

I am not Japanese... that covers both sides here. LOL.

First, a moment of silence for the passing of James Earl Jones. The voice of Vader, the voice of Mufasa, an actor of amazing skill and range, from villains to comic secondary roles, like the great Christopher Lee and Leonard Nimoy, he will be missed.

This is the final version of this chapter. The original version has been up on my Patreon page since the end of August, but I wanted to give Tomon more time to go over it, as excellent as he has been at all things One Piece. He finally got it back, and here we are. I would have gotten it out to him much sooner, but we are soon going to be welcoming a new member into the clan, and I got roped into helping with a lot of renovations around the house that will house the little one this entire month. I lost around ten days in total in August to that. Still, it is here, folks, the end of the war. Enjoy.

This has been edited by me with Grammarly, Hiryo and Tomon.

Chapter 44: War of the Best: Mountain's Peak

Marco hadn't actually been all that accurate when he told about how the battle on the right flank was going when he called Jozu and talked to him and Whitebeard. It was true that by that time, Doflamingo was retreating, but there hadn't been any kind of conversation with Doflamingo. Rather, what Marco thought he saw was events intruding on Garp as he pursued a duel that was, to say the least, not going Doflamingo's way...

Doflamingo grunted as a hand that his wires refused to bite into slammed into his face, a punch that his own Busoshoku could not fully defend against. Even as he was hurled through the air, however, he lashed out with Goshikito, a claw-like attack made of string from both hands. One struck but didn't seem to do more than open up tiny paper cut-like marks on Garp's forearm.

"Bwahaha, that's the way, stringy bastard!" Garp bellowed, taking the hit with good humor.

"Tamaito!" Doflamingo shot back, shooting from all his fingers tiny bundles of strings coated with Busoshoku. They hit like a super-powered Shigan and normally would have turned anyone he shot full of holes.

Garp was not normal. Like everyone else in his family, he was the very definition of abnormal. Alternatively, just plain weird, depending on who you asked. He grunted a bit as one of them caught him in the ear and another in the elbow, but that was it, as Garp blasted through them.

“Geh, I should have figured you’d be ridiculously durable.” Doflamingo dodged backward, desperately using his Black Knight technique, which created a clone of himself right in front of him. Garp smashed into it, but the explosive string attack that should have erupted from the clone didn’t have time to go off before Garp had torn the clone asunder as if it was made of wet paper rather than densely packed string.

His clone’s death allowed Doflamingo to both put more distance between them and lash out with long-range attacks in the form of Fulbrights, a series of detached strings that fell through the air like spears flashing down at the same speed as a Rankyaku. This was accompanied by more Goshikitos.

To his shock, Garp was able to sense the Fulbrights coming and dodged through the deadly rain. They continued down to impale three men on a Whitebeard vessel, killing all three while the remainder slammed into the deck of the pirate ship, blasting through like red-hot nails through butter. This did mean Garp was hit by a few Goshikitos, but most of them were blasted away by a “MONKEY FIST!” which created a massive blast of condensed air that spread farther in every direction than Garp was tall.

For a few moments, though, Doflamingo was able to play keep away. Garp tried to close, only using a few air pressure-based attacks, while Doflamingo hit him with a lot of different attacks, using his Sora no Michi to stay away from the other man. This technique connected strings to the clouds from the bottom of his feet, allowing him to basically bounce along. Soon, the older man was covered in dozens of tiny cuts across his upper body, to the point the prisoner outfit he had previously been wearing was shredded, and what looked like tiny rivulets of blood were dripping down from his arms and chest.

None of those cuts were even debilitating let alone dangerous, not even taken altogether. *Perhaps I can blind Garp. His durability is insane, even when not using Busoshoku. I need to somehow either get through it or around it.* Suiting thought to action, Doflamingo heated up some string as he created a whip coming out of his palm. “Overheat!”

Even though this attack was just as long-ranged as most of his Ito Ito no Mi attacks, this proved to be a mistake. The attack had taken just a few seconds too long to concentrate on and attacked in too linear a fashion. Before Doflamingo could tag him, Garp had bounced to the side and then darted in with Soru. Doflamingo tried to dodge again, but a blow from a fist the same size as his head crashed into Doflamingo’s temple, causing him to see stars.

The next instant, Doflamingo covered himself with Busoshoku in an effort to protect himself from further hits like that, but the damage was done. A loud *GONNG* sound began to reverberate as the two of them started to exchange punches, but almost instantly, Doflamingo knew this was a bad proposition. His blows didn’t seem to be getting through to Garp, despite the somewhat shredded nature of Garp’s chest and forearms. Instead, Doflamingo was starting to feel it, his bones grinding under each blow.

“BWAHAHA!” Garp bellowed, smacking aside a pointblank Goshikito, slamming a fist into the side of Doflamingo’s head again, then a third time, hammering Doflamingo’s face with a strong jab. “Come on then, ya wannabe peacock! Gonna need bigger sunglasses to hide your face after I rearrange those pretty boy features of yours!”

“Gah!” That last blow actually threatened to break Doflamingo’s Busoshoku. *Is his skill with that technique so much better than mine!? I knew that there were a few total monsters among the marines’ upper echelons, but...*

With a grimace, Doflamingo used one of his true secrets, his ability to use Haoshoku. Garp’s basic speed and durability were simply overwhelming him. Lightning coruscated over Doflamingo’s body for a brief second before focusing on his fist. Garp’s eyes widened, but then a near-manic look came into his eyes and he punched out. “POWER PUNCH!”

Doflamingo had begun to perfect using Haoshoku to add more weight to his strikes, and fully anticipated Garp’s punch being shattered, or at least his Busoshoku failing. Yet, while Garp had never shown any mastery of Haoshoku as most thought that skill had to be used, as in he could not release an aura that would overpower those of weaker will around him, Garp did have his own trick with the Conqueror’s Haki: the ability to add even more weight and power to his strikes.

To the Shichibukai’s horror, he felt as if he had just punched a mountain made of hard rubber. “What...” Before he could get over his shock, another blow flashed through his defenses, hammering into his face again. This time, Doflamingo’s Busoshoku failed. There was a loud *Crunch*, and Doflamingo flew back through the air, his nose flattened, and two teeth knocked out of his mouth.

Doflamingo tried to right himself enough to try to use his Geppo technique at least, but before he could, a stomp caught him in the back. As dazed as he was, Doflamingo didn’t have a chance to either dodge or cover himself with Busoshoku. The blow broke ribs, leaving him almost paralyzed for a second with the pain of it as he was sent rocketing down towards a marine ship locked in combat with a Whitebeard vessel. Two other marine ships had somehow joined up with it, but all three were battered, while the Whitebeard ship was slowly pulling back and turning away to unleash devastating broadsides from both port and starboard occasionally. Only one of the marine vessels was able to do the same in response, the others, having lost their masts and floundering.

Doflamingo barely got his feet under him, before he touched down on the ship, bouncing up slightly over almost like a trampoline, but without any time to control where he went, and one of his legs gave out from the strike to his back. Doflamingo rolled across the main deck of the vessel, grateful for once that the marines were too dumb to run.

Garp zoomed down towards him, and Doflamingo responded, shooting up dozens of tiny, barely visible Tamaito while the Marines all around him cowered away from both

Shichibukai and the rampaging former Vice Admiral. Many of them looked as if they were wondering whom to root for, even as the ship was rocked by a few cannonball strikes and Garp closed in.

“Can this day get any fucking worse?!” one officer grumbled from where he had just ducked underneath a cannon on the main deck, hoping to use it for cover.

“Did you **really** just ask that?!” several other Marines shrieked as they cowered under what cover they could find from the dozens of redirected string shots that Garp was simply batting aside as he barreled down towards the ship. Even Doflamingo was tempted to look away from his target for a moment to glare at the officer for the sheer stupidity he had just shown, trying to dare fate like that.

And, just like a part of Doflamingo knew would occur, something did happen. A communication specialist ran up from below decks, shouting out, “Captain, Captain! We’ve got the communication snails working again! But we’re picking up a call for help from...”

“Lieutenant,” another Marine shouted from near the prow, even as he directed two pintle-mounted guns to point upwards at Garp, “do you think we are in any position whatsoever to help anyone else?”

“But, sir!” the younger man nearly wailed, his knees knocking together but his voice firm as he performed what he saw as his duty. “It’s not coming from any of the other ships in the fleet! It’s coming from Impel Down.”

The captain barely heard him, but did turn away for just a second, only to watch as Doflamingo's attempts to ward Garp off ended. The former marine officer easily pushed through Kumo no Sugaki, a web-like defense that Doflamingo had just thrown up. He dodged, but Garp moved with him via a burst of Soru, his fist catching Doflamingo in the head so hard that he was flung down into the deck again, and not just one deck either. He slammed into the aft deck at an angle, smashed through the captain’s quarters and down through two more decks, only coming to rest in the lower deck.

However, the officer was not the only one who had heard what the lieutenant said. For just a second, Garp hesitated, then jumped down into the hole he had made when he struck Doflamingo. *Finish the flamboyant fuck off, and then look into that.*

In the hold, Garp found Doflamingo had created what amounted to a cocoon of string all around himself. He was battered, and there was something wrong with his brain at the moment. He could think but couldn’t concentrate very well through the pain in his head. He had taken too many hits straight to the head in too short a time.

Yet he still heard Garp coming and grinned manically in the darkness within his cocoon. “Cocoon Burst!”

The massive cocoon of razor-sharp string lashed out, cutting into everything around him, turning everything within a certain area much mincemeat. This attack slammed into Garp before he could fully call on his Busoshoku, and he grunted, as still more paper cuts were sliced open across his front and upper legs. The impacts tossed him backward, and the next second, Doflamingo across the distance, a blow striking Garp's chest and hurling him up through the hole again.

There, Garp righted himself midair, flipping backward to land across the hole as Doflamingo appeared, dazed, looking a little battered but still furious as more string began to appear all around him, flicking this way and that like a living thing. Looking at him, Garp noticed that even the wooden planks of the ship directly beneath him looked as if it were starting slowly to come apart, not because of Doflamingo's strings but because the wood itself was **turning into** string. *Is he that close to Awakening his Devil Fruit? Damn! That could make this fight last too fucking long.*

Once more, Doflamingo lashed out towards Garp, only for a Monkey Fist to eat his attacks and then slam into Doflamingo, hurling him off the ship. Doflamingo went with the strike, using his string to bounce up and away from the ocean between the wreckage of two marine ships. Then he was off, pushing himself away from Garp.

Garp was about to pursue when he remembered what the marine with the Den Den Mushi had been shouting about a second ago. *Best to see what's going on with Impel Down first. There are people there that... well if I thought I had the time, I might've killed them all after I finished my little warm-up with Magellan.*

Shifting to the side, he landed near the lieutenant, grabbing the younger man's arm. "Give me that."

Staring up at the former hero of the marines, the lieutenant could only gibber, but his hand freely relinquished the Mushi. Garp plucked it out of his hand and held it to his ear, the snail seeming almost small in his massive hand. "Speak."

Perhaps because of the authority in that one word, or perhaps because he didn't recognize Garp's voice, the man on the other side restarted his report. "We, we've been attacked, betrayed! Blackbeard and his sole crewmate, they, they're here, and they mean to break out the prisoners from... from the Sixth floor! They could build a pirate crew, the power of which might match a Yonko's!"

That probably wasn't accurate, in Garp's opinion, at least not in total military strength. Most of the Yonko had a handful of fighters capable of fighting at or near Kizaru's level or just below, like Jozu, Marco and Vista, any of whom could give Kizaru or even Akainu and Aokiji a run for their money or outright beat them in the right circumstances. The rest of their most capable fighters were at the vice admiral level, like Whitey, the other division commanders and several

of their captains. The lower ranks were, well, more normal, with several dozen, maybe as many as a hundred or more commodore-level fighters.

The monsters on the sixth floor began at vice-admiral strength and went up from there, with five Garp could think offhand were as powerful or as deadly as Kizaru and Jozu, if not quite up to Aokiji or Akainu's skill level. There was no Yonko-level threat there, of course. Such true monsters were as rare as an incorruptible politician was and if Blackbeard thought he could be a Yonko? The other true monsters of the world might have something to say about that.

Yet it wasn't just combat potential that had to be considered here. Even the Beasts Pirates' three All-Stars were not nearly as vicious and indiscriminate in the destruction they caused as people like Avalo Pizarro or Vasco Shot habitually were. Where they walked apocalypse followed. To say nothing of the information and non-combat abilities many could bring to bear, like in the case of Catarina Devon or the two mad scientists, Mohawk and Crest. That pair had been minor partners in MADS, the rogue group of scientists that Vegapunk had led before his capture by the World Government. And unlike Vegapunk and Caesar Clown, another member of that group, Mohawk and Crest had been researching things that forced the WeeGee to erase them from the face of the world rather than try to employ them.

Letting those beasts out would be a disaster, especially on top of the losses the marines had already taken in this fight. *AND FUCK... the fleet there. Most of the marine ships that were assigned to Impel Down would be fit to sail. If they just tie them all together and tow them with the paddleboats...*

Growling angrily, Garp turned around, staring out over the ocean toward where he supposed Impel Down was.

It actually wasn't. In fact, Garp was staring in an entirely different direction. But that was neither here nor there, as it was in the direction of a few marine officers. Including a few, he knew he could browbeat without first needing to beat them down. *Good enough to start with.*

He dropped the communication snail back into the officer's arm, glaring at him. "Repeat that report every few minutes. Get it out to every ship. There's now more at stake here than just the fight against Whitebeard. You all lost that fight, but you may be able to claim some measure of victory today."

"Wh... wait, you're on their--" the nearby Captain began before Garp cut him off with a growl.

"Bah! Fighting alongside 'em, not with 'em. I might've stopped listening to the WeeGee and that assbat Sengoku when I thought they killed my grandson, but I still got my own sense of Justice." With that, Garp jumped into the air. Moments later, he was bouncing through the air.

From here on, Marco's recitation of events became more accurate.

A few minutes of Soru and Geppo took him behind two marine officers who had previously been attacking a single Whitebeard vessel, well away from where Marco was currently fighting four vice admirals. With the four of them pressing him hard, Marco couldn't afford to do anything to help Izou, another division commander. Despite being pinned in place by a lack of Geppo, his long-ranged attacks had felled a vice admiral and several commodores as they attacked his division, but he hadn't been able to keep Momonga and Sharinguru, a Captain with a Devil Fruit, which let him transform his limbs into wheels that he could then spin at high speeds, from closing with him and his flagship. The crossdressing division commander was still alive, but his division's flagship was pretty much done, its steam engine gone, many of its crew dead or wounded.

Before the marine officers could turn to another ship or finish Izou off, both officers gasped as giant hands grabbed the backs of their heads and dragged them around to stare at the bloody, bleeding form of Garp, although the smile on his face and the power of the grip on their heads proved those were mere flesh wounds. "Hey, Sharinguru, Momonga. Got some news for you two brats that I'm certain you're gonna want to act on. Mainly because if you don't, I'm gonna hurt ya..."

OOOOOOO

At around the same time that Garp was practicing Monkey-style diplomacy elsewhere, his former opponent was indeed calling in the towel, as Marco had reported.

Doflamingo grunted with effort as he forced his legs to keep going, using Sora no Michi to once more bounce through the air. While normally Doflamingo had a nearly inhuman level of recovery from injury, and could use his string powers to almost instantly close any wound, the sheer pounding he had taken from Garp had overcome that, making this a lot harder than normal. That, and there was a limit to what even his endurance could do about damage done to the brain, and Garp had taken great delight in pummeling Doflamingo's head.

Yet despite the pain of his exertions and the weight of Baby 5 on his back, as Doflamingo pulled further and further away from the conflict behind them, he had to reflect on his escape from Garp. "Fufufu, amazing, amazing! Truly, fate is on my side."

In barely twenty minutes of combat with Garp, Doflamingo had been too badly battered to want to keep fighting. He could have made a significant fight of it with Garp or with anyone else who came at him, but his stomach for going on the offensive, for searching out other enemies to fight, was utterly gone. Thus, he had retreated from the marine vessel, and to his astonished happiness, Garp hadn't come after him.

It had taken him a few minutes to realize that, but once he did, Doflamingo turned back. Finding his ship in the tumult was relatively easy as the battle was noticeably dying out on this flank. Picking up the battered form of Baby 5 and discovering that his subordinate, Diamante, was indeed dead. His entire head was missing, seared off of his body by an intense flame of

some kind, while his chest looked as if someone with incredibly large talons had done a tango on it. Proof, if Doflamingo had needed it, that Marco the Phoenix had overcome his disciple before the vice admirals could come to his aid.

If they were going to do any such thing, which is doubtful. While most marines agreed with the need for the Shichibukai, that didn't mean they liked them or their crews. For certain, Momonga, one of the more senior vice admirals he could sense in the area, would not have come to Diamante's aid. Something Doflamingo knew all too well.

Now well away from where the fighting was still going on most fiercely at the center of the Tarai Current, Doflamingo saw one lone marine vessel shifting even further away. He looked that way and then shrugged his shoulders. It looked as if some marines understood when to exit stage right, and he was in no mood to hunt them down and see precisely why.

He then turned his attention back to where he could barely feel Garp at the far edge of his Kenbunshoku. Having fought the man, he now had a much better feel for the older man's mind and could track Garp a little better.

For some reason, Garp was gathering several officers to him, pulling them away in small groups from where they had been assaulting the Whitebeard fleet and sending them towards the prison. That was strange, but Doflamingo reckoned that had something to do with Blackbeard, as he knew the other Shichibukai had skirted around the entire fight in order to head towards Impel Down. *I wonder what secrets are in there that all of those marines have been convinced that stopping whatever is going on there is more important than finishing off the Whitebeard pirates? Of course, the Whitebeard Pirates have somewhat left Newgate himself behind at this point, but...*

Doflamingo laughed again at that thought. "I suppose in a way that your saving me through your actions here could be called payback for my saving you from Ace, Blackbeard. But if you live, I will still demand recompense in some manner. I **am** a pirate, after all."

