

One Piece: Halfway Broken

(Chapters 82 & 83)

Novus Peregrine

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Chapter 82: Preparations

Given they were still days from the East Blue, at the slow rate Merville was moving, Luffy was determined to treat the threat of Shiki with the seriousness the legend deserved. Without an immediate reason to rush, Luffy had encouraged taking the time to sort out all the information about Merville they could find. To that end, the first step had, of course, been their bribe for the locals. Xiao had been too ecstatically happy, since Dis *had* been able to easily grow her an entire basketful of IQ plant quite easily, to care about a bit of delay in returning to the village. That delay, meanwhile, had allowed the girls to perform at least a basic skim over the other islands. Including, in a bit of extra cleverness that had impressed Luffy, combining a spyglass with one of their drones to get a decent look at the main island of the floating archipelago without much risk of being detected.

The results were...disquieting.

Aside from the local's village, there wasn't a lot more than the various crazed monsters on *most* of the islands. The main island, however, had possessed three major points of concern. The first was a large body of water where the girls' scouting efforts had spotted the ships of the pirates Xiao had mentioned. There were 33 ships of varying sizes docked in that body of water, all of them baring different Jolly Rogers. Hina had joined them temporarily to help with identification, and between her and Robin they'd managed to name twenty of the crews.

The good news was that none of those crews were anything *too* special, only a couple of them being New World crews. On the flip side, none of them were pushovers either. Mostly, it looked like Shiki had gone recruiting among the up-and-comers for the last three years. None of the *current* 'Supernovas' were present, much to Luffy's relief, as he was aware the current crop of standouts was considerably more dangerous than average. Yet Shiki had managed to snag the loyalty of similar standouts from previous years. Though only a smattering of the most violent from each year.

The number of *reasonably* strong pirates was going to be a serious nuisance, though Luffy had a few ideas about how to mitigate that nuisance a little.

The second standout location they had far less information about, the girls having been rightfully leery of sending their drone construct too close. It was very clearly Shiki's base, and it was impressively large and well put together. It wasn't far from the lagoon holding all the pirate ships, with both being surrounded by more of the Daft Green plants that protected Xiao's village. The base, unfortunately, showed every sign of being quite high-tech, a fair bit above the usual norms

even for the Marines. They also, of course, hadn't been able to get *too* close a look at it. They didn't want to get even the drones too close, let alone risking having Robin try to spread her network of eyes and ears inside, as she'd done with the other two locations. Without more of an idea how good Shiki might be with Haki, doing that sort of thing was simply too much of a risk.

The only other major point of interest that had been uncovered, good to know but less directly useful, was that Shiki had a number of mines and factories spread around the island. Those factories explained a discrepancy in the village, where Robin had noticed there were really only very old or very young men and women populating said village. Xiao had, tearfully, confirmed that Shiki had essentially enslaved the original island dwellers when he'd first arrived, and the 'young and fit' groups were all serving him in some capacity or other. The men in the mines and factories, the women acting as servants in his base and the meeting hall near the ships for the pirate crews. The only potentially good news about that bit of horribleness was that Shiki kept the vast majority of such locals all in one place, a near-prison-like compound on the main island, after dark. Mostly, Luffy supposed, as a way to protect his workforce from the monsters, as that compound also had a circle of Daft Green trees around it.

According to Xiao, Shiki had promised to let all of the 'workers' go once he got what he wanted.

Not a single member of the Strawhats thought he'd actually do it.

"Well, I supposed there's nothing left to do now but see what the villagers know. Robin, Kaya, you two and I will return Xiao to her mother and grandmother. Kaya, I want you to learn what you can about Daft Green and IQ from them, Robin will cast her network out to keep an eye on the surveillance snails and anyone that might report us. I doubt they'll actually know much more than Xiao about Shiki, but we'll find out anything they might know or be able to guess. After that...we'll have to work out a plan of attack."

The entire group nodded, there was no way they could leave this alone. Even for those not originally from the East Blue, leaving a pirate to attack or wipe out islands wasn't okay with them, nor was the fact that Shiki was enslaving the locals. They'd already pissed off the World Government over slavery, a pirate wasn't going to get any more consideration than the WG had, no matter how powerful.

A few minutes of organization and waiting for an opening where Xiao's home wasn't being observed later, and the trio set off to find out what they could...

... ..

"...so Shiki promised to let us all go, once he'd reached his 'Sea of Schemes.'"

Xiao's mother had been both panicked over her daughter's action and absence...and utterly blown away by her arriving with a basket almost as big as she was, stuffed full of IQ plants. As Luffy had hoped, the gift of the IQ plants had opened the floodgates. As soon as Xiao had convinced her mother that the plants *hadn't* come from Shiki, but from a 'pretty plant lady who grew them using one Xiao found,' both her mother and grandmother had been so relieved that they'd spilled everything they knew.

