

I can't draw and am not Japanese.

Hey all, this is the next chapter of the War of the Best Arc. It moves things forward a good deal, and the next chapter will be the last one of this arc.

Edit 8/31: Finally got time to go over the last bit of the chapter Tomon was looking at. Mostly stuff at the start of the chapter because he and I edited the fuck out of the second half of this chapter already LOL. Nothing major, except a mention of why Sengoku's Buddha form messes with his Holy Powers.

So I can now officially say that the chapter has been edited fully now by both Tomon and Hiryo. Oh, and me with Grammarly, for what it's worth.

Chapter 43: War of the Best: Blood-soaked Waves

Screams of fear and curses against fate and pirates in general abounded to even greater heights than before across all three segments of the battlefield as lightning attacks fell toward the marine fleet. Spread out into five segments, large balls of electrical potential, these attacks looked like the Raigo attack Enel had used to try to wipe out Skypiea, yet were not as dense as that attack. That was the compromise Luffy had to make, to spread the large-scale attack into five different portions like this, so he could have an impact across the entire battlefield. The fact that there were no real clouds above the battlefield was also a deciding factor. The coal, gunpowder and smoke from burning ships could only give him so much to work with here in the Calm Belt.

It didn't really matter. Lightning was lightning. If there were a thousand lightning bolts or three hundred covering the same area, it didn't matter to anyone or anything struck. Normal people would still be quite dead, and most solid objects would be broken, melting or battered, depending on what exactly was being struck.

Seeing the multiple Raigo spheres falling through the sky towards the marine fleet, Kizaru only had an instant to react. To the Pika Pika no Mi user, an instant would always be long enough to make a difference, if not as completely as he could hope. "A Hundred Gleams, Solar Cage!" From out of every limb came nearly a hundred different clones, creating still more clones as they appeared before each of them blasted out beams of light upwards toward the Raigos closest to him and the one that would hit the backmost portion of the marine fleet. He couldn't do anything for the other Raigos, the ones that would hit bunches of marine ships that had begun to build up on either side of the center of the battle or the one that would hit that center. Kizaru couldn't split his attention over that far a radius. But these two, he could do something about.

Yet even as Kizaru launched a series of massive wavelike blasts of light from his body towards the Raigos, Luffy pulled one final trick.

He was too slow to save the Raigo directly above them. The thousands of yards-thick bolts of light that struck the Raigo instantly began dissipating the lightning, carrying the energy down along their route into the water around them, where it dissipated into the ocean harmlessly. The one aimed towards the center of the battle where Whitebeard was still fighting also disappeared. Luffy couldn't quite tell how it had been done from here, too busy concentrating on the rest of his attack and the actual dissipation had occurred well beyond his line of sight.

Luffy's attack wasn't nearly as indiscriminate as the Raigo Enel had used. Luffy had no desire to hit the Whitebeard Pirates after all. Instead, his final trick happened even as Kizaru's light raced towards its targets. All three remaining Raigo exploded, lashing downwards toward the Marine fleet with all their electrical potential.

Watching Kizaru's light anchors dissipate the two nearest, Luffy grimaced. By that point, his ki healing had kicked in, and all the damage he had taken from Kizaru in the last few seconds was gone. He charged forward, with Kizaru charging toward him at the same time, a ferocious snarl on the Admiral's face now, knowing that with that one move, Luffy had completely turned the tide across the entire battlefield despite his best efforts.

Now, no clear victory would be possible for the marines, if such a thing had been before. Their numerical superiority was simply gone now. They might have more undamaged ships thanks to Kizaru's actions but bringing them to bear against the Whitebeard Pirates was another thing entirely. Worse, while he wasn't as big a believer in caring for those under him as Aokiji, Kizaru did care for the troops underneath him, unlike Akainu. To see so many die in that single instant and knowing the crushing effect it probably would have on morale made him furious, more furious than he had been before.

Unfortunately for him, Luffy was a past expert at dealing with people who were angry at him. He smirked at Kizaru, the same kind of smirk that back in his old life would have sent any of his rivals through the roof. It worked here, too, the Admiral charging forward without care for his own body, neglecting his defense until a lightning-assisted punch from Luffy caught him right in the mouth before he could shift his consciousness away into a beam of light or take it with his own Busoshoku. This was followed by several more, with Kizaru desperately calling on his Busoshoku to defend himself, grunting under the impacts. Then Luffy was twisting around and above him, lashing down with lightning, forcing Kizaru to change into his light form a split second before Luffy followed down.