He paused there, creating a throne of string in midair, connected to the clouds above by hundreds of small strings. Once the throne was finished, Doflamingo leaned back, propping his feet up and setting Baby 5 to slump in a net of rope to one side, the filaments barely gleaming in the air.

With his sole remaining crewman taken care of, Doflamingo stared at the center of the battle. He was just within range of his Kenbunshoku to figure out what was going on there, and sensed Garp on his way into the tumult at the center of the battle, such as it was. *While I have no wish to become involved further at this point, I refuse to just leave. Not when I can watch history be made, no matter how distantly.*

OOOOOOO

With the last sounds of combat disappearing over the horizon, Hina's crew looked to their captain. Hina had informed them all of her fear that they would be used as a scapegoat, and after being treated almost like pariahs for working with the Straw Hats for the past few months, none of them had argued. Not after seeing Straw Hat Luffy, a man most of them had shared drinks with, throwing around lightning.

But now, they were all wondering what they should do, something that her first mate put into words. "Er, Hina-sama, what do we do now?" Fullbody asked.

"Get through the Calm Belt. Figure out where we are going from there," Hina answered briskly before pausing, staring at her crewmen. "And, and if we find an island that is neutral or at least peaceful, Hina will put you all to shore. You can make your own decisions then. But Hina could not leave you all behind to become scapegoats like Hina would for Monkey D Luffy having access to the Goro Goro no Mi."

At those words, Fullbody stiffened. "You're not the only one that's had a hard time since we returned from Skypiea, Captain. All of us could see that happening all too easily once you brought it up. And as for leaving you once we reach an island... well, we'll have to talk about that when we get there." *As if I will ever leave your side, Hina-sama!*

He turns to his crew, barking out orders. "You heard the Captain! Full steam ahead!"

Hina left him to it, turning to stare back over the horizon where the final sounds of combat had come from. Then she looked down at her officer's coat she was still wearing and slowly, almost ceremoniously untied it from around her shoulders. Hina stared at it for a few more moments before tossing it into the air, watching it float there for a moment as the ship continued on its way, leaving the coat behind to slowly settle down onto the ocean.

OOOOOOO

As Luffy zoomed away from the Everlasting Resolve, he fought for a few seconds to keep a grin off his face and not just because of the giggles from Hancock. The Pirate Empress seemed to greatly enjoy being carried princess style, despite why they were zooming through the air currently. Her giggles were nice, but so was meeting Vivi again after so long. *Damn, it feels like it's been years, but it's been less than half a year. That's what happens when you pack your time with so much.*

However, after a few seconds, Luffy's thoughts shifted quickly to the overall battle. He concentrated on his Kenbunshoku, hoping to get a visual of the entire battle before he was once more in the thick of it. *Not, mind you, that the term thick of it really works anymore.* That was the first thing that sprang to his attention: the battle was slowly dying out.

Before this, it had been clear that the Whitebeard pirates were winning the ship-to-ship combat aspect of the battle. Akainu's island had allowed the marines to bring forward more of

their ships, but Luffy's multiple Raigo strikes had offset that. The Whitebeard pirates had more than two dozen ships, maybe even a few divisions worth against their counterparts, but nothing in comparison to the losses the marines had suffered thanks to the nature of the battlefield and Luffy's powers. There were still a few undamaged marine vessels, but there was no way they could get into the fight, not with the amount of flotsam, burning wrecks and debris blocking their way forward around Akainu's island.

Moreover, there was a **lot** of that wreckage. This fight had been horrendously expensive in terms of lives and material. At least a hundred marine vessels still floating down there, but most of their crews were either nearly wiped out or too busy trying to do what damage control they could, putting out fires, plugging leaks, and seeing to their comrades and so forth to take part in the battle any longer.

That brought Luffy something of a sigh of internal relief. He knew how many he had personally sent to the afterlife and had no desire to add still more of the common marines to that ledger. *My nightmares will be bad enough as it is.*

Yet the story had flipped in the air, so to speak, where the majority of the high-end marine combatants could fly. There, the sheer number of marines that could move freely around the battlefield, along with the Pacifistas, K9Ms and the Green Goo had shifted the balance towards the marines. Indeed, even as the Whitebeard fleet had begun to pull back, Luffy had expected that to remain the case: that the vice admirals and others would be attacking the retreating pirate vessels, sinking or destroying any they could, wiping out the majority of the Yonko's forces, slowly but surely.

Yet that was not the case any longer. As Luffy zoomed towards the center of the conflict, where he could sense Whitebeard and Garp facing off against Sengoku, Kizaru, Akainu and the blonde guy, whose role in everything Luffy still wasn't altogether certain about, he could feel the tempo of the battle shifting quickly.

Many of the marine officers were gathering, pulling back entirely from the fight on the same flank where Garp had been before, shifting into a single group that seemed to be just speeding around the Whitebeard fleet in a tight turn. It looked at first as if they were trying to outflank the Whitebeard pirates, yet when he concentrated on them, Luffy could sense no such intent in the few minds out there, unable to keep his enhanced Kenbunshoku out. *Enel might have been an asshole, but he for sure knew how to use his Devil Fruit. I would honestly have never realized I could take my Kenbunshoku to this rare height without having heard some of the stories about what he could do.*

He couldn't quite sense what they were thinking from this far away. However, his Kenbunshoku was good enough to get a feel for the intent of the captains and commodores that were part of that group, even from this far away.

Not all the marine officers were pulling away from their assault on the Whitebeard fleet. There were still pockets of combat, but they were small and scattered. One of the larger ones was several officers fighting one of Whitebeard's, a mind that gave Luffy the impression of a bird almost, near where the right flank merged with the edge of the Tarai Current. Another was directly over the retreating fleet, where several officers were fighting two minds whose shapes Luffy had felt before.

So, that's Shiki and that diamond guy over there. I suppose the Whitebeard Fleet's going to escape the same way they came in, then. That might work, although it might also make them sitting ducks for anti-air fire, He thought, the term from his old world coming to him easily despite the fact there wasn't any local equivalent, really.

At the same time, it was also clear, the Whitebeard pirates had started to pull back in a controlled movement. All across the front, not just in the center, every ship that could retreat, be it through oars, engines, or the use of the Tarai Current, was doing so. A few on the flanks of the Tarai Current couldn't, damaged as they were from the fight, but the majority had already pulled back by this point, which was a show of surprising coordination in Luffy's mind.

As they left the wreckage of the marine fleet behind them, the divisions of Whitebeard's fleet formed into a defensive formation. This included all of their paddlewheel or other steam engine-type ships on the flanks. The Whitebeard fleet had been savaged but was still largely in one piece, and now they began to throw out waves of prepared cannon fire against the officers still attacking them. Even Soru and Kami-E could only do so much for the lower-ranking captains and commodores against so many cannons and guns, and more than a few began to retreat.

In his arms, Hancock had also decided to feel out the surrounding battle with her own Kenbunshoku. In her case though, she was keeping her attention on a few specific people. "Tsuru is retreating to the center of the current, the far back of that island. Do you think she will rejoin the battle between Whitebeard and Sengoku? And who else is the old man fighting? Kong, I presume."

"Nah, Kong was taken out... I think. I might've seen him... didn't really register." Luffy pulled out of his Kenbunshoku semi-mediation, wondering how long it would take him to the point where he could be as aware of everything around him normally as Enel was according to the Skypieans. *Mind you, I ain't laying out on a throne like a giant sack of shit, but there you go.*

He looked down at Hancock, swooping down to steal a kiss for a moment, causing her to gasp in surprise and delight. "Sorry, figured I owed you for how much tougher your getting away proved to be because of that old biddy," he said, his tone belying the seriousness of the words.

"Hehehehe," Hancock giggled like a lovestruck girl for a moment before shaking her head. "Ah, well, thank you for that. It won't be easy going forward, although after all the damage the marines have taken, here they won't have enough forces to attack Amazon Lily for years at minimum unless they allow the peace of the world to fad in large sections of their

territory. By that point, I hope we will have solidified our position. But you didn't answer my question. Who else is fighting with Whitebeard? Sengoku is good, but fighting Whitebeard for so long alone would be beyond him."

Luffy shrugged. He'd heard of Sengoku from Garp and knew how tough he was, but figured Hancock had a point. If Sengoku could fight a Yonko on an even footing, why wouldn't they have moved against one of them before this, let alone the World's Strongest Man? "I think I heard his name was Peter. He's a tall guy, taller even than Sengoku in his normal body, although nowhere near as huge as Whitebeard. Yellow hair, pretty tanned skin, a scar visible under his jacket..." Luffy trailed off as he looked at Hancock's wide eyes.

"That, that's the, he's a... I... that description sounds like one that I have heard before. From, from Shakky. He's a Gorosei!"

At that, Luffy blinked, and the pair paused in midair, Luffy's lower body still remaining in lightning form letting him hover there easily. "What? One of the rulers of the world? Really? I've heard of them, but I never thought any of those oldsters' be the sort to throw down."

"Then you were utterly naïve!" Hancock exclaimed, shaking her head. "Peter is a Gorosei. I cannot remember his specific area of control, but I believe he is the youngest member. I..." She began to chuckle, throwing her head back and pointing upwards into the sky, her position looking almost like her normal arrogant pose, but given her current position in Luffy's arms, it looked bizarre, to say the least. "We, our plans, your assault on Impel Down! That must have forced Sengoku to change his plans so much, he must have been forced to go to the WeeGee, hat in hand and beg for aid! Delicious! But... Peter is going to be deadly, beyond even Sengoku."

Her attitude shifted back to serious, and Luffy nodded. "Understood. Now, get your game face on, Empress. We're nearly there."

With that, Luffy concentrated back on what he could sense from the center, where Whitebeard, Sengoku, Peter, Garp, Kizaru and Akainu were. To his surprise, he couldn't really sense much of anything there, none of the back-and-forth moves or countermoves, even as the flying pair started to feel the reverberations of the fighting ahead of them as the super strong members of the fight exchanged blows. It felt to Luffy like several smaller 'domes' so to speak, of Kenbunshoku was pushing out his own, keeping it away.

That's got to be a sign of what Hancock was saying, that Peter guy's abilities. Luffy had been able to, if not outright defeat Kizaru and Akainu's Kenbunshoku. The domes were made by people who were much better at Kenbunshoku than either of those two. That was... kind of scary, but Luffy was determined. Despite being tired and feeling himself coming close to just using his life energy to empower his endurance, he needed to make certain his grandfather and Ace were at least able to get away. Whitebeard would be a great bonus but he wasn't Luffy's priority.

Using your ki to empower your endurance was a zero-sum game. It would take away from everything else he used his life energy to do and would eventually be like a snake eating its tail.

“Do you want me to just let you go here or toss you somewhere?” he asked as they came within sight of the battle. Luffy had gone deliberately slow so as to get a picture of the overall battle. The kiss and small discussion were just a bonus.

“Do I look like a ball?” Hancock demanded Luffy release her, and she hopped to the side of him for a moment, her eyes narrowing. “I will make my way around and wait for an opening. I doubt any of those fighters have had much time to realize what is going on beyond their personal battle, so their ability to discern where I am should be minimal at best.”

“Good thinking, I’ll try to close with Akainu, take him out of the fight right out of the bat. I’ve already, heh, disarmed him. Might as well finish the job,” Luffy said jokingly, although his blue eyes were dark with fury at the mention of the magma user, who had been behind the Water 7 debacle and whose idea of Absolute Justice Luffy abhorred.

Shaking her head at how easily Luffy spoke about ‘removing’ a flipping admiral, a logia user and one of the strongest men in the world, Hancock nodded. She then leaned in quickly, kissing Luffy on the lips, thrusting her tongue into his mouth for a brief moment, before pulling back. “For luck, my love,” she whispered before bouncing away, leaving Luffy there for a moment, before he shook his head and zoomed forward, shifting entirely into his lightning form as he went.

Changing into his lightning form, Luffy zoomed down, grinning evilly as he closed with Akainu from behind. He was to the side of the Gorosei, with both of them nearer the ground of Akainu’s island than Sengoku or Kizaru. Kizaru was across the way, dueling with a furious-looking Garp as he and Sengoku shouted something to one another, unheard over the clash of Peter’s sword against Whitebeard’s bisento.

Akainu had created a huge wall of magma to encompass the entire flank of the fight, pushing himself up towards the fight as even more magma rose, trying to form two massive hands. They reached up for Whitebeard and Garp from below, while the wall shifted forward towards Whitebeard from his side.

Thanks to not being locked in close combat, the Red Dog’s Kenbunshoku was up to sensing Luffy coming. He turned quickly, his eyes widening as the lightning bolt that was only vaguely human-shaped sped toward him.

Seeing Luffy zoom towards him, Akainu hesitated for a second, his attack stalling out both around and below him. The reminder of what had happened when lightning met magma filled him, and he lost control of his creations, concentrating more on his Busoshoku desperately, shifting his wall of magma around him. “Straw Hat!!!”

This move saved his life. The next second, Luffy's palm strike slammed into him. The lightning blasted through the magma with ease before hammering into Akainu's body, skittering off the Busoshoku covering Akainu's chest.

"GYAAAOOO!!" Akainu howled in pain as the heat of the lightning strike penetrated his Busoshoku, but he had better mastery of that technique than Kizaru, so it didn't do any 'real' damage. At the same time, it was like holding a hand over a scalding fire. The person doing that still felt pain despite not having anything to show for it after lifting your hand away. Only in Akainu's case, the pain was internal, and it was a kind of pain Akainu had never felt before, not since he had eaten the Magu Magu no Mi.

Hearing the cry from his subordinate, Sengoku whirled away from where he had been shouting at Garp. A Heavenly Palm lanced out, the beam a light-yellow color as Sengoku followed it up with a Soru-like move that a giant golden Buddha statue nearly five stories tall had no business doing.

Luffy had seen it coming, and he dived to one side in lightning form, ending his attack on Akainu. He then slammed back in, before suddenly redirecting himself off of the Buddha statue's golden chest before Sengoku could grab him with his free hand.

Luffy flipped up and away through the air, dodging a blow from Sengoku's staff and another strike from a long magma arm, as Kizaru came zooming through where he had been before. Peter and Whitebeard had continued their duel, not even noticing what was going on around them until Garp's fist slammed into the worm-man with such force he was hurled sideways almost out of sight before recovering and zooming back.

Whitebeard instantly lashed out with his Gura Gura no Mi power, sending a blast of shattering energy towards Akainu, only for him to disappear into the magma underneath him, reappearing a moment later, bursting out of the magma below them. Sengoku twisted around, lashing out with a beam strike of some kind from the bottom of his Shinto staff. "Coruscating Divine Slicer!"

Whitebeard blocked it, and Luffy zipped to the side, his lightning foot intercepting a blast of light from Kizaru, causing him to grimace a bit as the light did its typical redirecting trick to his foot before his Busoshoku-covered fist met Kizaru's. *God damn, but that always hurts, like getting your atoms tugged in different directions inside. Just slightly this time but that was mild.*

"God damn it, Luffy, we were having a conversation here!" Garp shouted, his fist zooming out to nearly decapitate Kizaru.

Only a last second Yata no Kagami down and off a bit of shining volcanic rock saved him. He bounced off the rock, coming to a stop an eye-blink later as he timed his shift back to his normal body. "Ma~h, ma~h, so scary. Just as scary as Whitebeard~."

Snorting as he watched Sengoku pull back, Luffy turned to deliberately roll his eyes at his grandfather's words. "Didn't look like it to me, Gramps. You two were just shouting at each other, while Whitebeard was doing all the work fighting Worm Man. Don't you feel ashamed makin' a geriatric do all... oh wait..." Luffy trailed off with an insolent smirk.

At the same time, he could feel Hancock waiting below and to the side rather than above as she had hoped, hidden in some of the smoke from the burning wreckage of the battle near the edge of the island. *I don't think this group's gonna let you get the drop on them, Hancock-chan, but more power to you.*

"OY!" Garp growled, his hands itching to reach out and noogie.

Whitebeard snorted. "I see you've got a mouth on you, brat. Still, judging from Magma-brat's arm, you've got some skill to back it up, at least."

"You didn't think I was just going to let you stand on the center stage on your own for the entire fight, did you?" Luffy asked, looking over at Whitebeard thoughtfully, ignoring his grandfather's grumble about teaching him a lesson later. Whitebeard looked a little seared around the edges, but he was still in one piece, despite the fact that Kizaru must've joined the fight almost instantly after Jozu had convinced Shiki to pull back and Luffy had zoomed off to meet up with Hancock and the strange, familiar mind he now knew had been Vivi's.

Tough old man. Although... I have to wonder if he's slowing down a bit. That last thought was because one of Whitebeard's legs looked as if it had been grabbed by a red-hot whip at some point, and his foot looked as if it had been stabbed through. He was still able to use Geppo, but those kinds of injuries could build up over time.

Wiping a bit of blood away from his golden visage from a blow from Whitebeard a moment before, Sengoku glared at Luffy, his eyes turning red, a very unusual sight in the solid gold face of the statue. "You, you! All of this, all of this is you!"

"Really? All of this is me? Seems to me that your plans weren't exactly all that good in the first place, if all that was needed to wreck them was little old me," Luffy snarked before becoming serious, his arms turning into lightning for a second as he glared at Sengoku. "You lot kept on poking me. First Smoker in Alabasta, then that whole attempt to blockade the island so I couldn't get away after cleaning up **your** fucking mess!"

Luffy growled a little before going on. "Then Water 7 and siccing three Shichibukai on me? What doesn't kill me makes me stronger, asshole! It's not my fault that every time you people try to make a plan to take me down, it goes poorly because I just decide not to roll over and die. Hell, I can't even be blamed for my grandfather's reaction to everything."

Garp nodded sagely. "True. That was totally me. And I would seriously like to cave in that golden skull of yours, Sengoku, but we have bigger fish to fry right now, as I was saying!"