There wasn't a *lot* more than what they'd already known, but several important things had come of the discussion. One was that it had been the *locals* who'd originally known how to work with the IQ plant. It had been explained to them that the IQ plant had been critical to the way the island functioned for as long as anyone could remember. Apparently, Dr. Indigo, the mad scientist behind MIQ and SIQ, had worked off of notes and formulas that they'd threatened out of the locals. Shockingly, this meant that the few elders who had once worked with IQ actually had a *very* good idea how both MIQ and SIQ worked. In fact, entirely without letting Shiki realize it, it had been those elders who had stabilized MIQ enough for it to not kill the villagers. Dr. Indigo hadn't been able to reproduce those results in any of the animals or his non-local test subjects, and had thus discarded the formula.

Kaya, of course, had been immediately interested. She'd also, notably, been able to use their notes on Daft Green and IQ to create a 'Sickness' that made the body immune to Daft Green. Since the 'poison' was apparently actually an extreme type of allergy response, she could convince her Devil Fruit that 'disabling the body's natural reaction' to it qualified as a 'Sickness.' Seriously, the knots Kaya could twist the Sick Sick Fruit into in order to get helpful results legitimately made Luffy feel a bit inadequate with this own Devil Fruit experiment. Sure, he was far more creative than *most*, but he was rapidly realizing that Kaya was a whole different level in that respect. Though, the mental gymnastics involved were also *probably* why Kaya had been developing her own Mad Scientist vibes. So maybe he was better off not being quite that good at it...

Aside from some deep background on Shiki, the two other things of import which had come to light from the locals were Merville's weakness to Storms, and an idea of the timeline they were working against. The first provided a last-ditch option, should they discover they weren't able to deal with Shiki personally. Even without the *Discovery's* Storm Cannon, if they failed to stop Shiki before he reached the East Blue, they could always repeat the cruder Storm Summoning trick they'd once used against Don Krieg. The storm they'd produced back then had been Grand Line levels of ferocious, and they'd only gained a *better* understanding of how to make even nastier ones from their time dealing with crazy weather on the Grand Line itself.

Of course, doing that would very possibly destroy the islands outright.

Honestly, though, that part might actually be inevitable. While the main island apparently *had* been a Sky Island originally, it no longer had it's Island Cloud. Meaning that if they killed Shiki, the islands would fall out of the sky. The storm angle still wasn't necessarily the best choice, however, as Shiki himself was entirely too likely to survive a mere storm. It was a solid Plan B, if they couldn't come up with a better option, but not something they should go with if there was a better path. After all, it would also be harder to evacuate anyone but the young and old still in the village if they went with that method. Whereas, if they could find a way to defeat the majority of Shiki's forces *first*, and *then* fight Shiki while an evacuation was ongoing? Then they could probably save more of the island's enslaved inhabitants. A goal they all agreed was the one to shoot for.

Thankfully, the second piece of important information, the bit about the timeline, meant they had a chance to attempt something better. Apparently, the very next day, Shiki was intending to finalize his alliance with the various pirate Captains, and the day after *that* they would hit the East Blue and start their reign of terror. According to the locals, Merville *could* move faster than it

was, but Shiki was drawing their arrival out due to needing to finalize the alliances with the pirate crews now under him.

“Thank you for this, Madam Long. With the information you and the village elders have provided, I believe my crew and I have a very good chance of stopping Shiki. He may be strong, but so are we, and the fact he is targeting some of our homes mean we have every reason to stop him.”

Xiao’s mother, Vera Long, looked pale and worn. She was clearly frightened by the idea of them taking on Shiki...but she also clearly didn’t believe Shiki’s promises. Xiao and she might escape, *would* escape since Luffy was fully intending to empty the village to a safe island before they attacked, but her daughter Ever and husband Dickson were among those conscripted by Shiki. She’d clearly decided to pin her hopes that they could at least save *some* of those Shiki had taken, even if he wasn’t sure the woman believed they could actually win.

Luffy didn’t blame her. Though he fully intended to prove her wrong if she didn’t believe it.

“Robin, you’ve confirmed the paths for the Surveillance Snails have settled?”

Nodding and opening her eyes, having been concentrating on a large number of *other* eyes around the village, Robin replied.

“Yes. It is as Madam Long said, once the sun went down half of the snails went into hibernation and the rest started a set patrol pattern. We can easily work around them.”

It was the one flaw in Shiki’s precautions that the locals had discovered. At night, the surveillance on the village dropped off. Mushi, being biological creatures, still needed to *sleep* sooner or later, even if only for a few hours each day. When the locals had realized that the surveillance Mushi slept in shifts over the night, with the remainder of the Mushi taking up a less heavily monitored patrol, they’d taken to using the cover of night to enact what limited plans they could. In particular, they’d dug out an admittedly impressive series of hidden shelters. Enough of them to hide the entire population, in fact. They’d even managed to stock those shelters with enough food, mostly via some rather harsh rationing, that they could vanish for a few weeks and hope Shiki left or stopped paying attention, if it ever came to him destroying the village outright.

