

Howdy, all. This is the next chapter of, obviously, ***Stallion of the Line***. It has been edited by Hiryo, but while Tomon has given me some of his thoughts, he did not have time to go through the full chapter and get it back to me. He tried, but simply could not do it. Hopefully with Hiryo's work and my own with Grammarly means there won't be many small mistakes. We will see.

This is a big ass chapter. Again. I will try to get back to smaller chapters for this work in the future, but I wanted to get the last bits of action from the War of the Best and then the reactions to everything going on out of the way in one chapter. I think that I did so, but if anyone has a specific person who you think should be reacting to this news I didn't cover, then PM me, and I can see about putting it in via flashback.

Chapter 45: The World Tilts

The first sign that Marshall D. Teach, or Blackbeard as he liked to be called, both because it was true and because it was a taunt of his old 'captain' Whitebeard, had that something was wrong was Lafitte meeting him in the entryway to Impel Down, a scowl on his face. The swordsman/spy/acrobat had a ferocious scowl on his face as he met his captain, looking past him for a moment at the first group of escaped prisoners boiling out of the elevator. "Captain, our ship's gone."

"What?" Teach asked, a scowl crossing his features. Keeping his voice low like his crewman had, he leaned down towards the much shorter man, shifting slightly so as to keep his prisoner, Domino, from dropping off his shoulder. "What do you mean our ship's gone?"

"I mean, it's gone. I can't tell if it was sunk or just sailed away by someone, but the Makeshift is gone. I found two jailers out there, but they saw me coming and ran off along the docks. I felt it was better to return to you than chase them." Lafitte smiled sadistically. "After all, it isn't like they have anywhere to really hide out on the docks."

Blackbeard snorted, not noticing that Domino, slung over his shoulder like a sack of wheat, breathed a sigh of relief. The prison's Chief Communications Officer had been taken captive by Blackbeard, when he invaded the prison. After Straw Hat Luffy had somehow snuck in and then broken out of the prison, very few of its defenses or defenders had been in any position to fight back against the Shichibukai and his single crewman. Those who had, the two remaining Beast Jailers in particular, had been dealt with easily. Taking Domino hostage had just been icing on the cake.

Since then, Domino had spent what she estimated to be an hour or two slung over Blackbeard's shoulder. A few times, he'd had to stop other prisoners who wanted to attack her, particularly on Level 6, but he did do so, seeming to have a slight sense of morality. He'd taken

her hostage, and as long as she was under his 'care,' Blackbeard wouldn't let any of the prisoners harm the blonde woman.

That didn't mean he had saved her from their attention entirely, though. A number of prisoners had smacked her ass over the past few hours. A few had even grabbed her hair, and their words, despite not being anything she hadn't heard before, had made Domino very, very afraid of what would happen when Blackbeard no longer felt he had to keep to his word. After all, most of the people on Level 6 were men, and none of them had seen a woman or even heard a woman's voice beyond that of their fellow prisoners for who knew how long...

However, hearing that her final trick, that of sending one of her officers out to use the Den Den Mushi on the marine ships docked at Impel Down to contact the rest of the Fleet, gave her some hope that the marines might be on their way. *I doubt I'll live through it if they do, but that doesn't matter at all in comparison to stopping this scum from escaping!*

"Damn and blast. Well, whatever. We've gathered enough scum of the sea here to man at least three of the marine battleships regardless." Blackbeard snorted. While he'd gone down to Level 6 to start, he'd gathered a lot of the surviving prisoners from Level 4 and above. It had been relatively easy, considering that only the surviving beasts had attempted to get in his way. Even the vaunted Blugori had apparently decided to stay away from him, given the losses they'd already sustained. How and where they had hidden, he had no idea. Neither he nor any of the prisoners had been able to sense them with their limited skill in Kenbunshoku.

Pity I couldn't find and finish off Magellan, but that would only have added a bit to the ignominy today's going to earn me! "Zehahaha. Ah well, into every life and all that."

Blackbeard turned, reaching up idly to rub at Domino's ass. He hadn't stinted himself when it came to touching the hot blonde woman, although he hadn't taken time to do much more than touch like this. They were on a time schedule, after all. With the marines so close, it made this whole plan far more perilous. "Zehahaha, but even with that, I think we can call today a roaring success, don't you, Lafitte?"

"Indeed. Planning and fate often work together to ease the path of those destined for great things," Lafitte said, chuckling along with his captain as the prisoners streamed around them, heading out the door of the prison.

A stream made of the worst sorts of scum humanity had to offer. Several hundred prisoners from Level 1 were wounded but with eyes alighted with the desire for freedom and vengeance. Fewer but stronger prisoners from Level 6, 4 and 2. No prisoner from Starvation Hell had made Blackbeard's cut to be fit enough to come with them. Yet the true blood-soaked jewels were the two-dozen of prisoners from Level 6. Even after several had died recently due to Garp or Magellan's poison, each and every one of them was a name fit to strike fear in the hearts of many.

Mass murderers and terrorists who had brought whole islands to their knees, so many that their names hadn't registered to Laffitte. Kings so cruel even the World Government refused to let them keep their power like Ori Wadi, the Spear King. Pirates whose deeds were but a few levels below monsters like Whitebeard or Gold Roger, such as Byrnni World or Catarina Devon, one of only three women among the prisoners, all three so dangerous that even the worst, most depraved men among the prisoners were giving them a wide berth. Enough power to drown the world in blood or carry Blackbeard to the level of the true monsters of the world, maybe even more eventually when coupled with Blackbeard's own intelligence.

And now, all of them were cheering and roaring in delight at the first sight of the sun many had seen in years, if not decades. Blackbeard and Laffitte joined them, heading towards the dock as Blackbeard started to shout orders, trying to organize the multitude, although several of the prisoners did not seem in the mood to listen, including the first man heading out towards the docked battleships.

Those ships had been largely abandoned by their crews, the marines having charged into the prison to first help fight Luffy and the others with him. Then, under Mozambica, they had first restored order in the prison, before Blackbeard had arrived and then tried to fight him. All of them were dead now, leaving their ships to him.

Byrnni World was a large man, only a foot or so shorter than Blackbeard, who himself was larger than most of the prisoners, beyond those with giant's blood in them, with a short-cropped beard, matching the hair on his head in looking somewhat moss colored, with his mustache noticeably a lighter shade of green. He was also older than most, but despite being held in Impel Down for longer than any of the other prisoners, he seemed hale and fit, eager to see the world. Byrnni was one of the prisoners who seemed least inclined to join Blackbeard's Crew but also one of the most capable, a paramecia Devil Fruit user of some kind.

It was when the light-green-haired man reached one of the battleships and leaped aboard that things began to go wrong. From on high, sharp-edged Rankyaku, hurled cannonballs, and finger bombs rained down from on high as a group of two vice admirals and seven commodores arrived under the command of Momonga. "Fire at will, none of this scum can be allowed to reach the high seas!"

Those attacks were mainly towards Byrnni, who grabbed at a cannon, heaving it up and enlarging it via his Moa Moa no Mi, a paramecia Devil Fruit that allowed the user to enlarge anything he touched. In this case, the unwieldy cannon suddenly became as large as the battleship, defending Byrnni from many of the attacks coming his way.

Others hit among the hundreds of prisoners. Bodies began to explode upon impact or fall as they did, blood once more running across the wood of the docks and stone of the outer shell of Impel Down.

Growling angrily, Blackbeard ducked back into cover, barely avoiding a blast of some kind of Devil-Fruit-created attack, tossing Domino uncaringly to the ground nearby. The slivers of dark orange energy of some kind flashed through where he had been standing a moment before, hitting one of the prisoners behind him. "Return fire! Pin them in place and wipe them out! Don't let them pin us in place!"

The crowd of regular pirates within bellowing range obeyed. They had made a point of stopping to arm themselves either from the bodies of the dead guards scattered throughout the prison or from Impel Down's armory, and now most raised muskets and fired up at the marines. But muskets weren't really all that good against mobile aerial targets, and not even a single one of the marines was struck.

Instead, they spread out, shifting away from concentrating on the group of prisoners around Byrnni, scattering even more as Sanjuan Wolf exploded up from where he had been standing among the prisoners. Another paramercia user, his fruit was essentially the opposite of Byrnni's, effecting only Sanjuan's own body, allowing him to grow to insane size. He went from being around Blackbeard's own height to being so large his bulk shattered a large portion of Impel Down's outer wall. His hands, now twice as large as a regular giant, he swatted at the group of marines, catching one of them and smashing him out of the air with such force that even the man's Busoshoku could not protect him from being broken from the impact.

That man was the exception to the rule. The rest of the marines scattered, continually attacking from long range, even Momonga, one of the most formidable vice-admirals, refusing to come in close with the prisoners.

"Blast it all!" Blackbeard hissed, before bellowing out orders again. "Spread out, you blackhearts! Don't let them keep us from the prize. We need to get aboard those ships!"

Blackbeard wasn't the only one among the crowd that realized what the marines were up to: slowing the escape down so that they could not get out to the open ocean on the marine vessels. It would take time and hands to get the marine ships, those that were not damaged, away from the docks.

As Blackbeard watched, the pirates tried to organize themselves around people like Vasco Shot, Byrnni and others, the more dangerous pirates lashing out towards the marines while the regular pirates charged onto ships scattered around Impel Down. Yet even so, masts and steam stacks began to shatter under their attacks, meaning that even if they got out into the Calm Belt, the ships would still be stuck where they were unless someone had a Devil Fruit that could push the ship along in some fashion.

And the fuckers are too spread out for My Devil Fruit to suck more than one of them in at a time, blast it all. Blackbeard's Yami Yami no Mi could not reach out as far as the long-range attacks of the marine officers.

For several minutes, the hit-and-run attacks from the marines under Momonga continued. Dozens, maybe as many as a hundred regular pirates fell. The attacks could not do much of anything to those like Blackbeard or the former prisoners who had Devil Fruits or other powers, but they cut down on the hands needed to get those ships out to sea. Similarly, the number of ships available started to fall.

Blackbeard roared in fury as his Black Hole attack missed as a commodore, a fucking commodore, bounced backward and away out of his range after dive-bombing another ship into ruin. "Damn it all, what twist of fate has let so many damned marines able to pull back from fighting Whitebeard's fleet!?"

"Fuck your fate, Teach!" Catarina Devon shrieked from nearby. "We need to get out of here, or else..." As she spoke, ice flowed out around the marine battleships, and she cursed. **"FUCK!"**

The ships that Blackbeard had hoped to steal, to use them to get the prisoners, who had joined him from Level 6 and above, away from Impel Down, had already been badly denuded before. Now, the group of commodores and vice admirals that had arrived to halt their escape cheered as ice flowed over the fleet, sealing them in a wall of ice that rose like a crown around the island of Impel Down along with hundreds of pirates.

Even Byrnni and Vasco Shot were forced to retreat onto the docks. Neither of them had attacks that could stop the sheer amount and flow of the ice coming towards them. "Damn it, now Aokiji too?!" Byrnni snarled, smashing at the ice with a spar the size of a tree trunk from somewhere, only for the ice to grow and nearly catch him again.

Standing about as tall as Teach himself, who was around eleven feet, Catarina was a tall, pale-skinned woman with a long nose, wide mouth and wrinkles showing her age despite how powerful her body seemed. She also had a Devil Fruit, the Mythical Zoan type Inu Inu no Mi, Model: Kyubi no Kitsune.

This she used now, transforming into a nine-tailed fox/human hybrid. From each of her nine tails blasts of fire, lightning, light and wind blasted out at the ice in front of her, trying to shatter the ice surrounding the ship she and a dozen other pirates had been about to board. A large segment of the ice melted, but nowhere near enough.

The other four tails rolled up and over her, their fur fluffing outward to create a protective wall around her. "Tail Guard!" she growled, sounding even more inhuman than before as attacks from still more arriving marine officers rained down. "This wasn't what you promised us, Blackbeard! None of us are up for a fight of this scale after being imprisoned for so long..."

"Speak for yourself, woman." Nearby, another one of the Level 6 prisoners scoffed as he interrupted Catarina. Looking in that direction, Blackbeard at first couldn't see who had spoken,

instead seeing a force of six commodores who had descended on a portion of the battlefield in tandem, slaughtering a hundred or more pirates and even one of the weaker members of the Level 6 crew, someone who was there due to knowledge rather than action.

As Teach watched, three of them fell, somehow becoming desiccated and lifeless before they even hit the ground, not having retreated fast enough to avoid their killer's attack. A moment later, Patrick Redfield, the Red-soaked King, stepped over their corpses. Where before the man had been elderly, elderly to the point of looking almost emaciated and on death's door, now, he looked young, perhaps in his twenties, his physical prime. Patrick's formerly white hair was restored to black glory, with a slim line of red going down his perfectly formed goatee.

As Blackbeard continued to look at him from behind cover, several bullets and two cannonballs hurled from some of the marines slammed into and through Redfield's body, which came apart as they hit before reforming. His body had transformed into several small, tiny bats for a moment.

From behind him, one of the other commodores tried to slash at him with a sword glowing black with Busoshoku.

This, Redfield took a little more seriously, twisting around the attack and grabbing at the man's hand, pulling him in to bite at his neck. The marine screamed, and several other marines shot or tried to attack Redfield from above. This opened them up to attacks from Sanjuan, Blackbeard and Catarina, downing several to the ground where they were quickly swarmed, killing and being cut apart in turn by the prisoners, with one of them, the first one in this battle successfully sucked into Teach's black hole.

Yet it did nothing to Redfield, only for his body to once again burst outward into hundreds of tiny bats. They swarmed in one direction, and none of the marines were in position any longer to attack or had any kind of suction or air-based technique that could hold his progress. Similarly, Blackbeard was busy for a second, dodging incoming fire.

Redfield was thus able to reform up on the shoulder of Sanjuan Wolf, who was standing as the largest thing in the area. There, even as Sanjuan was forced to shrink and retreat from the walls of ice, Patrick smirked down at his fellow prisoners and marines alike, although he kept a wary eye towards where the man who had created that icy crown now stalked down the sides of the crown-shaped iceberg he had created. The logia user was renewing it with every step he took despite the number of attacks now coming his way.

"I am now in fine form thanks to these fellow's contributions," Patrick continued as if the intervening moments of violence hadn't occurred. His words carried to Blackbeard and Catarina even over the sound of ongoing fighting all around them as the marines fought the escaped prisoners, the sound amplified by the sheets of ice now surrounding the battlefield. "and no longer have any need of you."

His eyes widened, Blackbeard raised his hand, a snarl on his lips, ignoring an attack from a commodore who had been forced to ground nearby, the man himself coming under attack quickly from Vasco Shot. Even more than the marines showing up in such numbers, the idea of being betrayed infuriated him. "We had a deal, Redfield! I break you all out and you..."

"My word only matters to those with the strength to keep their end of the bargain. Our agreement was that you would get us out, free from the World Government's peons. As you have only allowed us to escape from our cells yet seem to be floundering now to get us away from the marines and Impel Down, I believe I can take on that task myself." With that, Patrick leaped into the air, flying straight upwards, a long cloak of bats appearing from his shoulders. "Farewell, Blackbeard. I rather doubt we will ever see one another again."

OOOOOOO

Even as Blackbeard cursed the escaping prisoner, Aokiji also glared up into the sky after Redfield. *FUCK. With Kizaru busy helping Sengoku and all of the other officers stuck here, none of us can catch up to that asshole. Redfield might not be one to challenge the world as a whole, or make enough trouble to cause the world's balance to tilt even further, but he's a threat to anyone who comes in contact with him. That's going to be trouble in the future. Still, he should be one of very few prisoners who can fly, so his escape is negligible in comparison to keeping the rest from escaping.*

With that thought, Aokiji created and launched a shard of ice toward another prisoner who had just hacked entirely through the ice surrounding the island that he had created. He didn't know that prisoner offhand, but the man wasn't able to see or sense the ice lance coming in time to dodge. The sharpened ice lance took the prisoner in the side of the head, hurling him sideways but not penetrating the man's body.

Still, that was enough for two other marines who had arrived with Aokiji to jump on him, a furious battle beginning immediately. "All commodores, continue to keep your distance until we've winnowed their numbers a bit. Vice admirals, close and kill. Take no prisoners. They've had their chance to simply die quietly for their crimes," Aokiji shouted, his words relayed by a captain well behind and above him to the rest of the marine force.

One of the few captains who knew enough Soru to keep up with the battle with the Whitebeard Pirates, the man, who lacked any kind of Devil Fruit user, was an excellent organizer and had brought a series of Den Den Mushi with him when Aokiji gathered a group of marines together to intercept the prison break. Now, he and a few other such captains relayed his orders to the commodores and vice admirals who were doing the actual fighting, helping to organize their efforts in a way the pirates could not match.

With a wave of his hand, Aokiji caused the cuts in his wall of ice to reform, as he continued to stalk down the mountain. A second later, his body turned into ice as well, merging

with it to avoid an attack from Byrnni. A moment later, he reappeared at the edge of the ice on the docks below.

There, a spear-using giant of a man had gotten the better of a vice admiral who had been smashed to the ground by Sanjuan, impaling him to the ground with a spear through his chest and another through his shoulder. The man, a Zoan user with the Model: Ferret, screamed as the prisoner, another Zoan Devil Fruit user, although in his case, Aokiji didn't recognize the animal, some kind of lizard creature, prepared to finish them off.

Only for his entire body to freeze as Aokiji lightly touched his shoulder. "Ice Time."

Aokiji held that touch for a few seconds as his power worked on the man, turning him into a lizard popsicle within seconds, despite his size and the best effort the man could do to twist around and attack. In this, his type of Zoan was against him, the man almost going into a torpor before the full, chilly effect of the attack could work on him. A second later, Aokiji lazily swiped his hands to the side, smacking into his head.

That head flew off, and Aokiji walked on. Bullets and even a few pieces of debris were hurled in his direction as a foot the size of a battleship came down towards him, but Aokiji simply shifted into his ice body, the hits doing nothing as his body reformed after each one. A moment later Sanjuan yelled in pain, breaking his foot out of the ice and falling backward, forced to shrink himself further to get away from Aokiji's attack.

The flame attacks that came his way from Catarina were a little more dangerous. Sensing the fireballs coming, Aokiji shifted into his physical body, armoring himself up against the blow to come with Busoshoku.

Momonga, the first vice admiral to get to Impel Down, and who had led the hit-and-run attacks so well to this point, took the opportunity to charge down into close-range combat. His body armored from head to toe with Busoshoku, he slew a dozen regular prisoners before going sword to sword with Shiryu, the former Chief Warden of Impel Down. Shiryu's sword, Raiu, a Meito blade, intercepted the other man, with the two swordsmen growling angrily at one another.

Words were said there but Aokiji didn't bother trying to listen in. He simply stalked through the battlefield towards Blackbeard, Sanjuan and Catarina.

Seeing the admiral of the marines coming towards him, thanks to his limited Kenbunshoku, Blackbeard twisted around and away from where Vice Admiral Gion had just been about to try and attack him, swatting her sword aside then slamming a backhand into her head, which sent her reeling. Yet her Busoshoku was able to deaden much of the force behind his strike, and she came around again, her sword aiming low toward his legs.

“Liberation!” Blackbeard roared, holding out her hand towards Aokiji, launching cannonballs, musket balls, debris and people from within his black hole, hoping to halt Aokiji’s progress toward him even as he jumped up and over Gion’s attack. He tried a kick, but she blocked it with her sword, Busoshoku against Busoshoku, the contest causing a shockwave before she was flung backward.

Among the debris hurled Aokiji’s way were a few living marines, their minds broken from the sensory deprivation of his Black Hole. Mozambica’s corpse was there too, his head stuck at an unnatural angle from the blow that shattered his neck. There were also the two Beast Jailers that he had dealt with before taking Domino hostage. Unlike the others, those two were still alive, and their minds no more broken than they had been.

They, and the rest, smashed through Aokiji’s ice body and into the wall beyond, but within minutes, both had pushed to their feet, their awakened Zoan regeneration abilities coming into play. As Blackbeard was forced to defend himself from Gion, the two of them silently began to kill the prisoners around them, drawing shrieks of fear from the regular prisoners.

Gion rolled, but before she could try to attack again, her Kenbunshoku blared a warning, and she hastily raised her sword in defense. Another prisoner, Vasco’s attack, crashed into her sword, hurling her sideways but doing no real damage.

“Red Thrust!” Gion’s sword seemed to multiply dozens of times over before concentrated cannon-sized blasts of pure, focused and heated wind blast lashed out from her towards Blackbeard and Vasco. Vasco yelped and blocked them before being hurled away from his would-be captain by a strike from another vice admiral, while Blackbeard grunted at the impacts but took no damage from them. The heat of the Red Thrust was enough to burn his skin a bit, despite how dense and durable his body had been made by the Yami Yami no Mi, but that was all.

Worse, his own attack lashing out towards Gion at the same time. “Black Road!”

From beneath Blackbeard, darkness oozed out along the ground in an insanely fast rush toward Gion’s position, threatening to pull her into its embrace as if it were a liquid black hole. In response, Gion struck the ground with her blade, launching herself up and backward away from the attack. In an instant, she turned that into an attack on two other prisoners, only one of whom was able to block her attack.

Meanwhile, Aokiji had dealt with the mass of debris hurled his way by simply becoming ice again to advance, freezing prisoners as he went, although he was doing so slowly, wary of Blackbeard’s powers, as well as his own level of tiredness after fighting Ace earlier. *I’ve not seen Blackbeard fight, and I never even heard of the Yami Yami no Mi before this. Damn my laziness. I should’ve researched the man’s ability when he was raised to the Shichibukai position.*

As Aokiji dealt with three of the Secret Level prisoners, he could also see Gion and two other vice admirals launch attacks toward Blackbeard, pinning the man in place despite his best efforts to try to retreat somewhere. Where that would be, Aokiji had no idea. The only way they could retreat away from the marines was back into the prison. Which, mind you, Aokiji would be fine with. It would remove any chance of any of them escaping like Redfield.

Ducking under a blow from Sanjuan, Aokiji lashed out at his foot with a Busoshoku-clad fist, which upended the giant onto the ground, his own Busoshoku failing against the admiral's. The impact of the massive Deka Deka no Mi user on the island had all of Impel Down shaking, tossing several other pirates and even a few vice admirals to their knees as portions of the ground buckled, while Sanjuan screamed in pain.

Then Aokiji's hand reached out, grabbing him. For a moment, Aokiji had to deal with a flashback from when he had used this technique on his former friend, Saul. The furious screaming and roaring of the pirate giant as he was frozen, and the paramecia user's sheer size, broke him out of his momentary paralysis just in time to see over the giant's body as Blackbeard smashed Gion into the ground with a fist of Busoshoku of his own.

Teach seemed to be cut about in several places, but the other vice admirals who had been fighting him were nowhere to be seen. Gion was down at his feet, blood pouring from a blow to the head and side.

Leaving the giant to be finished off by one of the other marines, Aokiji jumped up and over him, using Geppo and Soru to close the distance as a hand of solid darkness grabbed Gion, pulling her into a punch that might as well kill her. Lashing out ahead of himself with ice spears, Aokiji saw them slam into Blackbeard's body, causing him to hiss in pain, his technique faltering as he twisted around to stare at the admiral but doing no real damage. *There is a reason why he's a Shichibukai, even missing an arm*, Aokiji thought with a grimace.

"Aokiji! I've heard of you, you know. The lazy justice admiral, the one who does just enough to get by." Blackbeard looked around them, somehow forcing a grin on his face despite the walls of ice in the distance and the battle all around them. The fight with Gion had pushed him back towards the center of what little free area Impel Down had above the water line, even as it did the same to Catarina Devon and several others.

The woman was nowhere in sight now, possibly having retreated back into the prison for some reason. Why she'd do so, Blackbeard had no idea, as that way only meant a longer fight with no salvation, but Devon was certainly not fighting anywhere he could see. *And where the hell is Lafitte?!*

Blackbeard had lost sight of his one true remaining crewmember early on when Momonga and the other marines up under him arrived. Being at what amounted to a low-tier commodore level of combat ability, he had become one of the first pirates to die under the onslaught of the vengeful marines.

