

I don't own Luffy, ain't female, and I'm not Eiichiro Oda, hence why I'm not the owner of One Piece.

This chapter was interesting to write. Oddly, the start of the Sanji segment fought me, but once Smoothie appeared, it got rolling quickly. I enjoyed the small signs of CP-7. The New Fishman Pirates/Jinbe showdown took a while to get right, and I'm still not certain I described the battle as a whole well enough. I also hope I did a good job in showing how the crew reacted to events and so forth.

A note on Fishman Island and specifically the whole idea of Fishman District having been an orphanage: No. That makes little sense when you consider its distance from the rest of Fishman Island, the fact it was so close to Noah, the idea that it was left to go to shit for so long, and so forth. Sorry not sorry. Similarly, separating the words Fish and Man like Fish-man doesn't make much sense when we have mermen and mermaids. I realize using common sense in One Piece is tantamount to sacrilege, but there you go.

Oh, Neptune has many verbal quirks. Mispronouncing names, shouting his own, that kind of thing. The two young princes also have verbal ticks. Yes, this was annoying to deal with.

This has been edited by myself with Grammarly and Hiryo for his Ranma knowledge and views of One Piece.

Chapter 51: Troubled Tides, Part 1

"Where in the darkest depths did Captain Hody find these?!" a fishman muttered to another, shaking his head in surprise as he hefted the rifle in his arms, which, to a fishman, was about as light as a pistol would be to a human, only far more ungainly. It, and others like it, had already been slathered with the special oils that allowed them to be transported through water without being ruined, but they would still be unable to be used in water, given that water would ruin gunpowder cartridges.

Still, that didn't mean they were useless, and the number of cannons being handed out was even better. Those, with their larger apertures and the loading mechanism at the back, could be used multiple times in the water, so long as you were slow and careful around the small bubble at the back and front of the weapons.

"Heh, looking a gift angler fish in the mouth?" another fishman snickered, looking over at Jean Nouailles, leader of the Sea Urchin Armor Spine Squad (SUASS). He was a sub-officer, the equivalent of a lieutenant in the Royal Army for the New Fishman Pirates. Along with Kasagoba, one of the Snatchers, he was essentially in charge of dirty deeds and rabble-rousing among the populace of Fishman Island. This was why he was here at one of the least-used docks near Fishman's Meeting Hall, an old part of the sprawling city that dominated Fishman Island.

“FUUUuuuuuck no!” the first fishman chortled. “This and that nice little metal hatchet, oh yes, I love that little toy, I do, I do. Funny thing, though, that weapon feels as if it’s weighted for a fishman.”

“I know, but there are other super-strong species out there. Hell, as much as I loathe them with every scale on my body, I know that even some humans can be strong enough to wield those things,” the second fishman, one of the SUASS, said, before smirking. “Just not as well as we can.”

“Enough about that,” Jean murmured, his voice almost low, a whisper in the dark. “We’ve got three primary tasks here with these new weapons of ours.” He gestured to Kasagoba, whose permanent, species-based smile hid a dangerous mind, and then to a member of the bombardment squad. “Etsuo, pick out your team first. You lot’ll have the hardest task, because you’ll need to get in, plant the bombs and get out without anyone noticing.”

“Why isn’t Zeo here?” one of the others growled. He was one of their spies among the normal populace, hiding his affiliations with the New Fishman Pirates to get a job on Fishman Island and to blend in with the weakling human lovers and was thus unaware of what had happened out in the coral reef. When told, he snarled, shaking his head. “Damn humans!”

“Right!? Don’t worry, though, those Straw Hat bastards will get theirs eventually for what they did to us and to Arlong-sama!” Kasagoba growled, holding back a shiver with difficulty even as he did. He was the only one of this group who had been involved in that fight, and he very much did not want to fight that blonde human ever again.

“Without Zeo to do any of the sneaking, Etsuo, you need to do your job the hard way. Choose your team with that in mind.” Jean took control of the meeting again, then waited until Etsuo had picked out his two teammates before splitting the remaining five hundred fishmen, all around him, into disparate teams. One was built around the Deadly Poison Squad, fishmen whose bodies secreted poison along with two of his own men and amounted to eighty men in total. Another eighty men would be sent against the Straw Hat’s vessel. The remainder, Jean would lead against the bigger and toothier, target on his list. “But before you go, take some of these bags, and listen to some more of Hody-sama’s orders.”

The men with him did so, with one of them opening the bag and looking inside. They got confused then, and Jean smirked, an odd expression on his normally triangle-like lips. “Heh. We’re not just striking out wildly here, my brothers of the sea. We’re going to cause some mayhem, sure. But our group has the targets we do for a very specific reason, as chosen by Hody-sama. After all, brothers, what is more sweet? Killing humans, or getting humans to kill one another?”

OOOOOOO

By the time the group returned to the main hall of Ryugu Palace, Vivi, who had returned to her normal size, had the younger, if now far larger, Shirahoshi giggling at a story about Igaram. As she giggled, Shirahoshi followed after the older princess docilely, her eyes rarely leaving Vivi. It was clear the girl had lacked any real feminine presence in her life for several years, and was now almost clinging to Vivi, both as another girl and as a defender.

The mixed royal-pirate group had been joined by a large shark, which flew around with its own support bubble. Shirahoshi called him Megalo, a name that made Luffy cough for some reason. He was dressed in a shirt of all things that, along with his strangely foolish face, looked almost cute as it flew all around the princess worriedly.

Luckily, no more flying objects had been sent their way by Vander Decken on the walk back. This state of affairs continued as they reentered the main hall, where Neptune explained what had happened and that he had agreed to Luffy's stipulations and to use the Straw Hat flag to defend Fishman Island to his two advisors.

This news did not seem to please either advisor, if for seemingly different reasons. One of his ministers began to protest even as Neptune spoke about the plans to deal with Vander Decken, speaking over the king in a way that had Vivi's brows furrowing in surprise as the seahorse merman glared at the pirates. "Now wait a moment, my King! While I understand Princess Vivi's efficiency as a bodyguard. Yet that defense is based on her Devil Fruit. All it would take is one local colluder to get her wet, and Vivi's combat abilities would be completely negated."

Honestly, there is creating a relaxed, human atmosphere, and there is being led around by the nose. Even my father wouldn't have stood for anyone talking over him like that in front of a group of foreign delegates... heh, nor would Igaram, come to think of it, Vivi reflected before addressing the man's concerns as firmly as she could, her tone chilly.

"That is not as easy an operation as you might think, Minister. While my own Kenbunshoku isn't quite there, Sandersonia will be accompanying me, and her Kenbunshoku is enough to keep a watch out for such things. We might be vulnerable in the tube going down if enough attacks hit to burst the tube's bubble, but that is my only real concern there."

As Shirahoshi rapidly nodded her head in agreement, Fukaboshi spoke up, his eyes narrow as he looked at the ministers. "Actually Ministers, we'll be going with the princesses until we reenter the bubble around the main island. With the three of us around you, Shirahoshi, the short amount of time it will take us to make it down through the connecting tunnel shouldn't be all that dangerous."

He looked over at Luffy, having been talking quietly with his two brothers at the back of the group as they headed back to the main hall. "There is a slight change of plans. We talked about it, and I feel that Manboshi should go with you and me on the royal barge to hunt down

Vander Decken, as Ryuboshi does a better job leading our troops than Manboshi. You, you are positive that you will be able to hunt Decken down?" he questioned hesitantly.

Unaware of a few suspicions that Vivi was making about the power dynamic of the Ryugu Kingdom's leadership, Luffy nodded. "I'm positive. Those attacks of his has got a bit of his Haki signature on them, which will make triangulating his position pretty straightforward. The problem will be how long it takes."

The Minister of the Right scowled and, despite Vivi's logic, looked prepared to continue the argument, but Neptune reared himself up to his full height and tried to put his metaphorical foot down. "No. Princess Vivi has offered to protect my daughter, while Luffy has offered to remove Vander Decken, jamon. This will happen, as will our flying the Straw Hat's flag. Further, their demand to remove the New Fishman Pirates holds merit. As Jinbe has already agreed to do so, and has told us that, that..."

Neptune seemed to sag in on himself like a pufferfish losing all its air as he continued. "Hody Jones disdains Otohime and her hopes for peace, I have no recourse but to let Jinbe move against the New Fishman Pirates, jamon."

"But your highness, using the Straw Hat flag... true, his name holds some weight in Paradise, but is that enough to protect our island, which sits on the only route to the New World pirates can freely use?" the Minister of the Left wheedled. "I have no issue with accepting his offer to deal with Decken, although letting Jinbe deal with Hody Jones is more problematic, and something we should take a few hours to consult over. Setting that aside, surely we could just pay for the Straw Hats' aid and... keep our options open?"

Stepping forward, Vivi answered firmly. "With what else we offered, **yes**, the Straw Hat flag will be enough to defend your island. While Luffy is young, his name carries weight now and will continue to grow in the future, so, as a defense, his flag will work very well. If you are worried about the speed with which we could reach you, a lightning rod that can be lifted up to the surface at need, a speedy mermaid or merman waiting there, and Luffy, at least, could arrive here at speed."

She held up when the elderly minister tried to speak, overriding him with a glare. "Franky, our shipwright, has already written up numerous ideas for defenses and ships that could be modified to work underwater and defend your island. Further, much like the military of my own Alabasta, your troops could be trained to use some of the Rokushiki, the formerly marine-only techniques, which would enhance your abilities further while in your natural environment."

Her eyes narrowed. "We are offering not just to defend you, but to let you grow stronger on your own without making any demands that you would find difficult, let alone morally repugnant, no price gouging, no demands on your local markets or how you rule yourselves. Where else are you going to get a better offer?"

Twitching back from her as if cowed by her gaze and demanding words, Neptune nodded, gesturing with one large hand towards her. "I, I agree." He held up a hand, actually managed a glare of his own down at his two ministers, who twitched, very obviously not used to Neptune taking such a firm stance. "Princess Vivo is right, and further, they could have made us dealing with Hody and his men a prerequisite for Luffy helping to hunt down Decken, jamon. They didn't, which speaks well of their character. As does the fact that he came here to see us personally as we requested."

He smiled at Luffy. "We're going to need to sit down and share a drink of sake before you leave, young man. I won't fully trust anyone until I exchange a few cups with them, jamon."

"But Your Majesty, the point about his name is still important now as it was when we first began our talks!" the Minister of the Left argued. "Setting aside Princess Shirahoshi's defense, which I, like my companion, am not happy about, this young pirate hasn't even been to the New World yet! How can we assume that he is not going to be overwhelmed when he tastes the depth of that ocean?"

"If you are so accepting of using his name, Your Highness, then perhaps we should consult the prophetess?" the Minister of the Right added. "We have not used that particular resource for more than a few decades, and I believe we all remember that she was right about predicting the death of Newgate."

Neptune hesitated then, his sternness giving way to indecision, glancing hard at Luffy for a moment, but before Vivi or anyone else could say anything, a sound came from Sandersonia and Vivi's pantaloons and dress, respectively. Vivi reached into a hidden pocket on her dress and pulled out Luffy's Den Den Mushi. He could have easily carried it himself, of course, but not if he wanted to turn into his lightning form.

Admittedly, even then, his ki space could have kept one safe, but Vivi still had to hold back a smile at how far away Luffy's eyes had gone when he explained what had happened the one time he'd done that. *Who knew that you could drive Den Den Mushi insane by sensory deprivation?*

Holding one end of the Den Den Mushi in her hand, she lifted the other end to her mouth, watching as the Den Den Mushi changed to show Franky's features. "Franky? We're still at the palace. Is there a problem in town?"

"Yo, Vivi," Franky answered. "Got word from Robin recently, figured I'd pass it on, even if she didn't want to interrupt. HAH, our archeologist didn't wanna, but then told me I could, and what do I care about politics and all that stuff, yeah?"

Luffy moved over behind Vivi, kinda sorta deliberately invading her personal space to pluck the snail out of her grip, smirking as an elbow and a glare came his way from the princess. "Lay it on us, Franky."

“Oh, Captain, you’re still there too? Well, it’s like this. Robin saw the flag of the Big Mom Pirates about forty minutes ago.” Franky’s words caused Luffy’s good humor to disappear, and for Vivi to round on Neptune and his advisors so quickly that Shirahoshi, who had been staying in the background during the confrontation, flinched back, her big eyes almost tearing up. “She didn’t see anyone of note, and told Cookie and me they were here buying a ton of sweets. They’ve paid for it in good beli, but both Robin and I were wondering if their being here, while we’re here, is just suuuper bad timing or what...”

“Or what,” Luffy echoed, looking over at Neptune, who frowned a little, but didn’t look away. “Thanks for the heads-up, Franky. I don’t suppose you and Sanji told one another where ya’d be or came up with any plans to meet up? Or that Robin decided to stay in the city rather than going out to the Sea Forest?” When Franky answered in the negative, Luffy chuckled. “Yeah, I figured. Easier question. Did Sanji at least bother acknowledging the message while getting his flirt on?”

“Hah, yeah, he spoke ta Robin for a few minutes. Even offered to cut out his time in ‘mermaid paradise’ which really doesn’t narrow it down, y’know? Camie, though, said she had taken him to see where she worked,” Franky explained.

“Heh, well, he’s had a few rough weeks. I’m not gonna begrudge him his time,” Luffy chuckled, even as his eyes remained locked on Neptune. “Just to make it clear, we don’t want to make trouble with the Big Mom Pirates unless we have to. We don’t have the full crew here after all, and just because Robin didn’t see any bounty-type officers among them doesn’t mean they aren’t there.”

This time, Franky answered in the affirmative, and Luffy thanked him again for the heads-up before telling Franky what their plans were for the day. The idea that Vivi and another princess would be going around town had Franky shouting, “Suuuuper,” rather than just stating it deadpan as before. “I’m looking forward to meeting this new princess and seeing the kind of devastation she and our own little lady leave behind them when they’re out and about in public.”

“Ano, devastation?” Shirahoshi asked, blinking, confused enough about what that could mean to speak up.

Thanks to the dynamics of the communication snail and the fact that Luffy hadn’t moved from his position behind Vivi, which placed him near Shirahoshi, Franky was able to hear it and continued on, answering her easily. “Well, if you’re anything like our princess, your beauty’s bound to knock people for a loop in their hundreds, Missy.”

“EEP! I, I, no, I...” Shirahoshi blushed, scrunching down and hiding her face in her hands. On a person with a normal fourteen-year-old body, that would’ve seemed cute and silly at the same time. On someone her size, well, it was still cute, and still very silly, but also somewhat

ridiculous. That didn't stop Vivi from gently patting her forearms, what little she could reach anyway, without using her Sand Growth technique.

"Nice one, Franky," Luffy laughed, while his gaze remained locked on Neptune and his two advisors as it had been throughout the conversation. On one side, Fukaboshi looked guilty, and when Luffy's eyes flicked to him, he subtly shrugged his shoulders and gently gestured with a finger towards the advisors. Throwing them under the bus or stating a truth, Luffy didn't know, although given the dynamic between the advisors and the king, it probably was closer to stating a truth than anything else.

"Vivi and Shirahoshi have a few specific places to go, but maybe they'll meet up with you and Sanji later on. Keep your Den Den Mushi on, yeah?"

"Roger, Cap'n," Franky then changed the subject, chortling. "What about yourself? I know ya can't keep a Den Den Mushi unless ya turn into yer other form or keep a hand solid just to hold it."

"Me? I'm going asshole hunting. Gonna repeat that you've got discretion about anything to do with the ship, and when I'm out of coms range, Robin or Sanji are in charge. If something serious goes down."

"Heh, don't you worry, I've already got into the area of the city devoted to coating outgoing ships, and if Den is anything like his brother, he'll do a Suuuuper job for us and our ship! But er, on that note, just one last question..." Franky paused for a moment, trying to figure out a way to hint about their secret crewmember without outright mentioning Eve. Den Den Mushi could be intercepted, even ones that were familiarly connected like the ones the crew currently used, the hints that the Everlasting Resolve had a fully formed spirit, and one that could do a good deal of stuff that it really shouldn't, a secret that could pay dividends way back down in the future.

Luffy didn't get the pause, but Vivi did, and smiled as she retook the pickup. "Don't worry, I think the Princess and I can make a stopover at the docks where we dropped anchor before going anywhere else, make certain our ship isn't being observed or bothered by anything. "

"Got it. See you later, Princess, Princesses, rather," Franky guffawed again as he hung up, and Vivi also turned her attention towards the king.

"Well, isn't this an odd... coincidence," Vivi drawled, one eyebrow rising. "Now, Ozark's Razor tells me that this really isn't something you could have planned, and yet, I feel as if you did keep the fact that the Big Mom Pirates are here a secret from us purposefully. Keeping all your options open, were you, your highness?"

“In actuality, while the Big Mom Pirates are here, and yes, we kept their presence a secret from you, it had nothing to do with weighing an offer from them to fly their flag in comparison to yours,” the Minister of the Left shook his head. “Not that the idea doesn’t have merit, but they haven’t actually given us such an offer yet.”