Such would only be helpful under very specific circumstances they hadn’t been likely to get, but it was still an incredible achievement for what they’d been working with. Thankfully, it would also serve their current purposes, as it meant there was a pre-existing plan and signal for an evacuation. After managing to speak with enough of those in charge, and prove to them that Vivi’s Air Doors could move them to another island, they’d all agreed it was the best choice. Now that night had fallen, the relatively tiny village population was going to be evacuated to Alabasta, who could *easily* absorb so few refugees. Given that there was very little chance the islands would survive Shiki dying and his Fruit ceasing to work as a result, it was the best they were going to get and they knew it.

“Alright. Time to get everyone moving. Vivi, Robin, Kuina, you know what to do. Kaya, Nami and I will get started on our own parts in the meantime.”

There were quick acknowledgements from his crew, as everyone shifted to start executing the loose plans they’d come up with...

Chapter 83: Sabotage

Luffy would have to admit that, if you really managed to pressure him on what the most useful feature of his System was, the answer was obviously the Shop. Frankly, given that they'd managed to acquire quite a number of Devil Fruits *without* purchasing them from the Shop, he'd probably say the same even if buying and selling them from his System wasn't possible. Just for starters, he'd acquired the more exotic materials required for the *Discovery* from the System Shop. It also meant that it was essentially impossible for them to run out of supplies, unless they also ran out of *money*, and his own efforts had seen them never run into that particular issue.

Honestly, he had no idea how the System actually converted belli and gold into *stuff*. Maybe it was literally buying it from shops all over the world and just making the exchange? It seemed very strange, whenever he made the mistake of thinking about it too hard, that he could buy pizza from a magical mystery isekai system with cash. Given that, at the moment, they were quietly planting what was best described as a 'metric fuckton' of explosives for the *second time in less than two weeks*, he wasn't about to question his good fortune, though.

Slipping out of *yet another* pirate ship unseen, having already done the same thing for seven others, Luffy's house-cat form twitched an eye as he heard the signal from Nami that she was done with her set. Somehow, he wasn't surprised that, in *pure spite* of the advantages he and Kaya had, Nami had finished her set of ships first. Kaya, as much as it annoyed him, would probably finish her set of eleven ships faster than him as well. One way or another, though, all 33 of the pirate ships that *didn't* belong to Shiki himself would be rigged by the time they were done. All of them on a timer set to go off in...2 hours and eleven minutes now.

He'd better hurry. This was only step one of their sabotage plans, after all. The Sabaody Archipelago operation had taught his crew just how much a fuckton of explosives in the right place could level a playing field, and they were more than happy to repeat the performance. Sure, it might not seem as epic a way to deal with enemies as charging in and punching them in the face. But there was a lot of good to be said about the Art of Explosions...

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Vivi's final Air Door closed with Yamato's less-than-subtle presence stepping through from the *Discovery*. There had been something *odd* about the *Discovery* when the Door opened, but it hadn't been open long enough for Luffy to determine what. He quickly put it out of mind. He'd left Hina, Perona, and Pagaya to look after the ship. Whatever was going on there, he could trust them to handle things. Doubly so since Dis herself wasn't exactly stupid or helpless. Besides, now that Yamato and Zoro were here, they needed to get their plan rolling fast. Neither of them were subtle with their Haki presence, and they had to work on the *assumption* that Shiki new Observation, even if they hadn't seen any actual proof of that yet.

Besides, everything was literally on timers, and there were only a couple of minutes left.

Everyone already knew the plan, of course, so they divided into their teams on the spots marked for Vivi to open three different Air Doors. The first team was headed to liberate the local

work force. It consisted of Nojiko, Kaya, Chopper, and Vivi. They shouldn't *need* a heavy hitter, there only being a relatively light guard on the local workers, but Nojiko in particular could act as one if they unexpectedly did need such. Vivi, of course, would be going along with that particular group in order to use her Air Doors to get the locals out.

Teams two and three were the ones expected to see serious combat. Nami, Sanji, Brook, Robin, and Usopp would be heading to deal with whatever remained of Shiki's allied pirates after their sabotage. Most would likely die to the explosives, but there was no way *all* of them would. At least a few Devil Fruit users and a few stragglers that weren't on their ships would survive and be *thoroughly pissed off*. Still, he was confident that their group would be able to handle them. Nami was seriously powerful in her own right at this point, Robin had gotten Armament down well enough to be *utterly horrifying* against most Devil Fruit users, and Usopp, Sanji and Brook were all extremely capable fighters by Paradise standards. Not up to where they needed to be for the New World yet, but there were only two New World crews down there, and neither of them were anything special.