Pausing, Luffy blinked, his arms turning back to normal as he turned to look at his grandfather out of the corner of his eye. "Wait, what? I'm confused. What could be more important than trying, heh," he turned back and gave Sengoku and the marines a smirk, "emphasis on **trying** to fight me and Whitebeard?"

"And you, Garp! Do you really think that telling us this, that leading the marines into keeping those monsters in Impel Down at bay will save you and your grandson from what you have done today?!" Sengoku growled, shaking his head angrily, ignoring Luffy yet also answering his question. "It's because of Straw Hat that the security of Impel Down was broken! It's because of you that those prisoners will escape, Garp!"

"So you would rather try to place blame than try to solve the problem? Wow, you really are a government official, aren't you Sengoku," Garp drawled back.

This made Whitebeard laugh, and Luffy just nodded his head sagely, tucking away what had been said about Impel Down for now. That certainly did sound like a lot of government officials back in his old world.

"Quiet, Garp! Every time you open your mouth, every time you do something now, you're just piling infamy upon infamy. Your image, the image of the Hero of the Marines has already been forever tainted!" Sengoku bellowed back, his golden brows twitching. "Do not think you can turn around and spout your nonsense about right and wrong to me!"

While he had ignored Garp's earlier words that had been his anger at the other man's actions and the debacle of everything else talking. In reality, Sengoku was very concerned about the prisoners of Impel Down escaping given the information some of them had, to say nothing of the sheer viciousness of the others. Yet he refused to let Whitebeard walk away from this. The man's legend would become unassailable if he did. To say nothing of Luffy's.

We cannot let another Pirate Emperor be born! I know that this day's work will shred the balance of power in the world like so much paper and we cannot afford any more disasters. But Aokiji is still out there, along with the vice admirals. They can handle Impel Down, so long as we slay Whitebeard and Straw Hat. "You are here, traitor! Straw Hat is here. Whitebeard is here. It is my job to make certain that you all stay here, sent to Davy Jones or back into Impel Down!"

"Oh, shut up, you gold-tinted turd! All the years we worked next to one another, and you still decided to go behind my back to okay the plans to attack my grandson! Fucking what did you think I would do?! Who betrayed who first?!"

"I'm right here, you know," Luffy quipped, snickering.

Garp ignored him, shouting at Sengoku again, while Kizaru and Akainu took the opportunity to regroup above and behind Sengoku and Peter. Why the pair had taken that position, Luffy had no idea but concentrated more on Garp's shouting match with Sengoku.

“Although you’re right, it ain’t my place to clean up your mess, especially after I was the one who put the likes of Vasco Shot or Catarina Devon behind bars in the first place. If you want to stay here and fight it out, that’s fine by me, I want to cave your head in, anyway!”

“Heh, so anger now overrides yer sense of justice, Gramps. Good to know, I guess,” Luffy snickered under his breath before looking over at Whitebeard. “So, any reason why you haven’t pulled back? Worried these four will come after you?”

“Bah! The fleet needs time to get out of here, brat. I need to keep Peter and Sengoku’s attention on me, or else me and Marco will be overcome at long-range attempting to protect the fleet from this pair’s long-range attacks,” Whitebeard scoffed, admitting without saying aloud that at anything beyond line-of-sight, Sengoku and Peter both had more weapons than he did.

Still, Luffy understood his point and resigned himself to sticking around. “Well, then, I suppose then I’m gonna be sticking with ya for a bit.”

“No one asked you to, brat. You and your crew did your part, freeing Ace in the first place. He’s returned to the Fleet. Getting him and the rest of my sons out of here is my concern, not yours,” Whitebeard growled out, turning his gaze on Luffy angrily.

“Hah! I told you, Old Man, I’m gonna be the Pirate King. What kind of Pirate King would I be if I just left a fight like this, knowing I still had more to give?” Luffy retorted.

As the shouting match continued between the former marine and the Fleet Admiral, Peter had remained stationary, thoughtful, as he had been since Garp showed up, shouting about Blackbeard invading Impel Down. Some of his internal calculations were based on assumptions, admittedly, but he had most of the prisoners of Level 6 memorized in his head. Now hearing Luffy’s words, He shook his massive head, a scowl appearing on his face. “The rise of a new evil fleet from the sixth floor is minor in comparison to letting Whitebeard walk away with this type of victory over the World Government. Letting Straw Hat Luffy live after such a strong showing on such a large stage is worse. His legend will continue to grow, even as Whitebeard’s begins to fade.”

Further, he is already connected to Whitebeard’s crew through his brother. If he becomes Whitebeard’s successor as a Yonko and simply incorporates the Whitebeard Fleet into his own, this entire operation will be for naught! Peter thought. Either the majority of the Whitebeard Fleet must be wiped out, or Straw Hat must die, and as he is right here, I will concentrate on the latter option.

Garp and the other combatants’ conversations ended as Peter spoke, turning to look at Peter. The worm man continued on, pointing at Whitebeard, then Luffy with one long finger-like tentacle after another, turning his head to bring an eye to bear on both. “Whitebeard and Portgas D. Ace, son of Gol D. Roger. Nico Robin, the only person alive able to read Poneglyphs.

These are problems of the past that must be extinguished. And your grandson is a problem for the future, one who is proven too large to let live. None of you will be living here alive!”

In comparison to those on the sixth floor, Luffy could be called a threat equivalent to an admiral, or perhaps even a little higher given his esoteric abilities, of which Peter had seen several reports before this, which had been proven to be accurate throughout this battle. Yet they still had a chance, albeit a small one, to take Luffy out with Whitebeard. So long as he didn't straight-up run away anyway. If he still had the energy to do that, then only Kizaru would have any chance of keeping up. *And he's already been badly battered by the... the holder of D. Blessed Imu, but I **hate** that cursed title!*

“Yes!” Akainu snarled, spitting blood to one side as he and Kizaru moved to flank Sengoku and Peter now, his legs merging into a funnel of magma that shot down to the island below. Instantly, more magma flowed out from where the funnel of magma touched down, spreading to get below the pirate. “For Absolute Justice, none of you will survive! Not you, not the scum of Impel Down! I will boil the oceans away in my magma before I let a single one of you walk away from this battle!”

“Huh, so does that mean that we're done talking now?” Luffy was kind of worried about what was going on in Impel Down, but it wasn't his job to solve the world's ills... well, it was sort of, but he had no idea what specific ill he was here to stop was. *Ugh, no double-guessing whether stopping that breakout is part of what Urd and Belldandy sent me here to do. I wasn't told anything about what the threat the Luffy-original failed at was, and I realllly doubt that he would have done anything like what I've done with Impel Down. Now... Make 'em mad, Make 'em stupid.*

“But before anything else, can I just say...” Luffy said aloud as he held up a finger, then swiveled in midair, all the better to add a little more gravity to what he was going to say, pointing at Peter. “Damn, you **ugly**.”

Whitebeard guffawed, hearing someone else repeat what he had said earlier. “Gurararara, I know, isn't he?!”

None of their opponents laughed, proving that perhaps Luffy's psychological tactics weren't going to work here. Still, he kept going. “I mean, what the hell are you supposed to be anyway? You look like a cross between a tentacle monster, a worm and a man whose been starved for decades. Your color scheme also sucks.”

“Keep talking, Straw Hat. You will only exhaust yourself further.” Peter opened his massive mouth even wider, the teeth inside gleaming as they began to shift and move. Swiftly, a wind pressure built up all around the combatants, threatening to pull them in, even as Peter slowly began to fall down towards the island below.

Sengoku attacked instantly, releasing his gathered energy as he shouted, "None of you will be leaving here alive. Buddha Sanskrit Barrage!" Around him, a circle, almost like a halo, appeared for a moment, from which beams of holy energy flashed out in every direction. It barely aimed, but it was a powerful attack that filled the air in front of him, forcing Luffy, Whitebeard and Garp to dodge.

Kizaru charged forward, zooming toward Whitebeard, as most of Sengoku's attacks were aimed toward Garp and Luffy in a blaze of light. His assault was deflected away by Whitebeard's weapon, while Sengoku followed his assault by engaging Luffy for the first time in this battle. Seeing his lightning deflect off of Sengoku's golden Buddha form for some reason, Luffy instantly shifted tactics, coating his arms with Busoshoku, even as Sengoku's eyes began to gleam again. Kizaru used his deflection to attack Garp instead behind an Amaterasu, which he hoped to blind Garp. This did not work, and he grimaced as he was forced to use Busoshoku to block the return blow before it could cave in his chest.

Whitebeard closed with Peter once more, braving a series of lava strikes from Akainu with a sneer on his lips. A strike up into the Zoan's chin sent him further up into the air and away from the ground. Whitebeard had long been worried about what an overgrown earthworm could do when he had actual ground to work with.

Another had the same thought. While Akainu's magma forced Whitebeard on the defense, Peter tried again to reach the ground. Aided by a wide-angle Yasakani no Magatama from Kizaru that covered a wide area around the Pika Pika no Mi user, Akainu's magma balls were able to keep Whitebeard preoccupied dodging, letting Peter retreat for a moment down to the ground.

Before he could land, Hancock decided to announce her presence. She strode out from behind a large, jagged mountain of magma Akainu had created earlier, staring up at the battle above, shouting out, "Mah, whatever is going on here?"

One of the weaknesses of the Mero Mero no Mi at range was that it had no effect on people who did not see and feel love or lust towards the wielder. Those feelings acted like a connection of sorts, which allowed the Mero Mero no Mi to impact them at long range, as Hancock had proven she could do with direct contact. Thus, while she could use her other skills to launch a sneak attack like this, Hancock needed to grab everyone's attention to use her Devil Fruit first.

Peter, Sengoku and Akainu all looked down despite themselves, even though both Sengoku and Akainu were locked in close combat with Luffy and at Whitebeard, respectively. Kizaru did not, being far higher up in the air and not even hearing Hancock's shout, busy as he was dodging around Garp.

Hancock winked up at them, her body language the very picture of coquettish beauty, helped by the fact that, from above, the three men had a very nice view straight down her

blouse. Even with Peter being around twenty feet above her, the view was too good to ignore, and despite themselves, both Peter and Akainu looked. Faint blushes appeared on their cheeks as they gazed upon the most beautiful woman in the world, her beauty sticking out even more in the barren, dead land of the island Akainu had raised with his magma powers, her smile enough to ensnare the heart. Or at least arouse something further south in combination with the rest of the gorgeous woman's appearance, which was only mildly marred by the earlier battle against Tsuru and the rest.

Yet Sengoku felt nothing. In his Buddha statue form, he felt no worldly pleasures, taking on the aspect of a true ascetic... or, depending on who you asked, just being made of metal inside and out. His eyes widened, but before he could do anything, Hancock brought her hand together above her head, aiming at a point between the trio.

"Mero Mero Beam!" The wide-angle attack flashed up and out from Hancock's upstretched hands and almost looked like a cone made out of heart-shaped energy bolts spreading out in every direction flashing towards all three.

That cry and perhaps their thoughts on her betrayal earlier in the battle, as evinced from Tsuru's actions, broke both men out of their momentary fugue. Akainu was able to shift his body entirely into magma, which saved him. The outer edge of the magma instantly turned into stone, showing that, yes, Akainu did not just love Absolute Justice and had a pulse. But at the same time, Akainu was still alive, the magma deeper within the mountain he had merged with protecting his mind and soul for want of a better term. When the energy of Hancock's attack passed by, the magma within began to burst out of the mountain, allowing Akainu to reform.

Similarly, the Devil Fruit's energy washed over Sengoku, doing nothing, although Luffy had to duck behind him, putting Sengoku's bulk between him and the Mero Mero Beam, which could not pass through solid objects. Peter, on the other hand, had to act swiftly. Unable to move fast enough to get out of the cone of energy's range, he stabbed one of his hands into his mouth, shredding his palm on his own teeth. The pain let him concentrate through his momentary lust so that the Mero Mero power didn't do anything.

However, that was enough to distract all three of them. The next second, Whitebeard and Hancock took advantage of this. Whitebeard instantly charged forward with Murakumogiri layered with his Gura Gura no Mi. "Kabutowari!"

Peter could not get his sword up in time to defend himself or his Busoshoku and was hurled back and upward away from the ground, his layered armor shattered, blood and flesh bursting out in a wide spray from the series of cracks and the long cut the attack had caused. The wound began to heal instantly, making a watching Luffy whistle in shock.

Whitebeard cursed. "Pesky Awakened Zoan fruit users and their insane regeneration... actually, I think Peter's is better than any other I've dealt with. Is that because his Devil Fruit is a Mythical Zoan type or just because of what animal it is?"

Turning aside, he watched as a kick from Hancock attacked the largest spout of magma coming out of the mountain of stone Akainu had disappeared into. On her hit, the magma turned into stone, shattering it at the same time. While the long-range aspect of the Mero Mero no Mi's powers relied on the impression, the mental contact the user made with its victims, Hancock had proven hundreds of times before this that direct contact needed no such impetus, even if she couldn't turn anyone entirely into stone with that kind of touch.

Hancock had chosen her target poorly. Even as that spurt of magma turned into stone and shattered under her attack, Akainu formed out of another. Once he was fully formed into his normal body, he shifted into flesh and blood, charging forward with a roar. "Traitor!"

Desperately, Boa Hancock met his Busoshoku-clad fist with a kick of her own. The woman's strike was overwhelmed, and she was flung through the air, but she moved with the hit, not letting it break her defenses and instead using it to gain distance.

As she found herself near the older pirate, Whitebeard nodded her way. "Gurararara, I was wondering what you were up to, Empress. I hadn't figured you'd tossed your lot entirely behind the brat. What've your elders got to say about that?"

"Nothing at all, Old Man!" Hancock snarked back. She held little respect for any man bar Luffy, no matter their power, and wasn't about to show Whitebeard any more respect than anyone else. "I am the leader of the Kuja, not they. And if we get out of this, our Alliance will be most fruitful."

Whitebeard heard something in her tone that had him chortling even as Peter finished healing, and the other two fights nearby were pushed towards the pair of them by Garp and Sengoku, respectively. Kizaru was being slowly overwhelmed and pushed back by the Busoshoku-using Garp, while Sengoku's raw speed had come as an unpleasant surprise to Luffy, given his huge size.

Akainu also charged forward, seemingly enraged at Hancock more than Luffy's arrival or Garp being there, shouting out about how Hancock would be given a traitor's death for this. She replied with, "You should try at least to be more original, Akainu, or did my love remove your ability to think more complex thoughts along with your arm?"

That had Whitebeard laughing again even as he was forced to duck under a blow from a palm the size of his own body as Sengoku flipped from fighting Luffy to launching a strike on Whitebeard. Meanwhile, Sengoku's other hand lashed out with his staff towards Luffy, who had just blocked a lightspeed kick from Kizaru. The strike caught Luffy unawares. His Kenbunshoku, despite his natural advantage, was now almost being entirely suppressed thanks to Peter and Sengoku's.

Yet even so, Luffy was able to move with the strike to a certain degree, directing the blow to one side and using the momentum of that strike to launch himself sideways into an

attack on Peter. Behind him, Sengoku paid for his lack of attention to Garp with a blow that caused a dent to appear in his Buddha Statue form and smashed him into a flow of magma from Akainu as Hancock dodged out of the way. Kizaru caught Garp in the side and arm with a series of close-range bullet-like light attacks before he was nearly slapped out of the air by a strike from Whitebeard.

Akainu was less lucky, being backhanded by a Busoshoku-clad fist around the same size as his chest that hurled him down into the ground, where he splattered before slowly reforming into his now one-armed human body.

Whitebeard turned inside another strike from Sengoku's staff, not to attack Sengoku, but instead slashing at a wildly flailing arm from Peter. Peter had intended to strike at Luffy from above, yet Luffy had dodged around so fast his sword strike had gone wide, and now Whitebeard's quick thinking allowed him actually to catch Peter's arm with his bisento. Visibly covered with his Busoshoku and his Gura Gura no Mi powers, the strike overcame Peter's durability. The double-jointed arm just came apart at the seams, once more sending blood and viscera everywhere.

Yet even then, Peter was already twirling around, bringing his head into a massive headbutt that caught Whitebeard in the side, hurling the aged pirate towards where Luffy was now dueling Busoshoku and lightning against Akainu, as Hancock fought at his back, driving off Kizaru. Meanwhile, Garp and Sengoku again started to exchange strikes, their raw strength creating massive shockwaves in the air that shook the combat zone. Akainu quickly sent a blast of magma from his chest toward Whitebeard and lashed out with a Busoshoku-covered arm toward Luffy.

With all his opponents occupied, Peter took the opportunity to gain some distance from the vicious melee. With that, Peter plummeted down to the ground, determined to get his feet under him once more. *Concentrating a portion of my mind and ability to stay in the air in this form has been far more debilitating than I anticipated. I should be able to turn the tide swiftly now.*

Forced away from Akainu by Kizaru as a Buddha Palm nearly hit Hancock, Luffy zoomed away, pausing in midair where he began to use Geppo instead of his lightning form, as he stared down at Peter. "Oh, why do I think this is gonna be bad?"

An instant later, Luffy launched a series of lightning-shaped wolves down toward Peter, the same technique he had used before against Kizaru. Several dissipated, struck from above by beams of light from Kizaru, but two of them survived long enough to slam into Peter. The attack barely made the giant human-worm hybrid cry out in pain, let alone any real damage. *Don't tell me the fucker's got some kind of element resistance?*

"For the good of the peace of this world, you should have let yourself die, Straw Hat. Now, I must correct that mistake!" Peter shouted, stomping on the ground. His leg disappeared

into the ground, and his large half-worm, half-human form seemed to glow with a vile, sickly pink light under its scales. The pulse disappeared into his leg and the ground as Pet continued on, "Worm Hydra!"

The entire island Akainu had raised from the ground suddenly erupted as hundreds of thin wormlike... tendrils... tentacles? Luffy wasn't certain what they were until they all opened their mouths and screamed. "YAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!!!!!!" The high-pitched sound reverberated from hundreds of throats, easily one of the loudest noises anyone there had ever heard.