From his tone of voice, it was clear that he had hoped they would, which was in keeping with his overall attitude since Luffy and the others had arrived in the palace. Fukaboshi’s glare, on the other hand, showed what he thought of that idea, even though perhaps, given what the Minister of the Left next said, he might also have had his own personal reasons for not wanting to agree in this case. “They haven’t even brought up the idea of offering one of Big Mom’s daughters to one of the princes in marriage, as would be typical of their way of binding new islands into Big Mom’s empire.”

“Wow, you two really didn’t want to agree to letting my flag over your island, did you?” Luffy asked rhetorically.

“You are young, and your name has only been on people’s lips for barely five months! You seem to shine brightly, but those who shine brightly often burn out quickly. Your anti-World Government status can also seem worrisome, especially for us. We want stability and peace more than anything else,” the Minister of the Left stated firmly.

At that point, Neptune stepped in, waving both advisors to silence. “However, I have already stated that we will fly your flag, Raffy. Don’t take the vagaries of politics too closely to heart, or the worries of my counselors, jamon.”

He let loose his odd laugh then, hoping to diffuse the moment a bit. “Besides, I would never have married any of my sons to any of Big Mom’s daughters, regardless. That is a fate I would not hope for my worst enemy, let alone my sons.”

The ministers didn’t look entirely convinced, and Vivi got the distinct impression that the moment she and the others left, they would be whispering in the king’s ears, but she decided to let those chips fall where they may. There wasn’t anything she could do to stop it, and hopefully by that point, Vivi hoped that Luffy had the Decken situation settled, and Jinbe, who had gone off somewhere when they returned to the palace, would have dealt with the New Fishman Pirates.

“...It would not be the action of a prudent ruler to not couch your bets in some fashion, and we will not hold that kind of action against you, although I feel that once you agreed to the conditions going forward, you should’ve told us of the Big Mom Pirates being here. If only to make certain that nothing untoward actually happened. We can agree to set that aside. I am, however, curious as to how long they are going to stay here, whether you believe they will make trouble for you or us when the Straw Hat flag starts flying over your island, and what you think they had wanted in return,” Vivi questioned, keeping her tone diplomatic.

"I don't think they'll make trouble, or at least, they haven't so far. They've only been here a few days though, and beyond a single message to the palace, we haven't had all that much interaction. In fact, they wished to work through Jinbe for us rather than vice versa, and he refused bluntly to do so, jamon" Neptune answered, to which both ministers looked like they had bitten into something sour; or sourer, in the case of the seahorse merman.

"I heard my name," Jinbe said, as he appeared from a side passage. He made a point of bowing from the waist towards Shirahoshi, who waved back at him shyly, but with a bright smile on her face. "And may I say again that it is lovely to see you out and about, Princess. I hope you and Princess Vivi enjoy your day out and that it is one of many to come."

He then turned his attention to Neptune and Luffy, his serene smile shifting into a grimace, his large, walrus-like tusks gleaming. "I stepped aside for a moment to contact my crew. My first mate Aladine and the others will meet me in the ocean in the direction of the Fishman District. We will try to keep the carnage to a minimum, but we will be moving against Hody as agreed later today."

"Sounds good, but you didn't mention the Big Mom Pirates when we arrived, Jinbe. Any reason?" Luffy questioned almost lazily. With his past life and his grandfather's training, being surprised was pretty darn normal for him, and besides that, he figured Jinbe had probably either forgotten or, more likely, wanted to handle it himself.

Jinbe winced a little at that but answered readily enough. "The Big Mom Pirates were initially here for me. They offered me a position on their crew and even wanted to bind my crew to them through the marriage of one of my officers to one of Big Mom's daughters. I first countered with the fact that I didn't want such and had an obligation to Fishman Island, and they needed to offer me something for it. I said that more as a stalling tactic than anything else, which worked as that kind of discussion was too much for Commander Smoothie to want to get into, and she had decided to send back a full shipload of the local sweets to Big Mom to see if she was at all interested in them before making any other kind of commitment."

Vivi, Sandersonia and Luffy all furrowed their brows, trying to place the name, but none of them had made any real study of the Big Mom Pirates. There was no prior connection there like there was for Shanks or Whitebeard, and Luffy hadn't thought Big Mom was the type to want to spread from her territory. *What was its name again? Whole Cook something?*

Jinbe scowled. "Smoothie spoke to me as if the initial idea of my joining them was a foregone conclusion. Even when I bluntly told her that I had already agreed to join your crew, Luffy, she just assumed it was a momentary complication, one she could overcome. But that is typical arrogance of New World Pirates."

As Luffy scowled, Jinbe went on hurriedly. "I wouldn't be too worried about it. Smoothie is one of Big Mom's more thoughtful, intelligent officers, as is Tamago, her second in command here. Once it becomes clear that you, yourself, are here, Luffy, they will almost certainly pull

back. They might make noises about future troubles and so forth, but we're pirates. That isn't exactly an issue, is it?"

At least, I hope that is the case. I had hoped to deal with them without Luffy getting involved, as his personality is like a bull in a glass house, and there are some lines Smoothie won't let anyone cross. Calm and thoughtful she might be, but she is still a daughter of Big Mom.

"I'd be lying if I said that it wasn't annoying to hear they are here from Robin, rather than you or the King but I suppose you're right. We might not have our full crew here, but so long as Big Mom herself isn't here; yeah, I can probably handle any kind of trouble they try to make," Luffy stated with the self-assurance that so often in his past life had caused friends and foes alike to lose it a little bit, and proved Jinbe's inner thoughts; even as the three princes looked on, something like envy crossing their faces.

"Still, Your Majesty, that's a point! Perhaps we shouldn't allow Princess Vivi to take Princess Shirahoshi out until everything else is resolved. I am still of the mind that putting our trust in these pirates is not a good idea, especially when it comes to the safety of the Princess!" The Minister of the Right growled, steering the discussion back to what he saw as the most important matter here, hammering at Neptune's willpower now rather than waiting as Vivi had thought he would. "We must keep her safe!"

"You must keep her trapped, you mean," Vivi growled out, switching gears so quickly that even Luffy was a little surprised, glaring openly at the man. "Is Shirahoshi a princess or not?"

"What, what kind of question is that? Of course she is, that is why—" the seahorse merman stuttered, but Vivi cut her off before he could continue.

"Then there is a limit to how much she can be protected. How much Shirahoshi can be hidden away from the world and still be prepared to deal with it when she no longer can be! A bird kept in a cage cannot know of the world beyond, and no matter how gilded, a cage is still a cage. Such is no place for royalty," Vivi continued, her Devil Fruit powers acting up a little in the form of multiple sand arms bursting out in every direction.

They almost made her look like a statue of an eight-armed deity that Luffy had seen in his past life and could still remember vividly for some reason. It sure scared Shirahoshi, the mortification, shame and sadness that had been rising in her over the last few moments overcome as she twitched backwards even as her eyes grew wide at Vivi's words. "I understand the issues with hunting down Decken. I even understand why the Princess volunteered to be hidden away as she did. It shows Shirahoshi has a good heart."

That line seemed to make Shirahoshi's fear of Vivi's sudden demonic appearance dissipate, and she started to smile even as Vivi went on. "You're going along with it, allowing her

to isolate herself without a close companion at the very least? That was doing Shirahoshi no favors whatsoever! Now, if you continue trying to stop us again from going out, after all of the assurances I have given as to her safety, I really don't understand what you could want, nor do I particularly care." Vivi's voice turned sharper and rose in volume, "I will instead start acting the part of a pirate and—"

"Okay, I think that's enough." Luffy gently rested a finger on Vivi's neck from behind, a motion that only Shirahoshi was in a position to see, but which caused Vivi to fall silent.

That motion dissipated the fear and sadness Shirahoshi had been feeling. Those emotions were replaced by curiosity as she looked at the two pirates. *O, oh my, is, are they... ooo, it's just like that one book of Mother's the maids confiscated from my collection last year!*

Unaware of the sudden interest he had created within Shirahoshi, Luffy addressed Neptune, his tone blunt as he gestured between the massive king and the somewhat human-sized ministers. "All of this has already been agreed to, King Neptune said so. Do you rule here, big guy, or do they?"

"I, I do," Neptune began hesitantly but went on strongly enough as he turned to smile at his daughter. Of everyone there, he was the only one who could look into Shirahoshi's eyes from the same height. Her body was longer than his, but not by much. "Shirahoshi, do you still want to go out with Princess Vivi, jamon?"

"I do, father," Shirahoshi stammered, twitching her eyes up from where she'd been watching that little byplay that only she had seen to look at her father determinedly. "I, I want to go outside. I want to see the island. And, and I want to pay my respects. I haven't..."

She trailed off, but the whole royal family seemed to understand what she wanted to do. Given the emphasis on the term, Luffy wondered if she wanted to go to some kind of gravesite or something, but whatever it was, it seemed to be something deeply personal for the royal family, as even the two ministers bowed their heads. Neptune and the three older siblings, who combined barely added up to the weight of the young princess, let alone their father, moved in for a hug.

Luffy wasn't the only one who looked away for a moment, giving the royal family time to collect themselves, and his eyes caught Jinbe. As Vivi moved in the other direction with Sandersonia, he shifted over to talk to Jinbe for a second. "One of the ministers mentioned something about some kind of prophetess right before you showed up again. I was wondering if you had any info on it? I'm not exactly a fan of that kind of thing, I think most of them are self-fulfilling prophecies, whether or not the person giving them actually saw the future or not, but the way Neptune glanced at me, well, it seemed as if there was something else going on there."

"Ah..." Glancing over to the royal family, Jinbe winced a little but decided that, despite the awkwardness of this conversation, they did have time for it, as he saw both Neptune,

Shirahoshi, and the two younger princes were no longer holding back tears. “Well, there is a reason for that look. The prophetess in question, her predictions are... They have been proven correct several times in the past, but she cannot predict when events occur.”

At Luffy’s look, Jinbe shrugged. “Fifteen years ago, she predicted that ‘The Greatest Pirate Would die in a war to rock the world, and that nothing would be the same ever again, and that a worm of sand would fall, while lightning rose. I think that we can see how accurate that was.”

“Ugh... vague, but if she predicted it 15 years ago, **why** did she, and yeah, if she can’t predict **when** something will happen, it isn’t exactly useful.”

“Whitebeard said much the same when he asked about his future. He did so jokingly, but seemed quite happy to know he would go out with a bang, even if none of his children were pleased at Madame Shyarly’s prediction,” Jinbe chuckled the chuckle of a man remembering something far in the past, but still dear to his heart before coming back to the here and now with a wince. “That is the name of the prophetess in question. As for the look the King gave you... she is Arlong’s younger half-sister. They had long been estranged, even before his incarceration, but there was still some familial connection there. And it is very well-known on this island that you were the one who killed him.”

Rather brutally, Jinbe added mentally. The news of what happened to the Arlong Pirates, the whole crew bar Hachi, had hit Fishman Island more than half a year ago. The specific news that Arlong had been basically mauled had not made it any better among those who thought he was a hero. Luckily, that thought had not been a popular one outside the Fishman District, but Jinbe had comforted Madame Shyarly at the time.

“Ahh... Well, it sounds as if the best idea for me would be to keep my distance,” Luffy murmured. “First, I don’t want someone to be dumb enough to ask this Shyarly gal to predict anything even remotely connected to me, and second, I’m not about to apologize for killing him, not with what that ass-puppet was up to.”

Wondering what that phrase meant but deciding not to give his new captain the satisfaction of asking, Jinbe simply shrugged and nodded in agreement. As Luffy looked disappointed, Luffy changed the topic of conversation to what Luffy thought about the Big Mom Pirates in general. That conversation took them a while and was very worrisome in many ways, but was soon interrupted when the royal family got themselves under control.

“Well, I won’t keep you any longer. I’d love to go with you and my sons to hunt down Decken myself, but with my back the way it is, and the fact that there’s doubtless going to be some turmoil after news of Jinbe going after Hody gets around here on Fish-Man Island, I feel I should stay here in the palace. More’s the pity.” Neptune glanced over at Jinbe, acting very much as if the moment of awkwardness hadn’t occurred, which everyone there went along with.

"I will remind you formally, Jinbe, that Noah is not to be touched or damaged in any way, Neptune! That is a piece of our history, a promise from the ancient past, jamon. It must be kept in one piece, regardless of what we will be doing with Fishman District in the future." Neptune went on, looking over at Fukaboshi for a moment, "I have some ideas in that direction, as does my eldest, but we will see where the currents flow first, jamon."

More and more, Vivi was getting the impression that the oldest son of Neptune would have been far happier to be proactive, but beyond voicing that, he had felt it was not his place to do so. *Interesting. I wonder what will happen there in the future when I have completed my rehabilitation of Shirahoshi?*

Having missed most of those little hints, Luffy's mind locked momentarily on the mention of something being a promise from the ancient past, which made him remember the feeling he'd gotten through his Kenbunshoku, and he resolved to mention that all to Jinbe. However, right now, he just wanted to get the group moving again, and he simply nodded. "Well, now that everything's been talked about to death, maybe we should get going?"

Fukaboshi nodded firmly, and despite both of the ministers looking as if they wanted to resume the argument, either about Luffy's flag or about Shirahoshi going out, Neptune also nodded and waved his trident towards the end of the hall. "Indeed, indeed. Get going, but remember to grab some supplies when you're down on the island, jamon. We don't know how far away Decken is after all, and I certainly don't want you to need to pull back or take time off from your search for him to resupply, jamon."

"That is sensible, and why I made the decision to switch which of my brothers will be coming with us. Manboshi is actually a better hunter than Ryuboshi," Fukaboshi smirked at his two brothers, who mock-growled at one another, much to the giggles of Shirahoshi, which was probably the point.

With that, the eldest of the three royal brothers turned away and began leading the group back to the royal eagle. Shirahoshi was of a size that she wouldn't be able to get in with the others, but all three of the princes opted to swim with her, surrounding both the eel and the princess as they descended through the tube to Fishman Island.

As they went, Ryuboshi and Jinbe began to plan the move on the Fishman District. "Is there any chance of a surprise attack digging Hody out of there, bon~? Or should we bring along the majority of the Royal Army-ti~? Perhaps a show of force will be able to cow more of Hody's followers-do~."

"Given what my crew has discovered about what has been going on in the Fishman District, I'm not certain a show of force will cow the New Fishman Pirates, but having more help will certainly be helpful, Your Highness. I think we should—"

At that point, Shirahoshi and Jinbe entered the water of the tunnel, their small hover bubbles turning off for a moment as they did. The princes all followed, while Luffy and the others shifted from the air of the palace and into the air outside the bubble around the eel without even getting wet, the water muffling the continued conversation from the young royal and Jinbe.

“Are you comfortable with just following the two princesses around, Sandersonia?” Luffy asked.

“I still have to pick up some goods I’ll be purchasing for Amazon Lily as a whole, Luffy, so I’d be going in the direction of Gyoverly Hills anyway. Besides, my Kenbunshoku is good enough that I’m able to sense incoming attacks. Between us, the Princess will be completely safe from that score. And if the Big Mom Pirates cause trouble, having me nearby will undoubtedly help,” Sandersonia affirmed.

Luffy nodded at that, and Sandersonia shifted to the front seat to have a better view of Fishman Island from on high. Seeing, as no one was now looking either at them or into the small hut that served as a part of the eel’s saddle, Vivi surprised herself by pulling her into his lap. Ignoring her squeak, Luffy let his hands go down to her rear, squeezing her cheeks gently, in a way that he knew Vivi liked. She still slapped his chest, but Luffy ignored it, shaking his head as he stared into her eyes.

“And as for you, you be careful too. The Big Mom Pirates are a New World crew, which means even their regular sailors are tough as nails, and their officers might have access to Haki. That makes them dangerous even against someone with a logia. Remember that if something happens, okay?”

“I know, and I will remember. You don’t have to worry about me, Luffy. Just go and do what you can to stop Decken, alright?” Vivi replied before leaning in to give Luffy a brief kiss.

Well, Vivi had meant that kiss to be simply reassurance rather than passionate, but Luffy was having none of that. Given how long it might take him and the princes to hunt down Decken, he might not see either of his ladies for a while, and Vivi was right here. More, Pervuffy, the part of Luffy’s mind devoted to these things, had noticed only one who could see them at present was Sandersonia.

Before Vivi could pull away, Luffy squeezed her rear enough to make her moan a bit, as having her butt played with like that was one of Vivi’s turn-ons. As she moaned, opening her mouth, Luffy swiftly deepened the kiss.

The noise from behind her caused Sandersonia to twitch. Despite a small bit of interest in the whole man/woman thing, she very resolutely did not turn to look at the pair, keeping her eyes on the island well below them, taking in the view.

Concentrating on Vivi so much the rest of the world fell away, Luffy didn't sense the princess moving towards the eel to ask Vivi a question. She looked inside, her mouth open to speak, only to pull back, a deep blush on her face as she saw what the two pirates were doing inside the royal barge.

Her oldest brother looked at her flushed expression, then to the royal vessel, an eyebrow rising in question. "Sister, are you alright?"

"I, I, yes! I, I didn't see anything, nothing at all!" the pinkette nearly squealed, shooting ahead of them.

Fukaboshi hummed, then, deciding not to indulge his own curiosity, raced after his sister, keeping pace with her easily even as they shifted from water to air, their bubbles appearing as they passed through Fishman Island's outer membrane. "Well, regardless, I wanted to wish you a nice time out, sister. I know it's been a long, long time since you were able to do so. Don't let yourself become too maudlin when you visit Mother's grave, either. Paying your respects is one thing, but Mother surely would not want you to be sad or morose about it."