"It's always sounded to me like you're someone who doesn't exactly believe in all that twaddle that the World Government tries to foist on you. Listen, why don't you strike out with me? Join my crew, we can..." Blackbeard's impromptu recruitment speech ended as Aokiji charged forward, a glacier of ice appearing in front of him and lashing out towards Blackbeard, who hastily activated his own power, tugging on the ice, drawing it into his black hole.

For a moment, the two Devil Fruit powers fought, the endless black hole sucking in the equally endless ice that Aokiji was launching Blackbeard's way. Then Blackbeard charged forward, still with his one remaining hand raised, aiming his black hole towards Aokiji. Aokiji retreated, wary of what other tricks Blackbeard might have under his sleeve and already feeling tired from his earlier fight with Ace.

Behind Blackbeard, Gion pushed herself to her knees, seeing double for a moment from the blow from Blackbeard. His Busoshoku was as good as her own was, and his blow had come in just a little faster than she had been prepared for.

Yet she was still grimly determined to take part in the fight, and Busoshoku flowed over her body even as she started to push to her feet. Before she could do anything more, another pirate slammed into her from the side. A drill of all things slammed point-first into her side, rotating as it did, causing Gion to cry out in pain as the rotation of the sharpened sides of the drill blade was enough to almost overcome her Busoshoku. "Gion! You, you bitch, you stopped our research, you destroyed our notes! I'll have your head for that! The perfect weapon, the perfect sword, I will give birth to it!"

Sent sideways into a wall, Gion could barely hold her Busoshoku up against the spinning striking power of the drill, itself quickly becoming coated with Busoshoku held in the hands of a mad scientist that had gone just a little further towards the 'mad' than the 'scientist' during his captivity. Somewhere, he had found a doctor's cloak to put over his prisoner's outfit, much like Catarina had done with a marine officer's coat.

There, however, the similarities ended. Where Catarina Devon was beyond tall for a normal person, this person looked about the same size as Gion. While Catarina had not been driven insane by her captivity, this individual surely had been, judging by the look on his face, as he continued to slam the tip of his drill into Gion's side. Where he had gotten that, she had no idea, but it was obviously a deadly weapon in his hands.

Yet even that frenetic movement, as well as the fight between Aokiji and Blackbeard, paused as words from far away from the island of Impel Down hit them. Carried across the distance by Whitebeard's Haoshoku and the sheer volume his body could create, his declaration washed over the island as it had his fleet and flew away from the battlefield.

"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!** Go forth and find it! It is there, on Raftel, Straw Hat!"

The impact of those words was tremendous. Most of the pirates roared in unison, pushing forward hard, their energy and desire to escape renewed by knowing that the single greatest prize in the world was real, as avowed by the Strongest Man in the world. Even Blackbeard, who could not stop himself from quivering a bit in fear at his old captain's voice, had to admit that hearing that was pretty amazing. Although, he also had to growl at the idea that Whitebeard had seemingly acknowledged the rookie Straw Hat in some fashion.

Even as the echoes of Whitebeard's final roar of the One Piece being real reverberated over the island, cracking the ice balls enveloping it in some places, the fighting intensified. For a few moments, as Blackbeard and Aokiji warily danced around one another, one unable to close, the other unwilling to chance it, it seemed as if the pirates would be able to push through the marines. Several places along Aokiji's circle of ice the pirates had shattered their way through. Three ships had been nearly cleared of the ice by a group of Devil Fruit users who could create fire in various ways.

There, more than a few hundred of the regular pirates were working on getting the two battered steam vessels to start moving. However, their teamwork was one of desperation rather than respect or ingrained training, and Chaton led a group of other officers down onto the vessels, smashing their smokestacks and closing with the pirates, Shigans and simpler yet more powerful Busoshoku-clad punches soon dealing with a majority of the pirates, leaving only the high-end fighters.

Elsewhere, two more prisoners, former World Government assassins turned mercs, had been able to start to move away out over the ocean using Geppo. Where they hoped to go, neither knew, but both wanted to get away from Impel Down, so much that the destination was secondary.

Yet even as Aokiji began to realize that maybe he shouldn't have challenged Blackbeard and gotten sucked into a one-on-one contest with him, Tsuru and the final reserve she had brought together arrived on the scene. She dove down on the two pirates that had been trying to make their getaway. Neither saw her coming from above and behind them, using a manner of attack that many an aerial fighter would have recognized.

Before either could flinch, her small, elderly hands slapped down, activating her paramecia Devil Fruit, turning them into so much laundry floating in the wind. Cleaned of all of their evil thoughts as they had been turned into pieces of cloth, the two former mercenaries floated in the wind for a few moments, before a commodore following after Tsuru grabbed them out of the air, grimacing at the half-happy, half-ecstatic look on their faces, as they mumbled to themselves about how they would turn over a new leaf and be better people from now on.

They wouldn't get the chance, of course. The commodore wondered if they would even live out the day after all this, wondering about the future of Impel Down as a whole and the blood price the World Government would demand.

Elsewhere in the battle, Shiryu looked up from where he had been fighting Momonga only barely able to duck under a blow from a new swordsman, who landed across from him. Geta tapping down onto the docks of Impel Down lightly, Issho's sword flicked up into a defensive stance. "In the name of justice and peace, you will not pass!"

Elsewhere, another volunteer was also making a name for himself. His hands had turned into glowing green tree limbs as he captured two more of the pirates from Level 6, despite their best efforts to use their own Zoan-type Devil Fruit to escape him. Dobby Ibadonbo, a member of the group from Level 6, fell soon after, run through by another vice admiral, and the fight slowly began to go out of the few remaining regular pirates, allowing more and more of the marines to concentrate on the ones from Level 6, ganging up on them as they had the officers of the Whitebeard Crew earlier in the battle.

With Sanjuan Wolf dealt with, and Caterina nowhere in sight, none of the remaining Level 6 prisoners had enough charisma or willingness to work with other people to try to organize a defense. All of them fought as individuals, while the marines and their conscripted allies fought as a unit.

Dodging instead of absorbing another attack from Aokiji launched his way, Blackbeard rolled across the floor, then launched himself into a shoulder charge, the shoulder of his ruined arm forward towards his somewhat shorter opponent in a makeshift Soru, something he hadn't shown any ability with before this. Surprised despite his Kenbunshoku, before Aokiji could turn into ice to simply allow the attack through his form, Blackbeard twisted around, bringing around his hand to slam into Aokiji's body.

As Ace had discovered before during their fight, something of the Yami Yami no Mi allowed it to utterly negate other Devil Fruit powers, or at least logia transformations. Suddenly, Aokiji found he could not turn into ice and hastily armored himself, but not before he found himself slammed into the ground and held there as Blackbeard started to grip him harder and harder.

Aokiji's Busoshoku was up to the task, and he simply glared angrily up at the taller pirate, trying to break free of his grip on his shoulder and arm but failing. Lashing out with a punch and kick combo, that Blackbeard could not block, simply taking it, grimacing at the pain even as he kicked down at Aokiji.

No longer trying to fight off Blackbeard's grip, Aokiji surged to his feet, trusting in his Busoshoku to defend himself. Back-and-forth the two of them went, with Blackbeard keeping a hold of Aokiji in order to stop him from using his Devil Fruit powers, but he couldn't use his own

and use Busoshoku at the same time. With Aokiji throwing out Busoshoku punches and kicks, not doing so would have had him breaking ribs and maybe worse, despite his insane durability.

In actuality, Aokiji was feeling the hits, the density of Blackbeard's kicks and knee blows causing some internal injuries despite his Busoshoku. Yet he wasn't taking nearly as much damage as Blackbeard. The lack of another arm was really coming home again, against an enemy on or above his own level.

This was a perfect example of a damned if you do, damned if you don't scenario, and as he realized that, Blackbeard howled in fury. "Fucking damn you, Aokiji!"

Another blow from Aokiji slammed into his face this time. Normally, Blackbeard would be able to use his greater reach advantage against most opponents, but Aokiji was only a few feet shorter than he was, and his arms were long for his frame. Worse, Aokiji's mastery of Busoshoku was well above his own.

Eventually, Blackbeard felt his Busoshoku crack and fail, causing him to hurl Aokiji away from him. Blackbeard howled, bringing his fist forward as he shouted, "Black Hole!" in desperation, trying to suck in Aokiji before he could activate his Devil Fruit power.

He was too late. Aokiji's body shifted into ice midair, a hill of ice suddenly flowing out and down into the ground, allowing him to reappear elsewhere even as Blackbeard sucked in all of the ice from the original hill.

Before this could lead to a renewed battle between gravity and ice, Blackbeard made a mistake. He had been so concentrated on Aokiji that he hadn't realized that the fight had shifted him around to near one of the marines he had already hurled out of his black hole against Aokiji earlier via his liberation assault. There, commodore Brannew lay, unable to move, his legs broken at the hips from a strike from Catarina earlier.

Since then, he had been playing dead, gritting his teeth against the pain, unwilling to draw attention to himself, lest some of the pirates try to either take him hostage or just outright kill him. Now, seeing Blackbeard standing nearby, Brannew took his chance.

Reaching under his officer's cloak, the man slowly and carefully pulled out a set of sea stone handcuffs. He had brought them along in case he faced a Devil Fruit user but hadn't been able to bring them into the fight before this, although he had used them successfully twice during the battle against Whitebeard's pirate crew.

Now, he lashed out with them, catching Blackbeard's ankle in one of the rings.

Instantly upon coming into contact with the cursed stone, Blackbeard's powers faded. He stumbled, crashing to his knees as all energy left his body. "W, what, what? No!"

Before he could do anything, if, indeed, he would've been able to do anything in the first place, Aokiji crossed the intervening distance via a mixture of Geppo and Soru. His hand slammed into Blackbeard's face, as Aokiji, blood streaming from his mouth intoned, "Ice Time!" for the third time in that battle. And unlike Sanjuan Wolf, Blackbeard's size wasn't nearly enough to let him keep fighting, especially with the Seastone handcuff around his leg.

"No! No, my ambition, my dream!" Blackbeard shrieked, real fear in his voice as he tried to force his body to move, tried to call on his Busoshoku to protect him from the cold and the touch of Seastone.

"Your dream is a nightmare, and I'm pulling the curtain on it," Aokiji said grimly, keeping his technique going until Blackbeard's large form was completely turned into ice before pulling his hand back. He then launched a punch forward, shattering the body of his opponent entirely.

This was followed soon after by a deep, subterranean rumble that shook the entire island like a lion with a Chihuahua. Most of the still upright buildings and walls fell, shaken to pieces as the ocean shifted and churned while a deep *CRRRAACCCKK* sounded in the distance. This was joined, for the Zoans and those with good hearing, by Whitebeard's voice roaring out, "**END TIMES!**"

Soon, though, the side effects of whatever attack Whitebeard had used faded, and the marines continued the battle against the would-be escapees.

In the next twenty minutes, Aokiji and the others were able to finish off, or force into retreat the last escaping pirates back into Impel Down. By that point, most of the members of the Level 6 group were already dealt with, as few of them were willing to retreat back underground.

Only Byrnni World and Catarina Devon remained unaccounted for. Even Shiryu, the former Chief Warden of Impel Down, had fallen to Momonga and Issho.

Issho had lost an eye to the man, Shiryu's blade cutting across the other swordsman's face and up into his head in what would have been a killing blow if Shiryu had not been forced backward to dodge a blow from Momonga even as his own strike hit home. His sword was in custody, and the man's body would be dumped into the ocean along with all of the other pirates.

Nodding at the report from one of the vice admirals, Aokiji stared hard at the entrance into Impel Down. "And we're certain that both Catarina and Byrnni retreated inside? Catarina, I will grant you, she's known to be an incredibly devious sort of woman, and she might have thought that she could find some place to hide out in order to escape later. But Byrnni? That doesn't fit his personality."

Vice Admiral Tosa shrugged his shoulders, one hand moving up into his short black beard for a moment. "I never fought the man, so I wouldn't know. Quite a bit before my time. Not that his age seemed to slow him down. He crushed Hound with a piece of rock, and a hurled bit of rubble tore off Redick's arm. As for Catarina, she killed T. Bone and Guillotine and nearly burned Hototogisu's face off. I've already ordered her to be taken back to one of our ships. If there are any of the jailers left alive in there, I doubt their medical crew will be up to dealing with that level of damage, along with all the other wounds we've taken here. These people... they cost us nearly as much as fighting the Whitebeard Crew did."

Aokiji winced. Hototogisu was an up-and-coming rear admiral, one of Tsuru's protégés. She specialized in gun-based combat, mostly ranged, but was also a dab hand at mixing her gun skills with her limited ability with Busoshoku, Shigan and Tekkai. *Damn it, Hoto-chan should never have closed in with a beast like Catarina.*

"Hototogisu must've been trying to shield T. Bone or someone else, blast it. She's always believed in giving her all in trying to save other marines, regardless of her rank," Momonga said sadly. "But you've got her and the other wounded already moving?"

"Yeah. Strawberry came in with one of our ships along the Tarai Current. Given the wounds he took fighting Hancock and then after against Straw Hat, he couldn't help in this fight, but he wanted to do something. He's now heading back upstream to the rest of our fleet," Tosa answered.

Nodding at that, grateful that someone else was seeing to the wounded, Aokiji turned his attention back to the entrance of Impel Down. "Hmmm... Well, so long as they're within the prison, we're going to have to go in after them eventually. Organize the most fit vice admirals. We'll take a brief rest to get some energy back, then head in. I'll freeze every floor as we go, but there might be places they can hide regardless, and Catarina's Devil Fruit might let her ignore my ice."

"Movement!" shouted a voice near one of the still ice-imprisoned battleships. Several commodores and vice admirals twisted in that direction, ready to launch attacks, ranging from paramecia to Rankyaku.

Before a group of trigger-happy commodores could attack, dainty hands appeared out of where Domino had taken cover. "Peace! I, I'm Domino, Chief Communications Officer of Impel Down! Blackbeard took me captive, but when Vice Admiral Momonga's initial group sent attacks his way, he hurled me aside. I, um, I think I might have a slight concussion..."

The marines watched warily as Domino slowly stepped out from the cover she had taken. Blood matted her hair on one side of her head, and she looked unsteady on her feet, but otherwise, the hut she had been hiding in had somehow protected her from being discovered.

Ironically, this was the same cover that Buggy and his makeshift crew had used when they first caught sight of Blackbeard arriving on Impel Down. That one carpenter's hut had survived everything that had been going on around it, living a practically charmed life save for one wall, which had collapsed during the blowback from Whitebeard's attack.

Aokiji stared at the woman thoughtfully, then asked abruptly, "Was it you who sent out the distress signal about Blackbeard? And to prove yourself, tell me what Magellan's favorite room is." *Catarina can take other people's forms, but she doesn't have their knowledge. Thankfully I haven't seen any female bodies around here other than two of the prisoners.*

"Magellan loves spending time in his bathroom. He likes being there in there in the dark, dealing with the upset stomach his Devil Fruit powers give him. He's devoted so much money to that bathroom it looks like something taken from a King's castle," Domino answered promptly. "And no, I wasn't the one to get the word out on that score. We,--" she nearly stumble, one hand rising to her head, but Chaton caught her elbow, helping her sit down on a nearby piece of rubble.

"At, at first, we couldn't get a warning out when Blackbeard first landed. Your communications were down. I was able to put the idea in one of my officers' heads soon after Blackbeard finished fighting through Mozambica and his marines, though. Where that officer is at the moment, I have no idea. Or even if he's alive..." she added grimly, staring out over the battlefield that had once been the premier prison of the World Government.

Tosa grimaced. Mozambica's corpse had been discovered mere moments ago. And as for any officer aboard the ships before the pirates started boarding those ships? Well, the best that could be said was the marines might be able to find their bodies and separate them from those of the scum.

Nodding his head to indicate that was indeed the correct answer, Aokiji gestured one of the other marines over to check the woman out, asking her to explain what had happened, while the vice admiral he had been talking to earlier began to gather up a few of his less battered fellows. At this point, there wasn't much to choose from in that area. The battle against the Whitebeard Pirates had been vicious, and the battle against the monsters of Level 6 even more so. The two Beast Jailers joining the fight did not make up for the losses of so many officers wounded or dead.

Even as he listened to Domino explain Blackbeard's arrival at the prison, Aokiji saw Gion push out of the rubble of one of the prison's outer walls, the body of someone she had been fighting there half-buried behind her, while another body lay nearby headless. He still saw no sign of Tsuru and wondered where she was right now, but trusted the old biddy was still alive around here somewhere.

Certain that after Blackbeard's death Aokiji had things well in hand, Tsuru had retraced her steps, so to speak. Even though Tsuru had felt the final clash between Saint Shepherd Ju Peter and Whitebeard, she still wanted to see the aftermath with her own eyes.

She was not alone in this. In fact, she arrived nearly ten minutes after the first person on the scene.

Garp, battered and with one hand holding his side, one eye closed by blood and with a foot that was more bits than actual bone, hovered in midair for a moment to one side of where Whitebeard's body stood.

When he had smashed Sengoku out into the ocean away from Akainu's island, Whitebeard and Peter had been clashing near the center of the Devil Fruit-created island. While the portion of the island behind Whitebeard was still there, the area in front of him was a different matter entirely. From about a foot ahead of where Newgate's feet stood, there was massive crevice.

Not just in the island. No, the island was just gone beyond Whitebeard's body. Segments had simply sunk, but the majority had been crushed or shattered into nothingness, just like the ocean beyond and then down, down to the ocean floor and beyond.

The sides of the crevice were shorn mechanically smooth, and from where Garp hovered above where the waterline should be, he could not see any hint of a bottom within it, the attack. Whitebeard's assault had created a new monstrously deep trench, radiating out from Whitebeard like a somewhat thin fan, his final attack imprinted onto the world forever.

Crevice radiated out from the central fan, far smaller, but still just as sheer, if not anywhere near as deep. Moreover, the water all around where the attack had struck its target had been 'broken' as well by the Gura Gura no Mi. Even now, instead of instantly beginning to pour down into the emptiness of the crevice, as it should as a liquid, that water held the same edge like shape to it as the solid ground below the ocean floor. Even in death, the Gura Gura no Mi's power, fueled by Whitebeard's raw **will**, retained its otherworldly nature.

Staring down at it, Garp could only shake his head. Peering sideways at him, Garp chuckled lightly. "Damn, Newgate, you sure went out with a bang, huh?"

The sight of Whitebeard's body might have been enough to turn most people's stomachs, but Garp had seen worse. Although most of the time, those worse examples were from bodies that were lying on the ground. Whitebeard, somehow, was still standing.

Half of Newgate's head was just gone, but the portion of his face still visibly was locked into one of his famous, wide, dangerous grins under the half of his white mustache that remained. The shoulder, arm and a goodly portion of that side of his torso were also just

missing, with blood still dripping slowly down to the ground from the massive, possibly bite-caused wound.

Yet still, he had struck back against Peter. What kind of attack that had been, Garp had no idea. He and Sengoku had moved well away from Akainu's island before that final clash. And even if they hadn't, putting down Sengoku had taken all of Garp's attention.

Still, it was very clear that Whitebeard had won the fight because the only sign of Peter that Garp could see anywhere was a splattering of blood caught in the water around the vast crack in the world, water, which itself was still touched by the Gura Gura no Mi. Nothing remained of Whitebeard's weapon or Peter's body. Nothing but blood in the water.

Yet the most surprising thing to Garp was how the old bastard still stood there. As if, even in death, his body refused to simply lie down and take it.

"Then again, that's probably the story of your life, isn't it? Facing any challenge head-on." Looking at Whitebeard like this, it was obvious that the man had far more wounds from past battles than Garp had, and that was saying something. The only thing there was the tattoo of his pirate mark. Every other scar he bore was on his front. Not a single wound resided on his back except those that had gone straight through.

Taking a step back and staring at that back and the new vista down into nothing that its owner had created, Garp knelt down in place, grunting at the pain from his foot. Once sitting down, he pretended to raise a nonexistent sake saucer in salute. "Here's to you, Newgate. You may never have been Pirate King, but you sure made your name ring!"

"Poetry, from you? I would never have thought to see the day." Garp did not look up as Tsuru alighted nearby, also staring at the back of the Strongest Man in the World. "Peter?"

"Some of his blood's over there, some of it over there, and some might be down there," Garp snickered, gesturing to either side of Whitebeard then down below his feet into the crevice beyond Newgate's body. "If you think he could have survived what caused that gigantic rift, be my guest and go down and explore. I'm sure as hell not going to."

Tsuru grimaced, moving forward to stand beside Whitebeard's body and stared down into the rift that he had created.

Even as she watched, the effect that the Gura Gura no Mi had on liquid began to fade, and the water from all around the crack in the world began to slowly pour down its sides, trying to fill the vacuum within. Within seconds a hint of steam began to slowly rise from deep below. This was followed by a slight tremor going through the earth underneath them, with more of the island starting to break off at the edges.

Seeing no sign of life there, Tsuru quickly stepped backward, shaking her head. No, if Peter had been struck by that attack, the blood that had even now dissipated in the water that was flowing down the edge of that rent in the earth beneath the ocean was indeed probably the last bits of him around. "The Gorosei are not going to like this. Any of this!"

She turned, glaring at Garp, who simply sat there, looking at Whitebeard, his eyes far away in memory. Growling, she hurled a small stone at him lightly, getting his attention without coming closer to him. "What about Sengoku? Did you kill him too?"

"What's this 'too' thing? I didn't even kill Magellan. I actually like the venom-using ass, he's always been a rule-abiding sort. He was just in my way and had some information I wanted. If he's dead, though, that's not because of me finishing him off," Garp said, snorting. "In fact, the only asshole I killed outright was Lao G." He paused then after thinking continued, "Ehh... I might have killed a few of the Blugori and a few prisoners when we made our escape from Impel Down, but that's about it. As for Sengoku, I wanted to beat his head in, not kill him."

The oldest living Monkey smiled somewhat bitterly. "We were friends once, after all."

"We all were, Garp. And then you turned on us!" Tsuru growled, shaking her head as she stared at Garp.

The look she got in reply caused Tsuru to take a step back slightly as Garp's sadness seemed to fall away, replaced by anger. "You sent three **fucking** Shichibukai against my grandson, the brat who I had raised, instead of his own father! The one family member I actually like! Then you expected me to just sit and take it like a good little dog, or worse, just not even learn of it!?"

With a scowl, he set aside his pretend sauce and stood up, stepping around Tsuru, keeping a good distance between them, lest she try something with her Devil Fruit powers. As tired as he was, despite putting on a tough appearance right now, he did have several broken ribs, and his hands were really feeling it, despite all of the training he put them through after pounding the golden statue of his former friend into the dirt. *And let's not get started on my foot. Asshole just had to stomp on it with his full damn weight in ultra-giant statue mode.*

Shaking his head, Garp waved his hand to his left, up the Tarai Current. Thankfully for the surviving marine vessels, most of them had been well away from the island, and Whitebeard's final attack had gone out towards the right of the Tarai Current rather than along it. "I left Sengoku over there somewhere. One of the marine vessels in that direction was doing a decent job of pulling in survivors from a few others that had apparently been fighting it out with the Kuja Pirates and was moving back along the Tarai Current. I think a few of the other ships that survived everything else might have sunk after Newgate's last attack, but Sengoku was still alive like I said."

As he finished speaking, Garp reached Whitebeard's body, looking from him then around, wondering if his weapon had survived somehow despite not being in sight when he first arrived. After a few seconds, Garp decided that whatever attack Peter had done to finally break through the old man's Busoshoku had apparently done away with the weapon to the point it was nowhere to be found as well as a goodly portion of Newgate's body.

What Garp did see was Whitebeard's cloak, still hanging on the half of Whitebeard's upper body that remained. He pulled it off him, staring at the gory remains once more, shaking his head. By this point, the body should have collapsed regardless of how Edward was made of stubborn, but somehow, it still stood there, overlooking the slowly filling crevice. "I wonder how far down the total waterline of the world is going to go before that's filled in?" He murmured, barely audible to Tsuru over the sound of steam and the waterfalls surrounding the crevice.