That scream sent Hancock, Garp and Whitebeard reeling to the point that Whitebeard actually dropped his weapon, his hands clamping over his ears and his heart and old wound throbbing in agony. Even Sengoku howled in pain, falling away. Further away, several marines on vessels that had crashed into the side of the island or even beyond fell, their eardrums rupturing under the noise.

On the other hand, Luffy and the two admirals shifted entirely to their logia forms, which protected them.

Seizing this opportunity, both admirals zoomed up above the others in the air, lashing down toward them with their different styles. Kizaru created a dozen clones, which began shooting off light bullets while Akainu flung out hundreds of small, speedy balls of magma. While Kizaru was still willing to close, Akainu was far more cautious after losing his arm to Luffy earlier.

Garp and Whitebeard both took a few hits, but even as she plugged her ears with her fingers, Hancock proved to be far more agile than the two oldsters. She danced between the balls of magma and beam of light, her Kenbunshoku working overtime to keep up with the speed of Kizaru's attacks until Luffy zipped up, engaging the light user once more.

While Akainu's magma balls seemingly didn't hurt the Zoan very much at all, his attacks still split Garp and Whitebeard up, not that either of them had actually been helping one another before this. But now all four of the pirates, although Garp would probably argue vociferously against such a label, were separated.

Grunting under the impact of a lightspeed kick, Luffy found himself flung down into the wormlike fronds. There, Luffy found they could do more than scream. They zipped towards him faster than any normal man would have been able to track, biting, binding.

"Yes, first you, then the others!" Peter ground out from nearby, not moving as he began to gather himself for another attack. He leaned down, chomping into the ground as if it was made of soft cake rather than hard volcanic stone, And then began to send it out in waves, shouting, "Shredding Wave!"

The wave of sand was spat out towards Luffy at such speed that the sand almost acted like a high-powered sander, but Luffy quickly transformed into his lightning form. The pieces of sand passed through him without doing anything, and he charged forward, only stopping as his Kenbunshoku felt a flash of satisfaction from Peter. "Reverse!"

The next second, Luffy zoomed sideways as Peter suddenly reversed the flow of his attack, sucking in instead of blowing out. In his full lightning form, Luffy should never have felt even a breeze, but somehow the Mythical Sandworm's sucking power started to drag him in. "OH fuck no!" Luffy lashed out with several lightning constructs, only to see them torn apart by the wind. The next instant, Luffy was pulled further toward the circular maw of the sandworm. He tried to create a Raigo, starting the process to one side of the monster, but it took too long to build up. "Well, fine, let's see if you like this!"

Twisting around, Luffy allowed his upper body to return to his flesh and blood form. Instantly, the sand still in the air from Peter's previous attack began to scrape at him, sanding off segments of skin quickly but Luffy ignored the pain. Bringing his hands together, he concentrated on inverting his ki for a moment and dark, black claw-like holes in the world appearing from his fingers. "KIJIN RAISHU DAN!!"

DEATH. Death was the warning Peter's Kenbunshoku suddenly screamed into his head. If that attack hit his brain or heart, he would die, regardless of the insane regeneration the Awakened Sandworm Fruit gave him. And he could not use Busoshoku while using two simultaneous attacks. Splitting his concentration between three techniques was too much.

Desperately, Peter cut off his attack, ducking to the ground, releasing Luffy from the insane suction of his attack. One of the strange, claw-like attacks still struck him, slicing across the back of his head despite his Busoshoku and natural armor.

"ARGGGGH!!!" Peter howled in agony, the pain of the strike nearly causing the Gorosei to black out. As it passed, the furrow of simply... disappeared flesh began to regenerate just as it would for any other wound, but slower. *I... that attack, I read about it from Aokiji's report about his fight with Straw Hat. It is even more dangerous than I thought. I cannot let it hit me.*

Instantly, Luffy zipped upwards in lightning form, watching in shock as the wound he'd caused a second ago disappeared with a swiftness that even his own ki healing would have been hard-pressed to match. *Damn, I am going to---*

Luffy's thoughts were interrupted by a warning from his danger sense. To his left and just above where he was currently hovering, Sengoku had just lashed out towards Garp with one of his Holy Palm blasts. Garp dodged, but the blast kept on towards Luffy and the ground below. Luffy couldn't dodge in time. Instead, fearing the result of whatever that energy was interacting with his lightning form, he clad himself in Busoshoku.

The strike slammed into Luffy at an angle, shooting him down and into more of the massive wormlike appendages that Peter had created, with a cry of pain. "OOOWWWW!" *Fuck me that hurt through my Busoshoku! The fuck?! I knew he was tough, but if that blast was more concentrated, I still would've broken bones!*

The strange worm things grabbed at Luffy, but this proved a poor decision when Luffy shifted back into his lightning form, lashing out all around him. "Spinning Saw Bolt!"

The lightning flashed out in every direction in the shape of a circular buzz saw that cut and electrocuted at the same time, erupting out for nearly a mile in every direction, washing over the still-recovering Peter and most of the tentacle-worms on the island, causing Peter to scream in pain as the lightning hit his still-healing wounds. The worm things proved remarkably durable, soaking up a lot of the voltage, with only the nearest turning into charcoal, but that was enough to give Luffy a few seconds to zoom back up into the air and away from them, still grimacing from the previous strike from Sengoku. *I can't take that kind of hit, not even with my lightning form. I don't have enough endurance left to take that kind of a hit.*

Nearby, more of the worm things shot up towards Whitebeard, while Peter crouched down, using several thousand of them, to create an interlocking dome around his body for a moment to let him finish healing. At the same time, the two admirals began to push Garp and Hancock hard.

Hancock covered her limbs in Busoshoku and grinned cheerily despite the attacks coming her way, lashing out at Kizaru with beams of Mero Mero energy and kicks and punches covered in it. This did nothing to the beam attacks but helped her tank them, while the one time she got through to Kizaru's leg, it started to turn into stone. "Hah! This is positive proof that all of you marines are lustful beasts, just like all men are when faced with my beauty."

"Mah, Ma~h, that's not nice~. It isn't as if you dress or act in a way to dissuade us from looking at you, Hancock-cha~n," Kizaru retorted, even as the bit of his body that had been hardened into stone shattered, revealing a regular light-based limb, albeit one missing the pant leg and looking almost red and raw. *I ca~n't let her tag me with that agai~n. Have to keep in Light form a~s much as possible. Damn it, how can she still seem s~o hot when she's trying to punch my head in!?* "But this is going a bit far for treason, isn't it? Were you so annoyed at us for calling~ you in? So egotistical~."

"Hah! You would not understand my reasoning, Kizaru! Suffice it to say that I think we Kuja will do far better allied with Luffy than with you WeeGee types."

"Mah~..." Kizaru grunted, then spoke seriously, pushing aside his normal attitude for a moment even as they continued to trade strikes. While he believed in the peace the World Government represented, he disliked certain aspects of the government, with one thing above all: the fact they allowed slavery. "You know that the Tenryubito will come for you. Without your

position as Shichibukai, they will see no reason to not take slaves from among your folk, you're almost as desired as mermaids."

"They will find that very hard when I am there to protect my people, when Luffy is there, his flag flying over my island!" Hancock hissed like an affronted cat at the older man's words. "And how exactly are those, those domed idiots going to be doing that when you marines, their whip hand, are so badly mauled? By the time you all—Gh!"

She grunted under the impact of a point-blank light beam but responded by kicking out hard, catching Kizaru even though he had shifted to the side, shifting places with a clone he had created for just an instant. At this point in the fight, he was starting to flag, and his Kenbunshoku was not up to snuff any longer, while Hancock, for all she had been fighting Chaton, Tsuru and the rest, was far less battered.

Sensing weakness, Hancock bore in, ducking around several strikes, then switching from a Busoshoku blow to a Perfume Femur. Kizaru was barely able to switch from his own Busoshoku to his light form before it struck, and again, he found his clothing turned to stone before his lightning form could come into effect. *Damn i~t, my Busoshoku is starting to fail but perhaps I should try to use it against her Mero Mero powers rather than my light form?*

"By the time you all rebuild your strength to the point you're a threat to me and my people, we will have fortified Kuja and the Calm Belt around it!" Hancock continued, her mouth now set in a vicious grin. "How many resources will you people be willing to spend on that when you have to keep the peace or whatever it is you all do elsewhere across the entire world?"

Kizaru didn't respond, knowing she had a point. This battle had gone far worse for the marines in terms of their regular sailors and even officers than they had ever expected their conflict with Whitebeard to go. *An~d it isn't over ye~t...*

A moment later, they were forced apart, as Akainu was sent tumbling through the air from a blow from Garp, who laughed wildly as he then turned and streaked towards Sengoku. "You're gonna have to do better than that, ya little Cinder Sucker!"

Previously, Luffy and Sengoku had been exchanging blows, with Luffy getting the worst of it, but as Garp closed, Luffy redirected a blow from the monk's staff to one side before grabbing the staff. This move shocked Sengoku, and Luffy roared, "Gloam Paddling!" as he then pumped as much lightning into the staff as he could.

The staff was part of Sengoku's Buddha form in some fashion that he had never shared with anyone else. Whenever he turned into his full Buddha statue form, the staff came with him, shifting into gold, as tough and versatile as the rest of his body, to the point where he was far more durable than normal people could ever be.

However, the staff was still gold, whereas the statue was somehow not infused as it was with what Sengoku called holy energy. Now, just like Enel's staff had, when he wanted it to, the golden buddha staff melted under the sheer amount of heat Luffy's lightning created.

This moment of concentration cost Luffy, though keeping him in place for a second, and Sengoku ignored the destruction of his staff to take advantage of this. A foot came up, glowing with white energy, slamming into Luffy with all the energy Sengoku could put behind the strike. "Holy STAMP!"

Luffy grunted in agony as his body of lightning was slammed backward, the 'holy' energy working far worse than a Busoshoku blow would have, the pain coruscating through his body. "ARGH!!!"

Wincing in pain from the heat of his completely melted staff, Sengoku didn't have any time to follow up. Even as Luffy slammed into the ground in an area of the tentacle swarm that had previously been shattered by Whitebeard, Sengoku was forced to turn aside, a punch flashing out to intercept one of Garp's.

The two fists pushed against one another, creating two shockwaves that nearly looked like two weather systems meeting, and despite its smaller size, it was Garp's that won the clash, hurling Sengoku back with a howl of pain. The Golden Buddha statue was still in one piece, but cracks and odd bumps and twists had been added to his arm.

Below, Luffy had barely a few seconds to realize that Whitebeard was nearby and had somehow gotten his weapon back before Akainu was on him. A stamp missed, shattering the ground in several yards in every direction, but Luffy's lightning leg flashed out, forcing Kizaru to leap back. Lightning and Busoshoku met Busoshoku as Akainu tried to use his magma powers to grab at Luffy, but he wasn't fast enough, and Luffy was soon in the air, letting Akainu get caught in an attack from Peter as Whitebeard dodged out of the way. The Magma man found himself nearly pulled into Peter's wormlike mouth but was able to save himself by reheating the volcanic rock beneath him and then diving down into the ground, disappearing almost as if Peter's legs had done a moment before.

Whitebeard retreated a bit, keeping his position in midair with difficulty as his heart fluttered. His scar was blazing in agony almost constantly now, causing him more harm than a lot of the attacks that had gotten through his defenses up to this point as age caught up with him. Yet he refused to let it show, instead bursting out with a bloody laugh. "Gurararara! Is that all you've got?!"

"I am still going strong, Whitebeard. Whereas I can sense..." Peter's retort trailed off as he stared up past Whitebeard.

All the fighters paused, turning to look as the first three dozen Whitebeard vessels rose into the air, flying rapidly up to meet the clouds. They were soon followed by the rest of the surviving fleet.

“Gururarara! Yes! Shiki, he’s doing his part, I see...” Whitebeard chortled, blood starting to drip from his mouth with no visible wound to cause it. His wounded leg also threatened to buckle for just a moment, but he forced it not to through sheer force of will.

Peter’s eyes swelled with fury, but at the same time, Akainu remerged, sort of. The ground around the island erupted in a dozen small volcanoes, shooting up geysers of magma as a roar could be heard from within the stone, “Apocalyptica!”

Garp and Hancock, who had been pushed down toward the ground by their enemies, had to scramble to dodge this, while Luffy, even closer to the ground, zoomed away in his lightning form.

Nearby, Sengoku shifted focus away from Garp and followed, his whole body glowing with his so-called ‘holy’ energy, closing in hard with a rapidly tiring Luffy.

“HRAAAA!!!” Whitebeard simply roared and lashed out around him, the air pressure of his attack being enough to fling every bit of magma away from him.

The damage had been done. As the others retreated from Akainu’s wild, barely aimed assault, Peter stood still, seemingly utterly immune to the heat of the volcanoes around him. As he stood there, he slammed his hands into the ground, gripping the ground. Peter’s entire body seemed to swell and shift, almost like his long neck had become a cannon. Then he roared, and a far more powerful version of his earlier vacuum attack blasted out over everyone’s head towards the retreating Whitebeard fleet. “Unending Appetite!”

“I don’t think so!” Whitebeard roared. Once more, he gathered his Gura Gura no Mi in his hands. From them, the very air began to crack and shatter. Then as that power spread, it seemed almost as if the entire world was shivering, quaking. “SHIMA YURASHI!!!”

All across the island and well beyond, the world seemed to crack and tilt. Giant segments of the ground, hundreds of yards across, cracked and shattered as if the air and water were solid objects. Ships and ocean alike cracked and shifted as if they had been sliced apart and then torn asunder.

This included the attack Peter had just launched and a large amount of the still-flowing magma. Whatever control Akainu had over the magma, he couldn’t overpower Whitebeard’s willpower. Miles above their heads, the attack shattered, sending segments of tornado winds everywhere, protecting the still-rising fleet.

Even before Whitebeard's attack hit, Luffy's Kenbunshoku warned him of what was going to happen. He zoomed away from Sengoku, dodging around segments of ground, air and everything else that had been shattered by the Gura Gura no Mi and suddenly tossed around like solid things. But Kizaru flashed into being in front of him just as Akainu appeared, pushing himself out of a portion of the magma that had been hit by Whitebeard's Quake powers.

Before Whitebeard could do anything, Akainu's magma hand plunged into his thigh near where it joined his hip.

"GAH..." Whitebeard howled, but his free hand clapped down on Akainu's arm, his hand lined with Busoshoku. "FUCKING candle brat, you couldn't even take me on from the front, could you!?"

"Die, you old relic!" Akainu shouted, trying to break free, yet his lack of true leg-type attacks came back to bite him now. With his arm being held where it was, he couldn't even turn his body into magma unless he wanted to leave behind his one remaining arm. Such was the touch of Busoshoku on someone trying to use a logia power when the user's willpower was greater than that of the logia user. He tried to lash out from his main body with a torrent of lava, but Whitebeard's Busoshoku flooded up from his arm to cover the rest of his body, stopping the attack cold.

Peter recovered from his shattered attack, his neck elongating towards Whitebeard. "Worm's Bite!"

Grimacing, Whitebeard lashed out with his other hand, grabbing at the lip of Peter's massive maw, holding it still for just a second. Peter breathed in then, the breath threatening to pull Whitebeard off his feet.

Yet even as Whitebeard's feet left the ground, Hancock slammed a Perfume Femur into the top of his head, causing Peter to gasp and twitch away quickly. A portion of his massive head had been turned into stone and shattered like shale, but he rapidly twisted his head around, grinding the bit of stone away, letting his regeneration kick in. "Damn you, Kuja bitch! I will make it my--**NO!**"

With Hancock attacking Peter, Luffy had gotten around Kizaru, who had to deal with Garp, moving even faster than Peter and Hancock had been moving. With his arm still stuck and unable to remove his consciousness from it thanks to Whitebeard's Busoshoku grip, all he could do was try to blast magma out of the rest of his body towards Luffy. Same as he had done to Whitebeard a moment ago, as he tried to cover his arm with Busoshoku, only for a knee strike from Whitebeard's other leg to send him to his knees, his concentration broken.

In lightning form, Luffy simply blasted through the blast of magma easily. An instant later, his lightning fist impacted and bisected Akainu's arm right below the elbow.

“ARGGGGHHHHHH!!!” Akainu screamed in agony he had never felt for the second time that day as he lost his second arm as he had the first. It wasn’t quite as painful as Luffy’s attack came in from the side and hit his upper arm rather than blasting through from his fist on, but that was a minor thing in comparison.

Before Luffy or Whitebeard could finish off Akainu, Kizaru flashed into being in front of Luffy, a lightspeed kick slamming into Luffy’s face as a sword made out of light flashed towards Whitebeard’s face. “Get away from him!”

Luffy felt raw agony fill his head and even brain as the light kick slammed into and through his head, redirecting the lightning, making up his head to the side, sending him sprawling onto the ground where he rolled, coming up in a roll.

Akainu continued to scream as he fell to his knees, desperately using his magma to seal the wound, his arm gone from just below the shoulder, leaving him armless and in so much pain, he could barely keep conscious. “No, no, this cannot, Absolute Justice wi--!”

Flipping away from where Peter had tried to stab her and then over his roaring maw as he tried to bite at Luffy, Hancock lashed out with a kick that Akainu was in no position to try to dodge. The Admiral, in raw agony from losing his last remaining arm, could only stare as a Busoshoku-clad foot slammed into his head, reverting it back to flesh and blood long enough to completely shatter his face and the skull underneath it.

“DAMN, HANCOCK! Holy Buddha Palm!” Sengoku roared, smashing aside Garp for a moment as he lashed out towards the trio of pirates. As he was currently as large as he could get in his statue form, the attack covered around forty yards by fifteen.