Team three, of course, were the ones that would be hitting Shiki's base personally.

Luffy was obviously taking Yamato with him to fight Shiki, but Kuina and Zoro were both coming along as well. Shiki wasn't likely to be entirely alone, and the duo were easily the third and fourth most powerful members of the crew. In truth, they were easily in the New World range already themselves, unlike the rest of the crew. They still needed to polish some of their newer skills, but Luffy would willingly stack them up against most New World *captains*, so long as you excluded the true monsters like the remaining White Beard Division Commanders. He'd been *very* tempted to add Kaya to the mix, as well. Less because of pure strength and more because she was such an utter wildcard. Kaya, however, remained someone who didn't *like* combat, despite how deadly she could be. Much better for Kaya's mental health to be with the group rescuing people.

"Ten seconds!"

The call out was from Vivi, who had the watch they had carefully synced to the mechanical countdown timers they'd used for the explosives. It was a much more complicated system than just having Robin set things off like they had a Sabaody, but they had enough targets here that it would have been genuinely difficult even for Robin to set them off all at once. Less a matter of numbers than distance, in truth, since the pirate vessels and Shiki's main base were quite far from each other. Not to mention the *other* places they'd very quietly and stealthily set explosives that were more noise-makers than destruction.

"Three, two, one..."

An instant after the 'one' there was a roar of explosives, audible despite them being on one of the farthest out islands of Merville. The first roar, which would be the ships, was quickly followed by a second less violent set...incendiary explosives that had been set into dozens of Daft Green trees all around Shiki's compound. Kaya had been the one to set those, with the help of Vivi's Air Doors and using her unique form of stealth to remain undetected by anyone. Now they could all see it as, exactly as the villagers had said would happen, the trees went up in spectacular gouts of flame. Apparently, the pollen of Daft Green was *extremely* flammable, and Shiki's scientist had

used another experimental version of IQ to produce Daft Green trees that produced *more* of it to ward off the drugged up monsters.

“Open the Doors, all teams go!”

Vivi obeyed the order instantly, three Air Doors snapping open, one for each team. Teams 1 and 2 darted through at speed, intent on doing their respective jobs. Luffy’s own team strolled through in a more leisurely, nonchalant and deliberately arrogant manner...and stopped even attempting to hide any of their Haki as they did. Their target would most likely come to them, rather than the other way around, as they stepped just a few hundred meters inside the ring of burning Daft Green trees.

They were spotted almost immediately, of course. They didn’t even try to stop the alarms, Luffy actively waiting for a few seconds for that alarm to properly spread...before creating a massive bolt of lighting that *erased* the wall in front of them. It also, of course, killed the people shouting the initial alarm. The four of them didn’t slow as they strolled causally through the hole in the defenses thus created, into a courtyard with dozens of armed men.

All of whom died to wide-area air slashes from Kuina and Zoro before they could even get a shot off.

“Well, this is disappointing so far.”

Zoro’s comment got a nod from Yamato, who looked a mix of bored and eager. An instant later, both of them smiled as they all finally felt a *much* more powerful presence moving rapidly towards them. That presence burst out of the main entrance, a spinning blur of yellow launching air blades at the four of them. Luffy and Yamato didn’t bother even twitching, allowing Kuina and Zoro to break the attacks apart. The blur resolved itself into an elderly man with golden hair and a yellow striped haori thrown over his shoulders. The bit of a ship’s wheel lodged in his head, and two legs that had been replaced with swords, left no question about who this was.

“Jihahahaha. Well, at least it isn’t *weaklings* that have had the sheer gall to board my island and disrupt my plans! Not that it’s going to keep you from dying, of course. But that’s just how it goes, don’t you know? Still, I have to wonder what you think you’re doing.”

Surprisingly enough, Shiki actually seemed to want an answer, and Luffy was willing to oblige. The longer the Daft Green had to burn out, the better. Particularly as their last remaining set of explosives would only be set off after that happened and the villagers were properly evacuated. After all, that last group, which amounted more to fireworks than any sort of destructive explosives, was aimed as pushing the various SIQ enhanced monsters into attacking the base. Depending on how the fight with Shiki went, it might prove completely unneeded. But only idiots didn’t plan to give themselves every advantage they could get.

“Hmm, in truth we only spotted you because we were on the way to the East Blue ourselves. When we learned you intended to attack the islands there, though, we couldn’t let that go. A few of them are under our active protection, you see.”

Shiki’s eyebrows rose, then he seemed to look more closely at all of them.

“Jihahahaha, I see, I see. The group that killed those Celestial Dragons! I suppose if you didn’t hesitate to do that, you wouldn’t hesitate to attack me either! Pity, I would have preferred to congratulate you on that instead of killing you. But clearly we aren’t going to find common ground. If only you’d joined my crew first, rather than attacking, I might have left those islands alone! Now, I’ll make sure to destroy whichever islands you’re protecting *first*.”