The two pummeled one another as Luffy bounced up and away, zipping away with all the power of lightning, dodging through a series of laser beams from Kizaru as their battle renewed again. However, nearby, Luffy's attack had unintended consequences in two places.

One was Black Cage Hina's commandeering of a paddle-ship on the right flank. While Garp and Doflamingo were battling it out in the air, the Raigo struck the marine vessels on this flank. One of which was a previously damaged steam engine paddle-ship. Most of its crew had

jumped ship. As lightning rained down on the surrounding ships and this one, Hina led her crew up and over the gunwales, shouting out orders. Soon, the fires were out. With the Whitebeard pirates gleefully concentrating on their still-fighting fellows, this ship was ignored as Hina and her crew cleared the paddlewheels and started the engine up again.

Closer to Luffy, Shiki laughed wildly, staring into the distance as the other Raigos that Kizaru couldn't defend against slammed down, sensing the sheer number of marines that had died. "Shihahaha, damn me, yes, yes! Davy Jone's hairy ass crack, that boy can back up his words at least! No wonder Shanks gave him Roger's hat! I wonder if he would be interested in my plans for the fut—GGAAHH"

So busy was he with what was going on elsewhere, Shiki had neglected to remember that he was facing an admiral of his own, just like Luffy had been. Only a last second dodge kept his head from being grabbed from behind in a magma grip from Admiral, and even that fast response couldn't stop his arm from being grabbed from behind.

Knowing he couldn't help Kizaru fast enough, Akainu had decided to try to finish Shiki off. "You have no future, Shiki the Lion. I will be taking your head right here," he growled.

Shiki yowled in pain but didn't lose his head at the agony or let the pain break his mind, instead he concentrated on his Busoshoku, somehow slowing the melting touch of the magma-using man. Flipping up and over in midair, he lashed out via one of his leg-blades, coating it in Busoshoku Haki and raw Haki, as the Kuja were wont to do to their arrows. "FUCK YOU!"

Akainu grimaced as he backed away, shocked to find blood spurting from a cut on his cheek that had nearly cut into his eye despite his own Busoshoku. Then Shiki was bouncing away, grasping the seared yet still slightly bleeding stump of his arm. The man had wrenched himself away from Akainu, leaving his limb behind.

"He overcame my Busoshoku!? That's the old generation for you, I suppose. Even with an arm missing, Shiki is dangerous," Akainu grumbled absentmindedly turning the burning limb in his hand to ash before chasing after Shiki down towards the marine vessels below.

OOOOOOO

From where he stood in the eye of the storm, Whitebeard laughed wildly as he saw the attack incoming, covering his entire body and bisento in Haki. "Gururarara! This reminds me of that one island in the New World, with its constant storms. Take your life and your own hands if you walk outside there without protection! This is going to tingle."

Of his three opponents, only Sengoku was willing to trust his ability to tank this kind of strike. After all, with lightning, it wasn't just that it would hit your body. It would also send that electrical energy into your body. Just because your surface nerves could be protected by Haki against pain and injury didn't mean they stopped conducting electricity. Protecting both your

outer skin and inner body was something only high-level masters of Busoshoku like Garp or Whitebeard could ever reach.

“Blast it, Garp! Why can’t anyone in your family be normal!” Sengoku grumbled as he prepared to hunker down and take the incoming attack. Sengoku gained a lot of strength and durability in his Buddha form and knew that he could survive the attack coming their way even without resorting to Busoshoku. Which, quixotically, interfered with his Zoan form’s holy energy for some reason. Sengoku had asked numerous specialists why that was, and the response had only vaguely made sense, but it came down to his Buddha form’s power being based on Faith, and that Faith could be overcome by Haki, or Will, and thus negate it. He couldn’t even cover a small portion of his body with it without making his holy attacks demonstrably weaker, and so had gotten out of the habit of using it at all once he transformed.

The same kind of calculation was going through Peter’s mind, and he knew that in his current human form, his level of Busoshoku wasn’t enough to deal with the incoming attack. *It is time to play my trump card. I hoped not to need it, but perhaps that was wishful thinking.* “This will not stop me or the forces of the World Government! Lightning or no, armor technique or no, none of you pirates will leave this battlefield alive.”