Hancock was able to bounce away from the massive palm-shaped energy attack, yet tired from hours of combat and using his ki, Luffy was slow to push back to his feet. Whitebeard saw this out of the corner of his eye and quickly flipped his bisento back up into his hand, lashing out with a quick slash of Haoshoku-assisted air pressure. Somehow, and Luffy wasn’t certain how, that was enough to slice the energy assault in two. “Gururarara, what’s the matter, Sengoku? Getting hot under that golden collar? And you, brat, you’d best get up. Your ally’s about to get eaten!”

True to Whitebeard’s words, Peter was lunging once more forward. The rest of his half-worm body had somehow been pulled forward by the mass of his neck. Now, he was lashing out at Hancock with his sword, neck, and stamping on the ground occasionally, sending large wormlike tendrils similar to the ones he had used earlier at her, only smaller and lasting only a few minutes before expiring.

At the same time, though, Kizaru attacked from on high, having taken a moment to clone himself into several dozen light clones, lashing out and down toward Luffy and the others.

Several of them had already hit Whitebeard, but he had blocked many of them with his bisento. While above them, Garp and Sengoku were continuing their own semi-duel.

Luffy pushed to his feet quickly, holding up his hands as he lashed out toward Kizaru with a blast of lightning almost as wide as Whitebeard was tall. The large attack overwhelmed the smaller light bullets coming down from the clones, slamming into and through several of them, dissipating them, but by that point, Kizaru had already bounced down onto the ground, using bits of the shiny volcanic rock adroitly. Luffy quickly followed, the two of them slamming into one another, but not before Kizaru was able to get off a shot at Hancock, which took her in the leg before she could use Busoshoku.

She fell but rolled with it, then astonishingly posed for a moment on her knees, her face forming into the world's most attractive pout as she stared up at Peter. "You wouldn't hurt someone as beautiful as me, would you?"

Despite all the immense self-control he had as a Gorosei, Peter hesitated for a fraction of a second.

That was enough for her to fire off a point-blank Mero Mero attack. Peter's chest and upper body hardened, but he roared, his head darting forward even as his arm and the lower side of his neck started to turn to stone where the Mero Mero attack struck. Hancock leaped away, barely avoiding disappearing down his maw, her already wounded leg almost getting caught on the outer edge of Peter's mouth. The impact flipped her midair, but she was able to slam her hands down on Peter's back and away, pulsing some more of her Mero Mero powers through her strike like the one she did with her Perfume Femur.

She righted herself a moment later, watching as Kizaru was slammed down out of the air by a powerful Busoshoku-assisted blow. He recovered quickly, slamming his hands together, creating a blast of light that resembled a flash bang going off, only many times more powerful. "Amaterasu!"

Clamping his eyes shut, Luffy howled in pain, but his Kenbunshoku was such that he was able to dodge through a series of strikes from Kizaru. Hancock's Kenbunshoku wasn't up to that level, and she took several more light-based strikes before she could cover herself with Busoshoku. Still blind, she was completely blindsided by Peter's sword slashing into her from the side. Busoshoku met Busoshoku, and it was with a dawning horror that she watched as the portions of Peter that she had frozen were almost expelled from his body as his regeneration reacted to the portions of him that had been turned to stone as if they were some form of injury.

Her Busoshoku held, though, and instead of being cut in two, Hancock was flung through the air in one piece. There was a long bruise already forming on her side, but generally speaking still alive. Slamming into the volcanic ash of the island wasn't exactly fun, but it wasn't life-threatening either.

And something was about to be added to the battlefield. From above came the screeching cry of a hawk on the hunt. Seconds later, fireballs the size of galleons slammed down into Peter. One was blue and yellow, the other one dark red and harshly white, as two cries burst over the battlefield.

“Get away from our Pops, you wormy bastard Blue-Flamed Goose!”

“Your fight is with me, WeeGee Dog! Great Flame Commandment: Flame Emperor!”

OOOOOOO

At around the same time that Luffy and his crew had met up once more, Ace and Aokiji were still locked in battle. Both of them had taken some serious shots: a few near knees, elbows and necks, as both combatants kept using Busoshoku and their elements liberally. Ace looked more like a man-shaped ball of bruises by this point, while Aokiji was favoring his right side and had a limp, along with the forearm on his other side, looking like someone had beaten it with a mallet.

Yet only one blow had mattered, signaling the slow turn of the tide. Following a flash of inspiration, Aokiji covered a sword of ice with Busoshoku after breaking it off from the rest of his ice. In that way, it was no longer controlled by his logia power and could be used like any other weapon. He couldn't keep it up for long, as Busoshoku acted... oddly on elements, even solid-state ones like ice, seeming to break it down to water and thus lose its shape. The Busoshoku covering had allowed the sword to break through a fireball Ace had hurled into his face from point-blank range, surprising the pirate and letting Aokiji open a slice across his forehead over his left eye. It would have been straight across his forehead, but Ace had already been shifting backward even as the cut hit.

Now, Ace had to keep fighting with one eye closed from the blood flowing from that wound. As he desperately kept Aokiji from closing in on his blind side, Ace wished, not for the first time, that he had figured out Luffy's ability to heal himself with that life energy stuff he used. *Or that I had enough self-control to keep my head flesh and blood and create a small flame brand or something right next to it so I could sear the wound closed. But I can't afford a second to use my hand to do it. Blast it!*

Aokiji pressed in hard, using his ice constructs to keep messing with Ace's ability to track him as he shifted consciousness into one clone after another, closing with his body covered by Busoshoku when he could, only for Ace to rocket away. Both of them knew it was only a matter of time now, but that didn't mean the dance was ending anytime soon.

Ace had just launched a rocket-powered Busoshoku punch Aokiji's way when there was a thunderous *CRUNCH* to one side. The whole iceberg heaved under their feet as a massive pirate vessel slammed into the massive island of ice that Aokiji had created early on in the battle. It was a heavily reinforced ship, its prow made to shatter ice, which it had just done, and

it also looked to be one of the few fully metal ships in the Whitebeard fleet or, indeed, anywhere else.

As the ice underneath them cracked and groaned, Aokiji and Ace blinked, staring in that direction. The pair of them had been concentrating on one another so much. Even Aokiji's Kenbunshoku hadn't warned him of the incoming arrivals.

"Yara, Yara, this is getting more complicated, I see," the Admiral muttered as he retreated from Ace, wondering who was aboard that ship, as its ensign had been smashed off the top of its main mast by a cannonball or some other kind of attack. Peering at it, Aokiji realized with a start that he had seen reports on this very vessel. "Whitey..." he murmured, scowling a little before frowning as he heard the sound of steel on steel over the sounds of groaning ice, "that probably means Gion's up there too."

Aokiji didn't know Tsuru's protégé well enough to pick out her mind with Kenbunshoku, even if her own skill with the technique didn't block him from doing so. Yet he knew that she and Whitey, a Whitebeard Fleet Division Commander, had a bit of an off-and-on rivalry that occasionally had messed up past marine operations.

Across from him, Ace could also recognize the familiar, very distinctive ship, and he groaned, raising a hand to wipe away the crusted blood over his eye, searing the wound shut as he did with a fiery thumb. Normally, the removal of that weakness would have left him smiling, but the sight of the ship had taken all of his attention. "Oh no, she's going to come all over overbearing big sister on me. I don't need that in my life right now!"

Hearing that, Aokiji actually chuckled a bit. Despite the amount of wounds they had given one another, and the overall seriousness of the battle so far, some things were just too damn funny. The reports of how Whitey treated Ace like a cross between a little brother and cabin boy whenever they interacted was one of them.

"Ahoy, Fire Fist! We finally made it," shouted a voice from on high, sounding almost completely unconcerned about the nearby admiral or, indeed, the continuing sounds of swords meeting swords in the background. "Captain! We made it to Ace. You won the bet."

"Bet?" both Ace and Aokiji said as one, then looked at one another over the twenty yards of melting, cracked ice that separated them. "Really?"

"I wouldn't put it past Whitey." Ace nodded. "Surprising that Gion went for it, though."

"That woman can be damned prideful when it comes to it," Aokiji grumbled. "Swords-people, so tiring the lot of them."

For a moment, there was silence from the ship, the sounds of the two swords clashing disappearing. Then, the two women launched themselves up and off the main deck of the large vessel. One of them landed next to Ace, a wild, almost fey grin on her normally composed face.

The other, Vice Admiral Gion, landed next to Aokiji. Her face, in contrast, was caught between a scowl and a snarl.

Both women were a little worse for wear. Whitey's hat was missing, and several cuts had been made through the material of her outfit, while Gion had lost her officer's coat, and her blouse had been sliced in several places, her pantaloons in two. Whitey was bleeding from a cut on her leg and another to her upper arm, and through the cuts made in their clothing, it looked as if they had been hit by iron rods in various places. These long strips of black and blue marks were the sign of someone using Busoshoku against similarly covered weapons when the two users were equal in strength. The defending Busoshoku would keep the weapon from cutting into the defender's skin, but the strength of the strike would still leave marks and vary wildly if their clothing was included in the protective shell of Busoshoku.

Whitey looked as if she had been getting the worst of it, but she was almost ebullient as she slapped Ace on his back with her free hand, her other hand still holding her rapier to one side. Her voice lacked its normal refined air, her blood still up from the duel with Gion, letting some more of her sailor's mouth take over. "Hey, Ace, what're you doing all the way out here having a private war with Mr. Shrinkage over there?"

"Keeping him away from my brother and Pops, what's it look like?" Ace grumbled, trying hard to stay on his feet. The fight with Aokiji on top of his captivity was rapidly taking its toll now as his adrenaline started to leave his body. That, and Whitey Bay was a lot stronger than her thin arms would suggest.

"Hah! Judging from the way he was flashing all over the place and his little speech to Whitebeard, I don't think your little brother would need all that much help. Quite the character he is, planning the infiltration of Impel Down and everything else." Whitey chortled before looking over at the two marines while her crew watched on weapons at hand but not doing anything. "You lost our little bet, Gion. We're done, right?"

"GRrr..." Gion snarled, but even though her jaw looked as if it was throbbing with pain from the effort, she spoke calmly to Aokiji when she turned to look at him. "Aokiji, we've got bigger fish to fry than just Fire Fist, as much as I hate to admit it."

"Coming from the woman that I have no doubt pursued a personal vendetta throughout this entire fight, that doesn't hold much..." Aokiji began before pausing as he saw the serious expression on Gion's face. That wasn't the expression of someone who had just been enjoying a knockdown drag-out fight and had lost on a technicality. Rather, that was the face of someone who just heard something that they very, very much didn't want to. "What is it?"

“Vice Admiral... That is, former Vice Admiral Garp somehow got access to one of our comms mushi,” Gion answered, holding up the remains of one that had been in her pocket before it had been killed, presumably in a strike from Whitey. “The ship he was on apparently was picking up a distress call from Impel Down, and he ordered them to relate it to the rest of the fleet. Not a lot of vessels are still capable of picking it up, but realizing that, Garp gathered seven other officers so far. Momonga was able to send out an all-hands call.”

“For what? After his betrayal, what in the world would make any of our officers work with Garp again!?” Garp had been Aokiji’s teacher at one point, and while a part of him understood Garp’s anger at the overwhelming power brought to bear on Straw Hat. Or what the marines had thought was overwhelming, anyway. He could not overlook Garp’s betrayal of the marines, which at the time had seemed utterly pointless, as it could not have helped his ‘dead’ grandson. Garp had put several of their strongest vice admirals in the hospital, some of them so badly crippled that it was doubtful they’d ever be able to fight again at the level they had previously, weakening the Marines prior to their fated conflict with the Whitebeard pirates, and had nearly defeated Aokiji himself. *We would be in a far stronger position with Garp on our side, along with Onigumo and the rest.*

Although if he was going to point a finger at who was really at fault here, it was Straw Hat. *How many good marines have died today because of Straw Hat’s duplicity, of his somehow finding a way to get into Impel Down and convince Whitebeard to come and help him escape? Would Garp have turned on us, if it was known Straw Hat had lived through the Shichibukai’s ambush?* Despite not showing it, Aokiji was quietly furious at how today had gone, and that and his personal feelings towards Garp’s betrayal colored his voice now.

Gion’s next words acted, ironically, like a splash of ice water to the face.

“Blackbeard betrayed us. He’s attacking the prison, and he’s going to break out all the prisoners from Level 6,” Gion answered bluntly. *Thank goodness, this fight brought Whitey and I in this direction, which brought us closer to the prison. Or else I would be well out of position to do anything about them. I am not letting those monsters De Lange and Swardo get loose again!*

De Lange and Swardo were two of the prisoners on Level 6 that Gion had personally captured. They were both swordsmen of quite decent skill, able to hold their own together against her, but that wasn’t why they were in Level 6. That was because of their experiments with living weapons. The pair had a shared obsession with creating the ‘perfect’ Awakened weapon, one that would make all other weapons obsolete and let them conquer the world. Following this dream, they had stolen or created weapons that had been force-fed Devil Fruits, and then Awakened them to cause havoc. They didn’t use them for long, as none of these weapons were ever good enough for the pair, but the Awakened Devil Fruit weapons were capable of toppling governments or destroying nations, and both had occurred as the two continued their search for the ‘perfect’ Awakened weapon.

Aokiji's eyes widened in shock, and, inside some of his anger at Garp's betrayal faded as he heard that. *Even as a criminal, Garp-san retains his own sense of justice. Why am I not surprised? And he's right, too. With Shiki here and the Whitebeard Fleet already lifting off, it's doubtful we can stop most of them from getting away. Stopping this disaster from getting even worse is a good move.* Still, there was one question that needed to be asked at this point. "What about Sengoku? Does he know about this? What are his orders?"

"No idea. Garp was heading toward the fight going on with Whitebeard, but right now, I don't think anyone's in a position to issue orders. Our escargatoire might've only been overwhelmed initially, but frankly, there aren't enough ships in the fleet still intact, let alone officers manning the coms systems, to coordinate anything. I also know Sengoku didn't bring a Den Den Mushi with him into the fight with Whitebeard. Which means you or Tsuru should take charge, and I don't know where the old lady is right now. But you know just as I do that if the prisoners of Level 6 escape, that will make this day a disaster even if we capture Ace or Whitebeard."

Aokiji wasn't certain he agreed with the bit about Whitebeard, but he had honestly never cared much about Ace one way or the other. The connection to Gol. D. Roger was useless in his mind. Ace had done enough to earn his bounty. Why pile more on top of that just because of who his father was? Yet right now, his anger at Ace came to the fore, self-condemnation and loathing going through him. Just like he said he would, Ace had held Aokiji's attention here for far too long, far too far away from the rest of the battle where he should've been. Hearing how much damage the rest of their fleet had taken caused him to feel almost as guilty about that as he was angry with Straw Hat for putting this battle into motion.

Yet Aokiji wasn't Kizaru, lazy to a fault, only following orders, never really choosing his own path. Nor was he Akainu, angry, arrogant and self-assured in the primacy of his own concept of justice, which, to Aokiji's mind, had always been far too close to the concept of 'rule of the strong'. Thus, even as Aokiji promised himself he would hunt Straw Hat and Ace down later, he knew that Gion was right. *Some monsters in Impel Down just can't be allowed to escape. Not if we can stop it.*

There was also another part of Aokiji, very deeply buried, that was simply frustrated that the fight would end like this that might be fueling his thoughts for the future. He'd had Ace on the ropes at last, and now, now he had to turn away? That was utterly galling, even if both his mind and his heart told him it was the right thing to do.

Unaware of Aokiji's inner turmoil or the fact that Aokiji had already made his decision, Whitey grinned, pointing past her ship out towards the Tarai Current. "Look there. Some of our ships are already lifting off, and we're about to get some help, too. If the two of you want to make a fight of it, anyway."

Several captains of the Whitebeard Crew were moving in their direction. Slowly, admittedly, and more than half were using Skypiean skates, but they were still moving in the direction of the iceberg.

Aokiji held back a faint urge to yawn, both in tiredness and in response to the level of threat such fighters were. "As much as I would like to, Gion seems to have made a good point. Although I'm still kind of confused how the two of you fought your way through the entire battlefield against one another without interfering over much, but I know better than to question how you swords-folk get tunnel vision."

Gion snorted at that, staring hard at the other woman, and Whitey grinned back at her. For a moment, the two of them just stared at one another, then Whitey bowed from the waist, and Gion answered in the same fashion. "We'll see one another again, Whitey! And next time, our fight won't end on a technicality."

While inwardly thinking similar thoughts about his duel with Ace, Aokiji shook his head. Honestly, people who follow the way of the sword always end up becoming almost as stubborn as the steel in their weapons. "Come on, Gion. I refuse to let anyone else break out of Impel Down today. After all, I put quite a few of those people in there myself. It would be a damn shame if all my work was wasted like that."

"Agreed. I'm not as lazy as you, but even I wouldn't want that." That, and I at least know most of my crew is still alive. I saw the ship explode, but by the time it did, everyone seemed to have gotten off. Although, I have to wonder about Ranko. I would have thought she at least would have made her presence felt by this point.

Shaking that thought off, Gion hopped into the air, bouncing after Aokiji, the two of them turning around from where they had been facing the Pirates and racing off in the direction of Impel Down, following the Tarai Current for now, as evinced by the bits of floating flotsam below them. It would take them directly to the prison in lieu of actual directions, the prison too far away for them for even Aokiji to feel out with his Kenbunshoku.

Ace waited until both of them were gone before slumping to his rear, not even noticing the cold of the ice underneath them, as he fell onto his back, gasping in air. "Damn! The fucker was outlasting me. And that cut to my forehead blasted fucking head wounds. I don't think I'd have lasted more than another fifteen minutes if that, if I wasn't able to sear it closed like I..."

He paused as Whitey loomed over him, staring down at him. "So what is this I hear about you and a rookie pirate captain shacking up, huh?"

"Ugh, of course, you'd have heard about Bonney, you rumor-mongering witch." Ace grunted, only to gasp as Whitey put her feet on his chest, the appendage flickering with Busoshoku.