As Shirahoshi smiled at him, her earlier flush fading, Fukaboshi wound an arm around her shoulders, or as much as he could, given their size disparity. "That's the spirit. Smile, remember the good times, and then come back to the rest of the island and have some more good times, all right? Hopefully, this won't be a one-off thing either. Manboshi, Luffy and I will see off Decken, and you'll be able to go around more freely."

Never too freely, though, the older sibling added internally with a faint scowl on his face, even as his younger brothers both chimed in with their own words of encouragement. *There had been more than one reason why Shirahoshi was so sequestered, after all, and I thank Poseidon that the ministers didn't accidentally let that secret out!*

The public reason, the one that anyone beyond the royal family knew about, was Decken's threats to Shirahoshi's life. However, there was also Shirahoshi's power to consider. The power to speak to the Sea Kings, to request their help or even command them at need, something that no merman, fishman or human could do. The power of Poseidon, dormant within the royal family, but always there, occasionally breaking out to the surface.

Still, he did not say any of that aloud and hoped that Shirahoshi would keep that to herself as well while she went around the island with Vivi. Despite Fukaboshi's wish to see the alliance with the Straw Hats flourish, some secrets had to be kept within the family.

At that point, the eel caught up to the four royals and the Knight of the Sea. As it exited the tunnel, Vivi pushed herself out from the bubble within. Looking only a little ruffled from the moment with her lover, she smiled over at Shirahoshi as if the interlude hadn't happened at all. "Luffy says we have incoming."

With that, Vivi waved her hand, and a massive wing of sand exploded from her arm, coming up and hovering in the air between one direction and Shirahoshi faster than even Jinbe could move. A spear appeared in the distance, moving faster than any of the other things that had been hurled towards Shirahoshi that day, but its speed mattered not at all as it slammed into the sand, which Vivi had hardened to the point where it could have been used as building material for a moment. The spear impacted, the tip penetrating the sand wall a little, then stuck there as more sand rose up around it, encompassing the spear.

Shirahoshi had barely had time for her eyes to widen before the attack hit the sand, and now watched as Vivi did the sand equivalent of clenching a fist around it. There was a sound of splintering wood, then tortured metal, and as the sand receded, the bits of the spear fell away, so crushed that there was literally nothing of the shaft remaining but sawdust on the wind, and the metal bit looked as if Luffy had used it as a stress ball.

The sand receded towards Vivi until she was holding the thing in front of Shirahoshi. "I don't suppose you would like to keep this as a memento?"

Hopping up onto the roof of the hut, while Vivi did her best to coach a giggle out of Shirahoshi, Luffy asked, "Do these attacks come so frequently all the time?"

"They certainly were not doing so the last time I was around," Jinbe growled a little. "It makes me very, very grateful that you offered to help hunt Decken down, Luffy."

Manboshi replied for the three royal brothers, his tone, for once, not cheerful, despite still sounding as if he were an inch away from breaking out into song. "Since he became infatuated with her, Decken began to fall into a pattern~. There'd be a break of a few hours, then three or four attacks in quick succession~~. However, since the Princess' fifteenth birthday is coming up, his attacks have stepped up in repetition~~."

"Yeah, this guy needs to die," Luffy growled.

Shirahoshi looked between the two Pirates for a second. Remembering the earlier moment she had accidentally spied on, a blush suffused her features, but thankfully for everyone involved, Megalo chose that moment to push into her side, making little squeaky noises as if he was checking on his mistress after the recent attack. She smiled and patted him on the head, then caught the wistful look that Sandersonia was giving the Royals where they were flying side-by-side with the eel. "Ano, if you want, Megalo can carry you while we go around the island, Lady Sandersonia."

"Are you sure I won't be a bother?" the large snake Zoan woman questioned, looking a little sheepish. "I am much larger than the average..."

She paused at the look that even Shirahoshi was giving her and laughed. "Right, never mind."

“On that note, I think this is where we should leave you,” Luffy announced, having turned in the direction that the attack had come from, adjusting himself as the eel continued its descent to continue doing so. “We’ve got a new heading, after all, and I’d like to be at the edge of the bubble before another attack comes in. That’ll give us two points, and if I can’t sense him by then, at least we’ll know the direction he had been previously.”

“I agree with your plan, but I was thinking of maybe bringing along a troop of the guards just in case. We can radio ahead and have a team meet us near the edge of the island’s bubble. The size of Decken’s crew isn’t exactly known beyond the point that he has a pufferfish giant Fishman as his first mate. And we’ll be fighting out in the water, once it comes down to blows, surely your Devil Fruit will make you a liability,” Fukaboshi worried.

“No, it won’t,” Jinbe, Vivi and Luffy said, before looking at one another and laughing as Luffy went on. “Trust us, while normal Devil Fruit users would be completely useless in the water, I am not normal in any stretch of the imagination.”

“Hmmm... and isn’t that the truth,” Vivi murmured in such a manner that had Luffy fighting back a blush as she looked at him. “But I agree with Luffy,” she went on at a more normal volume. “I do want to stop by our ship, though. I don’t suppose that you would be willing to carry me, Shirahoshi?”

Vivi honestly thought the shark was big enough to carry both her and Sandersonia, but also wanted to be a little closer to Shirahoshi. She had also noticed that the far larger princess looked as if she wanted to pick her up occasionally as they’d been moving to the great hall.

The way that the younger princess lit up and quickly reached out to pull Vivi up and into her... ample... bosom indicated Vivi had gotten that response correct. From her new position, Vivi, flushing a bit, raised an arm, the only portion of her body she could move at the moment without resorting to her Devil Fruit, grateful that the way Shirahoshi had grabbed her meant that she was still facing forward out of the large breasts that now basically threatened to crush her in their embrace. “Go on. We’ll be good.”

With a nod, Luffy hopped towards the front of the eel, settling into the passenger seat next to Manboshi as Fukaboshi settled in behind. Manboshi worked the reins, and the eel twitched around instead of going towards the ground, heading in the same direction that Luffy had been facing a moment ago.

“Maa, maa, I’ll be heading down as well, ti-do,” Ryuboshi sang. “Come on. I will have a squad meet you in a moment with your supplies, brother, doh~,” he shouted-sang towards the departing eel.

Jinbe also took his leave there, bowing formally to Shirahoshi again, before also making his own way via his personal belly bubble. He would meet Ryuboshi and the army later with his crew before moving on Fishman District.

Soon, the two princesses, the prince and the Amazon were close enough to the actual mermaid city that some of the other denizens, fishmen, mermaids, and mermen alike, were able to make out the princess, and several of them stared, shocked, while others, in their own bubbles, swam closer, as well as their worries about what she was doing. "Princess! Good grief, it's Prince Ryuboshi and Princess Shirahoshi!"

"It's so good to see her! Princess Shirahoshi, over here."

"But why is the Princess out and about? Who's that with her and Prince Ryuboshi?"

"Princess Shirahoshi, she **can't** be out in the open! What about Decken?!"

As those shouts reached her, the princess began to shrink in and in on herself, trying to make yourself smaller even as she continued to hold Vivi against her chest. Vivi changed into sand momentarily, causing her to twitch and giggle, then reformed, standing on the larger princess' shoulder. "Easy, Shirahoshi," she soothed, while Ryuboshi swam closer, smiling reassuringly at his younger sister.

"I know that the public can be scary when you're not ready for it. And you don't have to say anything yet if you don't need to. Simply smile and wave for now, act as if nothing's wrong. Remember, you've got me, your brother, for now, and Sandersonia here to protect you from anything incoming from Decken. We'll be able to detect and deal with anything that comes our way, even before it can bother any of the locals."

"Right, right, I know that, but it, well, I, I'm sorry, I'm sorry to be a burden," Shirahoshi began, looking as if she was about to burst into tears despite their encouragement.

Vivi simply patted her on the cheek, even leaning in to give her a very gentle kiss on that rather large cheek.

"It's all right," she soothed. "I understand, just keep calm, and we'll be able to do whatever we wish today. Okay? For now, simply smile and wave. Public speaking can come later, and I'll coach you in that too before my crew, and I leave."

"Hai, Vivi-senpai," the girl cheered up a little bit at the reminder that Vivi would not just be there for the day, but would be there for at least a few days. Hunting down Decken might take that while, but also because coding the everlasting resolve is going to be a long project.

To that, Vivi could only chuckle a little bit internally. She was always amused at how some idioms had spread across the world just because of how useful they were. 'senpai' being one such example, with 'aniki' another.

Obedying Vivi's suggestion, Shirahoshi raised a hand and waved at some of the closer flyers, smiling brightly at them, which caused several men among them to swoon and fall back,

while others paused, their concern slowly vanishing for now. This allowed the group to return to where the Everlasting Resolve had been docked. There, Vivi left the others for a brief moment, to rush inside and inform Eve of the threat of the Big Mom Pirates.

“Huh, that sounds like a powder keg waiting to explode. What should I do if any Big Mom Pirates or those stinky, tattooed fishmen try to do something to the ship?” the klabautermann asked.

“Whatever you can, dear. Secondary weapons, mess with them in some fashion once they are aboard, anything you can do. Then report whatever they’d done when we return,” Vivi ordered. “I’d say you could talk to us via the Den Den Mushi, but I know that’s beyond you.”

“Yeah, sorry.” Eve shrugged, before smiling menacingly. “Heh, but it is nice to know I’ve got permission to defend myself. That’ll come as a big surprise to anyone who tries to mess with me, thinking none of you are around.”

Vivi rolled her eyes at the bloodthirsty spirit before heading out to join the princess. Soon after that, Ryuboshi bid them farewell, having organized a company of troops to join Luffy and Fukaboshi with supplies for a possibly long journey, and needing to quietly organize the rest of the army.

With Ryuboshi gone, the ladies headed into the city. Their first destination was the shopping district, as Vivi was getting rather hungry and Sandersonia wanted to get her shopping over with quickly.

Soon after leaving the royal docks, other mermen, fishmen, and even mermaids began to crowd in, shouting their concerns louder towards Shirahoshi. This was a sign of how well loved the royal family was, and Vivi smiled, remembering times she had gone abroad with her father, both before the troubles and after Crocodile’s plans had been demolished by her captain/love of her life.

With the group on the ground, so to speak, Vivi could now walk as the princess continued to hover in her own bubble, smoothly swimming along. Realizing quickly that this was a bit awkward, Vivi used her Sand Growth technique to match Shirahoshi. This drew some exclamations of surprise and shock from the rapidly growing crowd of gawkers around them.

For her part, Sandersonia debated on using her own Zoan form for a moment before deciding she rather liked lazing about on the back of the shark. It was even better than doing so on the back of the snakes back home, and Sandersonia idly wondered what their reactions would be to being dressed up like the shark was in a good T-shirt, separating its hard scales from her back and rear.

Soon, a group of locals and a guards interposed themselves in the path, with the officers going so far as to prostrate themselves forward, despite how visibly uncomfortable that made

Shirahoshi. “Your Highness! I, we, it’s excellent to see you out of the palace, but we haven’t received any information about you being on an outing. And who are your companions? Where are the princes? Surely they should be here to defend you if Decken attacks!” one of them wondered, trying hard not to stare at the giant version of Vivi.

Chuckling, Vivi waved her free hand, her other hand having clasped one of Shirahoshi’s after she transformed. “My name is Princess Vivi, ex of Alabasta and current member of the Straw Hat Pirate Crew. I am here to simply take in the sights and go around with my fellow princess.” She then made a point of shaking her head and rolling her eyes as she looked over at some of the local women who had joined the crowd. “Honestly, what were the royals thinking, locking her away without any female companionship? Silly men.”

Vivi didn’t often play that kind of card in public, but it seemed to strike a chord with the locals, many of whom began to laugh, and the tension in the air started to dissipate, so random was her comment. A few young girls and boys even raced up to them out of the crowd, shouting the princess’ name. She smiled, and getting into it a little, even leaned forward, holding out her hand so that some of the smaller Fishman and Merman children could clamber up into it. Once they were all settled, Shirahoshi raised them up, placing them on her shoulders. One of them had even been carrying a basket of underwater flowers of some kind, which she started to weave into the princess’ hair with a grin.

Unprompted by Vivi this time, the princess spoke up then, only stuttering a little bit at the beginning. “Y, yes, I, I wish to go about the city, and when Vivi showed that she was more than capable of protecting me, my brothers and father all agreed that it was fine. There are many places I wish to go and see, and I’d, I’d rather just be out and about. With, without a lot of attention, if that’s all right with everyone?”

“Incoming,” Sandersonia announced without even moving from her position on the shark. “Coming in from the right up high, but coming down at a steep angle. It might clip that building over there.”

Vivi looked in the direction the Amazon had pointed, and, with her added height, could see the incoming attack. Instantly, a wave of sand raced out from her, a wave so big and so wide that many of the crowd shrieked, retreating in fear.

The axe that had been spinning through the air towards them didn’t even impact the roof of the building that Sandersonia had been worried about. Rather, it hit a bed of sand and was pulled towards Vivi, accompanied by the sound of shattering stone and crumbling wood.

The sand receded until Vivi was holding in her outstretched hands the bits of the ruined weapon, shaking her head as she stared at a symbol on it. “Is that his pirate flag? Or is that supposed to be some kind of rose?”

“While I would think that handing someone a weapon with a rose on it would be deemed romantic among my folk, I rather doubt that flies here on Fishman Island,” Sandersonia agreed, also looking at the symbol quizzically, wondering what it looked like before Vivi’s sand grasp had mangled it so badly. “Or am I wrong, Princess?”

“You’re not! And, and even if it was, flowers and stuff aren’t something I’d be all that interested in at all, particularly from someone like Decken, who is very much not my type!” Shirahoshi said, looking at the ruined remains and leaning lightly into Vivi’s side, feeling safe and happy, something that had been something of a rarity since she lost her mother. “Thank you again, Vivi-senpai.”

“You’re quite welcome, though, how exactly would you know what your type is? I’m not arguing that Decken isn’t your type, obviously. Obsessive idiots are rather a frustrating part of being both gorgeous and a princess. But if you have found out you do have a type, is there some handsome servant whom your brothers should have a talk with?” Vivi questioned drolly.

“EEP, no! Nothing like that!” The princess practically panicked, while the onlookers began to cheer and laugh, startled by how easily Vivi had dealt with what many had thought of as a serious threat that had been plaguing the island and the princess in particular for more than two years now. “Th, that was just something I heard from one of the maids, that’s all.”

Vivi chortled and gently patted the very much younger girl, even if still larger, on the head. Shirahoshi leaned into the touch, and Vivi gestured with her free hand. “Well, come on, I don’t know but about you, but I am getting rather peckish. Let’s get some food and then head to a clothing store.” She looked around at the crowd, one large eyebrow rising. “If, that is, all of you ladies and gentlemen would mind getting out of the way? As Princess Shirahoshi told you, we’re just here to take in the sights, and we can’t do that while being mobbed.”

While a lot of the adults in the audience felt a little shamefaced and guilty at that, and many of them began to move away, more to spread the word that Princess Shirahoshi was out and about safely than anything else, the children who had been placed on Shirahoshi’s shoulders all whimpered a little. But Vivi was insistent, and soon the last of them was down on the ground. The majority of the crowd dispersed at that point yet a group of the Army tried to join them until, at Vivi’s prompting, Shirahoshi ordered them away.

Finally on their own, even if dealing with the stares and whispers of those around them, the group continued on its way, eager to see what Fishman Island had to offer.

OOOOOOO

Unaware he was truly missing out on something amazing, even in comparison to what he had already seen that day, Sanji was doing much the same on the other side of the island. Sanji had started that day in Coral Hill, which was where Camie had first taken him on her tour. She had brought him there first to introduce Sanji to some of her fellow mermaids, a moment

that now, walking around the spice and fish market called the Marine Shopping Mall, he remembered quite fondly indeed.

Ah, the Mermaid Café, he thought, nodding to an elderly merman behind a stall lined with various types of sea salt crystals. The bountiful Ishilly and her knowing, enticing smile. Hiramera, she of the morose expression, whose eyes speak of a need for a man to make her smile to bring out her true beauty. Ahhhh, she did so enjoy the crepes I made for her; it was a delight! Mero the gentle, the leader of the five dancers, whose eyes are as deep as the oceans themselves, and whose giggling made my heart burst out of my chest in joy!

Alas, for Sanji, the Mermaid Café should not have actually been open when Camie was showing him around. She had been berated on that score by Madame Shyarly, and while Shyarly, who Sanji felt was a mysterious middle-aged beauty, had enjoyed some of the small treats Sanji cooked in their kitchen to ingratiate herself with them, she hadn't been willing to let him stay there. Why that was, Sanji didn't quite know, but it seemed to be something personal towards pirates or humans.

She had shooed him and Camie out after only a few hours, but had agreed to let Sanji cook for the café that night. To Sanji, that was about the only way he could show his love for all the mermaids there... in public, anyway. Sanji thought of that now as he stepped back.