Garp stood there for some time, staring down at where Peter had probably stood before he was turned into so many floating bits of debris, if that, by Whitebeard's final attack. Eventually, Tsuru's voice from behind him broke into his revelry, her voice more certain than before, having gotten over her surprise at Garp's cold, commanding attitude.

"You know it's not going to end here, right? The World Government still exists Garp, whatever the losses the marines have taken today. A wounded animal is the most dangerous kind. Your grandson's been involved in one hell of a wounding, but the World Government is just too damn big to fail."

Garp turned, laughing, causing Tsuru to blink. "You, you and the rest of the WeeGee are going to have a lot more problems than just Luffy and me to deal with soon. Or do you really think that the losses you all took here are going to be kept quiet? Hah! Do you think that the other Yonko are just going to let Whitebeard's death go by without trying to take advantage? And they're not the only ones."

His grin then shifted into an almost evil-looking one. "And my grandson's not the only family I've got out there, either."

That statement caused a shiver to go down Tsuru's spine, and she stared in horror at Garp as he began to bounce up into the air. "No, no, you can't be thinking of joining with...Garp!" she shouted.

Snickering, Garp gave her a final salute and then bounced upwards into the air and away, heading in the direction he could feel his grandson in, still sailing within range of his own Kenbunshoku, if barely.

"Damn it. The idea of that horror is just what I need to make this disaster even more perfect!" Tsuru grumbled, shaking her head.

She sensed one of the other marines coming towards her and remained where she was, feeling no urge to do anything other than sit there for a time, old bones protesting the exertions of the day. Soon, she was joined by Chaton, who landed beside her, staring at the still-standing body of Whitebeard. Moving forward to stand next to it, he whistled at the destruction in front of the man. "Damn. I don't suppose I have to ask what happened to Peter."

"No, you damn well do not!" Tsuru grumbled. "Tell me that you and the others are starting to organize relief efforts and so forth."

"That, and I've even brought you a Den Den Mushi. As to the rest of the Fleet..." Chaton shook his head. "The fight against the Whitebeard Pirates was deadly amongst our regular sailors and ships. I'd estimate only one out of every five survived if that. Not a single steam or coal ship we came with is among those and the Busties..."

"Must you call them that?" Tsuru grumbled. "That is a ridiculous name for our artillery ships, even if they are the ones called upon for Buster Call duty."

"Hey, after a day like this, I wanna take my humor where I can get it," Chaton rejoined. "None of them survived. We lost whole divisions, even after Akainu's little trick. Thankfully, though, a lot of crews abandoned the ship when they were caught unable to turn broadside to the enemy instead of dying, and a few of the captains, especially that Coby brat, began to gather up wounded as soon as you and I left him behind. Guy's got a good head on his shoulders. Although you might wanna sit him down and get him some advanced Kenbunshoku training. If his brain survives the overload of the day, anyway."

And the fact the little fool's idols both proved to have feet made of clay, Tsuru thought. I didn't realize he was friends with Straw Hat. I'm going to need to question him about that. As for Garp, well, at least they didn't see one another in person, although I bet Coby was able to sense the fight going on between Sengoku and Garp. "Noted."

Chaton gestured around them to the water, which was flowing with every increasing speed downward into the crevice. "Honestly, our fleet was doing a little better before the final clash here. Coby and the rest reported that any ship within sight of the island, er, from their decks, I suppose, was destroyed. Many of the survivors saw it happen. Being near the epicenter of whatever happened here was enough to shatter those ships like so much kindling along with their crew from the backslash of Newgate's attack."

He snorted. "And do not get me started about how many Sea Kings are floating around, as far as the eye can see from a good half a mile up. We could have one heck of a fish fry if we wanted."

"Concentrate, you old ass. Honestly, you act even more childish than Garp sometimes. You don't need to keep softening the blows for me. Just rip the fucking tourniquet off," Tsuru ordered.

Chaton's habitual sunny nature fell away for a second as he stared back over his shoulder towards the steam that could now be seen visibly coming up out of the crevice in the ground underneath the ocean as the water began to fill in the chasm. "Losses are still being tallied. I, where's the steam coming from?"

"Go back to school, old man." Tsuru snorted, ignoring the sophistry of that comment. "Any student would be able to tell you what that is. And I'm in no mood to educate you."

The back and forth, which, although she would never admit it, was doing good things for Tsuru's state of mind, was interrupted as both of them sensed someone coming towards the island, which had begun to be covered by the steam coming up out of the new gash in the sea floor far, far below. Turning in that direction, they saw Hawk Eyes Mihawk landing on the island.

Hawkeyes strode forward, his clothing cut in a few places, especially a slash made on his left shoulder that had bled a bit into his shirt and coat. His hat was missing, and there was a shallow cut on his cheek, but otherwise, he didn't seem anywhere near as battered as most of the vice admirals or other officers who had taken part in the battle.

His voice seemed almost lazy to those who didn't know him, but Tsuru could detect the respect and even shock in his voice and the way his eyes remained locked on Whitebeard's back. "So, this was the epicenter of the storm. A storm that has yet to simmer down throughout the world, I suspect. I wonder if either side of this conflict truly understood the effect allowing such a clear, brutal contest of strength would create."

"...Trust me, I've been thinking about nothing but since the battle died down. But you should be happy, shouldn't you? After all, you've been quoted saying often enough that boredom is the true enemy of those as strong as yourself," Tsuru growled. "Where the hell have you been, Hawkeyes?"

"Yeah, you didn't take part in the battle against Teach and the prisoners. Hell, the last time I saw you was early on in the fight," Chaton added.

"Unfortunately for me, my battle with Vista took me quite a ways away from the main battlefield... and destroyed my personal ship, drat it." For a moment, Hawkeye's attitude shifted into one that sounded truly aggrieved. "As such, I had to board one of the enemy's vessels. By the time I cut down the majority of his flagship's crew, I found myself well out into the Calm Belt. Getting back here was a bit difficult at that point. You know I am not the best when it comes to Geppo, let alone Soru."

Tsuru growled, but, given how much damage the marines had taken today, they could not really afford to go against one of the two surviving Shichibukai. *Especially the one who's still around. Doflamingo, damn his special status!* Setting aside her anger at the fact that she had heard Doflamingo had retreated after trying to fight Garp, Tsuru concentrated on the here and now. There would be time in the next few days to think of the Shichibukai and the need to fill

the other positions. With pirates who were more willing to follow the party line than any of the predecessors. A betrayal like Hancock's could not be allowed to occur ever again. "And you never joined the battle against Whitebeard?"

"I attempted to initially, but after that, once Vista had intercepted me, I had no chance to do so." Hawkeyes turned his gaze back toward the body of the Strongest Man in the World. *Or perhaps, living statue was a better term? It certainly shows no sign of collapsing.* "Besides, I would not get in the way of one wishing to die for what he has achieved, the family he built with his own hands and will."

"Fine. Chaton, is everything on Impel Down finished?"

"No. Catarina Devon and Byrnni World retreated inside the prison with less than a dozen other prisoners. Wrangling them out is not going to be fun, and frankly, after the fight against Teach and the rest of the escaped prisoners, Aokiji and Momonga's the only ones who're anywhere near fit to keep fighting. Aokiji's got a broken rib or three, while Momonga has a broken shoulder and a cut on his forearm that's pretty bad, but they're still better than most of the rest." Chaton himself wasn't all that wounded, although he was looking a little burnt around the edges. Yet even as a vice admiral, Chaton couldn't fight either of the named monsters on his own underground, especially if they had pulled back quickly enough to get some rest between then and now.

He did have some good news to report, though, and did so even as the remnants of Aokiji's island began to rumble and shake under them. "We've gotten in touch with Saldeath. He and the Blugori hid out instead of trying to fight Blackbeard, apparently,"

"Alright. Chaton, get Hawk Eyes Mihawk to one of our ships. By my authority, he is to be allowed access to Impel Down." *With most, if not all of the prisoners dead, I doubt there are any secrets down there worth hiding any longer.* "You're in charge of getting Saldeath aboard with that. Finish that fucking farce. For now, though, we should all get off this island."

Hawkeyes raised an eyebrow but did not argue. Today had been an intensely interesting day, and seeing the changes that would undoubtedly sweep the world after this from the position of a Shichibukai would be both easier and perhaps more amusing. *Besides, I have no doubt that the World Government will eventually recover and may send me and others against the Straw Hats. Hopefully, Roronoa Zoro will keep growing until then.* Besides that, the idea of facing a legend from the previous generation, like Devon or World was a fascinating one.

Tsuru left the island behind, retreating to a marine vessel Chaton had already ordered to brave the surging waters around it. As around her a reinforced crew strained against the tide with hundreds of oars along with Chaton pushing them along, Tsuru stood at the aft of the ship, watching the surging water tear the last of the island apart. The last bit of Akainu's creation had withstood intense tides as the ocean began to fill in what Tsuru was already beginning to

mentally label as Whitebeard's Tomb and now, the water swallowed the last portion along with Edward Newgate's body, still standing even as the rock underneath him crumbled.

However, as they finally pulled away from the worst of the current, the Den Den Mushi that Tsuru had been holding began to shift. Where before it had looked like a regular Den Den Mushi, now, its face took on the appearance of someone that Tsuru very much did not want to talk to.

Even among the marines, there were only a handful who would recognize the visage the Den Den Mushi shifted into, a slightly old looking face with white dreadlocks almost merging into a beard below it. But she did. This was the face of Saint Jaygarcia Saturn, one of Peter Ju Shepherd's fellows among the Wise Men and the most senior of them.

"This is Saturn." The voice coming from the Den Den Mushi was even older sounding than even Tsuru's and power radiated out from it even over the Den Den Mushi to the point that Tsuru's knees felt a little weak. "I demand an update on what has been going on with Whitebeard and everything else. The last reports we had were when the marine fleet left Marineford. We have not heard a single report since then."

Nearby, Aokiji, who had decided to leave the final cleanup of Impel Down to Chaton and Mihawk, looked down at the communications device in Tsuru's hand as if it had, along with transforming into the appearance of Saturn, suddenly become a striking snake, ready to slay all nearby. Similarly, the battered Gion looked very much like she wanted to run away right now.

Even under normal conditions, Tsuru was very hard to overawe. After the day they'd had, well, retirement, even the closed casket sort was looking very good indeed. Without hesitation, Tsuru bit the bullet for the trio, reaching over and picking up the speaker. "This is Staff Officer Tsuru. There have been a few developments here that have not gone the way any of us could have hoped to."

"Would one of those developments be the death of my fellow Gorosei, Saint Peter?" The oldest member of the five elders asked, his voice early calm, yet it was the calm of a volcano about to go off. The type that could not be appeased by virgin sacrifice, only by wiping out half of a continent.

"You know then," Tsuru said. Frankly, if the guy wanted to have her executed for this day's work, she would go along with it gladly, knowing precisely how much of the disaster had been directly because Tsuru had refused to go against their orders before. *Damn it, Garp really was right. Their actions led to this, and we've all paid for it.*

"We do. We have already begun to search for a replacement. We wise elders are connected in ways you do not need to know about. Now, tell us what has happened. And do not spare any detail."

“Details about how it all began are still unknown at this time, but...” Tsuru began. She was not done by the time the sun was going down in the distance, but enough reports had been coming in from the other marines that she knew at least more about what the battle had cost them than Chaton had told her earlier. The answer, was a lot, a whole hell of a lot.

Thanks to the nature of the battlefield and their initial advantage of surprise, Whitebeard Pirates had pretty much been dominating the battle in terms of ship-to-ship combat. That stage of the battle had taken a chunk out of the fleet in terms of ships and regular sailors. Despite all the marines and Akainu had been able to do, that aspect had not changed overmuch, aided by Straw Hat’s lightning assault wiping out still more ships. Yet the sheer number of ships brought into the fight meant that there were still twenty-three marine ships floating, although only a few battleships were truly in any shape to fight. Not one of them was the relatively rarer artillery type or a steamship either, just like Chaton had said, yet that really didn’t matter in terms of the number of sailors lost all that much. A normal galleon of the marines had a crew of around seven hundred normally. An artillery ship, an extra eighty gunners. A steamship, two hundred less as they didn’t have mast monkeys or heavy gunners.

Thus, the losses among the sailors, roughly around eight thousand dead out of a total of a little over thirteen thousand, were understandable. Deeply regretful but understandable. Those numbers, though, were not the true losses for the marines. Deck hands, gunners, carpenters, steersmen and even engine apes could all be replaced easily, given the logistics train the marines had access to. Indeed, there were almost always three times more such men than the marines had ships. No, it was the losses to the ranks of captain and above that would cripple the marines worldwide for at least a few years, if not up to a decade, if they were unlucky in finding potential recruits.

The marine’s vice admirals, rear admirals and commodores had been the ones to turn the battle around on the Whitebeard Fleet, despite its initial advantages thanks to all of them being able to use Geppo, while less than half of the Whitebeard Fleet’s best fighters could fight in the air, but they had also paid for it from start to finish.

Smoker, his back broken and ribs shattered, was a good example of what had happened to many of the commodores who had tried to fight pirates like Jozu and Marco. Of the ninety-four commodores and captains whose use of Devil Fruits or the Rokushiki was good enough to put them at that same level that had been a part of this battle, fully half had been killed outright. The rest were mostly wounded, with only twelve lucky to come through the fight without too much injury, particularly those commodores who had volunteered, like their higher-ups, to try Vegapunk’s Green Goo.

That Green Goo had been a true difference-maker. The Pacifista and K9Ms had done very well at first too, but, just like Devil Fruit users, seawater had proven deadly to them. Once one of the androids had been damaged in any way, all it took was a wave hitting it to sort them out. Right after they had been sent into battle that they had helped the marines gain the momentum, they’d kept in the air above the ship-to-ship battle for the rest of the day. As for the

Green Goo, adding a second Devil Fruit to those who already had such or giving one to those, like the Giant Squad, who did not was huge.

That did not mean that the vice and rear admirals had avoided getting mauled just like their lower-ranked fellows, however. In fact, the Giant Squad had been wiped out. Jozu had killed two of them, one had killed himself getting the first responders to the prison, and the others had died during the fighting, the last falling against Byrnni World.

They were not alone. Hound, Pomsy, Mozambica, Draw, Ketagari, the names went on. The marines had brought in all but seven of the Fleet's vice admirals who, at the time of the battle, were fit enough to fight. Similarly, they had brought in all but four of their rear admirals, pulling these officers over time from around the world and various Fleet, base or even fortress commands. Over forty of the strongest fighters the marine fleet had to offer, along with the three admirals, Kong, Sengoku and at least four fighters on the same level among the group, who had been brought in by Sengoku to make up the losses among the Shichibukai and the vice admirals hospitalized by Garp in his rampage.

Nineteen of those fighters were still alive, but four would never fight again at the level they had without significant aid. Whitebeard's crew had claimed the lives of fifteen vice admirals outright, the rest the escapees had slain, with Mozambica being one of two that the traitor Teach had slain, and with Sanjuan known to have killed another. The rest had fallen, their killers unacknowledged in the fog of battle.

Aokiji was dead, killed by Hancock after losing both his arms to the lighting of Straw Hat Luffy. Kizaru would take months to heal after fighting that man, whose abilities had proven to be so damn deadly.

Kong was dead, killed by Newgate along with Saint Peter Ju Shepherd. Sengoku was horribly battered, although Tsuru hadn't heard yet the precise nature of his wounds, only that he was getting the best care the fleet could give him. She had no desire to bother the badly overworked medical officers at the moment for more than that, not even for a Gorosei.

Saturn listened to the litany of disasters and dead without comment, and when Tsuru finally wound down, he spoke, his voice still calm despite the fact this was a disaster of **horrific** proportions, something that Tsuru admitted to Saturn, thinking *if even one of the Yonko decides to go on a rampage, we wouldn't be able to stop them. Nor will we, for months to come at best. Even that is based more on shuffling the officers we couldn't call in for this battle for one reason or another along with calling on Vegapunk.*

"I understand the depths of this disaster, Tsuru. Yet there is indeed much you do not know of how everything was set into motion here. You must discover that. Getting to the bottom of this will be your task, Tsuru. There are far too many coincidences, far too many things that went entirely in the favor of this Straw Hat in particular," Saturn continued.

“True. I want to know how the hell he got into Impel Down. I’ve talked to Domino on this point already. The Straw Hats were acting as if they had a plan the moment the Pirate Hunter and Black Leg were dropped off onto their respective hells. How did they get that coward Buggy and Bon Clay to go along with their plans. Where in the hell did Luffy come from!?” Tsuru growled, cutting her voice off, as it seemed to become a rant but only just. Straw Hat’s ability to do the impossible infuriated her to no end, especially after she had realized that Hancock had betrayed them. “Sorry.”

“Hmmm...” Saturn huffed, saying nothing, before moving on to something rather important to him as a Gorosei. “The reports said that some of the fighters Sengoku reached out to after Garp’s initial rampage are still alive?”

“Yes, sir.” Gion had arrived, replacing Aokiji at Tsuru’s side after checking in with her fellow ‘Baba-protégé’ as Gion put it. She still looked much the worse for wear, her side covered in bandages, covering up a massive bruise that went from thigh under her armpit, and one of her knees was also heavily bandaged, as was her head. But her mind was clear, and she and Coby had become Tsuru’s chief aids in organizing search and rescue, as well as everything else after the battle. “Four of them. Issho and Aramaki are the best of the four. Eldora of Weatheria isn’t all that strong, but he’s tricky. And Rubble is... well, a flirt, but around a commodore’s level in terms of combat potential.”

Tsuru grimaced, knowing what was going to come next, wondering about the results of it in the future.

“Commission them immediately. I do not care if they object. Those four have seen Saint Peter and have seen him pass on. You know what must happen if they do not agree to join the marines and keep it a secret.”

The normal rule was that no one who did not already know the secret could be allowed to live after seeing a Gorosei. Seeing one die was... well, it had never happened, but the Gorosei believed in painting with a very broad stroke, and Tsuru knew if there had been any civilian witnesses to this battle, they would be rounded up and executed. Indeed, she knew that the lower-ranking survivors of the fight would undoubtedly be split up and then probably sent to die, even if she and the other higher-ups demanded oaths of silence from all of them.

“I will see to it,” Tsuru stated. “It will help us make up our losses at least a little bit.” Looking over at Gion, she winced a little again at how many wounds covered the younger woman’s body, but she had reported to Tsuru just like Aokiji had. “Gion, what about the three bounty hunters with your crew?”

“Ah, all of them seem to have died early on in the fight. My ship was hit by a shot right to its magazine when most of the crew were up on deck manning our makeshift anti-air guns. The Devil Fruit user was spotted falling into the ocean when my flagship exploded. The other two, Margaret and Ranko, I don’t know how they did it, but somehow, they were able to contain

the explosion below deck for just long enough to let most of my crew survive. When the away ships tried to search around as the ship finished sinking, there was no sign of any of them."

Gion sighed faintly. "Damn shame too. Ranko would have made one fine marine!"

Grimacing, Tsuru hoped that the elder didn't make the instant connection that Tsuru, feeling remarkably paranoid right now, did. That perhaps, just perhaps, the bounty hunters had not been all they had appeared to be. *We know they were in the prison and that there was some incident during the in-processing when the Pirate Hunter realized his swords would remain with Gion.*

Still, Tsuru would not bring that up just yet, given how sad Gion looked at the notion that the three had died, especially in such a way that most of her crew survived to boot. *Which itself is also suspicious given a typical magazine explosion.*

"That is indeed a pity. But turning the conversation back to other matters, it is clear that this Straw Hat is responsible for practically everything going wrong with the conflict against Newgate. We will need to question... Hina, wasn't it? The reports we had before all of this told us that she had something of a friendship with this Luffy pirate." The elder's voice was once more back to that silky pre-explosion voice, but here, none of the officers who had gathered on Akainu's Island had any answer.

"No one's reported seeing Hina die or her ship sink, but in the melee of a battle like this..." Tsuru trailed off, shrugging her shoulders. "It wouldn't exactly be that big of a stretch to think she fell into the ocean and died at some point, would it? She's a Devil Fruit user, after all."

"No, I suppose it would not be so strange. That is among many reasons why the original plan was to have you marines fight Newgate's forces on Marineford. Her survival, it appears, would be too much to ask after so many things have gone wrong. Hmm... perhaps in way this will make it easier going forward."

Coby looked at Vice Admiral Gion in confusion, looking for an answer, but she simply shrugged while Tsuru closed her eyes, shaking her head. While the younger marine was looking confused, his elders understood what Saturn was thinking about. Treason among the marines would be far easier to stomach than the marines and, through them, the World Government, being so totally outmaneuvered like this.

In fact, Tsuru hoped they did run with that idea. *Hancock and Teach are obvious targets of that kind of thing, no need to besmirch Hina's reputation further than it already was. But damn it, girl! If you had even reported a single sighting of Straw Hat having the Lightning Fruit... fuck. Grasping at straws, Tsuru? Maybe we would have come after him all the harder, but thinking about maybes is not a good use of your time.*

"I doubt I need to put it into writing, but upon my order, everyone within the prison who came within contact with the Straw Hats is to be sent to us to be questioned in person. You may question them first, Tsuru, but we must get to the bottom of, as you pointed out, his sudden appearance on Level 5. That is perhaps the most incomprehensible thing you have reported to us."

"True. The lightning fruit might be able to let him bounce around a bit, but the lightning itself should have been picked up by the Den Den Mushi. But there wasn't even a hint of that, and then, as the breakout began, Garp and the rest destroyed any Den Den Mushi they saw. Which was almost all of them, according to Domino."

"Domino... no. The highest-ranking member would be Saldeath, yes?"

"Er, if you mean able to talk, then yeah," Gion answered for Tsuru, nodding over to Coby who had just taken a report on that score while Tsuru was giving her own report to Saturn. "Magellan was found hidden away in the maintenance ducts, badly injured but alive."

"Let him have some time to heal, then. Saldeath will also be sent to us for questioning. There has been a plethora of failures, and they **must** be answered for. This has indeed been an unmitigated disaster, yet it **must** be spun to serve our purposes. Whitebeard's death will hopefully allow us to do that. We will make his legend even greater so as to cover our own weaknesses," Saturn concluded.

Tsuru nodded, having already anticipated that would be at least a portion of the official party line for what happened here. "What about the reports that Doflamingo fled the battle? And what will be done about Hancock?"

"Besides obviously losing her Shichibukai status, Hancock will be dealt with along with this upstart Luffy in time. Yet, we cannot deny that this war has already cost us tremendously. We will be unable to attack them directly for a while," Saturn said, biting the words off angrily. "Against someone as skilled as this Straw Hat Luffy has proven, we will need to carefully plan things out. Until then, we will look for other means to attack him and anyone associated with him."

Coby grimaced at that, but Tsuru's gaze made him fall silent, and he nodded dolefully. Tsuru had already warned him that he was going to be questioned closely about Star Hat Luffy, and if he held anything back, it would go poorly for him. *Still, it isn't like Tsuru or the others will hold me responsible for Luffy's actions. Damn, I still can't believe he was so, so ruthless and cold. How, how many sailors did he kill with that one attack of his?*

Unknown to Tsuru, the three other elders had been talking in the background while Saturn was listening to her report. The idea of several of them heading out to Amazon Lily simply to wait in ambush for the returning Straw Hats was talked about. But if the Straw Hat simply decided to cut and run, this new ship of theirs judging was seemingly fast enough that

even the best of them at Geppo might not be able to catch up. Further, if Garp stayed with his grandson that meant there were two near-Yonko level threats in close alliance. Against such as that, especially with Hancock and her powers (none of them was **that** old) even the Gorosei might find themselves overmatched, as Peter had against Whitebeard. The elders wanted to think that had been a special case moment, but they could not afford to make any such precipitous moves, not without thinking things through very carefully.

“You will continue to recover and move back to Marineford. We will be in contact later. Yet if you think we will allow you to retire, as you once said you wished to after this war with Whitebeard is over, you had best think again, Tsuru. Like us, you will serve until you no longer can.”

With that, Saturn hung up. Tsuru stared at the Den Den Mushi as it shifted back to normal, before setting it down on the desk of the communications room she had taken over. “So much for the one possible silver lining I could see coming out of this, blast them to .”