"Is that any way to talk to your elders, huh!?" Whitey growled. "And it's either I talk about your love life or how you seemingly decided to go lone ranger and chase off after Blackbeard, while forgetting the fact you're a division commander, let alone a pirate captain! Which is it gonna be, you fancy matchstick?!"

"Erk!" Ace gulped, realizing that Whitey was really annoyed with him, and, even worse, she kind of, as much as he hated to admit it, had a point. Ace had blasted off on his small personal ship the instant he heard Blackbeard had hurt Thatch, not even thinking about using his division or his personal flagship to help. *If I had, what would have happened?*

Before Ace could lose himself in his maudlin thoughts, Whitey tightened the chokehold on him, taking his non-answer as enough. "That's what I thought. Now, tell me about Bonney, and if you tell me you loved her and left her, I'm going to break your legs and deliver you to her, you enemy of all women!"

Knowing that Whitey had somehow figured out the downward direction of his mood, Ace smiled, then shook off the sudden maudlin thought. "Er, I would kind of like some advice in that direction in the future, but um, seriously, Whitey-Onee-san, this isn't really the time for it."

Ace knew that using that term, which came from Wano, would make Whitey smile and back off a little for some reason. It worked like a charm, and Whitey backed way, letting Ace push himself to his feet, before both of them turned, staring over the horizon where the tip of what looked like a spume of water had just appeared then disappeared. The next second, lightning seared down through the sky, followed by an energy palm smashing up into the descending wall of electricity.

Staring in that direction, Ace frowned a bit, and his feet started to turn into fire, ready to shoot him away toward the center of the battle. However, Whitey grabbed onto his arm, shaking her head. "Hey now! Help protect the fleet until we're all into the air, at least."

"You think any of the sailors in the Whitebeard fleet wouldn't give their lives for the old man!?" Ace shot back, scowling at her. "He's fighting over there, you know! Pops isn't retreating yet, and until he does, we--"

"Will obey orders," Whitey interrupted him shaking Ace lightly. "While I know you think that idea's noble and everything, do you honestly think Whitebeard wants any of his sons or daughters to die for him? He wants as many of us who are still alive to keep on doing so, to get out of here, or else he would never have given Jozu the order he did: to pull the fleet back and get Shiki to renew his floaty touch thing." She waited a second to let that sink in before going on. "Now, are you going to help protect your comrades or run off again?"

Ace scowled at Whitey's harsh tone, but after a second, he nodded, and his feet shifted back into flesh and bone. The two of them walked back towards Whitey's ship, which was already beginning to reverse back out of the massive cut it had created in the iceberg. The

iceberg was already starting to come apart without Aokiji continually renewing it and would undoubtedly soon start to break up, so there was more than one reason to keep going.

As they walked, Whitey stared at the back of Ace's head, shaking her own slowly from side to side, remembering a conversation that she had had with Whitebeard prior to her ship rejoining the rest of the fleet. *I'm sorry to say boys, that if you think Whitebeard's to retreat to join the fleet even if he can, then you will be disappointed.*

Flashback

Whitey had been an independent pirate captain for a while, but Whitebeard had contacted her to take over Ace's division after he had sent out the change in plans to the various smaller allied crews. The evening after she had met up with the Whitebeard fleet, she had been called aboard the Moby Dick to have a talk with her former captain.

When she had knocked at his door, it hadn't been Whitebeard who answered. Instead, it'd been her chief nurse who had opened the door for her.

Entering, Whitey found Whitebeard sitting up in bed, a bed whose dimensions almost matched her own captain's quarters. Several nurses knelt on the bed to either side of the enormous man, Whitey always wondered if he had some giant in his ancestry, working some kind of salve into the massive scar across his chest. A third was replacing a series of IV tubes stuck into his arm. In his other massive hand, Whitebeard held not his habitual keg of ale but, instead, a similarly sized glass bottle filled with some kind of greenish liquid that sloshed slowly within. It reminded Whitey of this thing she'd tried once called a smoothie, although, from the look on Whitebeard's face, it certainly wasn't as tasty as the one she tried. "Yo, Whitey, there you are."

Whitebeard's voice was nowhere near the powerful deep baritone it normally was, and Whitey looked over her shoulder, unsurprised to see the nurse had closed the door after she entered. She turned her gaze back to her Captain, tapping a nervous finger on her belt buckle as she worked her other hand through her hair, her normal captain's tricorn dangling from her neck as was proper inside a ship. "You look a lot worse than I thought you were, Pops. Age and old wounds catching up on you?"

There was a tiny teasing note to her voice, but for the most part, Whitey was dead serious. Whitebeard looked pale, there looked to be some sweat on his brow and face, and that, coupled with seeing him laying out like this, was enough to make Whitey concerned.

Whitebeard grumbled a bit, but after taking several more sips of whatever nefarious concoction his nurses had made for him, he shook his head, raising his other hand to tap at the wound on his chest and almost pulling out the IV, much to the nurse's vocal consternation. "Age and this wound in specific. I've been told I've got about another year or two before I start to

lose even more of my strength quickly. At that point, all have to retire. If pirates like me can do such a thing.”

Whitey slowly nodded at that, discarding several things that came to mind to say in response to that offhand. This was the time to joke, and it certainly wasn’t the time for sympathy, not with someone as prideful as Whitebeard. “You know, I had kind of wondered about the original plan to free Ace. It was just a little too bull in the china shop of an approach. Especially for a trained Fleet Admiral like you.”

Whitebeard snorted at that. “True. I didn’t like the idea of fighting the Marines on their own ground, but it was the only way we could do it. Or so I thought until that Straw Hat brat contacted me about having a way into Impel Down. At that point, I remembered where to find Shiki and his Devil Fruit. Straw Hat might think he’ll be able to get clean away, but the world doesn’t work like that. Sengoku won’t be slow to respond to an attack on Impel Down. We’ll be faced with the fleet action one way or the other. This way, all the advantages will accrue to us rather than them.”

“It will still be a major battle, though. Which is what you want,” Whitey answered, her tone admiring. Any pirate worth his or her salt could understand the need to strike back when one of your crew was attacked. The more important the crew, the bigger the need to strike back, to make certain that everyone understood not to mess with you. If you didn’t respect would quickly erode, and with it, your power base. Whitebeard’s swift response to any attack on his sons was one of the things that marked him as the strongest of the four Yonko.

And more than that, she could understand where Whitebeard was coming from. Given his age, this might be Whitebeard’s last big act, his last big fight. She said that last aloud before crossing her arms under her chest. “But why are you telling me this?”

“Because unlike most of my brats, you’ve always been able to keep a clear head. Even Jozu might be tempted to stay and fight to the last if they see that I’m not retreating for some reason. I don’t want to commit suicide or anything so pathetic. Yet Shiki’s Devil Fruit can only do so much to get us back out of the Tarai Current without our coming under attack by someone like Doflamingo, Mihawk or Sengoku. Worse, without Shiki, the Calm Belt will become a trap for all too many of our ships. Under those circumstances, my staying behind might be the difference between life and death. If that happens, by my authority, you’re to take command of the fleet. It will be your job to get as many of my sons as possible out.”

Whitey stared back at Whitebeard, the older man who had been her father in all but name when she was younger, who had segued into a teacher and role model as she grew, speaking so calmly about his possible death, looking so much older and wearier than she had ever seen him. After a moment, Whitey slowly nodded, placing one hand over her heart. “Agreed. Though you better put it in writing, Whitebeard. On an extra thick piece of parchment, so I can use it to whack the meatheads in this fleet upside the head.”

End Flashback

Shaking the memory of that conversation off, Whitey followed Ace back to her ship. Moments later, the Ice Cracker met up with the rest of the Whitebeard fleet. It was still under attack from several of the higher-ranking officers, but several ships had already risen into the air. Coupled with those ships designed to fight flying enemies, the ships of Jiru's division, the pirates were able to keep the majority of the marine officers away from their water-locked companions. Jozu and Marco were also there, doing what they could, and as the Ice Cracker closed, Marco finished one marine officer off, turning him into kindling, while Jozu smashed another out of the air to fall to his death in the waters below.

Helping this defense was the fact that many of the officers attacking them were peeling off as Tsuru and a few others began to shout at them from outside the combat area around the fleet. Already, most of the vice admirals had peeled away, racing towards Impel Down, leaving only the captains and commodores who knew Geppo or had Devil Fruits that let them fly in some fashion to push the attack.

Jozu stood on his division flagship. The ship had made it through the battle with only a few dozen hits taken from enemy cannon fire. Two of his division's other ships had been sunk, though, with all hands, and now, his arms were crossed as he glared up at where a Vice Admiral had just pulled back reluctantly from attacking another. The Vice Admiral in question nearly got hit by defensive cannon fire from above, but he still retreated to join several other officers, skirting around the Whitebeard fleet.

He looked over to where Ace and Whitey landed, Whitey hopping off of Ace's back, the younger man having used his fire powers as a rocket as he usually did to cover the distance between the two ships. "They're retreating. Frankly, I'm kind of astonished. They seem to think that keeping Pops in place is enough for now. Or maybe they figured out some way of blocking us from flying away?"

"I'd bet on the first," Ace said, grinding his teeth. "Aokiji's heading for Impel Down, and I know my brother is out there. He could probably hard stop one of the admirals, but even if Garp is out there too, that still leaves Pops a little outnumbered."

"Not so much, really. I'm surprised your brother didn't tell you about his alliance with the Pirate Empress. She might not be up to admiral level, but she's no slouch," Marco opined, making Whitey and Ace start and turn to him as he landed behind them. The slightly taller man was covered in cuts and a few bruises and looked as tired as most of the crew did by this point. Yet he still had the energy to grin cheekily at both of them before he looked over at the far taller Jozu. "Shiki's nearly done feeling up all of the ships. We should be good to go when he gets back..."

"What did I tell you about using that term for what I do, birdbrain!" Shiki shouted as one of his leg swords flashed through Marco's body, who shifted briefly into his Phoenix flame form

to avoid being hurt by the attack. He grimaced a bit at the effort it took after the past fight but wiped the expression off his face quickly. The old pirate bounced in place in midair, his one remaining arm waving wildly. "Do you have a death wish or something?"

"Shouldn't I be asking you that? Although you seem to be paying it off in installments," Marco snorted insolently at the older man before looking over at Jozu. "We're good to go then."

"OY, I would've thought that losing my arm on this mad venture of yours would garner me some respect from you brats. And it's my power that we're all using to get away from here. I should be the one to give the order to retreat," Shiki grumbled.

"It is, but it isn't like you're not going to be paid for this little alliance when we get back to the New World, Old Lion," Jozu rebutted before shaking his head. "But if you're certain you've marked all of the ships, it's time we all get out of here." He paused then, blinking. "Is there some special term for it?"

"Liftoff," Shiki answered before laughing. With a gesture of a finger, the rest of the pirate fleet began to float out of the water to join their fellow, sliding into place all around and between them. Once the last had joined its fellows in the air, Shiki pulled out a strip of a Vivre Card. Then, the whole fleet rose swiftly through the air on a slight angle, heading in the direction the piece of paper began to move toward. "I call it liftoff. Descriptive, don't you think?" Shiki chortled.

The others all nodded and for a moment, they just all breathed in deeply as the wind began to pick up by the speed of their ascent. Despite their strength, all of them were grateful to be on their way and hoped that soon, Whitebeard would be able to join them and this battle would come to an end. They'd already lost too many friends today, something that Ace was feeling particularly guilty about as he glanced around at the others.

Before he could say anything, though, the lookout in the crow's nest shouted down. "Commander Jozu! Starboard and down, we're going to be passing by the center of the battle! Pops looks to be battling some kind of... of worm thing?"

Jozu's ship had been beyond the horizon by the time Peter had succumbed to necessity and transformed into his half-worm form. Indeed, most of the Whitebeard ships had been, and now many of them, including the gathered officers, crowded the bulwarks where the island that Akainu had created had just appeared over the horizon. Soon, more of it appeared from the perspective of those on the main deck, and more of the battle going on there was quickly apparent.

Nearly the entirety of the fleet stared down at where their Pops were fighting, cheering and shouting as they watched the battle below like spectators spying on a sports game from outside an arena. The sight of Straw Hat was something the fleet was mainly prepared for, having seen Luffy's Raigo. Many had even heard his declaration when he met with Whitebeard.

Hancock being there earned a lot of wolf whistles, but the biggest surprise was also the biggest reinforcement Whitebeard had down there.

“Damn! I would never’ve thought I’d see the day. Garp coming by for a drink is one thing, but standing there and fighting beside Pops? The world is ending, man, **Ending!**” shouted one pundit.

“Maybe, but I don’t see any of those enemies letting him have enough time to get up to us,” another, more worried voice cut through the cacophony of cheers. “Maybe we should start thinking about bombarding them from up here.”

“We could. But that would make us sitting ducks for long-range element attacks. I can’t use much finesse with so many floating objects at once, so dodging isn’t going to be easy,” Shiki warned. “I’m all for it, but some of your ships will undoubtedly be destroyed if we draw their ire up here.”

Shiki didn’t like to admit it, but with one arm gone along with his legs, he was in no position to enter the fight down there, even if he had wanted to. Moreover, seeing the Gorosei Saint Peter Ju Shepherd, who he had recognized before this, in his Awakened Mythical Zoan hybrid form, he very much did not want to do so. *The regeneration abilities of even a normal Awakened Zoan are insane. How much worse would a mythical type be? Especially one known for its durability and ability to regenerate on top of that.*

It was as the Old Lion was contemplating that and the others were arguing about what they should do to help their Pops that Whitey noticed that Peter had just gained some distance from Whitebeard and the rest for a moment. “Wait, that Worm thing, it’s about to do something!”

In an instant, a giant, sucking tornado appeared from the worm-man’s mouth, flashing up towards the fleet.

Ace and Marco, the only two who had long-range Devil Fruit powers, leaped into action. Marco hopped into the sky, grimacing at the pain in his legs. *Damn, that last hit I took from that Issho guy I took still freaking hurts!*

That didn’t stop him from adding his own blue-yellow fireballs to Ace’s orange and red. The attacks slammed into the forefront of the upcoming cone of sucking energy, pulled apart and doing nothing to redirect the far wider, far taller attack. Similarly, Shiki’s Lion Menace Earth Coiling attack was simply overpowered by the far stronger vacuum-like attack coming the fleet’s way.

Men across the fleet screamed, then cheered as they heard Pop’s voice, shouting out an attack, his voice like rolling thunder even this far away. The next second, the world cracked and

quaked along a diagonal, Whitebeard's attack bisecting Peter's. The front of the vacuum-like assault came apart instantly, leaving the fleet shaken but still all in one piece.

Even as shouts of relief and cries of "Of course Pops has it, he's **Whitebeard**! The strongest man in the world!" rang across the fleet, Marco, Ace and Shiki joined Jozu and Whitey around the aft of the ship, looking down as the fleet continued on its way. They were in time to see Akainu take advantage of Whitebeard's concentration, and Ace instantly rocketed into the air over the edge of the ship. Marco followed him within seconds, despite Whitey shouting after them. "God damn it, you two, get back-- fuck!" she cursed, cutting off what she had been about to say.

Watching the fight, as Akainu died and Peter dealt with Marco and Ace for a moment, Jozu frowned, looking as if he was about a second away from jumping after them. His Geppo was pretty damn poor, admittedly, but his diamond form would allow him to survive the inevitable landing... probably. *And if I can somehow direct my fall, I can crush...*

Whitey glared up at him, reaching up to tap his belt buckle, the highest point on his massive frame she could reach without jumping. "Don't. You and I both know the signs of an Awakened Zoan and that one is also armored with Busoshoku now. A Mythical Awakened Zoan, to say nothing of fucking **Sengoku**. As happy as I am to see Akainu get his like that, Kizaru's still down there as well. Whitey shook her head. "Besides, what do you think most of the rest of our men who are thinking of doing the same damn thing could do down there besides get in the way?"

The fact most of the Geppo users wouldn't survive the attempt from this high was left unsaid. All of them were tired after hours of combat, and this high up, the air was thinner, too, making it harder to use Geppo properly. Which wasn't even mentioning one other thing that Whitey had just noticed. "Tsuru's still unaccounted for, and look there..."

Reluctantly, Jozu turned away from the island below them to see a large group of marine officers bouncing in the air. They were much lower down than the fleet was currently, and the distance was growing as the fleet continued to ascend. But they were still in a position to cut off the fleet if the Whitebeard Fleet turned back and tried to get involved in the battle on Akainu's little island, and even from here, the glint of metallic forms could be seen from far too many of the marines in that clump. "Five will get you then that's Tsuru. She's not willing to toss those marines away in a fight between Whitebeard, Sengoku and that fucking Gorosei, but if we try to interfere..." she shook her head. "We'll not only get in the way but be attacked again by the marine's officer corps. And you and I know exactly how many of our high-end fighters we've lost in this fight."

While Jozu and Whitey were still up for a fight, the rest of the surviving Whitebeard Officers were very much not. Izou was down, badly wounded, being kept alive by their doctors for now. Marco and Ace had just run off. As far as Whitey knew at this point, that was it. There were a few scattered captains still throughout the fleet that were the equivalent of

commodores among the marines, but few lacked any ability to fight in midair like every marine officer captain and above did. The Whitebeard Fleet might have one the ship-to-ship aspect of this war, but they had been slowly getting ground under when it came to the officer's side of things, thanks in no small part to that damn Green Goo and the cyborgs.

Jozu ground his teeth, but he looked back at Whitey, nodding. "You're right. We can only hope Marco and Ace can help pull the old man out of there."