The stall owner twitched as the human's face morphed, his visible eye becoming a heart, pulsing in and out of his eye sockets. At the same time, his weird swirly eyebrow seemed to become more pronounced. Beneath that, his nostrils grew, and the overall effect made it seem as if the human had somehow changed species for a moment. "Er, are you alright, youngster? You're not allergic to somethin' in volcanic salt, are ya?" the man stammered, wondering if he should run away, while a few nearby mermaids shivered, looking around them as each of them felt as if someone had walked over their graves.

"AH, my apologies." Shaking his head free of the soft mountains, alluring hills, and enticing faces of the mermaids at the café, Sanji looked down at his finger speculatively. "You were right, though; salt with a hint of papaya. Very odd indeed. The spices and herbs of Fishman Island are all so interesting." He placed a few beli coins on the counter and asked a few questions about what kind of dishes this spice was used for locally before bidding the vendor farewell and moving on to the next stall.

Unfortunately for him, Sanji was currently mermaid-less. Once Shyarly had forced him and Camie to leave, the green-haired beauty had shown Sanji around for another hour, explaining how to navigate the island's public transportation and introducing him to some locals, including Hachi. However, their lovely date, which was what Sanji had thought of it as, ended abruptly when, with a panicked look, Camie shouted that she needed to get back and help prep the café for their business that night.

Sanji had, as a true knight, offered to escort her back, but she demurred, reminding Sanji of his promise to make a meal for the mermaids fit for a king, and then had raced off as fast as she could move, first hopping, then taking one of the slide-like tubes until she was out of sight, leaving Sanji where he had been standing in the fish district at the time. That was why Sanji was here now, in the Marine Shopping Mall.

He'd already bought and had several large fish delivered to the café, worked out both the appetizer, dessert and even drinks to be offered. The main dish, a type of fish called tiger grouper, had also been chosen and should be delivered to the café soon. The issue now was to choose how to serve it. *A glaze, certainly, water-bathed first, but the type of sauce to use in the glaze... hmm...*

Thanks to the size of the island and how distinct every interconnected town was, Sanji was completely unaware of Shirahoshi's arrival in the city and the furor it was currently causing. Later, he would cry tears of blood about that, but that didn't mean he was unaware of the beauties around him. It seemed almost a given that for every unattractive fishman, there were at least two gorgeous young mermaids in the crowds within the spice district, either working the stalls or shopping. It was all that Sanji could do to not flirt with each and every one of them, but he couldn't stop himself from doing so occasionally, their beauty pulling his mind away from the various spices and herbs here.

Some of those spices he'd never tasted before, like the strange salt he'd had moments before, salty but with a papaya tech taste to it. There were no peppers or chilis that grew on Fishman Island; they needed to come up with other spices instead. Even the spiciest things they had here had a hint of sweetness, and yet, they had no access to actual sugar. Rather, they had a dozen or more substitutes for it, which were just fascinating.

Sanji was at the stall discussing such with an elderly gentleman of the fishman variety, wondering about their nutritional properties, when he heard a slight commotion through the crowd nearby. The background hum of conversation grew stifled, then cut off entirely, as eyes twisted around, then away, their owners growing tense and worried.

It was the kind of reaction normal people showed when someone dangerous passed through, and Sanji turned away from his discussion, gazing around the crowded streets, only to be struck dumb.

A woman was stalking through the crowd. In her wake, three mermen hastily followed, their waste wrapped in the merfolk's habitual bubble tubes. To Sanji's eyes, they were dressed as if they were important burghers or mid-level managers, perhaps. Or rather, they appeared so to the small, infinitesimally tiny portion of Sanji's mind that wasn't devoted to looking at the woman as his visible eye turned into a heart and he fought the urge to wolf whistle.

She was tall, easily the tallest woman he'd ever seen, perhaps the tallest person in total, as tall as Magellan or the Feak-Who-Should-Not-Be-Named that Sanji, the Marimo and the

Lucky Bastard had met on the fifth floor of Impel Down. Yet, whereas most of their mass came from either their bodies or heads, this woman's height came from her legs. Her glorious, fully on display legs.

It was a sharp contrast to all the women he'd seen since leaving the Everlasting Resolve, and for that reason, perhaps, it hit Sanji all the harder, but they were glorious, those legs. They were the legs of a strong kickboxer, but feminine, without a single blemish, her skin glistening in the light of Eve's roots all around Fishman Island, shown off by the short shorts she was wearing, which barely covered her waist, let alone her legs.

She had large, built-up boots to go with them. Sanji could tell they had extra protection to absorb impact, much like his own shoes, though they were far more colorful than his, a dark pink edging into white, with an area near the knee marked with purple lines. A tattoo of a rose was etched onto her thigh, red petals and green stem, complete with thorns.

Above that, she wore a simple pink sailor's blouse with vertical white stripes. Over her shoulders, the silver-haired, lightly tanned woman wore a long yellow scarf, the end of which fluttered in the breeze. A large sword of some kind lay over her shoulder, while her hands were covered with thin gloves, leading up to a built-up top where they stopped by her elbow.

"Four days! We have been here four days, and you still haven't been able to fill our ship's hold? We paid you good silver for that amount, you agreed to do so, and now we're on the last day we're scheduled to stay here, our ship's going to be fully coated, and you **still** haven't delivered on your end!" the woman was growling as she stalked through the crowd.

Much to his dismay, the silver-haired beauty didn't even look in Sanji's direction, keeping her attention focused on the three men around her even as she stared over the crowd with a furious expression. All three men were sweating profusely, with two going so far as to pat their foreheads with small handkerchiefs, flinching with every bitten off word she spoke. "Perhaps you do not understand the gravity of our demands. Perhaps I should make my anger plain not just with you but with this whole island!"

"Madame, please, be reasonable. Our sweets are normally sold in small allotments, and every package spoken for from the moment they leave the factory," one merman wheedled. "We have had to cancel every other order, not just for our own island, but those that would have been shipped elsewhere to fill your needs. So far, even with the full output of the factory, we can only make so many sweets so fast."

"I'm hearing excuses! Do you know what happens to people who return to Big Mom without the food she promised?" the woman asked rhetorically, before suddenly twitching to the side and grabbing one of the three men by the shoulder, pulling him into the air. Her motion was so fast it seemed a blur, and the analyst part of Sanji's mind knew suddenly that he wouldn't have been able to track her at all without the training he'd done since leaving the Baratie.

As she held him, the merman's body started to transform, becoming almost like cloth or something, his bones losing all stiffness in the woman's grip. Sanji wasn't sure what, but then the woman began to wring him out between her hands. As he was wrung out, like a wet towel, green and yellow juices started to drip out of him, to splatter the ground below while the crowd rapidly retreated, startled and staring.

No one shouted for the guards, though, not yet, as the one she was squeezing almost looked as if he was enjoying the experience. There was a wide, almost euphoric expression on his face, as if he was being drugged at the same time he was being squeezed dry.

LUCKY BASTARD! Sanji roared internally, nearly biting his cheek so hard it bled. *To be held and, and squeezed like that in such magnificent hands! All while she shouts and berates him? How envious!*

"Would you like me to twist all the liquid from you now, as Big Mom would from your whole nation? Perhaps I should see what for pained merman in agony tastes like?" She growled, the words barely registering in Sanji's rose-tinted thoughts.

While the other two men continued to babble at her, A part of Sanji's mind, the small analytical part of his mind, the one that made him such a cerebral fighter, pondered on what exactly was being run out of the man by that Devil Fruit, and if the woman could choose what to pull out of him, could choose to cause pain or not. That part of his mind quickly decided that the long-legged woman probably couldn't. Or else, given her current mood, she would certainly be making it a painful process for her current victim.

Still mostly lost in a haze of desire, Sanji watched as the woman raised the man above her head, letting the droplets turn into a small stream as she opened her mouth, drinking it in. "Interesting," she mused as she tossed the man away. "Almost like kiwi, but with a hint of citrus to it."

Released from the woman's grip, the man's body swiftly reformed, the drug-addled look on his face remaining there as he lay on the ground like a washed-up rag. The crowd watched on, unwilling to get near the man for a moment, their faces going from mild concern to worry as his eyes rolled back in his head and he went limp, but now too worried to do anything but cower away for the most part. A few tried to run off to take warnings to the nearest Royal Army patrol, but unbeknownst to everyone around the current action, they found themselves ambushed and knocked unconscious by groups of fishmen, quietly moving through the alleyways around to come at the Big Mom executive officer from separate angles.

"Very tasty," the woman drawled, licking her lips as she suddenly rounded on the two remaining men. "I'm sure I could fill out the rest of my hold with that kind of drink, and Momma would accept that. You have until the evening tide, and if you have not filled the rest of my ship's hold with the required sweets, I will do so by other means," the woman growled, leaning

down from the waist to loom over the two remaining men, who frantically babbled acceptance and began to retreat quickly.

Internally, Charlotte Smoothie, fourteenth daughter and thirty-fifth child of the Charlotte Family, Minister of Juice and Governor of 100% Island, was more than a bit annoyed at how her stay on Fishman Island had gone. While she'd left the amount of sweets she'd be returning with open-ended, so her own rear was covered with Big Mom, that was but one reason she was here.

No, the more annoying concern was the report she'd gotten earlier from Tamago, about the Straw Hats being sighted. *He didn't see anyone but Nico Robin, but still, if the rest of their crew, especially their captain, is here, forcing Jinbe to join our kingdom isn't going to be easy.*

That she would do so was a given. Smoothie was also one of the Big Three Commanders of the Big Mom Pirates, and she wasn't the sort to be cowed by anyone, not even someone the news was calling the one to take Whitebeard's place as a Yonko. Big Mom wanted Jinbe to join them, and join them he would. Smoothie wasn't going to back down on that score. But she also knew her limitations, and if it came to a direct conflict with a logia user using Haki who had already helped kill the Red Dog of the Marines, well, Smoothie wasn't so prideful that she wouldn't call in help.

Shaking that thought off for now, the exceptionally tall woman stared out over the crowd, humming thoughtfully to herself. "Now I'm hungry. I wonder, is there anything on this island I haven't yet tasted? I suppose I could fill up on various smoothies... See what other tastes I can wring from the locals."

At that, the onlookers recoiled. A few even began to shout for someone to fetch the Army, unaware that people had already tried to do so.

Even so for Sanji, that was too good an opening to allow to pass by. With some difficulty, he tore his eyes away from her gorgeous legs, stepping forward and out of the crowd. Once in the open, he bowed languidly towards her, getting the woman's attention as he spoke. "Madame, if you are hungry, please, leave it to this chef! If we can but inveigle upon a local stall owner for access to his equipment, I'm sure I could make something more fit for your pallet than simply the random drippings of a crowd of merfolk."

That this action would indeed save the crowd from going through whatever process that had been was mostly a bonus in Sanji's mind. But it was still a bonus, and loomed larger now that he had begun to push through the haze of his hormones. *Did she mention Big Mom? Is she part of the pirate crew Robin-chwan warned me about?*

Robin had actually warned both Franky and Sanji, but Sanji had blocked out Franky's voice from his memory of that call. *Bah, who cares! Surely a woman as good-looking as she is wouldn't be the type to start trouble, right?*

The exceptionally tall woman turned, one eyebrow rising in amusement as she looked down at the little man with the big words, but before she could respond, out of the crowd on either side of them came groups of fishmen. They had begun joining the crowd around them moments before and now seemed to react to her earlier statements not with fear, as the rest of the crowd had, but with anger and bravado.

“You all heard her, she’s going to attack us. But not if we attack her first,” one of them, a marbled rockfish fishman with a perpetually smiling face, shouted. “We don’t need to keep wooing the Big Mom Pirates, playing nice with them! The ocean is our domain! Let’s show this woman who the superior species is!”

The man leading them would well have said more, and, in point of fact, was in the process of pulling something out of a small bag over his shoulder, but before he could do so, Sanji’s foot slammed into his face with all the power of a battering ram. The fishman, a large, well-built fellow, found himself lifted up off the ground and hurled through the air to crash into his fellows before he could get the next part of his practiced speech out.

“You bastards, how dare you all gang up on a woman, you damned fish! I’ll fillet all of you!” Sanji roared, flipping up onto his hands and lashing out with kicks in every direction. Each blow hurled fish and mermen up and out of the crowd in every direction with cries of pain and shock. “This knight will never allow you to harm a single thread of her hair, let alone put a mark upon her gorgeous gams!”

On the other side, the group that had moved to charge forward paused, staring at this, and that was enough for Smoothie to reach them. Indeed, Smoothie had already been moving in that direction even before the group of attackers came out of hiding. The next moment, her hands touched two of them, as a foot lashed out, so fast her entire leg disappeared from the view of the locals.

A second later, three of her would-be attackers found themselves blasted up into the air as if fired out of a cannon. Each of those three would find themselves flying through the air, to the farthest portions of the island or smacking down in the water that surrounded it. One even burst out of Fishman Island’s double-layered air bubble and into the ocean beyond.

As for the two in her hands, they found themselves suddenly being squeezed, lemons or oranges in her grip. From their bodies came a torrent of green and white liquid, flowing out in torrents before she dropped them both, entirely dehydrated and near death.

Undeterred, the rest of the crowd of fishmen charged forwards, but Smoothie was merciless. Her fists and feet flashed out, crushing bodies or blasting men off their feet with each strike, an almost bored, amused expression on her face. *Scum who think their race gives them a natural advantage, always prove to be so weak that it’s almost a waste of effort to deal with them. They might prove tougher against our crewmen but that’s about it.*

Done with the group on her side of the now somewhat deserted street, the locals having a modicum of self-preservation, Smoothie turned to look over to where Sanji was finishing off the group on that side. As she watched his kicks, Smoothie raised an eyebrow in mild interest, a sly little expression coming across her face as she heard the words he was shouting. "So, you consider yourself some kind of knight, do you, rushing to a woman's rescue?"

"Indeed, my lady, whether that woman is in need of rescue, aid or food, I am her man." Sanji twirled from where he'd just finished off the last of his own enemies to land on one knee on the ground before Smoothie as he bowed deeply towards the woman. "I am someone who believes that, like fine wine, women should always be treasured and treated like princesses, whatever their station."

Smoothie, daughter of Charlotte Linlin and thus almost by definition a princess, if a pirate one, snorted at that. *I mean, I am a princess, so he's got that right, but I can't remember the last time I was treated like such, and by someone who doesn't seem to know me at all. Fascinating.*

Shaking off that thought, she smirked lightly. "Well, chef, what were you saying before we were so rudely interrupted?" Her eyes narrowed then. "And what was that word you used earlier, gorgeous gams? I've never heard that term before."

"Rude indeed my lady, to stop such as me from creating a masterpiece fit for your palette. Never fear, the instant we find a stall where I can go to work, I will rectify that if you are still feeling peckish," Sanji said, not addressing that last question as he stood up from his bow. "All I would ask in return is the pleasure of your company."

Is this man asking me out on a date? Smoothie thought with even more amusement than moments before. That just did **not** happen to a daughter of Big Mom, but she had to admit it was somewhat flattering. "Well, if we're talking about my time, I can certainly offer that to you for a while. I am intrigued by how certain you are that whatever you make I'll appreciate. I might not be as picky and eater as my mother," she hinted, "but I am still somewhat picky about my food."

If you are thinking of poisoning me for some reason, stranger, you had best think again, she thought cynically. Her Shibo Shibo no Mi powers gave Smoothie the ability to wring poison out of her body with ease, regardless of how powerful the poison was or even how much it had impacted her body by the time she noticed. After a certain point, it wasn't exactly easy, but it was doable. "And you haven't answered my last question."

A wry little smirk on his face, Sanji bowed from the waist once more to the far taller woman. "Madame, I swear I will put my pride on the line that you will enjoy the meal I prepare for you."

Smoothie chortled at that as she took in the man's features again. His overall look reminded her of something she'd seen in the past, but the actual features were nothing to write home about, nor were they anything she had ever seen on a bounty poster or anywhere else. *He could almost be called handsome, if not for the smoking thing.* However, his continued dodging of the question about what a gorgeous gam was, was making the Smoothie think it was something dirty. "I will hold you to that, but you still haven't answered my question. Was that word, gam, meant to be a compliment or not?"

"It means thighs, my lady, and yours, along with the rest of your legs and indeed your overall body are gorgeous," Sanji answered reluctantly, knowing that women took it amiss when you only concentrated on one aspect of their beauty rather than the entire package.

Smoothie's eyes narrowed a little at that, but she still laughed, slapping her outer thigh right over her rose tattoo. "I do, don't I? Well, at least you're not blind, and you're certainly at a height to appreciate them too, little man."

Watching the blonde man nod his head rapidly like a horny dog made Smoothie grin. "Now, let's find a stall where you can put your skill where your mouth is. Because if you don't supply me with something I like, then you certainly will have put your life on the line for it," she warned.

Sanji simply smirked again, bowed once from the way, and asked her to lead the way.

Smoothie did so, neither of them noticing as they left the small bag that Kasagoba had left behind him before Sanji had punted him away, the one he'd just pulled off of his shoulder to reach into when Sanji's foot impacted his chest. As the crowd of passersby came out from within the various buildings or from behind stalls, the objects within mostly stayed there, bar one. That one had slowly unrolled from within the bag, revealing a small flag wrapped around a tree branch. A pirate flag showing the emblem of the Straw Hats.