OOOOOOO

After the waves of whatever had occurred back in the Tarai Current subsided, no one on the main deck of the Everlasting Resolve moved. Both crews, Kuja and Straw Hats alike stared out into the distance.

The Kuja/Straw Hat Alliance had scored a brilliant victory. While the majority of both crews had suffered injuries, none had died, and only three of the Kuja had been wounded badly. Chopper had seen to them after looking over them all three would make a full recovery. They had succeeded in getting Portgas D. Ace out of Impel Down, and Hancock had just as successfully handed in her resignation to the World Government in no uncertain terms, while also allying with another former Shichibukai.

Yet the passage of Whitebeard, the Strongest Man in the World, was going to cause repercussions across the whole world. While most of those gathered there knew a powerful man had passed and felt somewhat reflective because of that, the more intelligent members of the group like Robin, Vivi and Sanji wondered what form those reverberations would take.

For his part, Luffy wasn't thinking about the future at the moment. He was thinking about the old man he'd met earlier that day for the first time in person. About how tough Newgate was, even now, with age and a bad heart catching up to him, and how he had decided to lay down his life on his own terms instead of letting age take him. *Hundreds of years from now, when I'm old and gray... if I can age, I've no idea if I will beyond a certain point, not with ki added into the mix... I wonder, would I want to go out like that?*

Luffy thought about it, then looked to his left and right, taking in his crew and his girlfriends. Robin had an arm around Luffy's waist, her head resting on his shoulder, staring out into the distance, her own thoughts even farther away. Hancock was also still there, leaning

against the turret of the main gun, staring up at the sky, a grimace on her face, and not entirely from the wounds, she had sustained in the battle against Peter and the rest.

No, Luffy said to himself, no, I probably wouldn't. At one point, maybe. Back in my old life, heck yeah. But now, with Robin and Hancock beside me? I don't think so. I can think of a lot better ways of going. Funny that.

With that thought, Luffy resolutely shook his head, dismissing his somber mood for now. He knew it would come back to him in the dead of night, when he would have nightmares of the thousand plus marines he had slaughtered. Up to this point Ranam had gone out of his way to not engage wholesale slaughter. But in the battle he'd just been a part of, he'd had to throw such niceties over the side. And Luffy knew he would pay for it in the nights to come, when each of those marines suddenly had the faces of a shocked Coby, looking up at Luffy with betrayed, horror stricken eyes.

Yet right now, Luffy could not, would not dwell on such. I'm the captain, I have to at least act cheerful, and it ain't like there isn't a huge silver lining to all this. Ace is freed and I didn't lose any of my crew. Hell, we even gained back an old friend!

Those thoughts buoyed Luffy, and he plastered a smirk on his face as he clapped loudly, getting everyone's attention. "All right, you flotsam of the main! Whitebeard wouldn't want his own family to be sad, let alone us reprobates. We need to start moving on. We might be stuck here until Gramps shows up..."

As he spoke, Luffy held up a hand, launching a giant lightning bolt from his hand up into the air. While his body was still wracked with exhaustion, as a logia user, Luffy could use his element as easily as breathing. That made signaling their position to Garp easy, and if that didn't work, with the sheer range of his Kenbunshoku, Luffy felt he could easily just go out and find the old bastard and direct him back to the ship.

A lot of the Kuja flinched at the noise of the lightning blast, but Luffy carried on talking as if nothing unusual had happened. "But that doesn't mean we have to wait idly. I know my Gramps is going to want a big meal, Sanji. You're on that. Chopper, you've got some wounded to see two. Franky, forgot to mention it before, but damn fine work working with Hancock and the others. For now, help the ladies get situated down in the main hold, okay?"

"AHHHH, right? I came out here to get you, Zoro!" Chopper shouted, interrupting Franky as the large self-made cyborg opened his mouth. Turning into his heavy point, Chopper cold-cocked Zorro with a blow to the side of his temple that did for the swordsman instantly, knocking him unconscious before he could even hit the ground.

With that, Chopper grabbed the man's comatose form, growling angrily, his bad mood mirrored somehow by the patch over his eye, which had narrowed into an evil glare. "I swear to all the ancient masters of medicine, if I have to use my entire supply of knockout drugs on you

to make sure you don't get out of bed again, I will. You're fucking stomach was cut into, and you still haven't taken in enough blood to make up for what you lost. Moving at all is practically threatening your life, you moss-haired bastard. Damn it, you've already begun to bleed through your bandages!"

His anger at Zoro draining out of him, Chopper stopped, looking around sheepishly at all of the eyes staring at him, including the last few wounded Kuja who had yet to be treated by either him or the two Kuja who had healing knowledge of their own. One of those two was among the badly wounded, and Chopper only had two hands, meaning that progress had been kind of slow on that score, especially since Chopper had to interrupt it to take care of Hancock when she and Luffy had returned. "Er, if you ladies wouldn't mind waiting until I'm done strapping Zorro into his bed? I'll see to you all in a bit."

There were only four Kuja who hadn't yet been seen to by the normally cute doctor, and they all laughed and waved him off. Survivors of the crew that Hancock had led into the battle on Thriller Bark, they had seen Chopper in action before and were more than willing to wait.

Franky followed Chopper and his patient/victim into the conning tower and down into the ship, where he would set up the secondary gun deck of the Everlasting Resolve for the Kuja. The ship was quite large for its normal crew, with each of them having a very decent-sized berth, yet they didn't have that many spare rooms. However, this wasn't the first time the Everlasting Resolve would play host to so many guests. Franky, a packrat when it came to such things, simply had to get bunks, hammocks and so forth out of storage.

"Speaking of moving on, though, I have to ask, Vivi, are you sure joining up with us like this was a good idea?" Nami asked her bestie worriedly. While she had been ecstatic to see the Alabastan princess again, now that everything had calmed down, Nami had to wonder if Vivi had really thought things through. "I mean, Alabasta's a ways away from Amazon Lily, and the two Zoans there aren't really all that strong, no offense. What if that old biddy goes through with her threats? And, um, what is your father going to think about his little girl turning pirate for real?"

"Lightning can cover a hell of a lot of distance really quickly," Luffy interrupted, looking over at Vivi, a fierce yet welcoming grin on his face. "And it isn't like the WeeGee would allow her to take back her words earlier. Or mine."

"Nami-chan, it was threats and blackmail that got me to take part in this war in the first place," Vivi explained. After Hancock and Luffy had left them, they had been too busy getting the ship underway and helping with the wounded Kuja to really speak of why Vivi was there in the first place. "And when it comes down to it, my father and I have long had issues with the WeeGee. He might be a little upset at how precipitous this break was, but that's about it. As for me joining the crew... well... there are many reasons for that."

For some reason, those words made Luffy blush, although Nami missed it, as Vivi explained further about the threats made to her and Alabasta to force her to join the war against Whitebeard. "With all that said, why wouldn't I wish to instead join up with Lu—with all of you, my friends, the same group who saved my country when the WeeGee would have simply let Crocodile take over because he was one of their special tools, and we were but a minor country? Why would I not want to be with... with my friends, exploring the world beyond my nation's borders?"

Vivi laughed, the sound almost musical, causing Sanji, who had just come up with a plate of drinks for the Kuja, he had his own priorities, to dance in place, shouts of "Mellorine!" bursting forth from him. "Besides, if I stay with the crew, not only will I be taking some of the heat off Alabasta, but I will also be where I am going to be the safest, right by Luffy's side. I consider this a win-win."

"Right. And it isn't like I'm gonna ask Alabasta for anything. Vivi being with us is enough for me to want to protect her home," Luffy stated. "Heck, I'd have done that anyway, given everything we went through with Vivi before."

At those words, Nami and Sanji both grinned and gave their captain thumbs ups.

While the others had been lost in somber reflection over Newgate's death, Robin had been trying to think of what the World Government would do after this, but when Luffy clapped his hands, she'd come back to the present, realizing that she really didn't have enough data to figure that one out. Now humming thoughtfully, the statuesque brunette decided to concentrate on something much closer and more personal. When the crews had met up, and Vivi had made her declaration to Tsuru, Robin had wondered about some undertones she had felt from the princess and Hancock, although she hadn't remarked on it at the time since there had still been marines in the area.

Now, though, seeing the look the younger girl was giving her man and having heard those same undertones, Robin was wondering if they all might need to sit down and have a little talk. *While I admired Vivi's efforts to try and save her country and her overall intelligence, that is a far cry from accepting whatever she might be offering with that tone and those eyes of hers to Luffy. I accepted Hancock because of her strength and my own attraction to her. This is entirely different.*

Nami was the only other one in the crowd to figure out that there might be something more going on there. Like Robin, Nami knew of the kiss that Luffy and Vivi had shared and wondered now if Vivi was being entirely truthful about the reasons why she wanted to join the crew.

For now, she put it down as something that wasn't any of her business. Instead, she began to corral a few of the Kuja that she knew had somewhat decent carpentry skills. She sent a few of them down to help Franky, while demanding the others start repairing some of the

damage the ship had taken. Despite being Adam Wood, the Everlasting Resolve had been bombarded by Kizaru several times, and there were numerous patches of burnt-out decking in places. Franky had already begun that, but building more bunks for the Kuja took president.

For his part, Luffy didn't really want to address Vivi's interjection into his personal life just yet. There was an even bigger issue at hand, quite literally, in the case of Jinbe, the whale fish man.

After shouting up to Perona to send out a few of her hollows on watch just in case, Luffy looked over at the older man. The ex-Shichibukai was still staring somberly out into the distance, his head bowed a little, not having reacted to everything going on around him.

"You know, when we were breaking out of Impel Down, I talked about ya joining my crew after all of this since it kind of just felt right and the moment, you know? I only just realized that I hadn't actually asked you if you wanted to. Although, it would be kind of hilarious if I poached not one, but two warlords from the World Government. That would only leave them with Doffy and Mihawk," Luffy said with a smirk.

"That's quite all right. We all say things in combat that we have to later pause and reflect on," Jinbe said with a smile, banishing his somewhat dour, maudlin thoughts for the moment, adding jokingly, "Although, what is the prerequisite required to join the crew of the Pirate King?"

"To join the alliance, you just have to be strong and be friends with us," Luffy said gesturing around at Hancock and himself, the movement enough to draw a smile from Hancock as she moved to stand beside him. "Be trustworthy and all that stuff. Although to join my crew..." And here, Luffy grinned, shaking his head as one finger rose to tip up the cap of his Straw Hat, once more on his head, thanks to Robin. "To do that, you have to be a dreamer. Someone with a big, **big** dream, the kind the whole world might be against you for trying to achieve."

Although I don't suppose Makino-nee's dream is a big, world changing one, Luffy admitted with an internal snicker. Getting a Yonko to man up and take responsibility for the promises he made you isn't as huge as wanting to be the Strongest Swordsman in the World or any of the rest.

Currently, though, Makino wasn't on deck. Luffy could sense her down below in the med bay, probably helping with the wounded Kuja.

Jinbe blinked at that, and Luffy pointed to himself. "Pirate King." He pointed to Robin, who huffed and grabbed his hand, which halted his words. She then took his finger and raised it to her lips, kissing it lightly as a tongue, unseen by any but Hancock, appeared behind his ear. Small things like that, Robin could do without any gestures or even to close her eyes. As she

kissed his finger up its length to the tip, so too did the tongue she had created lick lightly at Luffy's earlobe.

That caused Luffy to blush, unused to Robin being that forward in public. *Or, or could she be doing this because she trusts Jinbe to keep it a secret just as much as she would trust the crew?*

For once, Robin had no great motive behind her actions. No, it had simply been several weeks since the last time she'd had some romance-type time with her boyfriend. Now that everything was over and they were safe, she felt no need to wait any longer to make her interest in rectifying that state of affairs plain. That, and she wanted to make certain her relationship was obvious to Vivi.

Seeing her lover stumbled to a halt at her unexpected action, Robin spoke up for herself. "I wish to discover the Rio Poneglyph, the true history of the world. Whether or not I will disseminate that history remains to be seen. But suffice to say that my dream might take me to Raftel just as much as Luffy's dream might take him there."

Like everyone else within a hundred leagues in every direction, Robin and the rest had heard Whitebeard's final statement. Yet unlike many, Robin had already known she might need to travel to Raftel, so it hadn't really mattered as much as pondering about what Whitebeard's passing would mean for the world.

Jinbe's eyes widened, connecting the dots as to why the World Government had put a bounty on Robin at such a young age, as well as the moniker the Ghost of Ohara he had heard occasionally. *On any other crew such an ambition would bring too large a target, but on the crew of someone who wants to become the next Gold Roger? To say nothing of their obvious relationship.*

Hearing what was going on, Nami also spoke up from where she had flung an arm around Vivi's shoulders. She was a little leery of Jinbe, given her past interaction with Arlong, but not all that much. "And I want to make a map of the whole world. An accurate map, depicting every island, every city, every current! That's all I've ever wanted to do since the first time I saw a map back on Conomi Island."

"My word, while not nearly as threatening to the current order of the world as the other two, that dream might be even more ambitious," Jinbe said, shaking his head, trying to hide a flinch at the mention of Nami's hometown. An island whose name was, alas, somewhat well known to him, if not for reasons Jinbe wanted to bring up right now. "What is next? Your first mate wants to supplant Mihawk as the greatest swordsman in the world?"

"Yep. Zoro's dream is that heavy and that large," Luffy said with a nod, having recovered from Robin's little attack, her tongue having disappeared from behind her ears as she spoke to Jinbe. "Franky wants to sail a ship he's built that can conquer every ocean in the world." He

tapped her foot down on the main deck, then gestured all around them. "That's this ship, our ship." *And, I note Eve's staying hidden now. I guess there are too many non-crewmen around, even if they're all friends.*

"Super!" came the shout from below as Sanji came back outside with another plate of food for the gathered Kuja and the first of several that were being set aside for when Garp inevitably joined them. Whether or not this meant Franky had somehow heard Luffy's words, he didn't know nor cared to speculate. *With that guy, it's a tossup of what super can mean from one use to the next.*

Sanji, however, had certainly heard what Luffy had said. Like the others, he was proud of his dream and now pointed to himself grandly before plucking out the cigarette from his mouth. He'd been pretty much chain-smoking since the moment he got back to the ship, having few cigarettes as a prisoner and then none in Impel Down. "I want to find All Blue! The ocean where every fish in the world can be found! It is like a paradise for any cook."

Another dream that may take them to Raftel, Jinbe thought, bemusement turning into shock and some awe at this moment. What are the odds of so many people whose dreams are so strong to come together? What are the odds that they can work together, like one another, and become a real crew? One that can possibly even accomplish such dreams? At that, Jinbe's thoughts turned to his own dream, a dream he had been working towards in his own way for as long as he could remember, but which might have just taken two massive blows, one of which was because of his own actions. The dream to see true equality between the merfolk and humans.

"I can speak for myself as well. As to my dream, in scope perhaps it is not as amazing as my captain first mates or navigators, Yohohohoho, but it is dear to me, nonetheless, the only thing that has kept me alive, although I'm not really alive, Yohohohoho skull joke!" Brook laughed before bowing low towards the only person on the deck who was actually taller than he was at the moment, causing Jinbe to start a bit, coming out of his thoughts as he looked at the odd skeleton creature. "You see, I was once part of another pirate crew, and we had a pet mascot, a young island whale by the name of Laboon."

"Laboon?" Jinbe blinked in surprise before leaning forward eagerly. "I have seen that one! A powerful beast he is, large even for his species, and quite intelligent, too. Most of that type of whale cannot understand human speech, but he certainly can. I remember he was being looked after by an old doctor, although the doctor's name escapes me at the moment, after trying to batter his way through the Red Line."

The Red Line was a mountainous mass of red rock that circled the world like someone had decided to create physical equator around the globe. It was the largest mountain in the world, dwarfing places like Drum Island, with the majority of it simply solid stone, inhospitable beyond the singly country of Mary Geoise, the Holy Land. To get into and out of any of the

oceans, you needed to either travel through the Calm Belts, or over the Red Line. Or, as the pirates had learned, under.

After Brook and the rest of the Rumbar Pirates had failed to return, Laboon had felt it was the Red Line that was keeping them from doing so. He had then spent years bashing his head against the Red Line, hoping to break through. Which, given the size disparity was rather like a mouse attempting to bang its head through a house from one side and out the other.

“Indeed, that is him Yohohohoho! Crocus is looking after him, and hopefully, thanks to the promise he made with my new captain, Laboon has stopped trying to batter his way through the Red Line.” Brook sighed, then reached up to his head, tugging lightly at his afro, opening up his skull and pulling out the snail with the final chorus of the rumble pirates. “I intend to go to him, to play this recording of the Rumbar Pirates’ final concert, for Laboon, to show that we never forgot him, that we had only been overcome by the strength of the Grand Line and were still thinking of him even at the end. But to do that, I must sail with this crew until we have traveled around the entire world.”

“Not as ambitious as the others, but perhaps even more of a heartfelt dream.” Jinbe nodded his head politely to Brook. Listening to all this talk about dreams, Jinbe was reminded even more strongly of his own dream for a moment, pondering the old queen, Otohime and the strife she had gone through throughout her life, working toward the same vision. *I wonder what you would think of these youngsters, Otohime?*

“Laki wants to prove that a woman warrior can be just as dangerous as a man with the right tools and to have adventures as she does it. Something I’d predict she’s probably regretting by this point, considering how many tough fights we’ve been in since she joined the crew,” Nami added, laughing quietly. “Perona... she’s more along for the ride right now since she’ll transfer over to the Kuja when we get to Amazon Lily. But Chopper wants to become a doctor capable of curing any disease, which I’d say is pretty much like my own in terms of how much it could change the world.”

“As ya can see, more than just friends, we’re all people who have huge dreams. If you do want to be part of my crew, you’re going to have to have a dream of your own to do it,” Luffy stated, chuckling.

Jinbe blinked, then chuckled himself, shaking his head as he understood that Luffy was trying a bit of reverse psychology there, trying to draw Jinbe to share his dream. Yet despite having only known Luffy and the others for a day, Jinbe was tempted to share his own dream, not just because he thought these people would understand but also because of guilt and a desire to continue to protect Merman Island.

After a few moments, he shook his head. *No. I know what they are capable of, but I do not know enough yet about their characters. The Alabastan princess wishing to join up with this crew speaks well of them, as do Zoro, Sanji and Luffy’s actions throughout the battle, yet that is*

not enough... Although, there is possibly a way forward, if Luffy's notoriety from this war is large enough. "Perhaps, perhaps, I will share my hope for the future in time. For now, though, I think that is your grandfather hopping our way."

Luffy blinked, then, concentrating on his Kenbunshoku, could indeed feel Garp deep into his Kenbunshoku range. He'd been so caught up with the conversation he hadn't even felt his grandfather enter his range. *Dammit, Luffy, you should be better at it than that! Especially with the advantage the Goro Goro no Mi gives you. Still, I suppose I can put it down to the portion of my attention being on Robin after that little finger-kissing thing she did. Stupid, sexy girlfriend and my own stupid hormones.*

Moments later, Garp settled down onto the deck, wincing badly as one of his feet touched down, nearly stumbling, only catching himself on the guard railing. Luffy blinked, and then looked down at his grandfather's foot, wincing at the amount of blood that was coming up out of his boot and the very flat shape of it in general. "*Whistle*, woo, Gramps, what happened to you?"

"Did you really think Sengoku the Buddha was going to be a pushover?" Garp demanded tartly, shaking his head. "I'm almost insulted, brat. He was my superior officer, after all, and whatever anyone says, it wasn't entirely because I didn't want to do all that damned paperwork. That, and he got one good freaking stomp in on my foot. While in his largest statue form, too."

"Do you have any other injuries?" Robin asked, staring at the older man. He didn't seem to be all that injured besides the foot, but she could see his hands shaking a bit at his side.

"My hands feel about as bad as they've ever felt in the past thirty years or so, I think I've got at least one broken rib, and I lost a few teeth." Garp grinned, showing where he had in fact, lost several teeth, causing his normal grin to be quite gappy in places. Despite that, and the bit of blood still visible on his lips and teeth, he grabbed the nearest tray of food, wolfing down a few large hamburgers eagerly. "And dammit, but I am hungry!"

Nami wasn't the only crewmember there who turned to look at Luffy, then back to Garp, before they all slowly nodded in unison, seemingly having come to the same realization, which Nami gave voice to. "So that's where he gets it from. Is being a bottomless pit some kind of hereditary thing?"

"First of all, ouch. How dare you hit me with the truth like that. Second of all, probably. Our family likes to burn a hell of a lot of calories. After the day we've all had, I think we deserve some food, don't you?" Luffy said, grabbing up a sandwich from another plate, the first one that Sanji had brought out. He kept on talking, chewing between words but somehow, not being totally disgusting doing it, a strange feat that the girls were astonished by, having been poised to pounce on him for his poor manners. "Anyway, now that Gramp's finally arrived, we should probably get going."

"Where you lot heading to?" Garp asked, honestly having forgotten if Luffy had mentioned it before.

"We are heading straight back to my island, Amazon Lily," Hancock said proudly, although she didn't enter her full haughty stance, perhaps because of the amount of injuries she had taken. "I have already given our principal navigator my Eternal Pose back to my home. As for you... well, I suppose I've already made special dispensation for Franky, and will be for the rest of the males on this crew. What's one more?"

"Huh... is Gloriosa still alive? Ugh... But hold on, you got no plans to meet up with Ace?" Garp asked, slumping down onto his rear, sticking out the leg with the badly injured foot out onto the deck away from him. "I'd have thought you'd want to speak to him and meet up with the rest of the Whitebeard Crew."

"I mean, it'd be nice, but it isn't really my priority right now. Getting out of here it is, and that means heading deeper into the Calm Belt and towards Amazon Lily. Besides, they're heading back into the New World and..." Luffy paused, shaking his head before admitting, "While me and my top tier fighters are ready for the New World, I think the rest of my crew could do with a lot more training before we make that jump."

That was underselling things a lot. Right now, Luffy had proven he could stand on the stage with the strongest bastards in the world, Admiral rank threats and maybe a bit more. Zoro, the next strongest, was perhaps at the level of a normal Shichibukai like Crocodile or maybe Jinbe, but not quite up to someone like Hancock, let alone Mihawk. *Come to think of it, what was that aho up to?* Sanji was next, who Luffy estimated was around the level of one of Whitebeard's normal division commanders, not the true monsters like Ace, Marco or Jozu.

"Agreed," Nami and Perona opined, who had come down from the crow's nest. They looked at one another, then laughed, while Vivi smiled politely at the newcomer. Perona was the only one of the crew who had joined up since Vivi had left the Straw Hats that she had yet to be introduced to.

Perona continued. "My Hollows might be able to deal with a lot of threats out there, but there's no way me, Nami or Laki, at the very least, are ready for the New World! Master Moria never even hinted at our being ready to return there, and we had an army of zombies under our control!" While Perona knew she would probably remain on Amazon Lily, the idea of being even that close to the New World was a bit much.

"HAH! That little Gecko was probably still butthurt by the thrashing he got from Kaido after challenging him. He put Moria and his first crew down hard."

Garp laughed. There was something niggling at his mind about Ace and Luffy, but he ignored the feeling for the moment. "Meh, sure, whatever. But ya don't have to make any dispensation or something. I'll probably leave you all before you reach Amazon Lily. I have

places to be and people to... well more than a little chaos to create before I start to really enjoy being retired. It might not have been the way I might have hoped to leave the marines, but hey, whatever."

There was a lot of honest pain in Garp's voice despite how lackadaisical his words were. He was, after all, turning his back on the organization and the friends he'd devoted his whole life to. While those friends had attacked his family, that still hurt.

Nevertheless, Garp was not someone who wanted pity or to talk about yuck, emotions. Instead, he pointed a finger angrily at Luffy, then at Robin and Hancock. "But before all that, what's up with this?! I did not raise you to be a two-timer brat! And if you are two-timing the Empress of the Sea with Nico Robin, the Devil Child, I'm going to laugh as I watch them..."

The old man's words slowed as both women simply chuckled quietly, looking at one another than at Luffy, without even a hint of surprise at Garp's statement that Luffy was involved with both of them. "Okay, what the heck is going on here?"