Shiki’s voice was jovial, right up until the last sentence, and a spike of malicious intent hit all of them with his last word. With a flex of his will, debris and dirt alike abruptly formed into massive lion heads and struck out at the quartet. Kuina and Zoro jumped back, both using ranged slashes to break apart a head each. Luffy and Yamato didn’t bother, instead launching forward toward Shiki. Lightning from Luffy broke apart the rest of the lion heads and a blackened fist launched from Yamato’s rubbery body struck out with blinding speed at Shiki.

The old man laughed again, not seeming at all pressured by the attack as he took flight to fade away from her, slicing out at Yamato’s arm with his legs. She pulled back quickly to avoid the cuts, with Luffy flowing into the gap, loosing another barrage of lightning. *That* at least got Shiki to block, dragging up debris between the lightning and himself. The chunks of rock wall were blown apart by the blast, but gave Shiki enough space to summon more lion heads. This time, he did so out of the very air, the much faster constructs lashing out at Luffy and Yamato.

Neither of them bothered to stop.

Instead, Yamato’s entire body turned red with her equivalent of Gear 2, then black as she coated herself in Armament, one arm cocking *far* back to chamber a much more powerful blow. Luffy, meanwhile, shifted to his Stormtiger form and *ROARED*, directed soundwaves ripping apart the compressed air of the new attack right before it hit them. It wasn’t a move he’d used before, but a trick had been inspired by the beam he’d killed the Elder with. It wasn’t nearly so powerful as that beam had been, yet it was more than enough to shatter the lion head air constructs. Yamato took the opening their sudden absence provided to launch her punch through to Shiki...who proved he *did* have Haki by deflecting the blow with a blackened fist of his own.

Shiki turned into a whirling top the next moment, dozens of air blades launching in every direction from his sword prosthetics. Yamato kicked off to go *up*, over the barrage, while Luffy drew his own blade for the first time and cut through the attacks, sending his own burst of lightning back in response. Shiki *blurred* out of the way of that, moving fast enough that even Luffy had trouble tracking him, cluing Luffy in that the man’s age only impaired him so much. The old bastard *still* had higher base stats than even Yamato, who was in turn still faster and stronger than Luffy...unless Luffy turned to lightning, at least.

Doing just that, he flashed right into Shiki’s face, the legendary pirate not managing to dodge this time as Luffy freed a hand and thrust a palm loaded with sonic energy into his solar plexus. Blood flew from Shiki’s mouth as he was launched violently backward, yet Luffy frowned. Using Sonic Pulse, as he’d named the rarely-used move, was intended to cause massive *internal* damage, something basic level Haki users would have trouble with. Yet he could sense it hadn’t done nearly as much as it should have, proving Shiki was at the more advanced stage with Armament Haki where he could armor even his internals.

Annoying.

Tisking as Yamato's attempt to stomp on Shiki from up high was met with a lion's head made of earth, Luffy did his best to analyze the way Shiki fought. If they didn't find a weakness somewhere, this fight might come down to stamina, and he wasn't at all sure which of side had more of that to spare...

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Kuina was *very* unamused at the giant gorilla she'd found herself fighting after the initial onslaught from Shiki. It was obviously another of the SIQ monsters, but far more intelligent...and a pervert. One that had *apparently* been fed a Devil Fruit that allowed it to *turn invisible*. Given that Shiki, Luffy and Yamato were utterly flooding the place with stronger Observation Haki than hers, curtailing her own range as they warred, she'd nearly taken a 'hit' from the monster.

It had only failed because the Gorilla was apparently a fucking pervert and had tried to grope her ass instead of outright attacking her.

Of course, the fact that it was *still* trying to do similar things, along with trying to capture her, was continuing to fuck with her Observation. Its intentions weren't *violent*, which was by far what she was most used to picking up with her Haki. Combined with the density of other people's Haki in the area and the fact the stupid pervert gorilla could *turn invisible*, she was not having an easy time pinning the stupid thing down!

Twitching as the gorilla managed to smack her ass, Kuina decided she was *done with this shit*. Gathering her spiritual energy, she focused it into a technique inspired by her Captain. Wado Ichimonji began to glow, and she thrust it overhead.

"Rairyūsen!"

A flash of light as bright as anything from one of Luffy's lightning bolts lit the area, and Kuina heard the pervert gorilla cry out as it was blinded. Her sword flashed down in an overhead strike at where the sound had come from, and she was pleased when a fountain of blood was the result. She was fairly sure, from the feedback of the strike, that she'd merely given it a deep gouge on one arm as it flinched away, but that was a good start.

Besides, after it smacked her ass, Death by a Thousand Cuts seemed like an entirely appropriate fate for the beast...