OOOOOOO

On the other side of the island, Franky walked along the wharf, where the bubble coating process was done for ships returning to the surface. Much like the rest of the island, the docks were made of coral, but here, they had grown to be thicker and jutted both out into the water lining the bottom of the bubble and up into the air. The segments jutting into the air were worked to help create the bubble coating needed for the ships in the docks. It was a pretty super setup in Franky's opinion, but also more function over form than most of the island's architecture.

This area was also situated well away from most of the other districts on the island, former towns that had slowly merged together over time to create a city. The reason for this was somewhat the same as the one for why the clothing and shopping district was so distinct from the Marine Shopping Mall. For some reason, the smell of the bubbles used for ships here,

the ones meant to last for a long while and burst only once, was kind of off. The smell wasn't horrible, but it was just nasty enough to make you uncomfortable being near it.

"I got to wonder why that is. I mean, I was around a lot of the bubbles rising from the ground in Shabondy, and even during the coating process. Nothing about the process or the bubble substance itself was at all smelly. If anything, it smelled like soap. Down here, it smells like disinfectant mixed with cat piss," Franky snorted, shaking his head as he walked beside a large, middle-aged-looking fishman. "Totally not super at all, and really strange to boot..." he frowned. "And don't ask how I know what cat piss smells like. It isn't a super or even funny story."

Taking in the appearance of Franky, the two corks stuffed into his nose, and his general appearance, the middle-aged man walking beside him chuckled. He was a well-built merman with long, curly white hair reaching down below his shoulders, sticking out from under a wide black hat. It was a toss-up which looked like it came to a sharper point, his goatee or his nose, and his chuckle fit well with a face that seemed used to smiling.

The man had four-leaf clover tattoos on each of his arms for some reason Franky had yet to discover. He had an earring in each of his ears and a bag of tools on his belt, which tied a light apron around his middle, the apron of which flowed down to what would be mid-thigh on a human, but which was only the start of the man's Fish tail. Franky could also tell Den, the brother of his old master, was well-liked by the locals by how many stopped working and waved at him as he went by.

"Judging by appearance alone, I think you'd be used to strange," Den said dryly. "As for the smell, that doesn't bother us Fishman or Merman, at all. Mermaids and humans, though, they're bothered by it a great deal, even more than you were when you first showed up. That's why we're out here like this. Speculation has always been that it's something to do with the nearby volcanoes and what they spew into the water, impacting the sap from Eve's roots. But no one's been able to isolate the specifics."

The man laughed, shaking his head. "It's fine, heck, even if it did bother me and I couldn't do something about it for some reason wouldn't be enough to stop me from helping you. After all, just like my brother, I like to do things with a DON!"

Franky laughed with Dan, the younger brother of his former teacher, shaking his head ruefully. "True that. If a man takes on the job, he'd better do it well, yeah? Couldn't call yourself a man otherwise, could you? But was there anything else you wanted to know about Bakaburg or old Granny Kokoro?"

"While I'd like to properly send an invitation to Kokoro, for now it's enough to know that she is still alive, as is young Chimney. Instead, tell me more about my brother and your time with Tom. Not his death, but the funny times before that, the quiet times. What you all did when you weren't working," Den requested. He then laughed loudly, pointing at Franky. "Start

by telling me the first time you made Tom angry enough to smack you upside the head the first time. That'll do for a start."

Franky was about to do so when he paused for a moment, staring ahead of him as he saw two truly bizarre individuals, even on an island that boasted mermaids, fishermen, and mermen. One looked as if he was some kind of strange lion Zoan in his hybrid form, although the afro-like mane was, while cool in Franky's opinion, not quite matching the lion motif.

Nor was the fact that his paws looked like, well, a cat's paws, and his tongue was currently hanging out of the side of his mouth. The sunglasses were kind of cool, but Franky quickly decided that pink was a horrible color for a suit, particularly if you meant to use it for the whole thing. The lion Zoan carried a sword on his hip, and old-fashioned black boots with white ruffled brims and high heels.

The other looked as if he was well, fused with an egg in some strange fashion.

He had really thin, long legs, which sort of reminded Franky of his own when he used his Centaur Form. While the other dude looked cute. This guy looked old, at least somewhere in his forties, with wrinkles on his forehead and a big mustache, with a scar over his left eye. Franky felt that eye was just gone, but couldn't tell because he was wearing sunglasses much like the lion Zoan.

Much like that worthy, the egg man was also dressed in a suit, which, once more, was pink. He had a cane sword at his side. An onlooker would have been forgiven for thinking the most unusual thing about the man was the whole wearing an eggshell around his waist thing, as it didn't look at all like clothing, but more like a part of the guy. But no, the weirdest thing to Franky was that he seemed to have a cup and saucer on his egglike head.

Franky didn't recognize either of them offhand, but Franky could tell they were dangerous, and, if that wasn't enough, they were standing near the pier to a large galleon that flew the Big Mom's pirate flag. Needless to say, the ship grabbed Franky's attention even more than the pink-wearing fellows, and while he hadn't let his eyes rest on the two for long, Franky let his eyes rest on the ship for a good while.

At first, it looked like a normal galleon. It had five masts, rather than the normal three, all of whom Franky could tell were not of a size to actually work with the ship the best way. He wondered idly why that was, wondered why redundancy rather than a good rigging system was important.

Beyond that, the ship had two large guns on swivels that looked like mortar guns set fore and aft, yet it was clear the ship's broadside was its real offensive punch. The guns on the sides were larger than they should be. The gun decks were further protected by metal bands covering the outer hull, while at the prow, there was another battering ram that, while coming to a point,

looked almost like a straw emerging from the top of a smoothie glass. The name was on a large golden plaque reading "Smooth Sailing."

Shaking his head and wondering about the oddities of the ship, Franky asked quietly, "Are New World Pirates heading the other way a normal sight to see here? And where do they do the coating on the other side?"

"They aren't normal, no, most of the traffic goes the other way," Den answered, also keeping his voice low. "I don't know the name of where their coating is done, but we do sell some sap into the New World to be used there. You'd have to ask someone else about the trade, though. I can tell you, they've been here four or five days, and beyond a few shouting matches and two bar fights, they've not caused much trouble. No kidnapping, no assaults. Their crew's apparently got a rule on that kind of thing. Rumor is they might want to incorporate the Ryugu Kingdom into their holdings."

"Hmm... well that ain't gonna happen. My crew're here to do that same thing, and our captain's with us," Franky stated firmly, before he went on a bit more calmly. "Still let's not go looking for trouble, yeah?"

Den agreed with that idea, and the pair shifted away from the Smooth Sailing's birthing dock, heading deeper into the city. "Let's head to my home, then. I for sure can't match any of the cafes or restaurants on the island in terms of food, but I for sure have enough booze to float a rowboat."

"That'll be super," Franky cheered.

Pekoms and Tamago had noticed Franky in turn. As the tall man walked away with one of the locals, Tamago set his tea cup back on the saucer on top of his head, pulling out a series of wanted posters. "Bon, well now. That would be Franky, Franky the shipwright, sixty-five million beli, another member of the Straw Hat Crew, soir."

"What was he doing here, gao?" Pekoms demanded, whirling to stare in the same direction.

"Bon, scoping us out, I imagine, even though he was also talking to a local when I first spotted him through the locals. That hair of his is most distinctive, s'il vous plaît."

"Want me to follow him, gao? He shouldn't be anywhere near as dangerous or slippery as the Devil Child, grr. We could maybe even capture Franky, make him answer some questions at least, gao."

Tamago hummed thoughtfully. He had no real desire to start a conflict with the crew of the Lightning King, not until they knew if the man himself or his swordsman first mate was here. *Or Black Leg Sanji, I suppose, but I would suppose the two of us would be able to deal with him*

between us, to say nothing of Commander Smoothie. The real trouble is Jinbe. If he was telling the truth about deciding to join them, only Smoothie is in his weight class... unless we call in reinforcements.

He said the first part of his thoughts aloud, and Pekoms grumbled but nodded. Logia users who had gained Haki were nightmares even in the New World, hence why Fire Fist Ace had, as of the latest report Tamago had read, been able to lead a successful assault on Dressrosa that ended with Doflamingo dead in a pyre. That report had gone on to proclaim Ace as the new overall commander of the Whitebeard Crew, but Pekoms honestly doubted that part. "Still, I'd prefer we start being proactive, grrr!"

"Smoothie is somewhat late to return from expressing our frustrations with the locals... Very well. Don't engage, but watch him, Pekoms," Tamago ordered.

This left Tamago alone, and he leaned back in his chair, watching several crew members sparring nearby. Most of the crew was aboard, working on repairs or going over the coating with a team of locals, and in several places, bosun's shouts could be heard. All in all, it was quite a bustling but calm scene, and Tamago reached up, reclaiming his tea with a small smile. *Once Smoothie decides how to apply further pressure on the locals, whatever the Straw Hats wish to do, such calm moments may well disappear, so I had best enjoy them while I can.*

His somewhat placid thoughts were interrupted by a loud *crump* noise. He blinked, staring all around him, unsure where the sound came from, while dozens of Fishman workers on the docks also twitched. Many in the waters nearby flinched, grabbing at their ears or pulling themselves quickly out of the water, and a shout of, "What the fuck, who set off a bomb?!" went up from the locals, causing Tamago to jump to his feet, the delicate teacup he kept routinely on top of his head placed on the table nearby.

"Bosuns, report, soir!" he bellowed, his voice losing some of its lazy attitude from a moment before, his eyes going wide. The Smooth Sailing had suddenly shifted, not listing but moving as if it had become heavier, settling deeper into the waterline. As Tamago watched, it continued to do so, causing Tamago's rising fury to disappear into a maelstrom of shock and fear.

Dozens of men were already running down into the ship, and others were staring over the side, but shouts were already coming up from deeper within. "The ship's sinking! Blistering cocks, the whole orlop deck is just gone!"

For a moment, Tamago froze. Not because of events in front of him, but because of what they might mean. *The sweets, the sweets destined for Big Mom. They will be ruined!* If there was one thing that every one of the Big Mom Pirates feared, it was their captain's food-based fury. "Get it out!" he barked furiously. "Get the sweets out, Soir!"

This shout galvanized the crew aboard the ship and working around it. Unfortunately, this was only about a third of the entire crew complement. The rest were scattered across the island as was usual when a ship would be in dock for a long while.

As men swiftly began to organize and create a bucket line to get the sweets out of the hold and onto the shoreline, Tamago glared down into the water. That meant he was able to dodge and block several shot harpoons and throwing spears as they raced out of the water. The men weren't so lucky.

One man, who had just volunteered to go over the side with some canvas to see if they could cover the hole, slowing the ship's descent into the water, gurgled as a harpoon shot from a harpoon gun took him through the throat. A second later, three more men fell from around him as sharp cracks abounded, the sound of rifles loud in the air.

Spotting something incoming from the side, Tamago whirled, one leg rising in a kick. The Long leg version of Rankyaku lashed out, slamming into an incoming cannon from one side, and several voices rose to join Tamago's. "We're under attack, ambush s'il vous plaît. Bosuns, split the crew, half on getting the sweets out, the other half armed to deal with our attackers, bon."

As he shouted, a group of ten fishmen raced out from hiding places deeper into the city. All of them were armed with swords or spears, and looked tough and strong, but that mattered not at all to Baron Tamago, Knight-ranked Combatant of the Big Mom Crew.

"You, you fools..." Tamago growled, unsheathing his sword and placing the scabbard alongside his chair as he stalked forward. "Fools! You, raw fools, you may have doomed your entire island s'il vous plaît. Bon, those sweets destined for Big Mom's palate, you think she will just sit idly by after such an effrontery? You think you will survive **my** wrath, soir?"

"Down with the surface dwellers!" many of the fishmen pirates shouted, as more appeared out of alleyways or, mainly, up from the ocean. Uncaring of the rapidly retreating workers all around the dockyard area, several raised brand-new rifles and cannons in his direction as the ship continued to sink.

The group facing him also attempted to fire at Tamago, but by the time they had, he had crossed the intervening distance, and bodies burst out from strong kicks or slashes from his weapon. Now, on the flank of a large group firing at his men aboard and around the ship as they tried to get armed or charged into combat along the docks, Tamago lashed down from the wharf towards several fishmen, skewering one fishman through the head, his cane sword penetrating through his skull and brain with an almost negligent flick of the wrist.

His cane sword then flicked to the side, opening another throat from a fishman who had just jumped up onto the pier. Shots of all kinds and sizes now flashed around him as more fishman pulled themselves out of the sea, but Tamago wheeled through it. His outer shell, the egg-like portion of his body that thrust up from his waist, was hit several times, and even one

cannon round caught him, but the toughness of his outer shell was such that it bounced off. Only the cannonball actually did any damage, creating a small crack.

The Tama Tama no Mi Zoan ignored this damage and, bunching his legs, flew out over the water for a moment. “Skillet Hop!” he shouted, using his long, powerfully built legs like Brook could to skim across the water as he stabbed down. He could no longer use his legs offensively while doing so, but his cane sword was more than long enough to let him make up the difference as he attacked the arms and upper body of the Fishman who were still in the sea.

Many of those sank back down into the water, and more than a few shifted to attack the Smooth Sailing from below once more. The twin mines they had latched onto its side and then set off had created two huge holes in the vessel and shattered its keel. The bottom of the ship was still coming apart as the ocean roared in, but it was slow going since here in the bubble of Fishman Island, the ocean lacked any current or waves.

Still, it was enough for many of the fishmen to get into the orlop deck, then up into the rest of the ship. Vicious hand-to-hand combat began there, with the New World Vets of the Big Mom Crew proving to be far more dangerous now that surprise had worn off than the fishmen had anticipated. Only Jean Nouailles was having an easy time of it, and he was soon in the main hold, among the crewmen working to try and get the sweets out.

“Hari... Sen... BON!” he roared, puffing himself up. Now larger and with hundreds of needles sticking out in every direction, he roared as he struck out, completely inviolate against the swords and strikes of his enemies, their blades bouncing off needles without hitting anything vital. Six men went down, and the hold belonged to him. Chuckling, he used his needles to tear apart the sweets, then made his way upward, killing several more, none of them able to get past him or get through his needle spines.

All around him, the Smooth Sailing continued to sink, and, just as he was about to burst up onto the main deck, Jean paused, turning to give orders to a group of men behind him. *I don't know why Green wanted this ship sunk without hope of recovery, but I am not going to question it when he came through with the weapons. I have to wonder about his motives, but as he's a fellow fishman, I suppose I can trust him.* “Get some grapnels up here and start towing this ship away from the wharf. That'll split their attention even more, and let us loot it easily.”

That was a flimsy order at this point, given how quickly the ship was sinking. Indeed, even on the gun deck now directly beneath the main deck, the lovely water was up to Jean's knees. But given how well the attack had gone, none of the men behind him questioned him, and they nodded rapidly, pulling back.

As Jean ascended onto the main deck, where men were now rapidly trying to escape the ship while fighting off other fishmen, still more, smaller groups had scrambled up onto the wharf in various places. Now they came in attacking him from all sides. The men who had made it ashore from the ship or who had been there already and hadn't been fast enough to join the

fearful work gangs trying to save the sweets met them, and the fighting became general. Again, it was soon clear that being New World vets gave the humans an edge in speed and skill, but numbers and strength quickly pushed them back.

That, and pirates weren't ever the best at working together at the best of times. The Big Mom Pirates were no exception, but even so, they were killing at least one fishman for every one of their own that went down, and Tamago was unassailable despite zooming along the water still. While none of the attackers were now trying to break the top of the water near him, he was still sending cutting blasts of air into the water, strong enough to slice mermen and fishmen alike in half despite being weakened by the water.

All of this had, of course, created a lot of noise, which had in turn drawn attention from both locals and Pekoms from where he had been following Franky. The locals hid in their houses or ran away if they could, while Pekoms turned, staring back the way he had come, a low growl coming from the man.

Even Franky and Den, who had barely put a few blocks between them and the bubble coating docks, turned, peering back over their shoulders towards the action. "What is that?"

"I don't know... maybe the Big Mom Pirates are making trouble, you think?"

Franky paused, torn. On the one hand, he didn't want to be the one to start something between the Big Mom and Straw Hat Crews, but on the other, he didn't want to just stand by and let them attack the locals. "Damn it..." he grumbled. "I wouldn't be a super me if I didn't try to at least see what was going on."

With that, he told Den to continue to his house and stay there before racing back the way they had come. Above, Pekoms had already raced off, but Franky didn't see him until he was back on the docks, where he skidded to a halt, taking in the fighting. *Fuck, really!? It's those NFP (New Fishman Pirates) assholes!? Give me back my concern, you barnacle suckers.*

A few groups of the fishmen who had intended to come in from behind the wharves had not yet made it into their position just yet, messing up the timing of their assaults. This segment of the island wasn't all that well organized, so the side streets and so forth were often dead ends, which threw them a lot. The instant they had reached the fight, they found themselves under attack from Pekoms, who fell on them like an avalanche.

One merman was slammed away, hurled into the wall of a nearby building, where Franky had paused to take in the fight. Now, seeing Franky through the tumult, he shook off his shock at being tossed aside by Pekoms and grinned evilly. *Time to put the boss's other plan into action!*

All the subcommanders involved in the missions across Fishman Island had been given a list of the Straw Hat bounty posters, and he recognized Franky from it. *If Boss Hody is right, this'll start a fight between the Straw Hats and Big Mom Crew!*

In reality, this plan didn't come from Hody Jones. He would've disdained any such idea that he needed trickery and guile like that to pin one enemy against another. They were, after all, only humans. Even Big Mom's crew couldn't be all that dangerous or deadly when surrounded by the waters around Fishman Island.