"We can hope," Whitey answered flatly before turning and shouting orders to the rest of the fleet. She wouldn't allow any of the other remaining officers to follow Ace and Marco into that madness. *I can only pray that their arrival will really make a difference. Or, barring that, they at least survive to fall back. But I know the old saying about shit in one hand, wish in the other...*

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"Hey Pops! Jozu's taken charge of the retreat now, and considering how little actual place to put your foot is around here, I thought we'd better come to help you," Marco stated as he landed beside his far larger captain. "You brats! Butting in like that, as if I needed help!" Whitebeard grumbled, although it was clear to everyone around him that having Akainu punch a magma fist into his thigh had very obviously hurt the giant man quite a bit. It was only the relative size of their two bodies and the fact that Whitebeard had responded so quickly by grabbing Akainu's arm with his own Busoshoku-clad hand, thus cutting off any ability to enlarge the wound in any way that kept it from getting worse.

"Oh, give over, Pops. You know that it's a crewman's duty to step in when his captain's in trouble!" Marco joked, although his eyes were serious as he watched the conflagration that he and Ace had created. He knew intellectually it wouldn't be enough to stop the Gorosei, hell, he might have actually seen the Mythical Zoan user call on his own Busoshoku before the strikes hit. He hoped that it would at least hurt, as while Busoshoku was excellent against actual strikes or impact, it didn't fare so well against temperature changes.

"And there is no way that I am letting anyone else die for me, especially you, Pops!" Ace growled, also staring at the flames, although his gaze flicked over to where Sengoku and Kizaru had retreated a bit as well. He then looked over to Luffy, who looked about as weary as Ace could ever remember seeing him. He wasn't all that injured, but considering what Ace knew of Luffy's healing ability, he wondered how close his brother was to simply collapsing. "Hey, little brother, running into some trouble?"

"You can keep calling me little brother only after you kill someone even stronger than a Marine Admiral, bro," Luffy quipped before moving over to help Hancock stand.

The tenderness of this motion wasn't missed by Ace, and he resolved to tease the shit out of Luffy at a later date. *My brother the ladies' man, who'd ever have thought that?!*

Garp landed nearby, very obviously not with the Whitebeard pirates, but looking Luffy over for a moment, then Hancock. He was more confused than anything, having thought that Luffy and Robin were involved with one another from their brief interactions back on Water 7. Yet seeing how gentle Luffy was with Hancock, the look on his face, maybe that had been wrong? *Don't the Kuja call that kind of thing the 'love sickness' or whatever? Hah, looks like she ain't gonna be dying from that anytime soon, at least.*

Hancock allowed Luffy to help her to her feet, before grimacing, holding her side. "I, I do not think that I will be of much use from here on, Luffy. I think that strike did something to my insides. I know I have broken ribs, at the very least, maybe more."

Luffy grimaced a bit, taking stock of himself for a second. He was close to running on fumes when it came to his ki, although he could still call upon his lightning form and his Busoshoku, if at a far reduced level for the latter. He wouldn't be able to heal from wounds any longer, and using a Kijin Raishu Dan as he had attempted earlier in the fight was probably too out of the question. *It comes down to endurance. Can they keep fighting, pinning Whitebeard here instead of letting him retreat to his fleet, or can we wear them out and force them to retreat?*

That question was answered in a very dramatic fashion as the fire suddenly began to roil, twisting around, flowing inward as if someone with a Devil Fruit that gave them the power to absorb it had begun to amidst the red, orange, blue and yellow firestorm caused by Marco and Ace. The flames disappeared almost entirely, allowing Peter to be seen. Still in his worm-man form, his mouth was almost completely shut for the first time that Luffy had seen. Up to this point, he'd been fairly certain that Peter wasn't even able to shut his mouth at all.

Then, as Luffy watched, Peter roared, and from his mouth came a stream of superheated fire, which looked more like plasma than anything that either Ace or Marco had been able to achieve. "Scatter!" Luffy shouted, grabbing Hancock in one arm and boosting away with his lightning form. Whitebeard and Garp jumped away, as did Marco and Ace, although Ace burst away like a rocket just in time as the plasma passed directly underneath him. Luffy had no idea what would happen if a hotter flame were introduced into his brother's flame body, but it probably wouldn't be good. *Just like when my lightning met Akainu's magma form.*

The plasma beam sliced through their previous position, following Whitebeard as he dodged upwards, then to the side and away, leading the beam away from both the others and the fleet still passing above them.

It carved through segments of volcanic stone left behind from the earlier battle with ease, sending giant mounds of rock to collapse, and when it passed over the ocean, just the heat of its passage alone was enough to flash several inches of water on the surface into gas instantly.

As they were dodging, Kizaru and Sengoku took advantage. Kizaru shot forward, lashing out toward Ace and Marco with light beams, disrupting their forms but doing no real damage before zigging toward Hancock and Luffy. Luffy barely had time to hurl Hancock up into the air, where she bounced and flipped away before Kizaru and a copy Kizaru slammed into them. The version of Kizaru going after Luffy had its arms and legs coated with Busoshoku, while the other one simply attempted to bodily slam into Hancock, but she dissipated the light clone with her own Busoshoku punch.

Two Holy Buddha Palms lashed out from Sengoku as he charged forward. One of them slammed into Garp, hurling him the entire length of the island and out into the ocean where he splashed down. Luckily, Garp didn't have a Devil Fruit, and the swim did nothing for him but sting his hundreds of wounds via the salt water. He soon burst back out of it, racing into the fight once more.

The other one nearly caught Whitebeard, and Whitebeard again had to use his bisento to dissipate before it hit. That moment of inattention cost him, as Peter used Worm Hydra again, covering the entire blasted, cracked island with worm-tentacles. Several dozen of them instantly began to attack Whitebeard, although thankfully, it seemed as if having previously regurgitated that plasma beam, Peter wasn't able to use the screaming portion of the worm Hydra attack for some reason.

Ace and Marco found themselves burning hundreds of the wormlike things, but this took their attention away from the main threat. That being Peter. "Infinite Hunger!"

Before the two fire users could realize what was going on, both of them were caught in a whirlwind of vacuum force, sucking them towards the worm man's waiting maw. The closer of the two, Marco, took the lion's share of the attack and quickly lost his footing. Changing into his Phoenix form, he tried to fly away, but the suction still pulled at him. He launched multiple simple fireballs and Blue Goose attacks into the vacuum, trying to overwhelm it, trying to harm Peter's mouth enough that he broke off the attack.

Just like against the massive attack Peter had launched towards the fleet, it didn't work. The vortex dragged and tore the fire attacks apart.

Fuck, should I not fight it, close and attack when I'm in his mouth? With that, Marco stopped fighting for a moment, letting his foot close to Peter's mouth. He lashed out instantly with Ongie, a melee-type attack that merged the fire from his Bluebird attack and a Busoshoku-assisted kick from his transformed foot.

To his horror, the flames of his form didn't even touch Peter's teeth before it was sucked deeper inside. An instant later, his Busoshoku was nearly overcome by the Sandworm's teeth as they began to shred at Marco's foot. As Luffy had learned before, element attacks didn't matter much to Peter's body, let alone his mouth, which seemed to have been created to eat practically anything. *FUCKKK!!!* Marco instantly began to fight all the harder, but the damage was done,

and within seconds, he found himself almost pulled into Saint Shepherd Ju's massive maw, fear rising within him for the first time in years.

Elsewhere, Ace, as tired as he was from the battle with Aokiji, could barely make any headway, but his use of the afterburner technique allowed him to gain some leeway, pulling away from Marco and Peter. He launched a few attacks but quickly realized he was getting nowhere and simply concentrated on getting away. Yet as the attack continued, even the flames around Ace's legs began to putter out.

Seeing what was happening to his sons out of the corner of his eye, Whitebeard allowed several of the worm things to bite into his legs and chest as he held up Murakumogiri. Once more coating it with Gura Gura no mi power, Whitebeard let his Haoshoku also burst out of him. The strength of the Conqueror's Haki was so strong that many of the mindless worm things around him died instantly, crushed into the ground by his greater will. "Naginata Rasetsu!"

The Devil Fruit-enhanced strike lashed out, smashing into Peter's body with such force that his last-second attempt to cover himself with Busoshoku failed. Scale and flesh exploded from the impact, and he was sent hurtling sideways almost to the edge of the island. Even as he landed, though, his wounds were already healing even as his head drooped over the side of the island into the water.

Thankfully, Whitebeard's attack did what it was intended to. Marco had already been halfway into Peter's maw when the attack cut off, and he burst out and away from the sandworm the instant the attack cut off. Seconds later, he and Ace launched their own attacks at Peter once more. Ace kept his distance, too exhausted to want to rely on his Haki techniques, while Marco closed viciously, his eyes wild as he lashed out and down with a special attack he only ever used against the strongest opponents.

Gathering up almost his entire phoenix form's energy between his talons, he lashed out with a combination of that and sheer impact. "Hoo-In!"

The attack slammed into Peter, who was barely able to get an arm up to block what part of the attack he could, hurling Peter back across the island with such force that, if the Gorosei didn't dig his feet into the stone beneath him, he might well have been launched out into the ocean beyond as Garp had been.

Even though he saved himself from that ignominious fate, one of Peter's arms was seared away by the attack, his sword falling into the ocean beyond the edge of the island as he slumped there. His mouth dangled over the water for a moment, but even as his arm began to regenerate, Peter suddenly grinned.

Although given his worm form, this was only shown in the way his large eyes seemed to shift in shape for a moment.

Then, he activated his vacuum technique.

Most Devil Fruits would never be able to interact with seawater, but Peter's vortex skill allowed him to pull the seawater into his mouth without letting it actually hit flesh or bone. The next second, Peter had brought his mouth to bear once more. From within his maw, he fired out a spout of saltwater, which slammed into Marco with all the force of a giant's spear thrust.

Even as Marco used his Busoshoku to defend himself, he was sent hurtling through the air, only righting himself a moment later, cursing volubly at the pain of the strike. Despite his Busoshoku, that water blast had hurt like a punch he had taken from Jozu once when he got the man drunk when he was in an angry mood. *And if Peter hits me with a continuous stream of it, it might start to impact my Devil Fruit like I was submerged in water!* With a grunt, he activated his Devil Fruit, burning the water away and then ducking aside as another attack came his way.

Peter roared, sending more than a dozen such attacks out, forcing all his enemies to duck and dodge or use their Busoshoku. Marco hissed as one slammed into him, the momentum sending him backward ass over kettle despite his Haki.

This included Whitebeard, who grunted as he smashed the attack aside with one of his fists, and Luffy, who yelped and ducked, his eyes wild, as there he hadn't had time to transform into lightning. And if it had caught him, then his curse would have activated, which would have been very bad indeed, cutting him off from his lightning powers until he could turn back. And here and now, Luffy's lightning power was the difference between life and death. Luckily for Luffy, Peter's attacks faded out, and he instantly launched a lightning strike. "Furious Flare!"

It was an attack Luffy made up just then, pumping as much energy as he could into a thin bolt of lightning. It struck, but Peter had already called upon his Busoshoku, and although the worm-man roared in pain from the heat of the strike, it didn't do anything, and a second later, Luffy was forced to concentrate back on Kizaru.

The two of them bounced and flashed around one another as they flew high into the air, Luffy pushing the fight away from the floundering Hancock. *Damn it, I can feel my body starting to wear out, I need to put Kizaru on the ground quick,* he thought, even as he dodged a light-sword strike to the head, pummeling Kizaru in turn with a knee to the chest. As he did so, he began to gather lightning in the air above them.

More debilitating for Peter was, Garp and Sengoku suddenly appearing above him, the two of them both using Soru to keep close with one another. That would have been fine, but the next second, Garp changed his style entirely for a brief second, grabbing Sengoku's outthrust hand in a grapple-style move that Garp had never used before. So startled was Sengoku that he couldn't even do anything as Garp judo threw Sengoku down onto the worm man. "HA! Two for the price of one!"

Even as a point-blank Buddha Palm launched Garp away, Sengoku's back slammed down onto Peter's, whose legs collapsed, the worm-man nearly being crushed by the weight of the giant Buddha statue form of the Fleet Admiral.

Ace landed next to Marco, nodding to the wary, still angry-looking older man, who nodded back, and the pair retreated back to Whitebeard. There, they were about to ask for orders, but instead, both men saw something that they hadn't seen before and gasped. "Pops!"

"The fuck..." Ace whispered, staring.

The scar across Whitebeard's chest had reopened for some reason, and blood was dripping down from it to the ground below. None of the bites of the worm fronds had been able to do much but leave little tiny marks. Yet Whitebeard was gasping now, grabbing at his chest with one hand, using his bisento almost as a walking staff for a moment, as blood began to gush down his chest from the ancient wound that Gol had given him and his leg, which was missing a large chunk of seared away thigh and hip, began to give out.

What they couldn't see was that his heart was also starting to give way. Yet Whitebeard refused to yield to the passage of time just yet. *Not just yet.*

Whitebeard pushed himself upright, ignoring his wounds old and new as he glared down at Ace and Marco, then over to where Sengoku had just rolled off Peter, leaping up into the air to battle Garp again as Peter quickly pushed himself to his feet, mainly healed from the previous wound. "So you bastard, I have to get you in the head, I think. Or maybe use Quake to crush your entire body all at once? Fine, I can do that. Killing a Gorosei will surely show the world not to mess with my crew!"

"Bravado, now, when you are so wounded? Even an ancient dragon must know its limits, Whitebeard," Peter answered, although he was looking quite the worse for wear by this point as well. Portions of his scales hadn't healed properly, several dozen teeth had yet to regrow, and his sword was gone, thanks to Marco's attack a moment ago, and the arm Marco had burned away had yet to regrow entirely, the hand yet to form.

He was also breathing deeply, although it was kind of hard to tell, given his strange hybrid form. "I will agree that this has gone on long enough, however. I will need to figure out some way to hunt the rest of your fleet down, after all."

Just then, Luffy slammed into the ground nearby, most of his body made of lightning, with just his hands covered with Busoshoku, something he had proven time and time again since the start of the battle that he was better at than Kizaru. His mouth was bleeding badly, and there were several burn marks across his torso, but underneath him was Kizaru, who gagged in pain as several of his ribs shattered. Luffy's Busoshoku had overcome Kizaru's as both of them fought through exhaustion. "Stay down, you freaking sunbeam!"

Sengoku whirled away from where he had been fighting Garp, lashing out with a kick to Garp's leg to interrupt his Geppo for just a moment as he lashed out towards Luffy with a small Holy Palm. It didn't have much power in it as he couldn't take the time to concentrate enough holy energy into it, but it was enough to slam Luffy away from Kizaru. He howled in agony as the holy energies interfered with his electrical form, spasming almost as he collapsed to the side, but he changed into his full flesh and blood form for a second, rolling away from the downed admiral, who made no move to get up, instead rolling onto his side, coughing blood and nearly curling into himself at the punishment his ribs had taken.

Nor was Hancock out of the fight just yet. She quickly kissed her fingers, pulling them slowly away from her lips to create a heart-shaped area of Mero Mero energy, which then burst as she pushed her hand forward, creating hundreds of heart-shaped arrows. "Slave Arrow!"

Looking up into the sky, Peter saw Hancock lashing out and down towards himself and Kizaru, and quickly thrust his head down into the ground, shouting out a new technique as he did. "Roaring Sand Shield!"

As fast as he vacuumed up the volcanic stone, so too did he hurl it back and upward. A dome of sand rose for a second over himself and Kizaru, protecting them from Hancock's attack, the bits of sand and stone being turned into different colored stone as the arrows hit, showing that inanimate objects could be impacted by her Devil Fruit too. Then he whipped his head backward, sending a sand-based attack up towards Hancock even as several more fireballs came at him from Marco and Ace, as well as a crack in the ground caused by Whitebeard's Quake powers.

Peter ignored the flames, grimacing slightly at the pain of them on areas where his scales hadn't grown back correctly, but dodged the shaft of Quake energy entirely as it was carried across the ground, practically splitting the island down to its bedrock between his position and Whitebeard's. Water began to spout up out of it, and he quickly thrust his head forward once more, using his vacuum attack to draw in the saltwater into his mouth, shooting it out towards Whitebeard and his two subordinates, much to Luffy's well-hidden relief, as he was in no position to move at the moment.

The attacks slammed into one another, the fireballs turning Peter's attack into steam. After a second, the steam dissipated, leaving Sengoku standing next to Peter, staring out at their various enemies as Garp retreated through the air towards Whitebeard and his subordinates as Kizaru tried to push himself to his feet, blood dripping from his mouth and one arm wound around his stomach.

In numbers, thanks to Marco and Ace's arrival, it would have seemed to most observers that the pirates had the advantage. That was only on the surface, as Luffy could tell easily as he pushed himself to his feet wearily. Sengoku's raw durability in his Buddha form had begun to tell against Garp. While he had several dozen Garp Fist-shaped dents in his golden form and a few

bent portions in his arms and legs, Garp now was sporting a broken arm, the bone visibly bulging right below the elbow under his skin.

Observing this, Luffy could barely push himself to his feet, and although he knew that he could summon his lightning form, he was running on fumes right now. Looking up, he could see that Hancock was also floundering in the air, each Geppo kick weaker than the other was. She was also bleeding from the mouth, a sure sign that something other than ribs had been broken in the last strike that had landed on her. Landing beside him, Hancock leaned into Luffy's side heavily as the two of them stood to one side, staring hard at the giant golden statue and the almost equally large sandworm-man hybrid, both of whom looked far less battered than any of their enemies bar Garp minus his broken arm.

If the wounds they had all accumulated by this point weren't enough, the two 'freshest' of them, Marco and Ace, didn't have any kind of technique that could really turn the tide against Peter, as shown in the last few moments when he basically negated their attacks. That might not have been true if both of them were actually fresh, but they were very much not.

Ace looked as if he was about to keel over. He had spent weeks in prison, and even gorging himself after getting the Seastone cuffs off him hadn't brought him back to one hundred percent. Then he'd been forced to fight Aokiji, and now all of that was catching up to him.

To Luffy's eyes, Marco looked far fitter for the fight. Luffy figured he had been fighting vice admiral-level fighters since the battle began, but even he looked utterly exhausted. *It doesn't look like Marco's got anything left that can turn the tide here. Wasn't he fighting a few vice admirals all at once at one point? Although he might be able to heal us all...*

"OY!" he shouted, glaring at Marco. "You're a Phoenix, right? Heal us, you idiot!"