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Zoro batted aside another of those weird chemical fireballs the stupid clown that was fighting him kept throwing. Despite the stupid bastard's looks, he was a surprisingly competent swordsman. Not competent enough to give Zoro trouble normally, but those fireballs he was throwing with his off hand, along with the debris they were weaving between as they fought, was adding complications to the fight. Annoyances, really. Still, the stupid clown was good enough to become a live test for the technique he'd finally polish enough to be happy with. Falling back, he focused his spiritual energy...

"Kiki Kyutoryu: Ashura!"

For the first time in a battle, he got the full technique completely perfect, phantom copies of him adding six additional arms made of his spirit, each armed with blades that were now pitch black. He flashed forward, all nine swords striking in perfect synch! Moments later, the clown fell to pieces and he let the projections fade, panting slightly.

“Ugh, still takes a lot out of me. Now...wait...which way did I come from? Damnit! Everything looks the same!”

Picking a direction, Zoro went with it, not realizing he was getting farther away from the fight with every step...

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Sanji cursed as he dodged fire from the weird five-barrel firearms the crazy luchador was wielding *two* of. The massive things weren't all that fast firing, but the rounds were explosive. Powerfully enough so that he wasn't entirely sure his Haki could take the hit. Add in the second set of gun barrels, far faster firing, on his *belt* and his ability to fucking *hover* with that weird hat, and this was not going as well as Sanji would have liked.

Thankfully, the fat bastard might be *strong*, but he wasn't *fast*, and it was only a matter of time before he ran out of ammo. Already preparing a Diable Jambe for the moment he got an opening, he was determined to end this fight in one hit! After all, he had to go support the beautiful Robin and Nami~! Even if they'd both settled on sharing his captain, who was living Sanji's dream!

If Diable Jambe charged a *bit* faster than it should, as Sanji's jealousy at that little detail stoked its flames, no one would ever know enough to comment...

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Usopp was extremely grateful for his girlfriend's mad scientist tendencies at the moment. Sure, he'd been well on his way to becoming fast and agile *without* the alterations she'd done to his musculature, but against the *very annoying pirate* that was launching *nets* of all sorts of materials? Well, he wasn't complaining about the extra flexibility, strength, and heightened reflexes. He was complaining even *less* about the eyes, given that he was pretty sure half of the nets would have been invisible in the dark without the changes she'd made there. As it was, he was managing to stay ahead of the annoying pirate captain, though the asshole was good at using his nets as shields against Usopp's fire as well. Ah, well, that just meant it was time to break out the *special* ammo.

Quickly opening some range with a burst of Soru, Usopp enjoyed the rush as he released the sliding 'magazine' out of the hilts of the paired pistols that were his latest design. The basic idea might have been Luffy's, but his Captain hadn't been able to get the capture and use of the discharged gas from the rounds right. Usopp had perfected the design, creating what his Captain called a 'true semi-automatic pistol.' One that was impressively large caliber for a pistol, given the muscle Usopp had put on from training and the enhancements Kaya had given him allowed him to make both of them oversized.

Truly, the best part about their brilliance was that reloading them was *incredibly* satisfying. Triply so since Usopp had worked out how to do 'trick' reloads that let him add a cool midair spin while slotting in new magazines! Oen with special ammo, like the ones he'd just loaded in, which

were both armor-piercing and incendiary. See how this stupid net making bastard liked chewing on these!

When his first shot with the new rounds punched right through the bastard's shoulder, Usopp grinned. Time to finish this...

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Nami held one fishman up by the neck, even as she used her other hand to spin her Clima-Tact. Another crackle of lightning struck down two more members of the same crew, which had an unusual number of fishmen. Given how much tougher a typical fishman was, it wasn't too shocking that most of this crew had survived, though many of them had been in rough shape and gone down quickly. As for the few that weren't? Well, Nami should *probably* be finishing them off faster than she was.

It was just so *therapeutic* to flash fry, strangle, beat up, and otherwise find creative ways to murder fishman pirates, though. She couldn't help it. She was a simple girl at heart, and *more* Fishmen thinking they could take over the East Blue *might* have made her *slightly incandescently angry*. Really, it was probably better to take her time finishing them off, right? That way, she'd get all the anger out on a perfectly acceptable targets...

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As he easily diced his way through handfuls of pirates that had escaped the burning ships, Brook was quite pleased with the progress he'd made in just a few weeks. Several of those he'd taken down *would* have caused him a problem, if he was still the same Brook from Thriller Bark. His time working with Kaya and Luffy had made a startling degree of difference since then, though. Something reflected in the sheer speed he danced through the pirates with.

He'd always been fast.