However, several of his messengers, along with Jean, had been suborned by the Cipher Pol Agent Green. It had been Green, on Operator's orders, who had chosen the three targets for false flag operations.

And unlike the first operation, where Sanji had unexpectedly interfered, no one stopped this merman from opening his mouth in time. "Franky! There you are. The Straw Hats, the Straw Hats are here to help! They'll help us win our freedom from the other surface dwellers!" he bellowed.

While that didn't make much sense to the merman shouting it, it didn't need to. All such shouts needed to do was to sow the seed of confusion and doubt, and right now, in the middle of a battle, was very fertile soil indeed. This was helped by others suddenly remembering that aspect of the plan. Many of them, mostly octopus and squid types, raised small Straw Hat flags into the air even as they kept attacking with their other arms. "For the Straw Hat Alliance!"

Even Tamago, normally a very mild-mannered, intelligent sort of fellow, scowled angrily as he heard that word. He might not have taken a shout like that on its own as proof, but seeing so many other merfolk take it up was enough for him.

For the more hotheaded Pekoms, those shouts acted like a goad, and he turned from the wreckage of several NFP members to roar, charging towards Franky even as Franky stared uncomprehendingly at the shouting group of Fishman pirates. "You, you bastard! Our ship, the sweets for Big Mom, you'll pay for this!"

"I suuuuper don't know what he's talking about, but if it's a fight you want, pink egg, it's a fight you'll get!" Franky shouted back, never one to back down from a fight. *Besides, it's not like I started this fight. Damn it, I am getting some serious déjà vu vibes here. Five will get ya ten that the New Fishman Pirates came up with that shout all on their own, but I suppose it doesn't matter. Certainly not to these two.*

Raising a forearm, Franky willed it to shift into its shield formation, which had changed since the days back on Water-7. As it spread downward and outward, the shield became more of a kite shield than a buckler, protecting more of his body. This was to the good, because the force behind Pekoms' blow was such that it rattled despite the impact dial embedded in his shield, pushing him back several inches. *Damn! This guy hits like Sanji's kicks in training!*

While Franky hadn't dueled all that often with Sanji or the other crewmen since arriving on Amazon Lily, he had dueled with him occasionally during those weeks, and a lot before the Thriller Bark incident. *If my shield were smaller or made of the same stuff as it originally was, I'd be without a working arm right now.*

"Nice shot, now here's one of mine!" Franky shouted, his other hand coming up in a punch, but Pekoms ducked under it, lashing out with several more punches, forcing Franky's shield arm back and then down to protect his stomach and leg. He whirled, lashing out with another punch, but Pekoms again dodged under it, coming up with an uppercut, but Franky leaned into it, small points coming out of his chin, tiny punch daggers in truth.

Pekoms' fist crashed into them, and Franky's head was sent rocking backward, the tiny daggers flattened or warped under his chin, making for a very odd sight. Yet at the same time, Pekoms growled in pain, wringing out his now blood-soaked hand. *Damn it, I should have used Haki!*

This opened Pekoms up for a punch to the chest as Franky recovered faster from the sudden reversal. He moved with the blow and came back with his own more powerful version, his fist now glowing black for a second.

SHIT!! Eyes widening, Franky shifted backward on his feet, his shield still held between him and the incoming blow. Thankfully, the impact dial built into his shield held. To cover that, Franky stumbled backward, as if he had been. He then hastily shifted sideways as Pekoms lashed out again, faster than Franky had anticipated. This forced him to raise his other hand before the shield on that side, and its attached impact dial could grow out of his arm.

The half-opened shield, not being in contact with its impact dial component, crumpled under Pekoms' strike, and the blow truly flung Franky off his feet this time. He then rolled away as Pekoms leaped up and came down on his former position, his fist shattering the hard coral beneath them.

From his knees, Franky bellowed, "Franky Machine Gun!" and let loose with his damaged arm, firing dozens of small bullets from his machine gun even as he realized that was the last bit of ammunition he was going to get from that side. That one punch had not only wrecked his shield but also damaged the internal robotics of his arm to the point that the autoloader in his outer arm was no longer connected to the barrels in his knuckles. *Fuck, but at least the other weapons further up that arm are still online.*

The bullets flew towards Pekoms far faster than the musket balls from a simple musket, and Pekoms swiftly turned, showing his back to the attack. From his back, a turtle shell grew, expanding to the point that the shell was visible from the neckline and bottom of his suit, causing Franky's eyes to widen. *The hell, I thought he was a lion Zoan!?*

Before he could think too much about that, Franky found himself under attack from other men from Big Mom's crew. Four of them charged through the growing smoke and haze of fires that had started up across the wharf, while two other NFP members stood with Franky, still bellowing, "For the Alliance!" despite not knowing or really caring why.

Franky downed two of the Big Mom crew members with hard punches, then lashed out towards Pekoms as he turned back toward him, raising a semi-weakened left, his hand clicking out of position on its outer hinge to reveal the second weapon built into his forearm. "Franky Cannon!"

The Franky Cannon in his left arm had been heavily revamped since Franky's time on Water 7. He and Laki had worked hard on it, much like Franky's other in-built weapons systems, and the cannonball that Franky had previously housed in his forearm had been replaced by a mortar round. It also shot out far faster than before, whirling in midair, showing the cannon in his arm had also been rifled.

Pekoms covered himself in his Haki just in time, but hadn't been able to set his feet properly as he had been turning towards Franky at the time. The rifled mortar crashed into him, exploding as it struck, and blowing Pekoms off his feet and into the water. "GAOOOO!!!"

"Damn it, get Pekoms out of the water before these assholes finish him off," a bosun ordered, jumping into the water.

Normally, this would have been a very foolish thing to do when facing merfolk, but Tamago had done so much damage to the NFP still in the water with his sword-based air attacks that many had joined the assault on the wharfs instead of trying to remain there. Now, as Jean led a large force up over the sides of the nearly fully-submerged Smooth Sailing, a group of four Big Mom Pirates were able to swim down and grab onto Pekoms as he sank like an anchor through the water, pulling him up towards the surface even as several fishmen attempted to attack them.

Back on the shoreline, Franky, against his will, continued the fight against another group of New World vets, who had closed with him, cutting down several merfolk to get to him. At the same time, a furious Tamago had turned to the wharf.

Now, he zoomed forward, furious and truly thinking now that the Straw Hats had instigated this assault for some reason, despite not seeing any of the Sun Pirates mixed in with the locals. His sword slicing still more of the NFP out of his way, Tamago crossed the intervening distance so fast Franky barely had time to turn to face him.

Tamago's cane sword glanced out, slashing across Franky's front. Blood spurted, but as Tamago paused a few feet behind where Franky stood, he paused, staring down at his sword in consternation. "Impressive toughness, soir," he murmured, turning back, only to stare in shock as Franky, while wobbling on his feet, turned around to face him, his fist already lashing out.

There was a thin gash across his chest, but all that had done was to reveal the metal underneath. "You're going to have to try harder than that to get through this SUUUPER shipwright's metal!" Franky shouted, lashing out with a Strong Right towards Tamago.

Or so it appeared at first. Even as the chained fist crossed the intervening distance, though, Franky was already pulling it back. *No way a normal Straight Right will matter to someone who can use Haki.*

Tamago slashed at Franky's flung-out fist with his somewhat ruined sword, missing it as Franky pulled it back. Franky's other hand came up, and in its center a small aperture opened. Following up on his attack, Tamago, who had only a very limited amount of Kenbunshoku, slashed at Franky's chest, only for his blade to smack into the shield once more. To his surprise, this didn't do anything. *What in the world?*

Before he could figure out what was going on there, Franky's clenched his hands together, portions of the arms almost seeming to link together. The revamped air cannon of his Coup De Vent fired as he roared. "A real man's gotta be SUPER!"

The enhanced, shrunken and further condensed blast of air slammed into Tamago, shattering his glasses and sending him flying, rear over ankles, down the wharf to crash into a warehouse several blocks away. There, he grunted, shaking his head and pushing himself to his feet, removing his ruined goggles. This showed that Franky's earlier thoughts on his ruined eye were correct, as the scar that had previously been visible above and below his glasses had also removed his eye on that side.

"Not a bad blow, soir. However, not enough, you half-boiled rookie, bon!" Tamago shouted.

Before he could close and engage Franky once more, he saw several fishmen fighting with his fellows as they attempted to get Pekoms out of the water. Cursing, he charged into their ranks, his legs lashing out along with his sword. Dozens went down, and his sailors finished pulling Pekoms out of the water.

Here, Jean charged forwards shouting, "Hah, let's see how your legs stand up against my needles!" in his deeper voice.

The rotund pirate was in for a surprise, however, as Tamago showed no hesitation in continuing his assault. His Haki-lined leg crashed into Jean, shattering hundreds of his needles and sending the fishman flying out over the waters of the island, nearly every bone in his body shattered.

While Pekoms slowly got over his dunking in the seawater, Tamago once more launched himself forward towards Franky. This time, he got in three hard slashes, each of them lined with Haki. Nevertheless, Franky's metal body held even as blood spurted. His side and shoulder

started to stream blood, but Franky roared back, lashing out at Tamago, who blocked with his legs, lashing out with kicks and his blade.

Tamago's eyes narrowed as, once more, he found the fully formed shield on one of Franky's forearms seemed to almost eat his attacks. *What is that?*

Unlike the Whitebeard Pirates, the Big Mom Pirates had no knowledge of Sky Combat, as the Whole Cake Kingdom lacked any means to reach the White Sea. However, Tamago was so good at dodging that Franky couldn't release his gathered impact yet.

A kick smashed Franky off his feet, and another threatened to shatter his leg as Tamago went low, but Tamago's blade shattered against Franky's punch a second later. Already warped and its edge having been blunted badly before Tamago began to use Haki, Busoshoku could no longer keep it in one piece.

Franky couldn't capitalize on that as a twirling wheel kick crashed into his already battered chin. The only thing that saved his teeth was the metal of his chin, and it warped badly under the strike, sending Franky sprawling onto his back.

He avoided a stomp, however, and rose into an upper cut that finally allowed him to use his gathered impact. "IMPACT LEFT!"

The palm strike landed on Tamago's outer egg shell and blasted him off his own feet, and Tamago grunted with pain as his outer shell shattered, but his Haki had kept him from being broken in half. He rolled with the blow to Franky's shock and came up on his feet, glaring. "Well, that was almost enough to cause me to evolve despite my Haki, s'il vous plait. Still, not enough, you half-baked egg, bon!"

Gasping and now badly battered, Franky knew that he couldn't face both Tamago and the swiftly recovering Pekoms, who was even then pushing himself to his feet. While around him, the NFP were still making headway against the few remaining Big Mom Pirates left, Franky quickly decided that he wasn't going to stay and fight a losing battle. Better, he saw that Pekoms had lost his glasses in his brief dip in the water.

Grunting in pain, Franky straightened up as his shoulders shifted and twitched, his hair slowly losing its vitality. *Damn it, I'm almost out of cola too! This better work.* "Prepare for my most powerful attack, the SUUPER FRANKY...BEAM!!"

Tamago and Pekoms both flinched, covering their body with Haki just in case, but rather than a physical assault, like his original Franky Destroy Ho, what came out of Franky's shoulders, redone and enhanced from his original BF-36 design, was not a beam of power or a heat-based blast. Franky hadn't figured out quite yet how to minimize the size of those dials just yet. Instead, what came from his shoulders was a bright flare of light, so bright it made Eve's roots seem dim.

The two Big Mom officers, and indeed everyone else around them, bar a few anglerfish fishermen, screamed as they were blinded. Tamago went so far as to cover his one remaining eye as he reeled back, and Pekoms rolled on the ground holding his eyes in his hands.

Knowing he couldn't take both of them out, Franky retreated quickly, his shoulders painfully shifting back into their normal position. At the same time, a mental command to his feet saw small slits pop up out of his feet. They immediately began to pump out smoke, further covering his blood-soaked retreat.

While the smoke spread out, Tamago and Pekoms slowly recovered, attacked at the same time by numerous NFP merfolk whose eyes recovered faster. Tamago's Haki and Pekoms' turtle shell protected them well enough; even blind, the pair lashed out, killing several of the attacking merfolk. More piled in, only to die similarly while the two recovered.

By the time they recovered enough to see, though, the entire area was engulfed in thick smoke, so thick that no one could see more than a few inches away from one another.

Damn it, and there are still too many people around for me to figure out which one of them is the Straw Hat Pirate with my Kenbunshoku, Tamago thought to himself with a grumble, a kick lashing out to kill another spiked fishman whose belief in his armored spikes quickly proved false. "Bon, Pekoms, you are in charge here. I will go after Franky s'il vous plaît."

Not waiting for a response from his companion, Tamago bunched his long legs and leaped into the air, pushing himself up and out of the smoke bank, to the point where he was in the sky above. For a moment, he floated there, staring all around him before he spotted a flash of blue hair racing deeper into the city. "Bon, there he is. You might've decided to steal a march on us and surprised me by working with the locals, but that does not mean you will be able to escape our vengeance, soir!"

Down below, Pekoms had heard Tamago, and while a part of him wanted to chase after Franky himself, he knew that Tamago was built more for the chase than he was, despite being a lion mink. Tamago's long legs and ability to use his people's version of Geppo meant he could canvas the city faster, even if he lost sight of Franky, and follow from the air rather than from scent alone.

With that in mind, he turned and, roaring, closed with the remaining attackers. Only a bare handful of the lower-ranking Big Mom Pirates were still on their feet, but Pekoms quickly rallied them, each punch blasting several merfolk off their feet. "GAO!! Come on, you useless jetsam, show these fish they shouldn't mess with New World Veterans, grrr!"

Racing through the city, Franky had put a few blocks distance between himself and the wharf before ducking under cover, grabbing a hat from a nearby vendor and stuffing it on his head for a second even as he raced through the man's store. The store exploded behind him as Tamago came down from on high with a Haki-assisted heel stomp, smashing straight through

three stories, shattering the whole building. But as he did, Franky raced on, grabbing up several cola bottles from a vendor as he did, sliding them into place in his stomach. This powered him up, for sure, but Franky had taken the measure of his enemies and felt he couldn't fight them even with more cola empowering his systems.

Ignoring the shout of outrage from the stall owner behind him, Franky raced on. It took him several more minutes to feel as if he had thrown off his pursuer enough to turn some of his attention away from simply racing on. As he burst out onto a busier street, Franky reached into his speedo to pull out the Den Den Mushi within.

Ignoring the shouts of 'hentai' and 'pervert' from the people around him, Franky shouted into it, his voice coming out in a mutter thanks to the damage his chin and lower jaw had taken from Tamago earlier. "This is Franky to any Straw Hat listening, we've got trouble!"

It took him another few minutes to realize he hadn't received a reply. Glancing down after jumping up over a small bundle of crates, Franky hid behind them for a second to look down at the Den Den Mushi. Eyes widened in shock as the Den Den Mushi remained silent, its features unchanged, its eyes closed. "What the heck!?"

Franky was a Paradise native, far more at home with Den Den Mushi than most from the other seas, and knew there were only two reasons why a paired Den Den Mushi wouldn't wake up when you pulled the transceiver off its back. "FUCK, they're jamming us now!?"

Another building nearby exploded as Tamago once more did an attack from on high. "Falling Egg Smash!" and Franky had no more time to worry about the implications of that. Only to run as the Knight-level Combatant came after him furiously.

OOOOOOO

"Agent Green, Agent Eyes, Agent Orange, Report," the voice of the CP-7 agent intoned, leaning back in a small room in Mermaid Cove. As far as the locals knew, the building this room was in was owned by a group of three mermaids who were in and out of the apartment all the time. However, those three mermaids had no idea that there was a fourth, sealed-over bedroom, hidden from the eyes of everyone within and without the coral apartments that dominated the area of Fishman Island that had become dominated by single, pretty mermaids.

The only entrance was from a very long tunnel through the underlying corral of the island. The tunnel connected this apartment to the island's sewer system from which the CP-7 agent, codename Organizer, could enter and exit.

Not that Organizer had in fact exited for a long while. He had come with a three-month supply of food and necessities. He was also a master of Life Return, a technique that could remake the user's body to a degree, so he did not care much about his overall health. No, what

mattered was that he was hidden, and his equipment, their importance to the plan to force a confrontation between the Straw Hats and the Big Mom Pirates.

“This is Agent Orange. Our coerced tool among Hody’s men assaulted Smooth Sailing, as we had ordered. I have eyes on the ongoing battle and can report that the Straw Hats have already been pulled into it in the form of Franky the Shipwright. There has been no sighting of any Royal Army units in the area. The fight is entirely going on between the New Fishman Pirates and the Big Mom Crew. CP-4?”

There was silence, and then Organizer spoke, ordering the Unseen member to answer. He had shifted from trailing Nico Robin to moving to a central location near the Everlasting Resolve, where he could trail any other Straw Hat member if they showed up.