"The envy of all men, the bane of my existence, the horror that I must live with on a daily..." Sanji began before Marguerite smacked him lightly upside the head.

For her part, Vivi leaned forward interestedly. Robin and Hancock both glanced in her direction before Robin explained the relationship. "I became involved with Luffy before you arrived on Water 7, Garp. You're quite correct about that. Although I hope that no one else figured that out?"

Garp nodded, and Robin continued, breathing a sigh of relief. While at this point it might seem redundant, she still did not want her relationship with Luffy to become commonly known. It just seemed like a very bad idea. *At least for now. Maybe when I am as strong as Hancock, I won't be so worried about that.*

Aloud, she continued to explain, looking over at her lover, allowing her love and affection to be seen now as she explained first why they had gotten together, then how Hancock had come to join their relationship. "After their clash on Thriller Bark, Hancock and Luffy came to an understanding of one another. Over the enforced closeness of our journey from there to the Archipelago, that understanding became an attraction, and after Hancock and I spoke for a time, I found I was attracted to her as well." An elegant hand raised, gesturing to the Pirate Empress as if to say, 'can you blame me?'

For her part, Hancock twitched her hair back over her shoulder, a smile on her face as she held Luffy's arm, deliberately pushing it between her breasts. *That's about all I can do at this point, drat these injuries.*

"There is an old saying among my people: you can only truly understand someone if you have crossed swords with them. While Luffy and I didn't use swords, I think that we truly began

to understand one another far better than I have understood anyone else in that fight,” Hancock stated, with Luffy grinning in agreement, leaning his head against hers. “And afterward, when our crews had to work together to survive the Grand Line and the lack of food and everything else, it drew us closer, as Robin said. That kind of closeness is something that I never felt towards a man before, but I could not deny it once I began to truly understand what I was feeling...”

She smiled over at Robin and her sisters, who were lounging nearby. “Thanks in part to Robin and my sisters sitting us both down and informing the two of us that we were unconsciously flirting with one another.”

“Ooh, I know Hancock-san told me a little bit of that before, but still, Both Robin and Hancock’s stories are both soooo romantic!” Vivi murmured under her breath, almost bouncing in place in an effort to keep her girlish squeal from escaping. Perona nodded, even though she was trying to not look interested, instead staring towards the conning tower, hoping that Zoro would be up for some fun time soon. Nami just chuckled, fully over her own romantic interests towards her captain. Sanji, meanwhile, was biting at his sleeve in an effort to stop his tears of jealousy from appearing, causing Marguerite and Aphelandra to frown. Jinbe and Brook simply smiled, as did most of the Kuja around them.

For the second time since he’d settled down on the deck, Garp blinked in some confusion, staring at them, then at Luffy. “You know, a part of me thinks I must have done something wrong with you when you were younger. One girl wasn’t enough, you had to go for two? And two of the most beautiful women in the world ta boot. The larger part of me, though, agrees with your cook over there. You’re going to make a **lot** of enemies once it becomes known that you’re dating the Empress of the Sea brat, let alone the Devil Child.”

“Which is partly why we’ve kept my and Robin’s connection to ourselves,” Luffy answered repressively, while Sanji simply nodded his head sagely, still biting at his sleeve. Luffy had indeed become a source of both envy and irritation for him, as he undoubtedly would for many, even if only the fact that he was involved with the Pirate Empress got out.

“Now you sit there and wait until our doctor’s done with our own wounded to see to yer foot. Unless you think you’re in danger of bleeding out?” Luffy questioned.

“Now that I’m actually getting some food in me, nope,” Garp said around another mouthful of food. Unlike his grandson, though, when he ate and talked at the same time, it was just as disgusting as most of the women on the deck had been prepared for earlier, and a second later, he was hit by several napkins, a few boots and the force of nine women shouting, “Don’t talk while your chewing, that’s disgusting!”

Shaking his head, Luffy turned to Nami, gesturing her up towards the bridge. “Nami, grab some Kuja and get us on course for Amazon Lily. I’ll head down into the engine room and power the engines.”

"I will join you," Robin said, not releasing his hands. "It has been more than a week since we were last able to simply talk, and I want to hear everything about your adventures in Impel Down."

Luffy nodded, and without even pausing, Robin turned to look at Vivi and Hancock. "Perhaps, Vivi, Hancock, you could fill us in on how the princess came to be aboard your ship, Hancock?"

The look that Robin gave the princess had barbs to it, but Vivi simply nodded, while Hancock chuckled, slowly following the other two women as they followed Luffy down into the ship. Garp stared after him, muttering about how Luffy was being a poor host before going back to eating.

"I wonder how long it'd take Franky to come up with some kind of storage device?" Luffy mused.

"Our dear shipwright is quite amazing when it comes to building things, so I do not doubt that once he has the idea, he will run with it posthaste," Robin said, watching as Luffy changed his hands into lightning and thrust them into the two bottle-like objects to either side of the electrical engine that powered the ship.

Instantly, Eve manifested from the deck of the engine room, giving them all a thumbs up. Evidently, the Klabautermann still considered Vivi a part of the crew considering how long she had been on the old Resolve, although the squeak of shock that Vivi released at the tiny girl suddenly appearing was cute. "Oh yeah, that's the good stuff! Permission to ask Nami to push the ship a bit?"

"Do it. I want us to be as far away from Impel Down and the Tarai Current as we can possibly get before nightfall. I'll leave off during the night. But also ask Nami to pass on to Jinbe and Gramps that they're on Sea King duty. If any of those big beasts try to take a bite out of us despite our speed, they can probably take it out a lot faster than any of the rest up there."

"Roger!" Eve saluted, before disappearing back down into the deck. Seconds later, a whoop of delight came from the communications tube, instantly followed by a sensation of speed, as the engine began to throw him behind Luffy.

"Wh, wha... was that a, a Klabautermann?" Vivi exclaimed. "I thought they were a myth. And shouldn't they never show themselves to their crew?"

"Yes it was, and since when has this crew ever done anything normal," Luffy joked. "That was Eve, and she's just as much a part of this crew as I am. You'll get to know her better I the future. She's kind of seriously shy at the moment thanks to all the Kuja around, along with Jinbe and Gramps."

While Vivi seemed stunned still, Robin had other things on her mind. She walked up towards Luffy, wrapping her arms around his body, careful not to touch where flesh and blood body ended and lightning began, leaning in and kissing him ardently.

Luffy returned the kiss as best he could, while with his hands stuck into the energy collectors on either side of him. His tongue probed Robin's mouth, dueling it out with Robin's tongue for a few moments, until the archaeologist had to pull back to breathe for a moment, whereupon she leaned her head against his chest.

"I needed that! And I think this is the last time we try something so overly elaborate and tricky, Luffy, especially something that takes you away from me for so long." She pulled back away from his chest to stare up into his eyes. "You convinced me to keep on living for my dream Luffy, remember that and be more responsible in the future."

The teasing tone she said those words took quite a lot of the sting out of them, if indeed there was any to begin with, and Luffy chuckled at Robin's way of saying that she had been worried for his safety. "I gotcha, Robin. They went both ways too. After we crossed into the Tarai Current, I was always concerned that something might go wrong and you all would have to turn back or worse, the bubble around the ship would break or something."

"That was an amazing experience but would have been better with you and the other boys with us." Robin agreed, before turning back to look at the other two women in the engine room with them.

Hancock watched this with a smile on her face, a look in her eyes that said she would have liked to join in. Yet with her chest and legs so heavily bandaged, it probably wasn't a very good idea. Handholding and arm hugging was about as much as she could do at present thanks to her broken ribs, although Chopper had astonishingly repaired her broken long to the point where it would heal on its own with only the minimum of surgery. *That young doctor really is a marvel.*

The younger Vivi also looked on, smiling both at the romanticism of it, as well as at Luffy in general Robin judged. The half-longing look in Vivi's eyes said that she, like Hancock would rather have liked to be in Robin's position just then.

Deciding to bite the proverbial musket ball, Robin gestured to one side, a flash of concentration crossing her face as she conjured up several dozen hands, forming a small chair for herself to sit on at Luffy's side, as she looked over at the other two women her gaze locking on Vivi, who stiffened. "So, I don't doubt that you've already realized why I wanted you to come along down here, princess."

"You wish to talk to her about her intentions toward our man," Hancock interjected, moving forward to lightly kiss Luffy on the lips, pulling back quickly blessed either one of them

could deepen it. “Yet you must admit Robin, that Vivi is quite impressive. In everything but height, at any rate.”

Vivi pouted a little at the dig at her size, which had not changed since the last time Luffy had seen her before the crew left for Alabasta. Yet she answered the interrogative gazes coming towards her gamely. “Seeing that both of you already know about the kiss Luffy and I shared, and the feelings behind it, I won’t try to lie. Yes, I hope to join your relationship.”

Robin frowned at that, while Hancock looked over at Luffy, trying to remember what he had said about that, but then Luffy spoke up, reminding them. “I didn’t want to be like my dad, loving and leaving someone. I also didn’t want Vivi to make a mistake like that. But I gotta ask, Vivi, are you sure about all this? This is kind of the exact same mistake I was afraid we’d be making back then.”

“But you’re far, far stronger than you were back then. You said it yourself, there’s a good chance that you might be declared a Yonko after today. As for back home, Alabasta’s peaceful, but we’re under heavy scrutiny after everything. I was basically bribed by the marines, as I said to Nami and the others, to join the fight against the Whitebeard Pirates. They threatened to release information they had about my friendship with your crew to the detriment of me and Alabasta. I didn’t like that, nor did my father or the rest of the country appreciate the amount of tariffs that had already been levied on our goods and ports since Crocodile was killed and everything came to light. They were already punishing us for things they did not want to make public, then threatened to make those secrets public anyway.”

Despite her decision to leave her country behind to be with Luffy and the rest of her friends, it was very clear to Luffy that she cared deeply for Alabasta, and that the actions of the World Government towards her country had spurred her on. However, before he could speak, Robin spoke up, her tone a little sharper than normal. “I can understand why you are incensed towards the World Government. However, that is a far cry from your joining the crew of the future Pirate King. It’s a far cry from being enough to let me agree with letting you change our triangle into a square.”

“First, let me state that I do wish to **join** it. While I was jealous when I heard from Hancock that you and Robin got together, Luffy, I kind of thought that was inevitable given how the two of you acted around one another. I’ve no desire to break the two of you up. Robin, I actually came to admire you quite a bit while we were aboard the Resolve. That respect grew after my father informed me that you had no interest in what was really written on our Poneglyph, only the history you hoped to find.”

Vivi moved forward, kneeling on the ground in front of where Robin sat. Reaching forward and taking both of the older woman’s hands in her own, Vivi looked at her earnestly. “And all of that, and what I later discovered about your past, all of it was enough to make me understand that you needed some happiness! If Luffy is giving you that happiness, I’m not going to try to take it away. I promise! I just, well,” and here, she looked up at Luffy, staring it up hurt

him through her eyelashes in a way that made Luffy's insides melt and another place stiffen, "if we can make it work, I think he could make me happy too."

The younger girl twisted to look over at Hancock and back at Robin, deciding to take a page from Hancock's book. "Besides, it's not like either of you girls are unattractive. I can't say that I am in love with you, but, well..."

Robin took that in silently, as Hancock shifted to rest a light hand on Vivi's head, causing the blue haired girl to blush rosily, a throaty chuckle coming from the Empress of the Sea. "As you can see, I somewhat approve. Perhaps it is the buried romantic within me, perhaps it is that I have heard how Luffy has spoken of Vivi before, and--"

"There's still a lot of feelings there," Luffy interrupted, shaking his head. "I wouldn't have let you kiss me that night if I wasn't attracted to ya, Vivi. And if you think that using my flag will better your country as well as defend it, I'm all for that. But as to a relationship, I'm not willing to wreck what I already have by saying yes to that. Robin? It's up to you, love. Both Hancock and I will go with what you decide."

Pouting a little bit at being spoken for like that, Hancock opened her mouth to say something, then subsided. Honestly, she found Vivi quite attractive. The younger royal was precisely the sort of girl that Hancock is taken on before as short-term lovers, and the girl's carefully hidden submissive streak was enticing, making Hancock a bit more forward than she probably should be given her relationship with Luffy and how little she and Robin had done together. *Although it seems as if that submissive streak isn't so carefully hidden any longer, given how she knelt in front of Robin so automatically instead of something reaching out and taking her hands. There is also the fact that I knew going into this relationship that Vivi had lost her heart to my new boyfriend before I even met him. Nevertheless, Luffy is right. If all of us aren't comfortable with this, then what's the point?*

For her part, Robin was used to being complimented by people, of both genders. If she was dressed to impress or simply not dressed to blend into the crowd, Robin routinely got second glances or even overtures from both genders. Nonetheless, the sincere admiration in Vivi's voice coupled with the look that the younger, shorter girl was giving her now, caused Robin to cough, flushing just a bit. "Well, I, I cannot say one way or another whether or not this will work. I, you're quite attractive too, and if we can make it work, well, I can't say I see a downside to it. But if we do try, and it does not work out, there could be hard feelings involved and you've cast your dice in with ours."

She shook her head, gesturing upwards. "Nami was able to get over it, to realize that she had made a mistake in trying to force her way into Luffy's affections, and the two of them have moved past it. If we allow you to try to join our relationship, and it doesn't work, would you be able to do the same?"

"I don't know. But I'm willing to try," Vivi responded firmly, internally wondering how the heck Nami had messed up. "Trying for happiness often can mean sadness if you can't attain it, but trying is never bad."

"That sounded almost like a quote," Hancock mused as she leaned into one of Luffy's shoulders. "I wonder if we all read the same kind of romance novels?"

"Not me!" Luffy answered heatedly. "I am so not into that kind of stuff."

As Hancock laughed, Robin kept her eyes on Vivi, before sighing. "All right. I...all right. Like Hancock, I knew there were some feelings between you and Luffy, unrequited though they were, before he and I got together. I'm not so cruel as to want you to break your heart, or make Luffy make that choice." Because frankly, while Luffy might've been attracted physically to Nami, he had been more romantically inclined towards Vivi, a lot more. Robin wasn't certain if her boyfriend would be able to move on if Vivi's inclusion couldn't be made to work.

"All right, so, if we are all for this, what happens now?" Luffy asked, smiling, happy with the outcome of this little talk.

Vivi had an answer for that one. She leaned up and into Robin's personal space, looking her in the eyes from a fair few inches away making her intent playing. Robin, although slightly shocked, nodded with a smile, eager to see if there could be a spark between her and Vivi. This was a step that she and Hancock hadn't yet taken, although both of them understood that attraction was already there between them. Several times during the first voyage of the Kuja/Straw Hat alliance aboard the *Everlasting Resolve* Robin had caught herself checking Hancock out, and had seen Hancock do so a time or two as well. It seemed almost right, though, that Vivi would be the one to initiate such contact between them.

With a nod, Vivi hesitantly leaned forward, with Robin meeting her halfway, while Hancock took the opportunity to kiss Luffy. Both Hancock and Luffy kept eyes on the pair at his feet, watching even as they kissed one another, neither of them willing to deepen it given Hancock's injuries. They slowly pulled away, watching, as Vivi seemingly seemed to melt into Robin, as the older woman's arms went around the younger girl's body. The chair below her became a series of legs, slowly pushing her upright still holding Vivi. By the time they both had to pull away to breathe, they were both standing up again, and Robin smiled, looking over at Hancock with a wicked grin on her face. "Well now, that was fascinating! I think I--"

"Hush!" Hancock ordered, leaning in to give Robin a kiss. Unlike with Vivi, the two women didn't deepen it overmuch, but it was certainly enough for both of them to realize that yes, there was a great deal of attraction there that they might wish to explore going forward.

Meanwhile, Vivi had shifted around the pair of older women, looking up at Luffy. He looked down at her, all right grin on his face. "Well, unfortunately, my hands are kind of stuck

where they are at the moment, so I doubt this matches whatever you might have dreamed about but..."

"I'd kiss you right now if you were covered in blood and mud!" Vivi leaned up, and Luffy leaned down, the two of them meeting halfway as Robin and Vivi had a moment before.

Vivi's first kiss with another woman had been interesting. If she were to describe it in one word, it would be soft. Robbins lips were far softer than she remembered Luffy's being, the kiss a little hesitant, a little explorative. There were some feelings there, some attraction and admiration. When Robin had deepened it, Vivi had gone along with things, finding it incredibly pleasant.

But kissing Luffy? She had dreamed about the kiss they'd shared our days, then for months after, had hoped to somehow, someday, reenact that moment. Kissing him now was like giving water to a woman dying of thirst. Their lips met tenderly, softly at first, but with far more passion than Vivi had been able to show Robin a moment ago. Instantly, they deepened the kiss, else, their tongues questing. Vivi put her arms up and around Luffy's head, moaning into the kiss, pressing her small, lithe body against his larger frame.

For Luffy, kissing Vivi was a little different from kissing Robin or Hancock. The angle was different, the amount of pressure he could put into the kiss, how he was able to take a little more command of the kiss than he would with either of his other ladies. But most of all, it was annoying. He wanted to put his arms around her blast it!

Necessity was known as the mother of all invention for a reason. Even as he thought that, Luffy concentrated on his Devil Fruit powers. His arms disappeared up to the elbow, lightning arcs connecting him to either side, the arcs so well-controlled that even as he kissed Vivi, all she or any of the other girls felt was a pleasant tingle from the distant electric shock. Then, Luffy's physical hands reformed, not taking the place of the lightning shooting out from his shoulders. He instantly wrapped those physical arms around Vivi, lifting her into the air, both of his hands on her rear as she giggled and laughed in the light into the kiss.

Robin and Vivi pulled away from their extremely nice, if somewhat annoyingly spare kiss, watching this for a few seconds, before laughing quietly and looking at one another. "Well, I think we've passed the first hurdle of making this work, don't you?"

"Not quite yet. I haven't had time with the little princess. And I won't until I can kiss her properly~," Hancock drawled, before once again letting loose another throaty little chuckle. Frankly, she was far more at home with the idea of being intimate with Vivi and Robin than she was with Luffy. Hancock could all too easily remember the moment of panic she felt back in Shakky's bar. She was eager to try, but also knew that it might end badly, whereas with Robin and Vivi, well they were safer.

Eventually, Vivi was forced to pull back, still moaning a little and jolting her hips lightly against Luffy's waist as his hands kneaded her small, pliant rear. Then she pushed at his chest, stepping away, watching as his physical hands once more disappeared, the previously small lines of lightning coming from his shoulders enlarging dramatically as they did. "Oh my word, yes!" Vivi said, raising two fingers to her lips which were feeling a little bee-kissed right now. "I definitely think we can make this work."

"Hicks, there is some more discussion we need to have," Robin began, gently tugging Vivi away from Luffy, just before the door opened.

Garp strode in, a crutch under one arm but very obviously not slowed down overmuch thanks to his lame foot, a wide grin on his face. He paused, taking in the trio of girls standing so close together and Luffy standing in the engine of the ship, before shrugging his shoulders. "I finally remembered! I remembered what I was going to query you about brat! Did you honestly forget you had a Vivre Card for Ace?"

Luffy blinked. Robin blinked, Vivi and Hancock exchanged glances. Then, slowly, while Luffy did the trick he had just pulled earlier to hug Vivi, one hand becoming physical and reaching up for his hat, still it on his head even in the engine room. He pulled it off, then, as an arm from Robin appeared on his chest to hold the hat, reached underneath the red piece of cloth around the hat, pulling out the Vivre Card that Ace had handed to him back on Alabasta."

"...Well... crud. I forgot I had that," he said slowly, looking as if he wanted to batter his head against the wall for a bit.

"I have to admit I did too. But, would it have made, oh, of course. With the Everlasting Resolve, we might not have needed to use the whole bounty hunter idea."

"We would've been forced to fight our way through the prison from start to finish, though. Maybe it's better that we did it the other way," Luffy mused. "Especially given how quick the marines were able to respond. We might've been forced to fight the whole marine fleet for a while longer before Whitebeard could arrive."

"I wasn't even thinking about that. I was thinking about how you could've met up with Ace and the Whitebeard fleet somewhere in the Calm Belt, you idiot, Garp snorted."

"Meh, I suppose we could have, but it isn't that big a deal. I'd wager they've got their own stuff going on. Still, calling and making certain they don't want to meet up physically somehow might be a good idea. As is telling them what you know about how Whitebeard fell, Gramps," Luffy mused.

"Before calling your brother though, I think we need to call my father," he stated firmly. "He needs to hear from me why and how I've rejoined your crew." She moved towards the door

past Luffy, whispering, “Don’t worry, we can wait to tell him about our relationship in person. But he does need to know everything else.”

Luffy nodded at that, relief shining in his eyes for a moment. Up to this point, he had had to deal with angry parents, but with Vivi, well, Cobra was a nice guy but he was still a father. A father of a daughter, who was going to be running away to the ocean blue with her boyfriend.

Soon Vivi returned, carrying one of the ship’s Den Den Mushi. She dialed a number, while behind her, Garp turned and left, heading back upstairs for more food, somewhat annoyed that his attempt at teasing his grandson had not produced more results. He was also not looking forward to the mushy conversation he could all-too easily see coming his way when Luffy contact Ace.

His concerns about that doubled when, after a quick round of pleasantries, Vivi looked over at him, smirking a smirk that Luffy had seen far too often on Nami’s face before she tricked someone. “I said I am fine, Father, Igaram. I lived through the fight and even made a new friend and met up with some old ones. To that point, I’m sorry, Papa, but I’ve decided to become part of the Pirate King’s Crew again!”

“EHHHHH!!!?” came the joint shout from the other side as Luffy groaned and Robin began to laugh. It looked like Luffy wasn’t quite done fighting for the day.

OOOOOOO

Over the next three days, as the *Everlasting Resolve* sailed on and Luffy and the rest of the two crews aboard enjoyed a break, the waves caused by the battles around Impel Down had already begun to spread. Even the original plan to draw Whitebeard’s Fleet into a trap at Marineford and overwhelm them there would have caused a massive shift in the balance of power in the world. The plan was for that shift to let the World Government and marines grow in strength. Although, even if Luffy and company didn’t get involved at all, perhaps Blackbeard’s assault on Impel Down might have gone through, causing their plans to go awry.

As it was, Blackbeard’s rebellion had been halted in its tracks and the worst outcome of his betrayal had been stopped. Yet the World Government and marines had achieved only one of their original goals: The death of Whitebeard.

Yet even that came at so high a price that it could not be called a victory in any way, shape or form. Worse was the fact that an event like the War of the Best did not occur in a vacuum.

When setting up the battle against the Whitebeard Pirates, the Gorosei, Kong, in his position as Commander in Chief of all the World Government’s military forces, and Sengoku had all calculated the risks involved in bringing together enough power in one place to challenge the strongest of the Yonko. When they had, all of them had felt that the Revolutionary Army and

the other Yonko would not be in a position to take advantage of events due to distance and the time it would take to organize anything and the wariness of one another. The battle was also supposed to take place in a single day on Marineford, the center of the World Government's logistical network, and thus, the marines would be able to shift their strongest fighters back to their prewar positions quickly.

This was somewhat correct in terms of the Yonko. Shanks was not the type to grab power. Big Mom was slow to react to anything that didn't grab her interest. Kaido **had** reacted, trying to interfere with what everyone had thought would be Whitebeard's line of advance, only to find nothing there, then deciding to pick a fight with Shanks. So far, so good.

When it came to the Revolutionary Army, this calculation was based on a false assumption: that Dragon wasn't willing to be proactive, to take advantage of what was to come. Dragon, while unwilling to join Whitebeard in a full-on attack against the marines, because he felt that the marines did in some measure keep the peace of the world, despite the sophistry built into the very structure of the fleet, was **very** willing to take advantage of the fact they pulled in so many of their toughest fighters and so many of their ships.

That, and unlike Garp, who had, much to everyone's chagrin not only believed the reports of his grandson's death and then reacted to it, Dragon had never believed that tale at all. In his mind, no one with the will of D would die so easily. Thus, on the same day on which the execution was supposed to take place, and the battle the Tarai Current actually occurred, the Revolutionary Army made its move.