That had been true even before he'd died, and after reviving as a skeleton he'd only gotten faster. Due, it had to be said, mostly to just how *light* he was without all the muscle and tissue and such. Yet, that jump in speed paled beside the speed he was using now. While they had yet to figure out any way to return his body to a less skeletal state, Kaya and Luffy *had* managed to teach him how to move the spiritual energy he generated around. An early attempt to try encouraging his body to regenerate had failed...only for Brook to discover that overlaying that spiritual energy on his skeleton in a way that matched normal anatomy did *dramatically* increased his power instead. It was finicky enough that, so far, he'd only managed to do so with his legs. Yet that was enough to take his former speed and nearly double it.

Humming, he sheathed his blade again as the bodies that were once pirates, now behind him after his latest dash, fell apart into dozens of small pieces...

... ..

Robin sighed as she snapped the last neck of the few pirates that had still been in the nearby watering hole. They'd timed their attack deep enough into night that even most pirates had passed out, but not all of them had made it back to their ships before doing so. A few had been

woken from their drunken stupors by the explosions, but they had still been tipsy enough to be easy to put down. As for the rest...well, there was a reason it was Robin doing this part. She was far more ruthless than most of the crew, and didn't have any issue with killing helpless pirates. She'd gotten over the idea of honorable combat long, long ago, and knew exactly what kind of monsters-in-human-skin most of these pirates almost certainly were.

That still didn't make the work pleasant, however. She was going to demand more Luffy-time to make up for doing the dirty work on this particular excursion.

... ..

Vivi was feeling incredibly satisfied as she closed the Air Door that took the last of the conscripted villagers to Alabasta. There were, regrettably, probably a few still up in Shiki's main compound, and it wasn't at all certain they'd survive Shiki fighting with Luffy and Yamato. Still, the vast majority of the villagers that had been taken had been freed, the minimal guard having been no match for their team. Despite being arguably an idealist, Vivi was also enough of a *realist* to know she couldn't save everyone. Yet, she didn't, couldn't, regret the attempt. Which, of course, meant that it was time to take a little bit of a risk. One Luffy probably wouldn't *approve* of, but would be proud they'd taken when he found out.

"Alright. Time to see if we can find anyone left in the compound! Remember, the whole place is going to be wrecked soon, with the fireworks set to go off any second now. We won't have much time, so move quickly, and stick to Kaya. She's the only one of us that will be able to sense anything through the battle."

Snapping open another Air Door, Nojiko was the first one through, throwing up a barrier to protect the others as they joined her. Time to be Big Damn Heroes...or at least little ones. It might not be riding to the rescue of her comrades, but it was riding to the rescue of *someone* nonetheless. Vivi personally thought that counted just as much...

... ..

As combat momentarily paused, none of the fighters were looking all that good. Shiki had proven every bit as dangerous, if not actually *more* dangerous, than Kizaru had been. He'd actually managed to break one of Luffy's arms, even if his spirit healing had allowed him to put it back together somewhat. Not enough to fight with, really, but enough to keep it from being a liability. Yamato, meanwhile, hadn't taken any one blow that was as bad as that. Yet she'd taken dozens of cuts, some of them fairly deep, as her Haki slowly faded in strength over the course of the fight. She had, in fact, lost enough blood that only her stupidly high endurance left her mostly unaffected by that fact.

Of course, Shiki had paid for all those wounds with some of his own. One of his sword prosthetics had been melted to a stump by a lightning strike that had nearly ended the fight, gained when the fireworks finally went off and sent a herd of SIQ enhanced monsters tearing through his base. The distraction had cost him that leg, as well as a nasty hit from Yamato. Of course, seeing the results of twenty years of work wiped away had also left him in a genuine rage for the first time, which is what had cost Luffy the broken arm a few moments later.

As appalled as Luffy was to admit it, Shiki was the one of the three of them who was in the best shape. Which left him debating with himself about risking using his Fruit's Awakened state. He'd tried...once, just once, during their 'downtime' after exiting the Sabaody Archipelago. It had *not* gone well, even if it *had* given him some idea what he needed to fix. His control of that state had been *utter shit*, even his physical form fighting him as it tried to shift with every thought. He needed to get better in tune with his Spirit Fruit, push his skill with its use closer to the point where Awakening should have been an option without outside help. Until he did, it would be a massive roll of the dice to use it.

Of course, he *had* gained a fair bit of Karma back from his actions at the Human Auction House. Not a staggering amount. He suspected that the System Reward he'd gotten was payment *instead of* any karma he would have gotten for killing that Elder dude. Yet, he'd recovered a not inconsiderable amount from freeing the slaves there and destroying the auction house itself. That meant he *could* lean into the gamble. The 'rolling dice' in the back of his head had occurred twice in this fight already. Which was bitter knowledge for him, as it revealed moments where only System-influenced luck had kept Shiki from killing him or Yamato. Yet, neither of those had required Karma as fuel. He was *fairly sure* he could replicate what he'd done with his Awakening by feeding Karma to those dice, gaining the *luck* to keep the Awakened State stable long enough for a hit or two.