With the order given, the CP-4 agent, who could barely be called a man, given his training to subsume himself to his orders, spoke, his voice a monotone that made even the other CP members seem emotional. “Reporting sighting of the local royal princes. Ryuboshi then left with Jinbe. Soon after, movement was spotted at various barracks, with the Royal Army moving out in force.”

“Good. We will accept that it is a sign that Hody’s main forces will have pulled them out of position to intervene between the Straw Hats and the Big Mom Pirates. Continue, Orange.”

“The Smooth Sailing is sunk, and I am ready to move against the objective within. Losses were heavy initially as the New World Pirates were taken by surprise, but that has since switched entirely. The pirate Pekoms is slaughtering every fishman that comes near him. I estimate the fight here will only last another few minutes, if that. Franky has escaped deeper into the city, but Tamago is after him. I will, barring orders to the contrary, move in to take”

For all the agent’s care, he might have been talking about the tide, which was as it should be. No Cipher Pol agent, regardless of his specialty, could allow himself to be overwhelmed by the sight of blood. As for the specifics, Organizer tapped his fingers gently, then shrugged. While they had hoped to cause losses among the officers on both sides, if only the Straw Hats died, that was more than acceptable. “Very well. Move against your additional target at your discretion. Agent Green?”

“This is Agent Green from my secondary hiding point. Hody’s men moved out and took possession of the weapons so quickly I was almost discovered, but I was able to escape with no one seeing me. Nico Robin has arrived here in the Ship’s Graveyard. Requesting an update on my orders.”

The Ship’s Graveyard’s formal name was the Sea Forest, an area on the ocean floor directly northeast of Fishman Island by a good twelve nautical miles. This was further along the route through the tunnel underneath the Red Line, at a point where underwater currents deposited the wreckage of ships from all across the ocean, hence its secondary name.

Despite the monotone nature of the Agent's voice, it was clear what kind of update he wanted to hear, but Organizer was adamant. **"NO.** There will be no move against Nico Robin unless all other objectives are met and blame can be laid at the feet of the Big Mom Pirates to any surviving Straw Hats. Do not, and I will repeat this, do not engage or show yourself in any way. Agent Eyes?"

"Lightning King Luffy and an individual CP-4 identified as Fukaboshi, the oldest royal prince, have left Fishman Island on the royal barge. They met up with a platoon of Royal Army members soon before leaving the protective bubble behind. He moved beyond my range more than two hours ago, heading away from Fishman Island on a northeast-by-east course." Agent Eyes answered.

He was the only one of them who could use Kenbunshoku, and while his range was incredible, he couldn't look into his targets all that far. Agent Eyes' Kenbunshoku was meant for long-range observation, not combat, which fit him as a member of CP-8, the Seekers. It was his job to warn, as best he could, of anything related to the Goro Goro no Mi user.

"CP-4, report on the targets remaining," Organizer ordered.

"At the same time that the princes were spotted and split off with Lightning King Luffy. Sand Princess Vivi and Boa Sandersonia went their own way. The two of them are walking around with another woman, pink-haired..." At that point, the CP-4 agent described Shirahoshi, whose identity the agent did not know. "Acting upon existing orders, I followed them for a time, and learned that she is Princess Shirahoshi. Soon after they stopped to eat at a café, I split off to put eyes on Charlotte Smoothie to observe the instigated assault on her."

Organizer frowned for a moment, then shrugged. The World Government had literally no information on Shirahoshi, other than her age, the fact that Decken was interested in marrying her, and Hody wanted her dead. Nothing else about her was known, and the Organizer now felt it was not an oversight but perhaps deliberate.

Why? And why is she being allowed to wander the island with the Sand Princess... protection? I see. That means Lightning King Luffy is almost certainly moving against Decken. Excellent. Still, this mystery of Shirahoshi... if I had even one more agent, another CP-4 member for preference, I would assign them to watch that group. As it is, I can only hope that the Big Mom Pirates go after them soon. "Were you able to overhear their plans?"

"To a point. The Princess wished to see a monument in the Sea Forest, but the Sand Princess was insisting she do some clothes shopping first. They were going to head to the Criminal Store in Gyoverly Hills."

"Very well. Has Charlotte Smoothie been successfully pointed toward the Straw Hat Pirates?"

“Negative,” the CP-4 member intoned. “At present, Smoothie is not being engaged; she dealt with an attack on her around thirty minutes ago. Before the local rabble could follow their set script, unfortunately. Charlotte Smoothie and an unidentified blonde man are in an area between the Marine Shopping Mall and Mermaid Beach.

“The blonde is a combatant?” Organizer inquired, his fingers twitching slightly in contemplation. “Assess the odds of him being someone of caliber.”

“High. The unknown blonde man was involved in halting the attempt to accost Charlotte Smoothie. He seems to be a chef as well, judging by his current actions.”

“Speculate on the man’s identity.”

“...” for a moment, the CP-4 member didn’t reply, struggling for a moment with the idea of having something so personal as an opinion, let alone sharing it. Yet orders were absolute. “He looks like a Germa 66 member.”

That caused Organizer to furrow his brows in surprise and annoyance before he remembered a few internal suppositions about Black Leg Sanji's identity that the lower-ranking agents were not privy to. Specifically, the reason why, even after events around Impel Down, he was wanted only alive. For a moment, he wrestled with the idea of sharing that information before deciding against it, only saying, “Assume he is an unknown Straw Hat member for now. It is actually excellent for our overall plans.”

Organizer thought for a moment, then nodded decisively. The enemy had foolishly decided to separate, despite almost certainly knowing the Big Mom Pirates were here. Now to make them pay for it.

“Attention all agents,” he intoned as he stood up, moving over to a large, horned Den Den Mushi which took up one corner of the room. Getting the huge creature here had taken some ingenuity and time, but it was about to be worth it.

“Remember, our primary objective is to remain unseen more than anything else. However, as Operator for his mission, I deem that phase one has succeeded. We will be moving to the second phase of the operation. To silence the enemy, we must silence ourselves.”

“Going dark,” his four agents intoned, followed by four clicks as they hung up their Den Den Mushi.

Each agent would have their own orders for this phase. For himself, Operator decided to put himself in a position to watch the Sand Princess and Sandersonia Boa. That would give them eyes on every remaining member of the Straw Hat Crew. *But first...*

At around the same time as Franky started to hide his blue hair, Operator pushed on the head of the horned Den Den Mushi, waking it up. He then pulled open its sides, so they lay on either side of the creature. Unlike normal Den Den Mushi, these sides didn't look like a transceiver. Rather, they looked like extra-large speakers. As they sat there, they began to thrum, and the horned Den Den Mushi's eyes widened, the antennae twitching in every direction.

And everywhere on Fishman Island and a dozen miles beyond in every direction, Den Den Mushi fell silent, unable to receive or send messages. The Straw Hats, and indeed the Big Mom Pirates, were now all on their own.

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By the time real trouble began back on Fishman Island, Luffy and two princes had long since met with forty of the Royal Army near the edge of the island's bubble. The army men, both fishmen and mermen, had carried supplies, which went on the royal eel's back, and then they were off.

By the time evening fell behind them and events played out, they had pushed well out from the island, speeding along as fast as the Royal eel could take Luffy. He sat in the back, while Manboshi controlled the yield from the front, closing his eyes as he concentrated on his Kenbunshoku. *Funny, before the trip to Fishman Island, I think I'd be freaking out right now, what with so much water so close. Thank every god and goddess, but that bitch Urd, that the water attraction part of my curse didn't pass over with my soul... mind? Both... heh. Both is good.*

"What are you chuckling about~? Something you wish to share? Jokes are best when sharreed~!" Manboshi exclaimed.

"Ah, I'd have ta explain the joke to you, sorry. It's just funny how memories sometimes stick with us. Heh. Although I'd bet you have some fun memories with so many siblings. What's the most embarrassing memory of Fukaboshi you have?" Luffy asked, more to change the subject than any real interest. *Nope, not gonna explain memes. Too much trouble for little reward.*

This worked, though, and Manboshi, with the glee of younger brothers the universe all over, had several such tales to tell of the normally serious Fukaboshi. Who did not take this retelling very well, trying to threaten his brother with all sorts of bodily harm? The teasing and threats went on until yet another attack from Decken sped through the water nearby.

"I still can't sense him, but that attack came in from a different angle," Luffy mused as the two princes became serious again. "Do you think Decken is the type to keep on a simple course, believing that distance and so forth will make it impossible for you to catch them, or randomly change his course to throw you off?"

"Distance and constant motion has certainly been working up to this point," Fukaboshi grumbled, before smiling darkly. "But with a Kenbunshoku user, we can start cutting across the internal angle on him."

Seconds later, Luffy whooped. "I just sensed something else out there, something big, moving around. Huge, and definitely a person, huh... I think I recognize this feeling from when we were traveling to your kingdom earlier today. I felt it right before... or was it after... those fishy idiots attacked us. You said something about Decken having a giant pufferfish fishman on his crew? If I had to guess, that's the mind I'm sensing out there."

"He does indeed. His name is Wadatsumi, and he is a rather slow, foolish fellow for all his size. How Vander Decken was able to convince Wadatsumi to follow him is one of Ryugu Kingdom's modern mysteries," the older prince smirked just a little bit. "With his size, it makes sense that you can find him first."

Thirty minutes later, Luffy frowned a bit. They'd gotten closer to the distant target, and he had reported that he could sense at least five more minds beyond Wadatsumi. Now, though, the Decken crew had seemingly changed direction randomly. Here, there wasn't anything like the coral forest, and they were well away from the underwater volcanoes, too. There was coral below them, sure, but the main landmarks in this area of the ocean were the roots of Eve, the massive Yarukiman-like growths that dwarfed whole islands. *Makes the size of the so-called tunnel under the Red Line all the more impossible, doesn't it?*

"Damn, he just left my range. Still heading in the same direction, though," he said aloud.

He pointed in the proper direction, and Manboshi angled the eel in that direction while Fukaboshi and the platoon of army regulars followed. "Huh... he's moving at a pretty decent speed, Wadatsumi can also change his course quickly, put more distance between us or even loop back the other way if we're not careful."

"We'll keep going on this angle for another few minutes, but don't let losing...er... sight of Wadatsumi get to you. You're bound to find him again eventually, or one more of Decken's attacks will come in, and we'll follow it back outward as we were before." Now that the solution to one of the more irritating problems facing his family was in sight, Fukaboshi was more than willing to make certain the job was done right rather than leap ahead.

"Not so much an angle now, brother dear, as simply a circle around the island~." Manboshi chuckled, causing Luffy to grin. The younger prince had an attitude towards life that Luffy could agree with. It was far better to smile and laugh than act serious all the time. "In fact, if we keep going, and if I'm right about Luffy's Kenbunshoku range and the timing, you might be able to follow some of the fighting going on around the Fishman District soon~."

He wasn't quite correct on that score, as they had put at least three hundred nautical miles between them and the outskirts of Fishman Island's supporting bubble. Such was the

speed that the eel and the royals could match. They'd then begun to follow Wadatsumi, but in a tighter curve to the course that the giant pufferfish fishman was taking.

"Huh?" Luffy asked quizzically.

"The Fishman District has always sat apart from Fishman Island by around eighty nautical miles. Originally, it was simply for merfolk, mermaid, fishman or merman, who preferred to remain true to our watery roots, and our ancient records say there was even some talk of it becoming a second city. When the predations of the World Government and other slaving outfits began, it became a place for those who wanted to strike back to gather. That shifted a few generations ago to being a place for general outcasts or violent types to gather," Fukaboshi explained before falling silent as if feeling guilty about something.

Thus, it fell to Manboshi to explain. "Our family's efforts to reclaim control have been desultory at best~. It was thought by many kings that having it as an outlet, a place to let the violent and criminal elements go, was a good thing for the rest of the Ryugu Kingdom~."

"Ah. Yeah, that's been tried a few times," Luffy agreed, remembering that Australia had originally been a prison colony. Or at least, that was what he remembered, and the reasoning behind it was something he'd never learned or at least didn't remember.

"Indeed. But more importantly for the moment is that, in curving around the island as we have, we will be coming closer to Fishman District." Fukaboshi quickly moved on from the talk of the past and his ancestor's poor governance, pointing in the proper direction for the district in question, seemingly knowing all the various landmarks around them.

Or should that be watermarks? Luffy thought idly. The view of the bottom of the ocean, lit up by Eve's roots, was just amazing. But Luffy could admit to missing Sandersonia and Nami's navigational skills. *All this coral and the rocks all look alike to me.*

"So, tell us if you can sense anything going on. If I'm right, it will have taken Ryuboshi this long to gather the Royal Army, so they should be moving against Hody soon," Fukaboshi finished.

"Alright, but remember that any fighting'll be happening between Fishman District and the main island, so I..." Luffy broke off, and his head did twitch in that direction, and he paused for a moment in his concentration on figuring out where the next attack might be coming from. "There it is again. Freaking, weird feeling..."

"There, what is again~? You can't just speak something like that and not have someone question what you're talking about, you know~," Manboshi teased.

Luffy snorted, shaking his head. "On the way to your island, I sensed something really weird out there near the edge of my Kenbunshoku range. A presence, but I don't think it's a

living one. We, my crew and I, wondered if it was some kind of slowly forming, or decomposing, ship spirit.”

“A klabautermann, you mean? I’ve heard legends of such, but I would not have thought you’d be the sort to believe in such.” Fukaboshi chortled.

“Heh, you’d be surprised.” Luffy snickered, then shook his head. “It was bizarre at the time and is even more bizarre now, feeling how vast it is.”

“Vast~, what do you mean by that~?” Manboshi sang.

“I mean, it’s freaking huge. Massive, like, like maybe a third the size of the bubble your island’s inside of,” Luffy explained. “Do you have any idea what it could be?”

The two princes frowned at that, but there really was only one thing, one ship it could be at that size. *And we are near, relatively speaking, the Fishman District.* “It could be Noah.” Fukaboshi tapped his trident thoughtfully. “Hmm... but I can’t remember any other Kenbunshoku users speaking of such before.”

“Noah? Your father mentioned that name earlier. What’s Noah?” Luffy then shrugged. “And as to your point about other Kenbunshoku users, remember there’s probably only a handful in the world that come close to my range, even underwater. How many Kenbunshoku users have ever been near this Noah ship?”

“The name of a truly gigantic vessel, the only one that matches the size of what you are describing,” Fukaboshi intoned solemnly. “It is ancient, and was so even when my father was young. The exact age of it is lost in time, but it hasn’t eroded or decayed over the centuries. Our records say that it is because it was made of Adam wood, the entire thing. It’s a historical site, as my father mentioned to Jinbe.”

“Adam wood would still decay, though; it isn’t like a living tree. It’d take a long while, longer even than oak, but it still would decay. Unless...” Luffy blinked, then remembered, as Vivi had when he had initially talked to her about Noah’s spirit, the letter that her ancestor had left behind. “Unless someone used Busoshoku, imparted Haki into Noah. But to do that to something so large...”

Thinking about it, Luffy shivered. *Fucking hell, and I thought Gramps and Whitebeard were monsters.* Luffy had never been under any illusion that Garp and Whitebeard, despite being past their prime, were still more powerful than him. In their youth, the age of Gol D. Roger, they would’ve been far stronger. *Yet even they would surely have had problems imparting Busoshoku to something as massive as Noah.* *I, I don’t think even Roger could’ve done it, given Noah’s size. Not the whole thing. Which doesn’t even consider how exactly you could do it so that the Haki doesn’t fade, a question I’ve had since that darn letter.*

“Why would someone go to such lengths, though?” he nearly demanded aloud.

The two princes looked at one another once more and shrugged. “No one knows,” Fukaboshi replied. “Where Noah came from, why it is here, or what have you. My father knows something about it, but he has never told me anything specific. He simply says Noah is the sign of a promise from the ancient past. What promise that could be, I cannot speculate, although perhaps it too has long since faded into memory, leaving only the knowledge there was a promise of such import made.”

Inwardly, Fukaboshi wondered if perhaps that promise also had something to do with the power of Poseidon, the mermaid with the power to communicate with Sea Kings. For some reason, the promise made about Noah was just as secret as knowledge of that power’s existence, which had always struck Fukaboshi as odd.

For his part, Luffy could also see a connection between Noah, this promise, and the letter that Vivi’s ancestor Lily had left with her family. *Could Noah be something else from that era then? Or even connected to Lily, Joy Boy, whatever that is, or maybe something else to do with the Void century?* he mused to himself. Then a smile came to his face, one tender and loving enough to make Fukaboshi blink, as his thoughts turned to Robin. “I think that my archaeologist would like to examine this ship of yours. Is that possible, do you think?”

Mind you, I’d like to examine it too. Not it’s body, for sure, but the feeling of that presence... it’s making me think more about Haki and what Will really means, what it can do. Even more than Rayleigh’s lessons.

“It isn’t exactly a historical site, despite my earlier words. There are no hints on it about its purpose, origins or creator, and we certainly haven’t needed to look after it one way or the other,” Fukaboshi stated deprecatingly, internally wondering about the oddly loving tone Luffy had used there. “Normally, letting a human examine it would probably cause trouble, especially given its position overlooking the Fishman District, but as Jinbe and his crew are going to be moving against the New Fishman Pirates, I doubt that’s going to matter much.”