Marco blinked, then nodded as if suddenly remembering he could heal other people too. Coming so close to death was a feeling he had largely forgotten, and having it happens so suddenly had shocked him badly on top of what had been one of the toughest battles in his life already up to that point. He turned quickly, placing a hand on Whitebeard's leg as if he had only just remembered that his power had less destructive applications. The blue flames instantly flared up, covering Whitebeard's body. Even as Peter and Sengoku both cursed, Whitebeard gasped, and Marco nearly slumped to the side as a wave of exhaustion hit him.

When the blue flames finished, Whitebeard's wound on his chest was closed once more. The scattered bruises, cuts and bite marks were gone, and the wound on his leg had stopped bleeding at the edges where the previously cauterized wound had opened. The old pirate still looked utterly exhausted, and his heart was still in danger of giving way, nor was the missing flesh from that wound returned to him. This let those around him see how deep the wound Akainu had given him went straight to the bone, removing almost all of the muscle on his outer thigh. It was very clear that Whitebeard was standing more because of raw willpower than anything else.

Marco's Flames of Regeneration used his own endurance to heal recently taken wounds, not age, and on other people, there was a limit to what it could regrow in terms of missing flesh or organs. Whitebeard was now as fit as he had been since the fight began bar the injury from Akainu. Yet his heart was still strained, still pushing well beyond its limits to keep him going. Whitebeard knew it and could see that the effort had taken a good bit out of Marco, too.

As the flames finished their work, a heavy hand landed on Marco's shoulders. Several times the size of Marco's head, so large was it that the thumb could rest on one shoulder while the rest almost completely encompassed the arm on his other side. A familiar hand, a hand that had given Marco both comfort and punches over the years when he was stupid, now gripped him with a surprisingly frail grip, but Whitebeard's voice was as deep and powerful as ever as he spoke to Ace and Marco. "Thanks for that, Marco. But it's time the two of you left."

"What, no!" Marco shouted, shaking his head to clear it of his weariness. *Fuck Issho and that other guy, fighting him and that tall guy in glasses really took it out of me. But I can't, I'm the fraking first division commander, damn it!* "Pops! We can't..."

His voice faltered as he turned to look at his commander, at the father figure that it dominated his life from the moment he had become a pirate. There was something in the older man's eyes. Not weakness, no, **never** that. That gleam was the gleam of determination. Raw determination. Those were not the eyes of an old man who was realizing his strength was waning and hated it. No, those were the eyes of a warrior who wanted to do battle on his own terms. "Get out of here, Marco, Ace. Return to the fleet. Order them to keep going. And don't look back."

Luffy and Hancock heard this. Already pulling Hancock to his side and making his way over to the others, Luffy slowly nodded. *The old man was grabbing at his chest long before that wound of his began to open. His heart. It's giving out. Better to die on your own terms than let old age take ya. Fuck, I respect him even more now.*

Ace protested, "Pops! I can't, I can't let you, all of this, all of this carnage, all of it's my fault!"

"No. It's Blackbeard's fault. Hopefully, the Marines who broke off from the fleet will be seeing to that little problem. And it was the Marines and the world government who wanted this fight, never doubt it. If they had captured any of my other sons, I would've responded just as strongly. Do not take it on yourself!"

On the sidelines, Luffy was almost tempted to point out that actually, it had been his planning that it led to this battlefield, and Sengoku's ability to plan contingencies and, if Hancock was right, his ability to set aside his pride. It had been his asking the WeeGee for help that had brought Peter into this fight, and without Peter, this entire battle would've been very different. Or if Marco had arrived with enough endurance left to heal more than just

Whitebeard. But he didn't say any of those, deciding, in the spirit of diplomacy, which must have felt very alone inside his head that now was not the time.

Ace stared up at the older, far taller man, fighting back tears with difficulty. "But, but!"

Whitebeard slowly shook his head, staring across at their two remaining enemies. Sengoku was currently arguing with Peter, while a mauled, barely able to stand Kizaru stood nearby. What the argument was, became clear as Peter nodded reluctantly, and Kizaru began to retreat, shimmering away in a blaze of light.

In the distance, though, Luffy could sense he hadn't retreated per-se. Instead, he had simply left the main battle, heading up and away. Soon, thanks to the range the Goro Goro no Mi gave his Kenbunshoku, Luffy could sense the light user launching long-range attacks against the retreating Whitebeard Fleet and Shiki doing his best to defend it along with others in the fleet.

Meanwhile, the two discussions had given Peter time to heal himself. All his earlier wounds, which hadn't healed or had healed wrong, were in the process of healing back to normal. Sengoku stood beside him in his giant Buddha form, his arms crossed as he glared not at Whitebeard but at Garp, his former friend turned hated enemy, ignoring the numerous dents in his golden body as if he could barely feel them. His glare, though, was next to nothing to the rage conveyed in Peter's inhuman eyes.

By this point, Peter knew that they would be unable to achieve any but the most important objectives. Luffy could use his Devil Fruit power to escape in an instant. Not even Peter's vacuum attack would be strong enough to drag him back, and Kizaru was in no condition to fight the young upstart any longer. Whitebeard's fleet was also mostly out of range of any attack, although Kizaru would at least be able to bombard it from long range for a time before Marco arrived to drive him off. His own personal agents had not returned, and thus he knew the assassins had also failed in their order to kill Nico Robin. The only thing he could do now to wrench any victory from this day was to kill Whitebeard, and that thought galled him to the point of frothing fury.

Whitebeard locked gazes with Peter's red-rimmed eyes, then looked back down at the two younger men in front of him. "When men become old, we can only choose where we stand, not if we are to die, as that is already predetermined. This is my fight, brats. Not yours. The two of you, the rest of the fleet, you all can keep on going! Keep getting stronger."

Marco and Ace still wanted to protest, but the look on Whitebeard's face ceased all conversation for a moment. Marco finally sighed, staring at Whitebeard's face, but at his body, at the giant wound that had just begun to reopen again despite his healing flame. That horrified him, but he still nodded. "All right, Pops."

"I, I wanted you to be the Pirate King! I wanted to help you achieve that!" Ace almost lost control of his voice for a moment, shaking his head. *I, all of this, it's all my fault*, he thought, guilt filling his mind. "We can't lose you, Pops!"

"I've never wanted to be the Pirate King. All I wanted to be, all I wanted, was a family," Whitebeard said in a moment of honesty that he had not shared with anyone since becoming a Yonko or even before that if he was honest. The only one who had known his real dream, his real hope for the future was his old friend and enemy, Gol. *Ironic to think that it's the wound you gave me that is slowing me down now! Decades later, and it's still the worst one I've ever taken, old friend. I wonder, are you laughing up there in heaven more at that, or the fact that you so impressed Garp's grandson of all people that he wants to be the next Pirate King?*

Chuckling a little at that, Whitebeard stared down at his sons, seeing through Ace's self-control to the guilt inside. "And **none** of this was your fault, Ace. The fault lies with the World Government, with its desire to knock me off my perch. Your arrest was just an excuse, as it would have been if they captured any of my sons. Just... tell me this. Was I a good father?"

Luffy looked away as his older brother finally lost control of his tear ducts and began to cry, while Marco closed his eyes, just nodding silently in answer to that question. He only looked away when Garp slapped him on the shoulder, nearly sending him stumbling along with Hancock. "Damn it, Gramps! Why do you have to be like that? Why can't we have those nice emotional moments!?"

"I agree wholeheartedly," Hancock grumbled, a wince on her face. "I am not one for tears, but it was quite moving."

"Hah, we're the Monkey family! We don't do that soft shit!" Garp said with a bellow of laughter, causing Whitebeard to grumble a bit, even as he began to push Ace and Marco to leave. Nevertheless, Garp was serious as he gazed down at his grandson. "It's time you left too, Luffy. Get Hancock and get out of here. This is no longer a stage for the young. Even if Marco can heal your wounds, the both of you are running on fumes and I know it."

Luffy reflected that was true. Kizaru had followed Sengoku's barked order to retreat. There was no chance in hell that he would be in a position to fight anyone, not Luffy, not the fleet above. Similarly, Luffy and Hancock were too tired to be of much use, even if they both had their Devil Fruit powers still.

Garp repeated himself as he saw Luffy's agreement on his face. "Get out of here, Luffy." He then flashed a grin at his grandson and his... girlfriend? *I have so many questions about that one and about Nico Robin and their relationship, but it can wait until I can grill him properly.* "And don't worry, unlike Whitebeard, old wounds aren't slowing me down. Even with my arm broken, there's still a lot of fight left in this old dog!"

Whitebeard heard that and growled a bit but said nothing as Hancock muttered, "That may be true, but how are we supposed to meet up again? Or do you think we'll just sail around here waiting for you?"

"Actually, given how fast Eve can go, we can do that very thing." Luffy shrugged. He nodded up at his grandfather, then turned towards Whitebeard.

The two of them locked gazes, and Luffy slowly bowed from the waist.

Whitebeard stared at him, at Hancock, and then up at his sons as they flew up towards the fleet. When he spoke, Haoshoku poured out into his voice, adding weight and volume well beyond what mere lungs, even lungs as large as Whitebeard's, could have achieved. "**The ONE PIECE is REAL!**" he roared.

Above, the crews of his fleet could not see everything going on down below, but those with spyglasses not busy trying to defend against Kizaru's long-range light beams had reported Whitebeard's wounds, the lack of Ace and Marco's impact up to that point. All of them were worried, but Whitey had sat on any talk of turning the ship back down toward the ground, pointing once more to the large group of flight-capable commodores, vice admirals and captains operating nearby under Tsuru, many of whom showed the telltale metallic gleam of the Green Goo that had seemingly given many of them the power of a Devil Fruit.

That group had shifted slightly from where Whitey had seen them moments before, Tsuru positioning them halfway between Impel Down and the fleet's current position, where they could go to aid either the marines already on Impel Down under Aokiji, or to attack the fleet, if the Whitebeard pirates tried to turn back. Which would be disastrous for the Whitebeard Pirates. Besides Marco, Jozu, Ace and Whitey, of whom only Marco was both in shape enough to and could fight in midair equally as well as on the ground, all their division commanders and the best of their fighters were dead or in the various infirmaries across the fleet. Shiki could not control so many different floating objects in a combat situation. The fleet would lose whole ship's crews quickly against the Devil Fruit users and higher-ranking officers.

And while all the men of the fleet were willing to lay their lives on the line, Whitey, with the written orders from Whitebeard in hand, Whitey shouted them back to their current duties again and again, repeating the words, "What kind of parent would want his sons or daughters to die for him!?"

Now, though, as Whitebeard spoke, the crews quietened down to listen, even Kizaru's attack pausing as he listened. "Go forth and achieve your dreams, my sons! My journey ends here, but no man is truly gone until he is forgotten. Live on, and live well!"

He then turned his attention back to Luffy, then over to a snarling Sengoku and Peter. Yet even they were affected by the raw **WILL** in his voice, held in place like snakes facing a

mongoose even as Ace and Marco, both of them crying openly now, began to fly up off the ground.

“Inherited will! Someday, someone, be it Straw Hat or someone else, will appear, carrying the weight of centuries of history within him. He will challenge the world, your system, as you so fear it, Peter, Sengoku. And when he does, your house of cards will fall. **The One Piece is real!**” he roared once more.

Whitebeard’s voice carried even to Impel Down, stopping the first portions of the fight that had just begun there. Everyone there paused just like within the fleet from Shiki on down, their eyes wide and shocked to hear that from the Strongest Man in the World.

They were about to get even more shocked, not by words alone but by what they meant, the acknowledgment in them. “Go forth and find it! It is there, on Raftel, Straw Hat!”

“...As if I need to be told, Old Man,” Luffy snorted, finding his own tear ducts in mild rebellion for a moment even as he picked up Hancock once more in the bridal carry. “Sayonara, Newgate.”

Garp waited until the reverberation of Whitebeard’s roar faded until Luffy and Hancock were bouncing away through the air. His grandson’s lower half turned into lightning once more, and he zipped away.

Then Garp turned to Whitebeard. “So, from one old fart to another, if I remove Sengoku, do you think you can put that worm down permanently?”

“Impudence!” the worm in question roared, finally freeing himself from the strange paralysis that Whitebeard’s words had evoked in him and Sengoku alike.

He shot forward, lamenting internally how little the island had grown since Akainu had joined the battle directly against Whitebeard as it kept him from using his more powerful full transformation into his Mythical Sandworm body. Given how much of the island had cracked, shattered and sunk by this point, he just did not have enough space to play with to make that form viable, a problem he had faced since the beginning of the battle.

“Gurararara! You just see to your own fight, Garp! And come what may, I’ll be waiting on the other side with a cup of sake for you.” With that, Whitebeard charged forwards as well, his whole body suddenly shifting into Busoshoku in a way that it hadn’t since near the start of the fight, his Haoshoku roaring out at the same time as he began to use the last vestiges of his endurance even as his heart threatened to burst within his chest.

Even so, Garp was faster, having already begun to move before Whitebeard did. He crossed the intervening distance as the giant Buddha statue lashed out and down towards him with the palm. Bouncing around it, a blow like the world’s largest hammer crashing into a bell

sounded as Garp used his special version of Haoshoku as he had once done to Doflamingo once more. Only this time, Sengoku couldn't react in time with his own and found himself flung through the air like a pillow out of a cannon. Garp followed up, shouting out, "We're not done talking, you and I, Sengoku!" While behind him, worm-man and giant pirate clashed once more.

OOOOOOO

Luffy zoomed back towards the Everlasting Resolve, which was already at the outer edge of his own Kenbunshoku, landing lightly. "Captain!" the shout came from many throats, and he smiled at seeing his crew again.

As he landed, Jinbe nodded formally at him. "I see it is over for us, then. Is Whitebeard..."

The pirate captain didn't answer for a moment, instead handing Hancock over to Chopper, wishing Marco had healed the pair of them but waving away the doctor's concerns about his own injuries, away. Looking around, he was not surprised to find Zoro had somehow, through sheer willpower, undoubtedly, pushed himself out of the infirmary. His first mate looked at him, shifting his gaze over the horizon in the direction Luffy and Hancock had come, then to Luffy.

"Well?" Zoro asked gruffly, adding his questions to Jinbe's. "We saw portions of Whitebeard's fleet passing overhead. Perona also sent her ghosts up. She said she saw Fire Fist Ace and Marco the Phoenix rejoin the rest of the fleet and drive off Kizaru, who was attacking from long range. But she didn't say any sign of Whitebeard or your grandfather."

That made sense to Luffy. While Kizaru had astonished him by getting back to his feet after their last clash, Luffy doubted the guy would have been able to take a single Busoshoku punch at this point. Lobbing long-range attacks and retreating when challenged was just good tactics.

"Gramps has got some unfinished business with Sengoku. And Whitebeard... Whitebeard chose his last hill to stand on," Luffy said, turning his attention back towards the Tarai Current over the horizon.

Both Jinbei and Zoro understood without further explanation, and they, Sanji and the nearby Vivi, who had been talking quietly to a few of the Amazons, waiting for a moment to talk to Luffy, fell silent. Soon, they and the rest of the two crews out on the main deck also turned, staring out over the horizon. While none but Luffy could even sense what was going on out there, some things just needed to be observed in silence. The end of an Age was one of them.

Luffy didn't move when a hand appeared on his shoulder or when Robin came out, slowly putting his straw hat on his head before standing beside him, staring in the same

direction, although her own Kenbunshoku was limited at best. He didn't move when a limping, heavily bandaged Hancock arrived. He, Jinbe and Zoro simply kept on staring in that direction.

Moments later, Nami's shout came from the conning tower. "Something's happening! There's a massive tide coming our way from the Tarai Current."

Here in the Calm Belt, that was supposed to be impossible, yet Jinbei instantly added to the report, saying, "All the monsters and even the small fish are fleeing like crazy from whatever is going on out there. Even the whales, which I would normally be able to communicate with are mad with fear, too busy running away to converse with me."

Moments later, a massive wave hit them. Thankfully, Nami had already shifted the ship to face the wave, riding it out easily. Moments later, there was a *CRACK!* noise in the distance, so loud it could be heard even this far away, like the world was ending, causing many of his crew to stumble and fall to their knees. Luffy shook his head sadly from side to side, as he felt Whitebeard's presence in his Kenbunshoku wink out, along with Peter's. When he spoke, his words and the others, Kuja and Straw Hat alike, bowed their heads in respect. "You can always take one with you. Cheer's, Whitebeard."

The War between the Marines and the Whitebeard Pirates, which would soon come to be called the War of the Best, was over. Soon, no matter what the WeeGee attempted, the entire planet would learn about the outcome, and the world would change, for better or for worse...

End Chapter

Woo... hope everyone is happy with how this chapter went. I wanted to show that Whitebeard wanted to both go out on a high note and protect his sons. He wasn't looking to suicide, but he was more than willing to let this be his last ride, and that thought kind of grew as the fight continued on and his body started to shut down. When Marco healed him, he could have fallen back, but if he had, Peter and Kizaru would have been free to attack his fleet from a longer range, eventually overcoming him, Marco and Ace. Even if they had been somehow able to get away. Newgate would have died in his bed soon, and that is just not the way a pirate would want to go. Giving the WeeGee a last and **very big** middle finger is way more his style.

For those wondering, the two prisoners Gion mentions and I describe are my own characters. I take the appearance of some of the prisoners from Level 6, as shown in the manga, who are not shown joining Blackbeard's crew and give them a bit of background. Whether they will be used in the future is up in the air. That is what happened on Impel Down at all.

Thus ends the largest arc of this story and the largest continuous combat scene I've ever written. May I never have to do something like this again? Like, I love writing out combat scenes, but soooo many with sooo many different powers, and the need to keep the setting in

mind and everything else? UGHHH. Anyway, see you next time, folks, in a good old response chapter with a decent splash of romance as well.