Several dozen islands changed hands within a day in a choreographed worldwide assault on the status quo that showed the Revolutionary's military strength and a frankly horrifying level of coordination. A full fleet of marine vessels, thirty strong, in Paradise was outright destroyed in port, the island they had been docking at taken, its people cheering the return of an old king who had been deposed for opposing certain measures that the World Government wanted to put in place on the island. Two more in the New World, where the people had labored heavily under the taxation of the World Government as well as corrupt nobles, welcomed the revolutionaries with open arms. On other islands, the fighting was far more brutal, yet still saw a change in the local government.

Worse, the islands that the revolutionaries targeted were carefully chosen. Not just because most of those islands had societies on them that would welcome the overthrow of the World Government but also because of what they exported. Specifically, what they exported to the Holy Land.

Despite its tremendous size, Mary Geoise had very few places where soil enough to provide good crops for its inhabitants could be found. Of course, the Tenryubito could never be asked to go without their palaces and other pleasures to simply grow food. Now, food flowing into the Holy Land from elsewhere to feed the Tenryubito and their hordes of slaves began to slow to a trickle. Soon, in a few weeks to a month, the regular Tenryubito that made up the

majority of the Holy Land's populace, as far as the World Government was concerned, anyway, would start to feel the pinch.

All of this came in through reports to the four Gorosei, who, if they were anyone else, might well have begun to curse fate, shout scream or carry on in attempts to deny what was going on. As it was, they simply read the reports, passed them on to one another, and then looked at the problems facing them, holding onto their self-control with all the power of their advancing years.

The four of them were, as always, meeting in the so-called Room of Authority in Pangaea Castle, a massive edifice that loomed over the largest city of the Holy Land on top of the Red Line. The Room of Authority was a circular room lined with multi-colored glass windows and super-smooth, highly polished granite floors. The room contained heavy, comfortable furniture in the form of a few stuffed chairs and a sofa, all of which was done in green padding and golden filigree.

Three servants moved around the room silently, their faces obscured by thin sheets covering their faces. Marks on the cloth showed a mouth with a large X over it. Never would a servant of the Gorosei be able to speak their secrets. Or anything at all, really. Nor did they know how to read, write or even use sign language. All they knew was how to cook, clean and obey orders from their masters.

In the center of the room currently was a large dining table, the better to let the four elderly gentlemen pass reports to one another. Besides the three servants with their heads covered, a large Den Den Mushi sat in one corner, with each of the Gorosei having a snail set to one side of where they worked. Normally, the Gorosei would simply give out orders, having someone else, like Kong or other World Government officials, give them the data they needed to reach the conclusion they needed. Under these circumstances, however, the trouble was so large that the four surviving Gorosei had decided to cut out the middlemen.

The four Gorosei were, besides their advanced ages, very different in appearance from one another.

The one who had spoken to Tsuru three days ago, Saint Jaygarcia Saturn, was an overweight-seeming, elderly man who needed a walking cane, with, oddly, white dreadlocks under a black hat, which seemed to almost merge with his equally white, full beard and mustache. A thick scar on the left side of his face that just missed his eye was a mute testament that, like his now-dead companion, Saturn had been a warrior in his youth, befitting his position as Warrior God of Science and Defense.

Peter's position had been Warrior God of Agriculture. The label of Warrior God was not simply a title. All the Gorosei had achieved their position after a lifetime of fighting and growth, not just service to the World Government.

Like two of his fellow Gorosei, Saturn's outfit matched that worn by most government officials: a black suit and a white collared shirt, as well as black pants. Although, he was not nearly as egg-shaped as one of his fellows, the Saint Topman Warcury, the Warrior God of Justice.

Practically obese, Topman moved with far more grace than his weight suggested when he moved around and while bald, had a truly magnificent white mustache, which he took some pride in. Birthmark spots on his forehead and right cheek drew the eye, too, in contrast to Saint Marcus Mars, who was, despite his height, easily the most unassuming of the Gorosei. Unlike Saturn and Peter, he had no scars, and while being as tall as Aokiji, he was, in appearance, simply an old man with long white hair and a long, unkempt mustache flowing down to join a goatee, almost forming the edge of a trident. He was the Warrior God of the Environment.

The only one of the four Gorosei who did not wear a suit, Saint Ethanbaron V. Nusjuro was a completely hairless man, who wore clothing from Wano, a loose-fitting keikogi with a golden obi, open enough to expose his flat, still-muscled chest despite his advanced years. His personal blade never left his side and was currently propped against his chair. His complexion was even paler than the others were, which, along with his numerous wrinkles, gave the Warrior God of Finance an even greater feeling of advanced age than the others did. On his hooked nose a small pair of circular metal-frame glasses sat, the better to let him read through the reports laid out in front of him.

After more than an hour of silent reading and passing on reports to one another, it was Topman Warcury who first broke the silence. Tossing a final report on the table in the only sign of pique, he would allow himself, the rotund man kept his voice even with difficulty. "I suppose we can say that the only saving grace of this entire debacle is the fact that Shanks suppressed Kaido's attempts to take advantage of things by attacking Marineford. That would probably have quadrupled the amount of regular sailors that the marines are going to have to recoup going forward."

"True, although Shanks will be a problem for the future. Look at this report from an eyewitness of that battle. Miriam the Sky Eye, submitted a report this morning," Marcus answered, holding out a report he had been reading.

Miriam was a young CP6 Member who had come into possession of a Zoan-type Devil Fruit, the bird, model: Godwit. She wasn't very good at the Rokushiki and thus would probably never be elevated to any position above the one she already had, but she was an excellent spy and had even begun to show signs of Kenbunshoku recently. Moreover, playing to her strengths, she was one of the best snipers the World Government could call upon, and her vision was even better than any of the guns that Vegapunk had provided to her.

She had been assigned as lookout around Marineford to watch events there for the World Government, and Sengoku had not called her in to join the fleet as it moved to stop Ace's escape from Impel Down. Primarily because he hadn't known she was in the area. The World

Government watched the marines rather closely, as they did their own people. As such, she had been in the area and been able to watch from a distance the clash between the Beast and Red Hair Pirates.

Marcus handed the report over that he was talking about, letting the other elder read it quickly. When he was finished, Topman let it drop back to the table, reaching up with one hand to rub at the birthmark on his face. "So it is confirmed, Shanks ate that..., that damned Devil Fruit! I had hoped that the reports of the ship that the Hito Hito no Mi going down with all hands and the fruit were accurate. If Shanks can somehow awaken that Devil Fruit, he will become the strongest force in the world."

"Luckily, it doesn't seem as if he's very in tune with it. I wonder if he only reluctantly decided to take it in the first place. Shanks has always struck me as someone who trusted his own power and intelligence more than the powers of a Devil Fruit or something that he could simply take without achieving, so to speak," Marcus murmured, frowning pensively. "And given the powers Miriam reported, he's only been able to use the rubber aspect. Perhaps he even thinks it's a simple paramecia rather than a mythical Zoan-type."

"Perhaps. But Shanks has taken it now. That will need to be added into our calculations going forward," Saturn interjected before looking over at Ethanbaron. "And moving on to the main point, Ethanbaron, have you finished your calculations?"

"Three to five years to build up the marine's military strength to prewar levels if we do not rely even more heavily on the cyborg department and Vegapunk," the bald Elder stated bluntly, looking up from where he had been writing things out on several pieces of parchment. He had not been reading reports of the actual battles that the Revolutionary Army had launched, the side battles that went on or even the main war against Whitebeard. Rather, the God Warrior of Finance had been going over the spreadsheets that the various marine recruitment offices' training centers and the like sent in weekly, as well as from other departments.

"With an accelerated shipbuilding program, we can make up the numbers in ships within seven months, but there, I think that we need to seriously consider looking deeper into making more of our ships steam or coal-based in the future. Especially if we need to move on Amazon Lily. The Calm Belt and the monsters there will provide that island a defense before we even reach the individuals that are currently making it their home. Even then, we will face the bottleneck of Seastone, but the more ships, the better."

The Calm Belts were not only almost impossible to navigate through because of the lack of wind or weather, there were also the Sea Kings to consider. While such beasts could be dissuaded or killed, and for those ships that did not have fighters that could do so, covering a ship's bottom with Seastone was a viable defense.

“Possible. We’ll need to consider that, but that’s a small consideration right now. The bigger ones are, where we can recruit instantly to bring up the number of high-level fighters,” Saturn ground out. “We’ve lost too many commodores and vice admirals in this war. And that is with Sengoku demanding the usage of Vegapunk’s Green Goo. I am not pleased with its early usage like this. A secret weapon once used is no longer a secret.”

“Promoting from within was part of that three to five-year estimate,” Ethanbaron answered mildly. “Folding in Magellan and the survivors of Impel Down, offering the near dozen fruits harvested there from the battlefield and more.”

Ethanbaron’s listeners all grimaced at that. The fact that so many Devil Fruits had been discovered after the marines reclaimed Impel Down was one thing. It was, in fact, the only time luck had worked in the World Government’s favor, as far as the Gorosei were concerned since Garp had turned against the marines. But pointing out that Magellan would now become a vice admiral of the marines was just another sign of the total loss of Impel Down. All the prisoners within were either fled or dead. The marines had not been interested in taking prisoners, and the escapees had not been kind.

There were a surprising number of Blugori who had lived through the fight, and Saldeath and Domino had also survived alongside Magellan and the prison’s medical team and two of the Beast Jailers. Yet in comparison to the loss of the prison and face that implied, that was small change indeed. Especially considering that many of the dead from the Sixth Floor had been there due to information that the World Government might one day have wanted to call upon.

Ethanbaron continued, ignoring the grimaces on his listener’s faces. “I also have a few reports of some pirates that might be up to Warlord status.”

That caused the grimaces to turn into full-on winces all around the table, despite the Gorosei’s normal level of control. The Shichibukai were one of the Powers of the World, like the marines and the Yonko. It was only through carefully controlling two of those pillars that the current peace of the world could be maintained. The loss of all but two of the Seven, either to death or to the enemy in so short a time, was enough to rock that balance to its foundations all on its own.

Crocodile, weakest of the Shichibukai. Dead by Straw Hat Luffy. Gecko Moria and Bartholomew Kuma are both dead at the hands of the same ‘rookie’ pirate. Hancock is romantically involved with Straw Hat. Jinbe was last seen boarding the Straw Hat’s ship and is possibly behind the death of the two CPO agents Peter brought along. Damn the Will of D! Saint Saturn thought, something all of the Gorosei had thought more than once over the past few days as reports came through.

“Who are you thinking of?” Topman asked, hoping for some good news.

“One of them is an up-and-coming rookie, the pirate doctor, Trafalgar Law. He seems to be making a name for himself quickly in the New World, faster even than the other Supernovas that have already arrived there. That could be quite useful. We could also reach out to Chinjao. While not in the same category as any of the Shichibukai that he would be replacing and somewhat old for the position, He has the Happs Navy under him and right now, that could be extremely important. Perhaps sweetening the deal with a Devil Fruit would bring him into the fold and make him happy to follow our orders. There are two others, but I am not satisfied with the reports we have of their abilities just yet. One of them is a Fishman, who we could perhaps use to simply take over Mermaid Island, but that is an idea I need to sit on for a time.”

The other Gorosei fell silent, thinking about that. After a moment, consensus was reached to watch Trafalgar Law in a few weeks. The young pirate would need to make more of a name for himself before he could be truly useful.

Building up the Shichibukai again was a major concern, but it needed to be addressed carefully and with an eye to the future going forward. The idea of bringing in someone who had a fleet of his own was probably a very good one, considering the deprivations that the war against Whitebeard and the Revolutionary Army had caused. Warcury, who had taken up some of Peter’s portfolio, spoke up now, “Kano Country also produces a goodly amount of food. That could be a case of killing three birds with one stone if Chinjao accepts.”

“Sweeten the deal with a Devil Fruit for himself and his son, and he will,” Saturn stated firmly. “The reports of the Happs Navy make it clear they’ve been wanting to add to their military strength with a Devil Fruit for at least the past seven years. One Zoan and one Paramecia type should be an excellent bribe. Better, the Chinjao family is known to keep their word. An excellent thought.”

Orders were quickly written out and sent out with a servant to set that ball rolling, while the group of Gorosei turned to the first of several thorny issues they needed to tackle that directly came from the war against Whitebeard. They could come back to the issue of the World Government’s military strength and the Shichibukai later. Now, they needed to get ahead of the rumor mill before the public could decide what the story was without waiting for their betters to tell them.

“We **must** control the narrative,” Marcus stated firmly, tapping his fingers down on the table in front of him. “I have already ordered his minders in CP6 to sit on Big News until we are ready to create a story for the public.

“We **cannot** allow this Straw Hats involvement to be fully recognized and known. We must in some manner minimize that, lest we truly create a new Yonko that can simply step into the shoes of the old,” Topman added.

“Agreed,” the other two said as one, with Jaygarcia going on. “Akainu’s death, along with the majority of the damage done to the marines, can be put down to Whitebeard. We can also,

perhaps, blame Whitebeard for bringing in Straw Hat in the first place. Make it as if Straw Hat and Whitebeard were in cahoots from the very beginning, that he was simply following Newgate's orders. Further, there is the concept of treason to be considered."

"Is it treason if it comes from one of the Shichibukai? They are ever tools that are oft to turn in the hands that wield them. Useful but certainly not exactly unexpected. Even Hancock turning on us is not exactly beyond the pale despite what it might cost her people in the long run," Topman objected.

"I would not count on that. As I said, three to five years to make up the marine's losses in high-end fighters unless we wish to lean even more heavily on Vegapunk. Which has its own issues," Ethanbaron warned.

"We will need to discuss that, but you misunderstand what I was implying Topman," Jaygarcia said. "To the common public, even considering the fleet of the individual we were fighting, would it not be more palatable to assume that treason within the ranks of the marines was the cause for the turn in their fortunes? Treason that began before the battle was joined, dragging the marines out from Marineford? Treason that sucked in the former Hero of the Marines along with it, perhaps, pulling on his heartstrings with his grandson's involvement?"

"... Teach and Hancock convincing Garp to strike out with them? Yes, I see your point. Two Shichibukai deciding to work together to screw over the Marines, working with a new rookie, yes, that... we can use that," Topman agreed. "We can even lean more heavily into the breakout. Say that it was Straw Hat, under the orders of Whitebeard that broke out all the prisoners. We can then point to the bravery of Aokiji and the rest in preventing those vile creatures from escaping."

Mercury and Ethanbaron frowned but did not object. The damage this would do to the position of Shichibukai was a minor consideration: the warlords of the sea were supposed to be feared, after all, and the fact they might be willing to turn against their word would just add to their infamy. This would also take more of the spotlight off Straw Hat. "We will need to couch the story so that if some measure of the truth becomes known, it will only seem as if we jumped to conclusions rather than fabricated the tale, but it is possible," Mercury warned, while also agreeing with the idea. "I suggest we give one of our primary public relations specialists in here to go over that aspect now. Further, we should wait until Chinjao agrees with our terms before allowing this story to reach him."

Everyone there agreed to that, and Mercury conveyed that order via the Den Den Mushi. The Public Relations Department's best skills would be sent their way within the hour, their eyes carefully covered so as to never actually see the Gorosei.

There was no talk about Peter's death, of course. There was no need to. All of them knew that any mention of the Gorosei was to be suppressed. The hints that they were mortal could not even be allowed to exist. No mention of Peter's ranks or ability could be allowed to

infest the story the people needed to be told. Luckily, the sheer size of the battlefield meant that not every ship or marine had seen Peter in action. Yet even so, all of the sailors who had, would be broken up into smaller groups and then sent out essentially to die in small lots. Even sub commanders like Smoker, Tashigi and others like them would be observed closely, to be certain they did not share that aspect of the battle.

It could **never** be known that the Gorosei could not only exist but could even die. Not even Gold Roger had killed a Gorosei. Follow several, yes. When they were younger, both Warcury and Ethanbaron had fought the so-called Pirate King. Yet even he had not killed a serving Gorosei. It had not happened ever and would never happen, not even, as far as the Tenryubito were concerned, although the Gorosei would need to look among them for a replacement. Or, rather, their master would need to.

That was another aspect none of the four Gorosei were looking forward to. For they were not, as most of those who even knew of them thought, the true masters of the World. The Empty Throne was not empty at all. Rather, the eternal king, Imu sat there. It would be Imu who would choose from among their suggestions for another Gorosei. It would be Imu who bestowed upon someone else the powers that the Elders held and raged at them for the loss of Peter and the destruction of much of the marine fleet.

Despite the apprehension they all felt for telling Imu what had happened, that was a task for later. Right now, the Gorosei still needed to get a handle on a response to the disaster before submitting themselves to Imu's judgment.

The discussion continued, turning into specifics of the story, the details of which would have to be perfect and credible enough so that people would not try to go searching for new information and would simply accept what the government was telling them. There was even more talk about incorporating Big News Morgan's newspaper directly into the government, and orders were cut to send to CPO operatives to replace his current minders. At present, the independence of the Seagull Zoan's newspaper served a purpose, as it seemed to be independent from the World Government. However, such things could only serve so far. When it came to something like this, no contradicting story could be allowed to distort the public's view of events. The truth was what the government would tell the people, and that was how it was going to stay.

Beyond setting the narrative for the rest of the world, starting to move against the revolutionary army's new holdings, and ordering further recruitment of both strong individuals and normal sailors into the marines, orders were also cut to places like Enies Lobby, where the World Government itself had their own forces. Those forces would be incorporated into the marines to act in their stead in significant portions of the world, while the marines rebuilt their own strength. Furthermore, Vegapunk was going to be 'offered' the opportunity to shift his Special Science Group to Mary Geoise. This was a very literal definition of an offer he could not refuse, and indeed, Marcus would leave later that day to 'offer' it to the irrepressible doctor in person.

Once in place in Marineford, Vegapunk would be put in charge of designing new ship types and new weapons, while setting up a factory to build the K9Ms and Pacifistas in greater numbers. For now, that and further experimenting on the Green Goo would be Vegapunk's tasks. A minder would also be set on him, just in case.

"Which brings us to a point. Those cyborgs are going to need to be further integrated into the marines than we had anticipated..." Warcury broke off, looking over at Ethanbaron. "Did your three to five-year estimate include that concept?"

Ethanbaron shook his head, turning to crunch some further numbers for a few moments, while the others fell silent until Saturn spoke up, "Beyond that, there is an issue at the top of the marine fleet that needs to be addressed. Kong is dead. Sengoku might not be dead, but he will almost certainly never be able to fight again on the front lines." Jaygarcia tapped one report on the long table in front of them, which reported on the various injuries Sengoku the Buddha had taken in the final clash with the traitor Garp. While Sengoku lived, his hands had been crushed by the former hero of the marines. They would be building up his reputation, putting it on him to have been the one to finish off Whitebeard, which would suite well with his wounds, but that didn't address the primary concern. "Who is going to replace Sengoku as Fleet Admiral?"

Unfortunately, there was only one real choice for this. That meant the discussion went quickly and soon shifted back to the logistics side of things. Although scrambling, the Gorosei would be able to react to this disaster. The World Government would endure so long as no more massive jolts shook the faith in the marines and the World Government for a time...

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"...Thus, by order of the Gorosei, I'll be taking over Kong's position until such a time as the marines can stand on their own feet, and you, Aokiji, will be taking over from Sengoku," Tsuru concluded, leaning back in her chair, before pushing to her feet, and hobbling towards the door. "Rebuild, retool, keep what we have. That is going to be your mission. Me, after we're done questioning Coby, Saldeath and the rest, I'm going to need to work more closely with the World Government in order to figure out precisely what we can do going forward about the Revolutionary Army's recent advances."

Aokiji winced at that, knowing Coby might not be allowed to return to the marines for a while. And if he did, the fact he was friends with Straw Hat Luffy was going to follow the young sergeant around for the rest of his time. "But they haven't given you any specifics?"

"A lot, actually, mostly on the logistics side of things. I left the report there for you. But it will be your job to decide the course of the fleet going forward, even with all that. It will be up to you to mold the heart of the marines from now on. What operations to take on, what fleets to reinforce, which ones to move, the Gorosei have 'suggestions' for, but it will be your decision

how to follow through.” Tsuru smirked slightly. “I suggest calling up the remaining vice admirals and talking to them. Put your stamp on the office quickly.”

With that, Tsuru was out the door before the younger man could say anything.

Behind her, Aokiji sighed, knowing that not giving him further advice had been her way of forcing him to think things through and take action, something she knew that Aokiji struggled with. Still, he did not begrudge that, knowing that soon, Tsuru would regardless have a lot on her own plate. Already, rumors had reached his ear that the outcome of the battle against Whitebeard had begun to get out to the common populace. And soon, the World Government would be issuing its statement. When it did, the ripples of that conflict were going to become tsunamis, and he would need to be prepared for it. Or as much as the depleted marine fleet could, anyway.

Shaking his head with a sigh, Aokiji shifted over to Tsuru’s desk, grabbing the folders and reports. “Might as well get started.”

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For her part, Tsuru was due to leave Marineford for Pangaea Castle in Mary Geoise that night, along with Coby and the others the Gorosei wanted to question in person. *Thankfully, in person doesn’t mean they will be able to see the Gorosei, there’s a set ritual to that which will let Coby and the others survive. Already, I think that we’ve learned a good deal about Straw Hat’s ability to plan, something that we didn’t really have from Hina’s reports. Now, I wonder what that secret that Coby is still holding onto is? He better tell me before he is questioned by the Gorosei, or else.*

Setting that thought aside, Tsuru spent a few minutes talking to some of her former underlings, some of whom would be coming with her over to the office of Commander and Chief. Others had already been sent ahead to Mary Geoise to take over Kong’s former offices and such. Beyond that, though, Tsuru had one more thing to see to. She had already said farewell to her granddaughter, to Gion and most of her protégés. The only one she hadn’t yet was the heavily burned Hototogisu. There was a reason for that... a... suspicion.

Turning her feet in the direction of the medical wing after stopping over in the armory, Tsuru smiled and chatted with many of the orderlies and doctors seeing to the wounded. Most of them were in the main wing, with only the vice admirals, Kizaru and Sengoku, having their own rooms. Sengoku was asleep, his pain medications knocking him right out, as was Kizaru. With their wounds keeping them unconscious, until some of them began to heal, was easily the best plan.

Eventually, Tsuru walked into Hototogisu’s room, closing the door behind her. The young woman shifted in her bed, making a muffled sound, and Tsuru smiled. “Hototogisu, it’s Tsuru.

I'm sorry I haven't been around since you were injured. We had so much to do I just couldn't get over to see you until now."

"It's all right, Ma'am. I know it was tough," Hototogisu said, her voice muffled by the number of bandages covering her face.

Smiling thinly as suspicion crystallized into knowledge, Tsuru sat down in a chair by the foot of the bed. "Ugh, these old bones, been doing too much fighting and too much walking. Anyway, I've been told that your burns are responding well. But I'm afraid that you'll never get your good looks back. I know that you don't care much for such things, but still, I felt I owed it to you to explain at least a bit about why this fight went so wrong."

"Hmm?" Hototogisu made an interrogative noise, although she had seemingly stiffened at something Tsuru had said.

Tsuru smiled wanly, reaching into her jacket pocket with a hand covered in a glove. "Yes, you see, a lot of this started because I decided to believe the reports I was given. I didn't investigate Straw Hat and the battle in the Florian Triangle myself. I trusted Shichibukai's words. I shouldn't have. I should have looked at things more closely, made certain."

Tsuru's voice changed. "And I would be an old fool indeed if I was fooled once more in so short a time. Wouldn't I, Catarina Devon?"

'Hototogisu' stiffened, but too late. The Seastone handcuffs slammed down on her bare wrist. Instantly, her body shifted the Devil Fruit transformation power that the Kyubi No Kitsune Mythical Zoan type had given the former prisoner. The effect of the Seastone was already weakening the woman to the point she could barely toss off the blanket, but before she could do more, Tsuru had a hand at the younger, far larger woman's throat. She kept it there even as the bed, designed for someone of normal size, cracked under the weight of the giant of a woman.