The idea wasn't all that appealing, though. Both because he hated the idea of not being strong enough to finish this without blind luck...and because he *wasn't even sure it would work*. Assuming the backlash was like his previous pulling of that same trick, it might well knock him out. Which meant that, if he didn't kill Shiki in the process, it might end up getting all of them killed if he tried it and failed.

"Jihahahaha! You two have put up quite the fight! But I think I'm going to end this now!"

Luffy's eyes widened as he realized why Shiki had been willing to let the fighting pause. A *massive* wall of water was forming up behind him and surging not only toward them, but *around* them. If they got trapped in it he coul-

"Mori Mori no Dis Nuts!"

The voice, unquestionably Dis's but floating out of the air from *nowhere*, was followed by Shiki the Golden Lion simply *splattering*. The sound of sonic booms followed only *after* he'd turned into so much gore. Luffy gawked, full on staring with his jaw dropped, unable to compute what the fuck had just happened. It was only the abrupt motion of the *islands* all around beginning to pull away from him that he shook himself free of his shock. The islands falling meant Shiki really *was* dead, his Devil Fruit power vanishing with him.

Casting his Observation out to the sorts of ranges that were only possible because his Fruit amplified it, he found the answer to a *part* of the mystery. He could feel the *Discovery* a good two and a half miles out...in midair, somehow, and radiating good cheer. Also apparent was the fact that *all* of the crew except him and Yamato were back aboard, and even as he realized that, an Air Door formed where he and Yamato were using Geppo to stay in midair. Yamato, despite her own surprise, was already moving toward it, and Luffy quickly followed her. Moments later, they stepped out onto the deck of the *Discovery*, and Luffy was tackled in a hug by a cheering Dis.

Just...what? What the fuck? How the fuck? For that matter, why, when and where the fucks too?

Either those questions were written blatantly on his face, or he'd spoken them aloud, as a smirking Nami answered them.

"Apparently, Dis was disappointed about not getting in on the fight, so Pagaya came up with the idea of using the Milky Road Dials we rigged as a safety net for traveling the White Sea a bit more...creatively."

Nami gestured to the side of the ship, and Luffy mechanically followed the motion with his eyes, getting a partial answer for his unconscious effort. All around the *Discovery* were the Sea Clouds produced by Milky Road Dials. They must have used every one of those Dials they possessed to create a pathway they could sail up to Merville from the edge of the Calm Belt. Dis interrupted his thoughts by letting go of him and dancing back happily.

"Yeah! It's almost like flying! And I got to go 'pew pew' with my Giant Doom Guns! I've never gotten to fire those at someone before! It was so easy! I guess I picked up how to aim really good from Usopp!"

The railguns. That was what had wiped out Shiki. Dis had, somehow with pin-point precision, hit Shiki with the railguns. That...made a disturbing amount of sense. Outside Luffy himself, very few people's Observation would have enough range to sense the danger from that sort of distance. Combined with the raw power and muzzle velocity of guns like that crossing the range in a flash, Shiki had never had a chance to react. Slightly recovering, he gave Dis an impressed look. Though, he did have to ask...

"Who, exactly, gave you the idea to shout that as an attack name?"

Dis, oblivious to the fact that Usopp was now sweating bullets, cheerfully pointed to said sniper.

"Usopp said it would be really funny!"

Giving Usopp his best 'I'm disappointed in you for corrupting Dis' look, Luffy was about to lecture him for that...when Pagaya coughed and saved the sniper by bringing up a more important point.

"As much as that might have been in...poor taste...we have a bit of a larger problem. We're almost out of Sea Cloud and it will fade soon. We have enough to get down to the surface, but we're still in the middle of the Calm Belt."

That caused several people to flinch, looking worried as all the reasons *not* to want to cross the Calm Belt with the *Discovery* were brought back to mind. Luffy, on the other hand, wasn't worried at all. Instead, he opened his menu and bought a very specific Devil Fruit which he'd *really wanted* for Dis anyway, and which had just become available. He'd gotten four new Spirit Coupon points for killing that Elder, and it only cost *one* to buy the paramecia in question, despite its power. Pulling it out of his Inventory, he grinned.

“Well, then I guess it’s a good thing I grabbed Shiki’s Devil Fruit after Dis turned him to paste, isn’t it? Eat up if you want to *fly* Dis!”

More than one person looked dubious that he’d managed to grab it, but Yamato had gone into the Air Door before him, so no one could *prove* he hadn’t gotten that lucky. Kuina and Nami, of course, gave him knowing looks. Dis merely cheered and lunged for it, practically biting it out of his hand. Luffy was finally going to get his Flying Pirate Ship after all, and the utility it would give Dis herself in other ways wasn’t to be mocked or underestimated either.

Smiling as the *Discovery of Storms* shuddered, absorbing her new powers, Luffy decided that this had been a Very Good Day. Though he *was* still a little annoyed that Dis had no scoped Shiki and stolen his kill...

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