Luffy’s head twitched again, and his eyes narrowed. “Well, you were right. The battle’s begun back there.”

Just on the edge of his Kenbunshoku territory, in the shadow of Noah’s spirit, hundreds, then thousands of mines boiled up and out from where they had been so clumped up that his ability to pick out one mind from another had been impossible. “Damn, there’re a lot of people crammed in that district! They’re spreading out quickly, but I’m still having trouble picking out individual minds there’s so many. Did you guys have any idea of the numbers Hody had in his crew?”

Hearing that, Fukaboshi called a brief halt, frowning a bit as he treaded water next to the royal barge staring in the direction Luffy was, then at where he carried a Den Den Mushi on the

sash at his waist. "Our intelligence reported something around twenty thousand. Hmm... I had thought that Jinbe or Ryuboshi would at least call to tell us when the attack was going to happen."

"Eh, they're big boys. Jinbe certainly isn't the type to check in or ask for advice from anyone else," Luffy answered as he glanced at the Den Den Mushi he'd reclaimed from Sandersonia, which had yet to ring as well. Indeed, both it and the one on Fukaboshi's sash looked to be asleep. Frankly, the whole time since leaving the palace had been far quieter than he had expected. *Which is suspicious as all fuck. So, where's the shoe gonna drop, on me, or my crew... or Jinbe. Could be Jinbe, based on what I'm sensing out there.*

His sudden spike of worry assuaged by the sheer number of enemies Jinbe would need to deal with, Luffy relayed what he was sensing via his Kenbunshoku. "Well, at this range it's really difficult to make out single minds, but I guess judging by how much they're still spreading out, and I'm still having trouble doing that, there's got to be at least twice as many." Luffy scowled, staring in that direction, then whipped his head back and out to the starboard side as a large piece of coral zoomed through the water, its speed faster than any cannonball. "Turn the eel in that direction! I think I just felt Wadatsumi's mind again."

Manboshi urged the eel to change direction, and it did so with a flick of its long prehensile body, zooming in that direction all the faster as the troopers clung to its back. Seconds later, Luffy raised a fist with a whoop. "Yep, that's Wadatsumi. Keep pushing on in this direction, and to a little to our Portside! We've still got the internal angle on him. Unless Decken turns completely away, we'll close with him soon enough."

"As pleased as I am to learn that we are that close already, I have to worry about the numbers you reported. I hope that Ryuboshi mobilized our whole army, or else they could be in tremendous trouble," Fukaboshi muttered. "Even the Knight of the Sea cannot fight those numbers."

Luffy blinked, then snickered despite not turning to look at the older prince. "You really don't know how strong Jinbe is, do you? I've fought four Shichibukai and sparred with Jinbe. I'll thank you not to pass this on to Hancock, as she would literally geld me, but Jinbe is the strongest of the group." *Not up to Mihawk's level, but then again, that guy's an outlier in every way bar height you could meet.* "Even without his own Haoshoku or Kenbunshoku, his mastery of Fishman Karate makes up for it."

"No," he murmured as the feeling of *Noah*, the last presence from that area of the ocean, faded behind him. "No, the best thing we can do is finish Decken off as quickly as possible and then return. Jinbe might not be able to stop all of that crowd from getting into Fishman Island and causing trouble if they spread out fast enough, and there's also the Big Mom Pirates to consider. I want this job done as fast as we can do it before anything happens there... as it almost certainly will, knowing my crew's luck. I just hope that it'll happen after I return."

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Unaware that his worst fears had already happened, Luffy continued on his way, as Jinbe, his crew, and the Royal Army moved on Fishman District.

Jinbe had thought that he would need to convince his crew to fight their fellow, and mostly younger, Fishmen. However, after several weeks on Fishman Island and getting the tenor of the locals after so long away, only Jinbe had had any real sympathy for Hody or any of the rest.

In fact, Aladine had bluntly told Jinbe, "It's about damn time we moved against them. Those assholes are just like Arlong, believing in the superiority of Fishmen over everything, even their own damn eyes! They are just as racist as the World Government, only they don't hide it even a little bit and don't have as much power to act on either racism."

Thus, around the same time that troubles began back on Fishman Island, Jinbe, his crew, and nearly twenty-eight thousand members of that army were swimming through the water toward the Fishman District.

They had been a bit delayed from leaving Fishman Island because Neptune tried to get involved via Den Den Mushi in organizing things soon after Ryuboshi started organizing the army's movement. In fact, it was the king's worries about his son that had them taking the whole army out rather than half. Thankfully, Ryuboshi had talked Neptune out of coming out to lead them personally.

Not that Neptune wasn't a capable fighter. He was. However, he had severe back problems, as he himself had mentioned earlier, to the point where any long combat action would be practically impossible. Given the numbers they were dealing with, a long fight was almost an inevitability unless Jinbe could cow Hody and his followers.

Worse, if Neptune hurt himself or became unable to defend himself, every Army officer within sight would rush to defend him, breaking whatever formation they had, and leaving themselves open to defeat. That would be a problem for Ryuboshi as well, but he was young, faster in the water, without back issues, and far more likely to retreat and fight again than try to tough it out.

Jinbe swam at the head of the spear-like formation as it made for Fishman District. This area of the ocean's floor was mostly lined with hundreds of old, ancient corals, massive clams, and a few old outlying houses built out of coral or bedrock, all of it shadowed by the mass of Noah behind it, looming like a miniature Red Line. The actual area called Fishman District was built around, under and even incorporated some of those clams, but was largely built near the side of Noah.

As if, Jinbe mused, those who live here both want to hide and seek comfort from something larger at the same time. I should have tried harder. Should have been a better leader, done more, like Fisher Tiger did, putting the whole district under his control. But I have always found leading hard, and... and by the time I became Shichibukai, everything here was already too set. The people here had chosen their hero, Arlong. I thought my status would inspire them, would shield our brethren enough so that their thoughts would change in turn. But it didn't happen, instead, their hatred ossified, fed on itself, becoming darker.

Jinbe had hoped that their assault would be swift, taking the enemy by surprise. But given the time it had taken to get the Royal Army moving, he was unsurprised to see the New Fishman Pirates boiling out of it in the distance towards them. Their numbers were something of a surprise, a fact that made Jinbe happy for the extra tridents.

A bit more worrisome was how organized the NFP (New Fishman Pirates) seemed to be. While large numbers of them swarmed out like small hordes, there were other groups what were far more organized.

The beast tamers, fishmen who hunkered down on the backs of various 'tamed' Sea Kings, kept together, moving around one flank, looking to get away from the incoming loyalist forces. Ryuboshi had already seen them, though, and a force from the Royal Army twitched sideways shooting to cut them off even as Jinbe noticed other similar groups.

"Human slaves..." he grunted, fury welling up within him as he saw one such group. "By Davy Jones, Fisher Tiger must be turning in his grave."

There was indeed a group of human slaves down there. Not many, but they were there, toiling along on the sea floor, dragging massive, crude looking bombards behind them. Around them another organized group of mermen and fishmen moved, the Bombardment Squad.

Another group consisting entirely of mermen and fishmen dressed in Sea Urchin Armor settled into place along with two people Aladine recognized. "Those are Dosun and Ikaros, two of that brat Hody's officers. I'll wager they'll break off from one another soon. He needs his officers scattered to deal with this rabble."

Aladine's voice trailed off as he took in how many guns, swords and spears there were among the enemy. Those guns would break the small air bubbles around them and be useless after a single round each, but they would have been far more deadly if this fight was happening back on Fishman Island. More than that, the number of weapons bothered him. That had been one of the limiting factors of Hody's ability to force the Royal Army to take him seriously before this.

"There are thousands more weapons among them than there should be. Where did they get them all so quickly? No way could Hody or any of his officer's thing to hide them so well that the boys and I couldn't find them when we were sneaking around Fishman District."

"It really doesn't matter right now," Jinbe answered mildly, before raising his voice in a roar. "Attention all Royal forces! Spread out, shift formation to Formation B."

The twenty-five-thousand men of the Royal Army spread out in every direction, shifting from a narrow, dense spear like formation to a wide, loose formation that resembled a wall for a moment rising from the bed of the ocean floor beneath them upwards, dense enough to have every squadron be able to go to one another's aid, and allowed them to spread out at an angle. Soon, the wall became a curve and even more dispersed. Now the formation almost acted like a net to catch the incoming fishman pirates from every direction as they closed with the center of the Net where Jinbe and the Prince stood. Aladine and one army officer were the only other officers nearby.

"Attention, Hody Jones and the New Fishman Pirates!" Jinbe shouted. "By order of King Neptune, you are to surrender your weapons and yourselves into our custody! Your time of ruling Fishman District is at an end!"

"HOHOHOHOH!" A deep, almost sepulchral baritone replied as the group of fishmen boiling out from the district parted, leading Hody and several of his officers to swim forward across from where Jinbe and his companions were floating. "You think that just because you have Jinbe that you can overpower us? We are sixty thousand strong! Our anger, our hatred, it is perpetual. You cannot stand against it. Ryugu Kingdom will be ours, and then the oceans of the world."

"Ah, the familiar refrain of a madman. It's been a while since I've heard it. That addition of controlling the oceans is somewhat new, though, congratulations," Jinbe drawled, his eyes flashing with anger. "Do you think that Otohime or even Fisher Tiger—"

"We don't care what the past queen wanted. She was weak, she was a fool! Fisher Tiger didn't go far enough, didn't hate hard enough because he felt sympathy for the surface scum! We will correct his mistakes!" Hody bellowed back. "There will be no peace with the weakling humans, but our boots on their neck, as it should always have been. Otohime died for her ideals; she died because she was too weak to see where those ideals led her, but we are the New Fishman Pirates, and we will sweep humanity away from the oceans!"

"You think you and yours are strong enough to get past me?" Jinbe snorted. Holding up a hand he cupped it moving it gently, gathering water into the palm of his hand, condensing it to the point that to those who could see the technique, what was in his palm barely resembled normal water in comparison to everything around them. "One last chance. Give up your weapons, surrender, or we will claim them from you by force and clap each and every one of you in irons."

"For my new world order, for my crown!" Hody shouted, charging forwards.

A second later, he stopped in place as several water bullets slammed into him, the bits of water in Jinbe's hand creating a series of shockwaves that crashed into Hody. He fell back, bleeding from the six holes that had just been drilled through him, and the entirety of the fishman pirate horde paused, staring to where Jinbe had seemingly waved his hand towards Hody.

"I say again," Jinbe ground out, his tone carrying through the water like a crashing wave. He watched idly as several of his followers raised up to Hody, grabbed him as he had begun to ascend through the water, opening his jaw and stuffing something inside. "Surrender."

"Never! Down with the dogs of the humans! For our hatred, for our rage. Go forth, and if you die, remember to curse the humans, curse them for all time, DOSUN!" One of his surviving officers shouted, charging forward and up from the valley floor where he had been standing on the sand beneath the rest of the horde.

At his shout, the New Fishman Pirates seemed to regain some of their courage, and remembering how badly they outnumbered the Royal Army, they charged forwards. Soon, all around Jinbe, the waters boiled with combat as squads moved towards him, and hundreds and thousands of the attackers charged towards him, armed with iron shields in the lead. "You'll never crack our iron shields! We'll—"

That was as far as he got before the Prince and Aladine charged forwards, cutting and slicing. The prince's blade was indeed blocked by the armored shield of his opponent, but he struck the man so hard, he was blasted back through the water. Aladine's sword, gleaming with Busoshoku, sliced through shield and fishman alike, spraying blood everywhere.

Jinbe saw that for a moment and sighed faintly. As much as he had agreed that this was necessary, as much as the sight of the human slaves below being forced to take part in the battle, the sight of mer-and-fishmen fighting one another could only make bitter feelings well up from within him. That it was necessary to remove the equivalent of a cancer from within Ryugu Kingdom was the only thing that made it palatable but even that knowledge was bitter.

He barely glanced to the side as a group of young pirates charged him with their blades drawn, blocking them all easily with a wave of his hand and a mutter of Fishman karate, "Blasting Wave!" All four of them were slammed backward, flying through the water as if each of them had been slammed by the tail of a Sea King.

"And if it is to be done," he said aloud, "better to do it properly, and once and for all."

With that, Jinbe charged forwards, blasting straight through several groups of enemy pirates, coming face-to-face with Dosun, the one who had rallied the enemy moments before. Hundreds clambered in, and hundreds were flung back, then thousands, making Jinbe wish for once that he had Haoshoku.

"If Luffy or Hancock were here, they could simply put the majority of these pirates out with the power of their will. But no, I have to do things the old-fashioned way," he grumbled, even as he thrust his fists out in every direction, creating shock waves through the water that slammed into dozens or hundreds of attacking fishmen with every strike.

They were hurled away and outwards, allowing him to take in the battle as a whole for a brief moment. It had spread and escalated as he had feared it would, with the net formation of the being almost completely enveloped. *We did indeed underestimate their numbers*, he mused, even as he had just dealt with several thousand of them without breaking a sweat. *Still, it looks like the army's better training and organization is holding.*

Fist met hammer then, as he leaned back and thrust his hand up, grabbing the incoming hundred-ton hammer as Dosun attacked, the blow aimed towards Jinbe's chest. "However, I wonder how many of your people will keep fighting when I capture you and all the other remaining officers. I don't see Daruma or Zeo, though. If they have been set out to cause mischief just as we're here to clean out the root of this issue, I will become very annoyed indeed."

"HAH! You don't know anything yet! You haven't killed a single one of us just yet, and even if you did, our crew, our hatred would still be there, still biting at you for siding with the humans! Curse the humans!" Dosun bellowed, bringing his hammer around again.

Jinbe was about to grab the hammer, rip it out of this young fool's arms, and then possibly beat him to death with it when a sudden throbbing motion went through the water around Jinbe and indeed the whole battlefield. It was followed by another, then another, as if a giant beast had awoken nearby, its stirring or its heart creating ripples throughout the ocean around them.

Slowly, fighting died away as enemies backed off from one another, staring toward where the strange heartbeat-like thrumming was coming from, fear coursing through every fishman and merman there. Only Jinbe and his crew stood strong, simply watching. His men were wary, wondering what this was, but trusting their own strengths as New World veterans.

But Jinbe, Jinbe was angry. "I see, Hody Jones. You had a very specific goal when you joined the Royal Army decades back, didn't you? The thing your fellows pressed into your mouth, it was the royal medicine, wasn't it?"

"HO?" Hody muttered, cracking his neck as his eyes opened at last. In the last few moments, as the drug flowed through his system, his body had begun to shift. His skin whitened noticeably, and his hair followed suit. Hody's whole body was also bulging out in every direction, until he was larger by at least half again in both height and the width of his shoulders than he had been before. "You know of it, Jinbe?"

He held up his hand and performed a Finger Bomb attack, flicking his finger at a portion of the water around him, aiming not at Jinbe but at the prince.

Ryuboshi had barely an instant to gasp before Jinbe's back obscured his view. He watched as Jinbe shuddered as if he had been hit by a powerful blow. He jerked back through the water as a shockwave crashed out, blasting Ryuboshi and hundreds from both sides away, but even as he found himself whirled end over end through the water, Ryuboshi could not pull his eyes away from Jinbe's vast back as he staggered, and blood appeared from around him, a red cloud rapidly dissipating in the water while Jinbe doubled over in place.

"Haha, I always knew you were a fool, Jinbe," Hody said, his very voice shaking the ocean all around the battlefield, causing his men to cheer and the loyalists to quail. "But this is the power of the royal Energy Steroid!" He turned, roaring out to his crew, "Everyone! This is the power I promised you when you joined my crusade. Take them, take the Energy steroid pills we passed out to you. Overwhelm these fools, and we can move on. Soon, the Ryugu Kingdom will have a new king!"

This earned Hody a roar from the hordes following, but then a blast wave like a focused tsunami blasted out. Hody reacted in time to bring his forearms up to block, but gasped as he was flung back through the water several feet. His arms aching, he pulled them away to growl angrily. "Still alive, Jinbe?"

"Yare, Yare, I seem to be getting underestimated," Jinbe muttered, wringing out his hand lightly, showing it was bleeding badly from where his palm had taken the impact from Hody's water-style finger bomb, but it certainly wasn't a life-threatening wound. "What that is, Hody, is stolen power. Unearned, unlearned. Without depth or understanding."

He took a stance in the water, facing Hody without fear or even concern showing on his face. "Let us see what lasts longer, the strength I have built through my own blood, sweat and tears, or the power you have stolen, Hody Jones, shadow of hatred."

Hody roared, and the two large fishmen charged forwards, crashing into one another with enough force to send thousands of fishmen away as the shockwaves reverberated through the water.

Staring at this, Ryuboshi shook himself, then drew his second blade from his waist and charged forward to do battle. "Charge! For the future and your King!" All around him, the battle renewed, and blood began to darken the water once more.

End Chapter

I had initially wanted to add the bit with Smoothie and Sanji learning what is going on at the end, but the timing didn't quite work. No Den Den Mushi call, you see. And I didn't want to half-ass it. I hope the start of the Jinbe fight and the Franky fight was fun. Next chapter,

Smoothie and Sanji join the fun, Decken realizes he's become complacent, a problem that might prove lethal, and Hody and Jinbe clash while in the background, Operator and his men continue to scheme.