"Your mistake was not trying to escape while at sea. Even trying to make your way over the Calm Belt would have been better. You trusted in your little disguise too much. But Hototogisu always called me Tsu-Tsu, the little brat. She was also always whining about wanting to have more of my attention after I took her under my wing. And didn't care a whiff about her looks. Further, Mihawk reported never even seeing you in Impel Down, where we all thought you had retreated."

Standing up as she saw that Catarina was utterly unable to move with the Seastone cuff on her, Tsuru stood up, a grim smile on her face. "And at least this way, we can execute someone. And I can avenge Hototogisu, too." She moved to the door, letting in two grim-faced captains. "Have a nice night, Catarina. It's going to be your last."

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The next morning, the news about Catarina Devon's attempt to escape by taking Hototogisu's appearance had spread, but most were grimly satisfied at the outcome, praising Tsuru's cunning for spotting the problem. But oddly, orders had come to wait before executing her. The World Government wanted her transported to Mary Geoise along with Tsuru and the others that would form her work team when she took over from Kong.

That was Tsuru's issue, though. Aokiji had other matters to see to.

The afternoon after being handed the new position as Fleet Admiral, Aokiji called for a full command meeting. Since very few of the vice admirals had been sent back to their fleets or bases just yet, he could have this in person, in the Hall of Justice. This was a long room where dozens of officers could meet for formal discussions.

This happened now. The vice admirals, those who had actual command positions to go with their rank, those that survived, and the officers moved into new positions, settled down onto cushions in rows, each of them having a small mobile table ahead of them with a saucer and flask of sake on it.

Aokiji sat at the front of the room under a large tapestry on which the words Thorough Justice were spelled out in the language of Mary Geoise. That was Sengoku's personal vision of justice, a very 'ends justify the means' type of justice that had led to the Buster Call on Ohara being accepted and numerous other events where the lives of innocents were sacrificed along with the guilty. Aokiji had never felt happy about it, but now in the same position as Sengoku, given the chance to put forward his own brand of justice, Aokiji found himself hesitating, the weight of the office already pressing down on him even after a bare day.

He looked around as the room slowly filled, noticing that most of the vice admirals there were still bearing the scars of the battle against Whitebeard, his fleet, and then Blackbeard and the would-be escapees. *And if that isn't a sign of hard times to come, I don't know what is.* The fact that Kizaru was not there was another part of that. Kizaru could at least move on his own power this morning, but he had several internal injuries to go with simply a cavalcade of broken bones, and it would be months before he was back into shape enough to take on some of his duties again.

Along with the vice-admirals came a few individuals who had proven themselves in various ways, be it an organization, combat or information gathering that Tsuru recognized. These individuals looked quite out of place among the higher-ranking admirals, and many of the vice admirals and rear admirals looked at these commodores, captains, and even staff sergeants like Helmeppo, askance, wondering why they were there.

Coby, Helmeppo's near-constant companion, was not with his more gregarious friend. He had already been sent to Mary Geoise with Tsuru. Aokiji just hoped that Coby would give Tsuru the answers she was looking for before being questioned by the Gorosei. If they thought he was holding back, Coby would undoubtedly disappear, never to be seen again. However,

Helmeppo had proven to have good combat skills for his rank and an astonishingly good grasp of logistics after the debacle, helping alongside Coby, Gion and Chaton to aide Tsuru in organizing everything to let them return to Marineford.

Issho and Aramaki, the two best fighters among the group that Sengoku had brought in to boost the marine's combat strength prior to when Ace's execution was supposed to happen, were there. They sat alongside one another, their vice admiral outfits brand spanking new in comparison to the others around them, their golden epaulettes gleaming in a way none of the other, older officers' shoulder markings did.

Another new face among the other officers was Sentomaru. Extensively part of the World Government's own forces, he had accepted the rank of Commodore from Aokiji earlier that day. He would gain training in the Rokushiki to go with his decent mastery of Busoshoku and hand-to-hand combat, and Aokiji had plans for him.

The doors finally shut behind the last person to arrive, one of the more injured vice admirals, and Aokiji leaned forward, looking at all of those faces, as the massive doors closed across from him at the end of the hall, Aokiji held up the saucer of sake to the crowd. "To the fallen," he said simply.

"The fallen," the crowd answered in a low rumble, made in equal parts anger, sadness and regret.

The marines... were not taking how badly they'd been mauled well, and Aokiji knew it. He needed to direct that anger, that energy, or else these officers might start lashing out, costing the marines even more.

After a single sip, Aokiji set his saucer aside, leaning forward. Gone was his normal lazy expression or attitude, replaced with cold calculation, the weight of authority already making its mark on him, clear in his eyes to the people lining the hall. "Most of you no doubt have already heard or can understand the fact that I'm chairing this meeting to be a sign that I was named the new fleet admiral. This is correct."

With that, two captains behind Aokiji slowly, ceremoniously removed the tapestry with Thorough Justice written on it as two more set a similar tapestry in front of Aokiji, on which he wrote out each letter slowly in large, broad strokes. As he finished a letter, the two captains pulled the large piece of parchment along, letting Aokiji write out the large letters without a need to move.

"As you know each Admiral has their own sense of justice, an idea of what that term might mean for them, which could in many ways be seen as driving their actions. Most of you also know that my own has been 'lazy justice' in the past. Acting only when necessary with the minimal amount of effort for the most impact. However, the world has changed," Aokiji intoned

as he wrote. "My position has changed, and with that and everything else that has occurred over the past few days, I cannot adhere to that belief any longer."

Silence filled the room until Aokiji finished the last letter. By this point, the two captains who had removed Sengoku's motto had set it aside, and between the four of them, the captains quickly hung the new motto behind Aokiji. On it was the term Waiting Justice.

"Waiting Justice. As we are forced to rebuild our strengths, we will watch, we will make notes, and we will wait. We will learn from the past mistakes. For example, new ships being built will take into account some of the things we learned when facing the Whitebeard Pirates. We have spies already being sent into Water 7 to discover what they can about the ship that Franky, formerly known as Cutty Flam, the shipwright, built for the Straw Hat and pirates. With that, and with Doctor Vegapunk, we may see the day in the next few years when we have ships of that type or better to match against it."

"So the Age of Sail could be ending? That's kind of sad. There's a certain amount of romance to sailing. You know that you don't just get with steam or coal ships," Chaton murmured, to which his friend Comil laughed quietly beside him.

Despite the bit of side chatter, both kept their attention on Aokiji as the younger man continued to speak. "New ways of fighting, new ways of organizing ourselves will be looked into. All of it to make the marine fleet stronger going forward. We will wait, and we will watch. But that does not mean we cannot act."

Aokiji pointed to a few officers, assigning them to new positions of command, while ordering others to retain the positions they already held and cut orders for the fleets of still other admirals, who had abandoned those fleets where they were ordered to join the battle against Whitebeard, to join their commanding officers in Marineford in order to be reassigned elsewhere.

Many of the fortresses on the first half of the Grand Line would soon be abandoned, letting the marines consolidate their strength. The law-abiding islands within Paradise would need to look after themselves in the main, which would make Paradise more lawless in the main, but not entirely. The former bounty hunter-infested island of Whiskey Peak would be home to a new marine base with provisions and ships that could range out towards the Grand Line side of Reverse Mountain. Shabondy Archipelago's marine base would be heavily reinforced and put under the command of Sentomaru, replacing the somewhat... unenthusiastic... officer who maintained the base now.

"Your job in particular, as well as other linchpin-type fortresses, will be to gather information. I don't want you to strike out against every pirate crew that comes through the archipelago or elsewhere," Aokiji said, allowing his eyes to sweep from Sentomaru to the other officers he had just put in charge of similar fortresses. "Instead, you will have to act both as eyes and ears and then as needles, targeting specific pirates of fell repute. We were unable to stop

the majority of the supernovas from getting through from Paradise to the New World. We cannot allow any other such up-and-coming pirates to join them. The New World is going to be tumultuous and enough as it is.”

Everyone there nodded, understanding that it was indeed the New World where things would be changing the most. Even with Aokiji’s efforts to shift forces from Paradise into the New World, Whitebeard’s death would leave a tremendous vacuum of power. Yes, most of his fleet had survived, something that none of the marines there were very happy about, but most of the top-tier officers of that fleet had died, and between that and Whitebeard’s own passing, it was very doubtful that they would be able to keep the peace in former Whitebeard territory.

Consolidating would also cover, at least in the New World, the weaknesses that the marines were currently feeling. Fleets that had previously been assigned to watch the other Yonko would also be recalled and reassigned and no efforts were to be made to reclaim islands taken by the revolutionaries yet. The marines simply would not have the manpower to get involved in that kind of quagmire. The World Government would have to do it directly. Elsewhere, especially in North, East and South Blue, the locals would be badly undefended, but that couldn’t be avoided. If the marines survived the next few years, as they rebuilt their strength, then any gains made by local pirates or warlords could be reversed. Right now, the New World needed to be their priority.

A few other orders were simply Aokiji sharing things that Tsuru, as new commander-in-chief of all forces, had passed on to him, specifically that the number of cyborgs within the marine fleet were going to rise tremendously. Forces from the World Government’s various departments would also be folded into the Fleet. Their amount of clandestine agents would, in particular, grow tremendously.

This took a while, by the end of which, many of the officers in the room had demanded writing utensils and begun taking notes. When Aokiji broke off for a moment to wet his throat, Gion took the chance to speak up. “What about a quick strike against Amazon Lily? If we assume that Hancock and Straw Hats alliance will remain in place, it makes sense that Amazon Lily will be their primary base of operations. If not there, could we maybe set up an ambush on Alabasta? Take command of that island, and we won’t need to man two of these other fortresses you’ve proposed to police the trade lanes, Fleet Admiral.”

Normally, Gion would not be anywhere near as formal, not even to someone like Sengoku. Heck, not even someone like Akainu, thinking such things were a waste of time. However, this kind of meeting did demand a certain amount of decorum.

“No,” Aokiji said firmly. “Straw Hat alone is a **major** danger. His entire crew got away, along with Jinbe and Hancock. The Kuja themselves are no joke. We would be playing to their strengths if we attacked Amazon Lily. Furthermore, I am ordering it now: there will be no move against Straw Hat Luffy or his new coalition. Not now, not until we have fully regained our prewar strength.”

Maybe not even then, he added mentally. Not if Garp remains with him. Not if he reaches out to his father. We could be seeing a real nightmare there, but we're just not in a position of enough strength to do anything about it! Maybe, maybe if the Gorosei took direct action, we might be able to move against him, but I don't see that happening. And even then, would they consider the loss of maybe one or two of their own again on top of Peter worth the price? No, waiting is best. That way, some other concepts I know that coming out of the think tank under Vegapunk will have time to finally become something.

"Striking at Alabasta is a possibility, but we cannot make such decisions in haste or in fury. Waiting Justice must be cold," Aokiji intoned aloud, making his voice a low rumble that everyone there in the room could hear. "We must pick our duties and our targets so that our image as the marines cannot be tarnished further, the position of the World Cup government weakened further. We must wait, we must rebuild, and then, only then, will Waiting Justice change into Searching Justice."

That needed no explanation, and a rumble of approval went around the room, which ended when one of the officers raised his hands quietly. "What about bounties? What are we going to do about them?"

"While we can't allow word of his specific actions to get out, not with the World Government already having decided on a plan there in terms of public relations, some new bounties for all of them is a good idea. I've already got a group working on collating the data of what the Straw Hat's crew did during the battle under Brannew, and his own bounty has already been decided. Hancock's, too. They will all be going out with the news of Whitebeard's war," Aokiji answered. "Shiki the lion, whose powers allowed the Whitebeard Pirates to arrive as they did, will also be getting his first put back on the books and then raised dramatically. We... may be able to do something about him specifically, but I will keep those cards close to my chest for now."

The officer who had brought the bounties up nodded, and the meeting continued as the admirals tried their best to make solid fortresses out of clay.

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Whitey allowed herself the first smile she'd had for the past few days, as she stood on the prow of her ship, staring down through the clouds towards a distant island that had just appeared over the horizon ahead of their course. "Get the word out, everyone! We're almost home. That's Foodvalten. Shiki, you can start taking us down now."

Foodvalten was but one of many islands that looked to Whitebeard for protection from pirate raids. With his name and flag, Whitebeard made certain the islands were protected in return for what he felt the island could afford. In Foodvalten's case, despite its odd geography consisting of numerous plateaus merged together, the island produced a great deal of food,

being a Spring Island with decent weather all year round. It was also the island from, which the fleet had flown out towards the Calm Belt and Impel Down.

Shiki snorted but nodded. "I hope you lot have prepared the gold at least that's part of my payment for this. Hell, I should probably demand double for the loss of another limb."

"Done," Jozu grunted. "Your current body weight in gold added to what we already owe you."

As Shiki agreed, below in the room he'd been given by Whitey, Ace sat in his bunk, a communications snail in one hand. "Huh. So that's what you've been up to instead of trying to rescue me? I wish I could say I was insulted, but I'm really not. Hell, I didn't even want Luffy to try to rescue me. Let alone him and Pops alike..."

"I'm sorry to hear about Whitebeard's death," the man on the other side of that communication said.

In the nation of Duoluo, Sabo sat on a throne as several bureaucrats worked around him, going over the laws of the country, the number of prisoners that would need to be freed from political imprisonment, and other things of that nature. But Sabo, despite his position as Chief Operations Officer for the Revolutionary Army, couldn't care less about the minutiae like that. Ace's story had his full attention. "It's honestly almost scary how stronger Luffy has become since the last time I saw him in person. We'll have to think of a way to get one of our specialized Den Den Mushi to him. Having a Yonko in connection with our movement would be amazing!"

"Hey, asshole! He's not taking over from Pops just yet! There's me, Marco, and Jozu to consider, you know."

"Yeah, I know. And if you and Luffy stay in touch, you might even be strong enough to make monsters like Big Mom or Kaido think twice before taking you on. Maybe not the World Government if they're desperate to try to recoup some losses. Something to think about. Besides, there's the personal angle to consider," Sabo replied. "Forcing a reconciliation between Luffy and Dragon would be really good for both of them."

"You've been wanting to do that ever since you joined up with the revolutionaries, and you haven't had any luck, Sabo. Luffy just wants to know what happened to his mother, but Dragon refuses to say. There's also the whole 'left Luffy with Garp when he was young' thing to deal with. I don't think you're going to get anywhere now that you haven't in the past." Ace snickered, shaking his head, the Mushi in Sabo's hands mimicking the movement.

He sobered then. "You do realize that taking those islands means the World Government is going to have to move against you unless they can figure out some other way of bringing in food for those fat celestial fucks. You all are going to their primary target, not us."

“We do. We also know that the WeeGee’s... love that name, by the way... whip hand is broken at this point, and it’s going to take them a while to rebuild it to the point they can launch attacks on us without the worry of losing still more. Hopefully, long enough that we’ll be able to move on them in turn. Besides, I just recently learned that a certain Old Man has shown up at one of the islands we’ve controlled for more than a decade asking for Dragon, claiming a familial connection.”

“Garp and Dragon working together...” Ace thought about it, then shook his head. “Yeah, if I was in the World Government, that would surely be some nightmare fuel for me. That’s two reasons why you’ll be their target, not me or Luffy.”

Sabo laughed at that, then instead of addressing that concern further, he turned the conversation back to Luffy and what Ace thought might be his plans going forward. The answer to that was very little, as Luffy didn’t really have any plans. The two brothers had talked via Den Den Mushi a day after the battle, during which Ace had ribbed Luffy hard about forgetting the fact that he had been given a Vivre Card by his older brother. Not that on its own that would’ve made getting to Impel Down or into it easier, but it would have cut down on the elaborate infiltration plan the Straw Hats had forced to go with. A plan that was certain to bring Luffy’s curse to the attention of the marines. Regardless, the two brothers had a decent discussion, yet with Luffy adamant, most of his crew wasn’t ready for the New World just yet, they probably wouldn’t meet up in person again for a while.

Worse, the rest of the Whitebeard division commanders were not quite willing to try to join the Kuja/Straw Hat Alliance just yet. Many thought that doing so would cheapen Pop’s memory, and that wasn’t something any of them were willing to do. The others, while acknowledging Luffy’s strength, didn’t think he was mature enough to follow.

If the public and the World Government acknowledged Luffy as a Yonko to replace Pops, that will be a deal breaker for many, one way or the other. On the other hand, we’re all kind of ignoring Jinbe. I know that he was on Luffy’s ship, and I’d wager Luffy tries to recruit him, but beyond that I’ve no idea what his plans are. Although, I do know he had to use Pops’s flag to defend Mermaid Island. That might force Jinbe’s hand in some fashion.

Although still incredibly sad about what had happened to Whitebeard, Ace had begun to move past it. After they had gotten out of range of any attempt to stop them, Whitey had come clean with the entire fleet about her final meeting with Whitebeard. She had told him Whitebeard knew he only had a few years, at best before his heart gave out, and, while not looking for it, had been fully prepared, even hoping, to go out in a blaze of glory.

There had been tears. There had been shouts of anger at Whitey for keeping it secret, of denial. But when Jozu and Marco had both admitted to knowing how sick Whitebeard had become, those had faded. The mood had been somber until Marco, with some effort had put a smile on his face, and, forcing a laugh, shouted, “Well, fuck me! If Pops wanted to go out with a bang I’d wager that killing a fucking **Gorosei** let him go with the biggest bang of all time!”

That had won a loud, if still ragged cheer, and Jozu had pounced. His voice rolled out like thunder, reminding many there of Whitebeard's voice, if far weaker. "That's right. Pops lived his life the way he wanted to, from start to finish, griefs and glories alike. He would want us all to keep living our lives the same way, not wallow in our sadness of his passing." With that, Jozu had brought out the largest saucer of sake aboard Whitey's ship. A glare around him and a barked command into the Den Den Mushi later, and every member of the Fleet who could find a saucer or mug and had the strength to lift them was doing so as Marco, Jozu and Whitey, as the longest serving members of the crew led a toast. "To Whitebeard, the Strongest Man in the World, and our Pops! We will make sure that the world never forgets you!"

Knowing that his Pops had been so close to death and having heard Whitebeard didn't blame Ace for anything meant a lot to Ace and to most of his fellows. On the other hand, several of the other officers within the Whitebeard fleet had mixed feelings towards everything that had occurred and Ace's role in it, something none of them had been shy about sharing with their 'idiot younger brother.'

None of them blamed Ace for going after Blackbeard in the first place. They blamed the hotheaded way he did so for Ace's defeat, which in turn led to everything else. That showed a severe lack of leadership and planning skills. It had become clear that Ace wasn't going to be given back his old position as a division commander anytime soon, although thankfully, everyone had acknowledged that Whitebeard had decided to stay behind and die fighting, so they didn't blame him for Whitebeard's death. Still, Ace knew he would need to work hard to get back the trust of the rest of Whitebeard's fleet.

That didn't mean that the other division commanders weren't going to listen to their best fighters, though, and hours after Ace had gotten off the call with Sabo, Ace joined the other division commanders in a hall ashore. The time for mourning had passed on the trip out from the Calm Belt. Now, they had to discuss what to do going forward.

Somewhat mirroring the discussion Aokiji had with his officers in Marineford at around the same time, this was simply a conversation on how to keep what they already had. Whitebeard's name had been enough to secure the peace of many of the islands in his realm. With him gone, it would come down to the wooden walls of the Whitebeard fleet to maintain that peace.

Soon, calls were going out to various allied crews. Those crews would hopefully retain a sense of loyalty to the Whitebeard Fleet, even with the man himself gone, and between them, they would be able to protect their territory. Ace and Marco would probably be on overtime duty doing that, considering the two of them were the only ones in the fleet who could fly long distances quickly. In turn, this brought up the idea of who was in overall command, a discussion that had only been skirted around, as everyone there, all of the surviving division commanders, understood the main problems facing them.

“Seeing as I know I’m not gonna get the position, can I speak on this first?” Ace asked, holding up his hand.

The other surviving division commanders, all five of them, nodded, and Ace looked over at the sole outsider who had taken part in the meeting. Like Ace, Shiki had been silent, although in his case, it had to do with counting the money that he had been given upon arriving on Foodvalten as part of his deal with Whitebeard. “First of all, Shiki. No offense, but I don’t think your name would carry as much weight as Pops’ did. You’re dangerous, sure, and in your prime, maybe, but despite your installment plan with death being pretty awesome, I’m afraid that too many people would see the wounds you’ve taken as a sign of weakness.”

“Shihahaha, more power to them if they’re that stupid,” Shiki laughed before nodding. “But that’s fine by me. I am good with creating a formal alliance between me and the Whitebeard Fleet, adding my name to this coalition you are thinking of building. It might even be an interesting idea, a coalition of free pirate groups not allied with the remaining Yonko unless, of course, your little brother becomes one. Shihahaha, which I think he will. The youngest person to ever be named such, beating out that brat Shanks by a good seven years.”

There was some grumbling about that around the circle, but not as much as Ace had feared. Jozu caught his change of expression and snorted. “Your brat of a brother helped kill Akainu and damn near crippled Kizaru while also getting in a few nasty blows on Sengoku and the Gorosei. We can see the way the wind’s blowing, but none of us are willing to enter into a formal alliance with him just yet. The Whitebeard Fleet cannot go to Luffy hat in hand as supplicants. We need to prove we’re strong enough to hold the majority, at least of Pop’s territory, before we go to him as equals.”

“Just remember, you all still owe me for my help. A new flagship built for me on one of Whitebeard’s islands, to my specifications, and breaking Dr. Indigo out from prison on that cursed bridge of the Tenryubito’s,” Shiki reminded them all.

The remaining division commanders all grumbled but nodded at that, while Whitey wrote it down on a piece of paper. The island where her ship had been made would probably be the best one to build a ship for Shiki, whose power meant that size and weight were not exactly points of consideration. He would have some pretty distinct demands, too, which probably meant bringing in some of the better shipwrights within Whitebeard’s territory.

Seeing this, Ace smirked a little and, before anyone else could bring up any further points, pointed to her. “In terms of leadership, getting back to that topic, I think Whitey should be our Chief Operations Officer and Marco, you should take the position of Fleet Commander. It’s either you or Jozu, and no offense, big guy, but while your name’s really well-known, you don’t actually have the right kind of personality to put yourself out there.”

“Hmm...” Jozu hummed in agreement. “Agreed, and, with you and Marco being the ones who are going to be running around putting out fires...” He waited until the groans at his little

joke faded, smirking a little as he went on. It was a horrible truth known only to a few, but while Jozu didn't really have much of a sense of humor, what humor he did have was completely concentrated in the realm of puns. "Marco's name is only going to be growing in the next few weeks."

"Oy, don't I get a say in this?" Marco grumbled, while Whitey groaned at the number of orders, paperwork and so forth she would be settled with shortly. Normally, there wouldn't be that much. It wasn't as if their fleet was a government. But like the marines, the Whitebeard fleet would need to rebuild their strength, bringing in allies as full members, figuring out who among them could be division commanders and island governors and so forth. "I don't want to be a figurehead!"

"Too bad," Jozu and Izou said as one before looking at one another and snorting.

"Dammit, this is to get me back for all the teasing I did about that Supernova Bonney isn't it?" Whitey growled, pointing to Ace.

"What's this?" Izou asked intently, leaning forward, as did Jiru beside him. Both of them had been horribly wounded during the battle, but like most of the wounded across the fleet, Marco had healed their wounds, and all they needed was rest and blood infusions, as Marco couldn't do anything about severe blood loss, as both of them had from their wounds.

They were the last of the Division commanders who had made it through the fight against the marines. Only six of the fifteen division commanders they had brought into the battle in the Tarai Current had made it back out. Indeed, whole divisions had been wiped out, like Vista's, and a lot of their best fighters had also fallen. It would be really, really tough for the Whitebeard Pirates to hold onto their territory going forward.

That wasn't important to Izou at the moment, however, as he detected a teasing target. "Is romance in the air for our hotheaded young friend?"

"No!" "Yes!" Ace and Whitey said as one.

Whitey continued, pointing at Ace. "There's a big rumor going around in Paradise that Ace showed up and helped the Big Eater Pirates out of a jam and then was seen sleeping with Bonney in a room in one of the hotels on Spa Island, that island in Paradise that specializes in spas, water parks and stuff."

"Ooh, I know that place," Jiru snickered, a low 'shnshnshn' sound from the Sky Islander. "It's actually a pretty damn nice place to visit. A great place to take a gal on a date if she's the adventurous sort."

"Before anyone else says anything, realize that Jewelry Bonney has a Devil Fruit that can impact people's ages, both other people and herself. She's actually twelve years old," Ace

growled. "As for the two of us sharing a room, I had one of my narcoleptic episodes, and she decided to stick me in the same room with her. The next morning, I woke up to this little girl sleeping in the bed beside me and nearly freaked the hell out!" That caused everyone there to laugh, even Whitey, despite looking a little chagrined at finally hearing the truth about the thing she had teased him about more than once. "Trust me, there's nothing romantic going on between us. As for going around afterward, I had money, and she had spent most of it on food."

"Ugh, why didn't you mention that before?" Whitey grumbled.

"I wanted to explain what happened only once, and I knew you would have told most of the other division commanders about that rumor at least," Ace answered blithely. "That and turning the tables on you. You're looking a little green there, Whitey."

"Still, you're friends with her, right? Is there a chance we could bring Bonney into the fold? That kind of power would be amazing," Jozu interjected before Whitey could retort, trying hard not to think bitter thoughts. *If we'd been able to contact Bonney, would she have been able to reverse the effect of aging on Pops? Or are those kinds of changes only temporary?*

"Ah, no, that would be a big no. In fact, I wouldn't recommend looking up Bonney for any reason whatsoever. Once it becomes better known that Luffy is still alive, she's not going to want to have anything to do with me or anyone else allied with him. In fact, she might go after him herself."

"What, why?" Jozu demanded, incredulous as Ace's response broke him out of his maudlin thoughts. "I mean, I know she's a Supernova, and you just described her power, but even so, there's got to be some kind of limitations to it, and Luffy was... a revelation during the battle. I can't imagine any fight between them going well."

"Heh, that's one way of saying he's stronger than any of us," Marco muttered, shaking his head. "Logias who take their training seriously are nasty, and that Devil Fruit, in particular, is nasty all on its own. I wonder how he got those electrical scars he had. Maybe from beating the previous user?"

Ignoring this side bit of conversation, Ace addressed Jozu's question. "Bartholomew Kuma was Jewelry Bonney's dad. I learned about that in conversations with Bonney after promising to keep her secret about her real age and everything else. She's a precocious twelve-year-old, but still just a twelve-year-old, and well, any twelve-year-old is going to be furious when they learn that their father's dead and his killer is out there."

That caused some winces but more nods than anything else. Soon, the conversation turned back to who was in charge. Marco, for all his protests otherwise, was elected, and Whitey was indeed put in the position of chief organizer and logistics officer. Neither of them was happy with this but agreed to do the work for now.

Ace had one other suggestion. "I think, besides making certain that we can defend as much of our territory as we can, we should also try to create a show of force. Something splashy that will make it clear that Marco is a true heir to Pops' power. We should strike at Dressrosa and Doflamingo."

This caused several outbursts, but it was Whitey's voice that cut through the din, as the older woman glared at Ace. "That's an interesting suggestion, considering that it was Doflamingo who helped Blackbeard capture you. You told us all about that a few days back, and now you want us to attack him? Seems a little suspicious, regardless of your reasoning."

"There is a bit of vengeance in this idea, yeah, I'm not gonna lie. But think about it: if it comes out that Doflamingo was the one to really capture me, a lot of people who know that Pops would avenge any wrong done to his sons might look to us to attack him anyway. The flamboyant bastard's also one of the two last loyal Shichibukai the World Government can call on. Hawk Eyes Mihawk might be more of a neutral, but Doflamingo sure as hell isn't. If we don't attack him, he's liable to come after us eventually. He's also the one most likely of the two to remain loyal to the World Government if their position continues to worsen over the next few years," Ace argued back.

There was also Mihawk's basic strength to consider. Of the Shichibukai, only Hawk Eyes Mihawk and Bartholomew Kuma did not have crews to call upon. Crocodile even had a crew at one point, although most of his crew had died when the idiot had tried to take on Whitebeard right after being named a Shichibukai. After that, he retreated to Paradise and never came back to the New World. Gecko Moria had a crew, Doflamingo had a crew, Hancock had a crew, and even Jinbe, the Knight of the Sea, had a crew.

Hawk Eyes Mihawk had never had a crew. He had never been part of a crew. He had gained his position as Shichibukai through his own personal strength alone. He had been named the world's strongest swordsman beforehand, not after.

Ace wasn't the only one who also wanted a piece of Doflamingo, too. He'd done a decent amount of damage to the crew before Marco and Garp had forced Doflamingo to run away after killing several of his crew, and Whitey frowned pensively, thinking about it. "A single ship with a group of strong warriors on it. Marco or Ace, Jozu, Little Oz and a few other survivors. You would need to be surgical, and maybe you'd also need to find out more about Doflamingo's strength on the island before striking. Someone capable of sneaking around too..."

Seeing even Whitey was even thinking about it, Marco sighed and held up her hand. "All in favor of invading Dressrosa and taking Doflamingo teeth in, say aye."

The Ayes had it, although Shiki surprised everyone by saying, he might be involved in that as well. It would take a good few months for his ship to be designed, let alone built, after all, and there were a few mysteries around Doflamingo that he wanted answers to. A statement that made Ace twitch, a feeling of danger going down his spine. Yet he said nothing, simply

listening as the meeting went on, the Whitebeard Pirates trying to get to grips with a world without their Pops in it.

OOOOOOO

Two days after those meetings occurred, the Everlasting Resolve finally came within sight of Amazon Lily, and the official version of events from the World Government came out. According to the World Government, Hancock, Luffy and Blackbeard had worked together under Whitebeard's command to orchestrate the greatest betrayal the marines had ever seen. They had turned turned the hero Garp against justice for the sake of his family, while also creating a breakout from Impel Down.

Since nearly all the prisoners within had been killed, the whole prison was going to be shut down regardless. This not only freed the surviving forces from the prison for other duties but also meant the World Government didn't care about the prison's reputation.

According to the World Government's version of events, Sengoku killed Whitebeard, but not before the Strongest Man in the World had taken a deadly toll from the marines. Blackbeard had been killed, and Luffy and Hancock were forced to retreat by the marines, while Akainu had lost his life in a heroic effort, along with numerous other marines, to halt the monsters from within Impel Down from escaping.

Most of it was pure lard, but it was built on kernels of the truth. Even better, at no point did the tremendous losses among the marines truly come to light. Some losses, yes, among their most famous fighters. It was hoped by the Gorosei that in this way, they would hide the true depth of their losses from anyone who tried to figure it out.

It worked to a certain extent, although embedded into that story was a bit of information that most of the Supernovas were far more interested in.

Eustass Kid growled angrily as he tossed the paper aside. "Damn it all! Straw Hat not only survived fighting three Shichibukai but then allied with one of them against the World Government?! How the hell did he do that?"

"Who cares?" Killer said, shaking his head. "At this point, it hardly matters how we did it. All that matters is that he did and that his new bounty dwarfs ours. We're going to need to make an even bigger splash than we thought and quicker to boot if we're ever going to catch up to him."

Eustass snarled angrily, pacing around the room.

In his own ship elsewhere, Trafalgar Law stared thoughtfully at the bounty posters. Unlike Eustass, he was wondering more about Straw Hat and the future in general than any mad idea of trying to catch up to Straw Hat Luffy's infamy. "Fascinating, truly fascinating."

The bounties he was looking at were frankly astronomical.

Black Leg Sanji had perhaps the biggest leap besides Straw Hat himself, surpassing the first mate's previous bounty at 225,000,000 beri. *Yet still wanted alive rather than dead or alive. Which is truly fascinating. I wonder what is going on there. And that picture is... odd.*

Laki, the Angel of Death, didn't get as much of a bump in her bounty, nor did Cat Burglar Nami, with only five million added to both, bringing their bounties to 45,000,000 and 30,000,000 respectively. Tony Tony Chopper, the Beast Doctor, hadn't changed at all, but was now wanted dead or alive. *I suppose the three of them were simply splashed by the fact that they survived the war instead of having been seen doing anything truly tremendous.*

In stark contrast to those three, a new member of the Straw Hat Crew, Perona, the Ghost Princess, had a massive bounty of 78,000,000. Apparently, she had been the cause of several deaths among the marine officers, who weren't able to deal with her strange powers.

The next one was a surprise and for several reasons. "Vivi the Sand Princess. She looks familiar to me... hmm... Ah, from an article about Alabasta months back. Fascinating. Although I do not agree with putting all this royalty aboard Straw Hat's Crew. Still, 105,000,000 beri? Whatever did she do to earn that large a bounty?"

On the other hand, Nico Robin, the fourth woman on the crew, had a bounty that was enough to possibly propel her up into Shichibukai status on her own at 295,000,000 beri. Why that was, Trafalgar had no idea, but it was quite intriguing.

Franky the Cyborg not only got a new picture, but his bounty was raised to 65,000,000. Rather smaller than the other two who had obviously taken part in the battle, but still a decent amount.

Jinbe's old bounty had seemingly been activated again as his status as a Shichibukai was revoked, while also linking him to the Straw Hat Pirates thanks to his role in what the article called 'the great betrayal,' 438,000,000, the third largest of the bounties shown in the newspaper.

Pirate Hunter Zoro, was at a 300,000,000 beri. This was a large increase, to be sure, but what it hinted at, Trafalgar had no idea.

In contrast, Boa Hancock's new bounty was amazing. She'd had a rather small bounty before becoming a Shichibukai, a mere 80,000,000. Whatever she had done during the war, it had been raised to 700,000,000 beri.

Similarly, Straw Hat Luffy's new bounty was a staggering 1,000,000,000 beri.

That is insane, but Trafalgar thought, perhaps accurate, if he truly survived the war and was the reason why two Shichibukai and the Hero Garp turned against the World Government, as this article says.

“Not that I’m going to take anything written in that article without a tremendous serving of salt. Still, Straw Hat must’ve done something for that bounty. Interesting, very interesting indeed. I wonder, Straw Hat, if you and I will ever meet in the future and what will come of that meeting. Perhaps I can enlist you to take on another Shichibukai. You do seem to be making a habit of it, after all...” Trafalgar murmured, leaning back and grabbing up a glass of wine, holding it up in a mock salute of Straw Hat, before downing it and going back to read more of the article.

However, among the other three Supernovas, one of them was very much not in favor of what she was reading. “Dammit, dammit! He lives! I was, I was fine with, with things as they were, him dying along with Dad. But this! He’s alive, Straw Hat’s alive and, and Hancock stabbed him in the back! That must be it, yeah, the two of them somehow knew one another or something and stabbed Dad and that eel guy in the back,” Jewelry Bonney muttered, kicking her feet up onto the desk in front of her. “Dad was the strongest. He could never have been taken down in a fair fight!”

She was in her normal form, that of a twenty-something young woman, with a pile of pizzas to one side that she was working her way through. Although, for once, Bonnie wasn’t even bothering to try to taste the food, she was shoveling down her throat, so bitter and angry did the pink-haired girl feel.

“Straw Hat, dammit! The moment I get the chance, I’m going to turn you into a baby and squish your fucking head!” Jewelry shrieked as her anger got the better of her, kicking her feet out and waving her hands to either side as tears began to fall from her eyes once more at the thought of her dead father, a man who had sacrificed literally everything for her, including his own memories of his daughter. “I will get my revenge, Straw Hat!”

OOOOOOO

There were hundreds of kings, queens, commoners, pirates, and mayors around the world reacting to the news of what had happened, much like the other Supernovas. This included the other Yonko, or rather, the surviving Yonko. Kaido and Big Mom’s reactions were easy to understand.

Kaido lamented the fact he could not fight Whitebeard again and was furious at what he saw as a perfect example of a lion torn down by hyenas. In his mind, someone as strong as Whitebeard should only have died to a younger, stronger beast, not simply piling on lesser fighters like Sengoku, Akainu and the other high-ranked marines, all of whom he held contempt for. Kaido was not one to look more deeply into it and completely believed the narrative that

Luffy and his crew had been simply carrying out Whitebeard's orders. He concentrated solely on the little information that was getting out to his spies or via the official news about Whitebeard's death, supposedly at the hands of Sengoku, not caring about anything else.

Big Mom's response was more dismissive toward Whitebeard's death, not caring overly much about that, except that it left his territory ripe for the taking. Immediately, Big Mom began to plan out an assault into Whitebeard's former territory, although it would take a few days to get that ball rolling.

Shanks' response was more thoughtful. "Well. Fuck."

Ben Beckman snorted. "Damn, cap, tell us how you really feel."

Shanks didn't reply right away, instead reaching out toward the table where a feast had been laid out. Ostensibly, the feast was in honor of Whitebeard, but the Red Hair pirates really didn't need a reason to party.

Ben watched as Shanks' hand flicked out, more like a rubber whip than a flesh and blood arm snaking through several crewmates and grabbing at a chunk of recently cooked meat, grabbing it up and tossing it in the air before Lucky Roo could grab it. "Oy, captain! No Devil Fruits at the table!" the overweight-seeming pirate bellowed.

"Ha, we're pirates! Who would come up with that dumb rule!?" Shanks chuckled.

He then ignored the shouts and roars of "It was you, dumbass!" that came from his crew, reaching out his other hand and catching the meat out of the air.

He chewed thoughtfully for several minutes, then shook his head. "The World Government's covering its ass so hard, I doubt most of them could find the real story with an Eternal Pose. Luffy," he snorted. "That damn precocious fucking brat, I wager that he had a much bigger part in this than they are hinting at above and beyond causing Garp to change sides. I'd bet it was Luffy who somehow figured out a way to attack Impel Down directly. Don't ask me how, though."

He paused again to take a big bite out of the meat, and Ben snorted, watching his captain eat. *Damn, ever since eating that Devil Fruit, he packs more away than Lucky Roo.*

"I think... Whitebeard definitely died. The rest of it, Well, we know how cunning Blackbeard is. I'd wager that he tried something, for certain. I, haha!" Shanks laughed suddenly. "I'd wager half the treasure in *Red Force's* hold that it was a huge cluster fuck from start to finish. Garp getting free, we know they turned on him soon after he reacted to Luffy being 'dead', though there's probably no truth in Hancock and Blackbeard being the ones to convince

him to break away from the marines. Then Blackbeard turning traitor, then Luffy and Hancock working together, that's possible."

"That bit, I don't understand," Ben admitted. "How the hell did Luffy get Boa Hancock, of all people, to join forces with him?"

"Better question, how bad were the results of the war that the World Government thinks it can't cover up the fact that two of their precious Shichibukai turned traitor? After having announced the news that two of them had died a bit ago. To the Rookie who then made a splash in this War of the Best. Ugh, I hate that name," Ben grumbled.

"Hmm... well, Hancock won't be the first Kuja to fall for a guy. Just saying," Shanks joked, admitting without saying it he had no idea while also actually hitting the mark. "Wouldn't that be hilarious? Garp's grandson, not only wanting to be a pirate but enough of a lady's man to get that woman to be with him? HAH! Garp might die of equal parts jealousy and pride."

Ben and Yasopp, sitting nearby, laughed at that, but Ben continued to look at his captain. After a few moments of laughing and eating, Shanks sobered again. "The world's going to shift. It's going to become way more dangerous everywhere. The marines... they are probably at their weakest ebb right now in centuries, way before Roger's rise. Whitebeard's territory... even if Ace and the rest of them survived, there's no way they can stand against the likes of Big Mom and Kaido. Luffy... he's going to be targeted. But we've also heard about the Revolutionary Army's recent moves. The old fuckers up in Mary Geoise won't be able to go after him fast. That will leave Luffy free to either consolidate or continue to rock the world. I don't know which way he'll go."

"They might go after anyone close to Luffy or his crew, though," Yasopp pointed out worriedly. "Makino's traveling with them, but there's still the islands Luffy and his crew come from. It could be bad. Are we going to do anything about that, Cap'n?"

Shanks grimaced. He still wasn't used to thinking that Makino was on the Grand Line. In his mind, Makino was far too nice and gentle to be a pirate. But apparently, something had driven her to the ocean alongside Luffy. What that could be, well... Shanks didn't really want to speculate.

With the ease of long practice, his mind shifted to what else Yasopp had said. "You're right, but again, I don't think the World Government's going to be able to do anything, even reprisals against islands well away from the Grand Line, for a while. No, the worst places are going to be in Whitebeard's territory and then around the Red Line. We're going to be seeing a real war between the Revolutionaries and the Old Bastards."

“So, are we going to start fishing in troubled waters, Cap’n? Or *Belch*, hunker down,” Lucky Roo asked.

“No. Instead, send a message to our agent on Mermaid Island. I think I want to meet Luffy in person. One Pirate Captain to another,” Shanks mused, grinning.

OOOOOOO

While there were more than a hundred countries that together composed the World Government, some of them were much more closely aligned than others, and some were far more loyal and powerful. Such was the way of things. But one country that had been part of the World Government for nearly three hundred years and was supposedly loyal, well, it was far more self-serving than the World Government would have liked to think.

For the Germa Kingdom was home to the Germa 66, an army that acted as an underground military force more than an official country’s military forces. In this manner, they were far more free to act, their activities further covered for the world as a whole by a series of books that actually depicted the Vinsmoke family, the members of the Germa 66, as a fictional military force fighting against a made-up marine officer. In this way, most who did not know about the Germa 66 directly thought they were just made-up characters.

Yet, the Vinsmokes were very real. And right now, the head of the family, Vinsmoke Judge, frowned pensively, raising a cup of wine to his lips as he stared out a window. Nearby a servant waited, having delivered the news to him and to his firstborn son, Ichiji. Despite being his heir, though, Ichiji didn’t care about how this news implied to the future, only eagerly rereading the bits that directly hinted at the insane amount of violence that the so-called War of the Best had entailed.

This left Judge to think about the future, which he was fine with. “I must take this apart, see it as separate issues... or rather, as separate ways, we can benefit from events.”

That got Ichiji’s attention. The redhead looked up at his father eagerly, his one visible spiral-like eyebrow twitching upwards eagerly. “Should we attack Whitebeard’s territory, father? Two islands in North Blue fly his flag, after all.”

“Hmm... yes. Wait a few days more. We won’t be the only ones trying to take advantage of the old bastard’s death,” Judge mused. “Let someone else try, maybe even take over the islands. Then we can sweep in and take over after.”

“Hah, swooping in to save the day just like Sora, hmm? That sounds amusing, at least,” Ichiji snorted, but when he spoke he showed he had been paying more attention to the information about the war than just the violence. “But what about this Straw Hat crew? They might’ve been just pawns in Whitebeard’s scheme, but they are still alive after facing such a

war. And they have that damned defect on their crew too. Should we attack them? Wipe them out to grab him up for our scheme with Big Mom. I know that talk with her is just starting, but having a disposable tool might be a good move.”

“Perhaps. Although, we need more information about this Straw Hat’s abilities. You’ll note the tale the World Government spun doesn’t give us any specifics about him. I think he is rather more dangerous than they want to let on. But for now...”

“Why don’t we reach out to Alabasta, Father? Or somewhere else they are known to have stopped at?” a new voice intoned, a feminine voice.

Reiju Vinsmoke, Judge’s only daughter, walked up to her older brother and her father, running one hand lightly through her pink hair, her one visible eyebrow, a spiral like her brothers, cocked in query. “We have interests in Water 7, for example. That way, we can get information, not only about Straw Hat, but their ship.”

“Ah, you read that bit too, hmm, about their ship being fast enough to outpace the marine vessels trying to catch it in the Calm Belt? Yes, that makes some sense. We could certainly do the same with our technology, but perhaps their ship design is advanced enough to interest us even if the material and weapons aren’t,” Judge mused. “We won’t make further plans for the Straw Hats directly until we have more information about their captain, at the very least.”

Judge smiled, then stood up from the chair he had been sitting in, striding towards the door. “Beyond the two islands here in the South Blue, I will wager anything that the marines will have to be consolidating. That means now is the time to strike at far more than just those two islands! Come, we have plans to make!”

As her older brother hurried out after their father eagerly, Reiju followed more slowly, breathing an internal sigh of relief. It would still be some time before her father forced a ‘family reunion’ with her erstwhile brother, Sanji. He would have some more months, at worst, to remain free of their family and its machinations. *If you can even call us a family in the first place. Although... if Straw Hat ends up strong enough to remain free after helping to give the World Government a bloody nose, maybe... maybe that meeting won’t go the way my father and the other sociopaths think it might.*

OOOOOOO

Cheers and arrow as that exploded in the air with all the force of cannonballs greeted the Everlasting Resolve as it closed with the docks of Amazon Lily with Hancock standing on the prow, staring straight ahead of her. The Kuja were lining the sides of the ship around her, almost obscuring Luffy and the other Straw Hats from view for now. Jinbei and Franky stood out among

the crowd though, given their size, but primed as they had been thanks to Franky's earlier visit, neither they nor the other boys garnered more than curious looks.

Garp was gone. He had told the truth about leaving the ship before they got to Amazon Lily. Instead he had headed off following a Vivre Card via Geppo, his flattened foot the only injury he still had by that point. His natural healing ability was almost as good as Luffy's, even though he couldn't direct it consciously.

As the crews began to disembark onto Amazon Lily, Luffy froze, his eyes twisted upwards, staring at something none of them could actually see. Hancock caught this, and turned towards him, waving off Elder Nyon and the other Kuja who had crowded the sides of the docks, cheering her return. "What is it?" she asked, moving forward to touch his shoulder.

Luffy's hand rose to touch her fingers reveling in that connection. The past few days had done wonders for their intimacy, and that between the girls and Vivi. In particular, the trio of girls had helped Luffy through his nightmares, as he did the same for Hancock. While her nightmares were mostly about the past and the future, the proud Empress not being nearly as certain about her decisions as she liked to act, that didn't make them any less hard to deal with, and it was in those moments that what Vivi called a cuddle pile proved it's worth.

Right now, though, Luffy's thoughts were not on romance as he kept on staring up into the sky out and beyond the horizon. "Something at the far edge of my Kenbunshoku range. A feeling that I've felt once before. Do anyone here get new seagulls?"

"Both Elder Nyon and myself do. In fact, I imagine we should be getting some soon. They usually arrive near evening tide around here. It means we don't get news as fresh as other islands might, but it's always been like that. Why?"

Luffy continued staring in that direction, his brows furrowing as two more presences entered his range, heading directly towards the island. That first impression though, remained, then it started to move forward, not towards the island, but upwards. Soon, Luffy almost lost it entirely, the flyer having taken a direct route upwards, whereas Luffy's lightning assisted Kenbunshoku created a dome so to speak around him.

Soon, however, it reentered his range almost directly above the island, and Luffy suddenly grinned. "I do believe a ninja gull has graced us with his presence." He looked around at the others, subconsciously pulling Robin into his side, while Vivi and the others all looked on in confusion. "So, tell me, exactly how angry would the World Government get if suddenly, big news Morgan was sharing our perspective of Whitebeards war with it? Along with a lot of other things that my crew is seen?"

Hancock frowned at that, while most of the others looked lost. In contrast, Vivi's face lit up with an almost evil look. "Oh my, Luffy. What is this you're talking about?"

Luffy hastily explained, and Vivi's eyes started to glow as much as Nami's did when she considered a pile of gold. "I think, my captain, you should go and grab that ninja gull. It definitely sounds like something we'd need to get as soon as possible."

Luffy nodded "That sounds like a good idea. Ill head up and capture the seagulls now. Hancock, if you could lead everyone to your palace? Oh, but..." He clicked his fingers at Zoro, who, despite Chopper's best efforts, refused to stay in the med bay. "You all have to wait until I'm there to open them. I'm dying ta know what our new bounties are, and no way am I gonna have anyone else look at them before I can."

Vivi shook her head, and Luffy laughed, ruffling her head even as she he hopped into the air, his lower body turning to lightning as he hovered there. "Hey, you're a pirate now princess, there are other priorities other than screwing The Man over. That's just one of the most important ones."

End Chapter

So, a lot of speculation, scrambling, and changes. From here on, we'll see little blurbs of what is going on around the world to