With that, he began to transform. *I normally would not want to use my Devil Fruit with so much water around, but I am more than skilled enough with Geppo to make my hybrid form work. There is also Akainu’s island behind us to consider, if we could force Whitebeard to chase after us through the marine formation.* That island was situated in the middle of the Tarai Current, almost at the horizon from where Peter and the others were bouncing in the air. Its creation and the immediate impact had been something that all of them had noted. *And now the lightning user will have almost certainly negated a large portion of the gains that will have given us. Blast every owner of the Will of D to Davy Jones’ locker!!*

Beyond the secret of who they were, what they looked like, or even their names, there was one other secret the Gorosei kept from the rest of the world. The fact that all of them had Devil Fruits. Specifically, Mythical-type Devil Fruits. These Devil Fruits might seem simple Zoan-types on the surface but were actually not, rather being mystical versions of said. A Puka, a Death Horse instead of a simple horse. A Demonic Spider instead of a regular spider.

In Peter’s case, this took the form of the mythical giant Sand Worm, the Great Devourer. Hence, his reasoning on why his full animal form would not do much good here, where the only piece of land was the island, which was more than a dozen miles in circumference to impact the whole of the Tarai Current, that Akainu had raised, such an animal would be more liability than anything else given its own size. But every Zoan Devil Fruit had a hybrid form. Even a mythical Devil Fruit like this one. It was just... well, even as powerful as he was, Peter had some personal vanity when it came to his looks, and the hybrid form of his Devil Fruit had not only been difficult to master, but was also... striking, to put it nicely. Yet, he had no choice. *Damn Straw Hat for making me use this form!*

The shift happened quickly, leaving Peter in his new body within seconds before he leaped into the air.

Staring after him, Whitebeard shook his head, watching him go with one eye, while keeping the other on Kong and Sengoku. "Damn, he ugly. I can see why he didn't really want to use that form, Gurararara. Now, I wonder what Peter's can do with that freakshow body?"

Even as the other two attacked Whitebeard once more, no longer fearing Luffy's attack, up above, Peter closed with the incoming mass of lightning. And anyone pirate or devil alike, who looked at the so-called saint, would probably be forced to admit that Whitebeard had a point. The hybrid form that Saint Shepherd Ju Peter had taken was incredibly disturbing to look at.

Peter's body had expanded to the point where he matched Whitebeard for height but with wider shoulders, even though the rest looked somewhat thinner, at least in the waist area. Underneath his suit, which, had shifted with his body's changes, as clothing always did for Devil Fruit users, Peter's skin was now a series of tiny black scales. His arms had lengthened even more than his body had grown, almost looking like a Long Arm tribe member now. Peter's fingers ended in tentacle-like feelers, one of which still held his sword, although it looked almost comically small in his hand now.

His legs were somewhat bowed under the weight of the rest of him, most of which was devoted to his head and neck, if it could be called that now. After all, his neck was almost as large as his body was. Now it stretched further, making it obvious to everyone watching that he could control that length and the width. His head was a thing of nightmare, mostly devoted to a giant mouthful of teeth, a mouth that grew as he closed with the incoming ball of lightning, although the ball of lightning still dwarfed Peter's whole body, let alone his mouth.

In that mouth, there was not just one set of teeth but hundreds of teeth going down into his gullet, all rotating around one another inside his circular mouth, almost like a buzz saw mixed with a shredder. Above that mouth, Peter had an equally wide snout and large eyes, set to the sides of his head and forward so that he had no blind spots except directly behind him as was normal for humans, but very obviously making his eyes still further inhuman.

Despite his bravado of a moment before, Whitebeard was deeply concerned. Not only had Peter stopped holding back from using his Devil Fruit, but his form was giving off black smoke, which was a clear sign of someone who had awakened his Devil Fruit. *Dammit! He already had a healing factor I had to deal with, now this. This is going from difficult to damn hard!*

"Endless Appetite!" Peter shouted, his mouth opening wider if such a thing was possible. As if a giant had inhaled, a vacuum of gigantic size suddenly began to pull at everything around him into that maw for a few seconds before the attack suddenly concentrated on the ball of lightning coming down from on high.

The lightning ball burst then, hundreds of lightning bursts going in every direction, but all those bolts were pulled towards Peter's gaping mouth, doing no damage at all. It was as if the inside of his mouth completely negated the attack. Watching as that attack dissipated, Whitebeard snorted inside his head. "Yet more proof that Devil Fruits are bullshit! That's about as realistic as my quake powers being able to shatter air or anything else I want them to."

With that in mind, Whitebeard used his powers on a Murakumogiri. Darting forward, he lashed out towards Peter, ducking under a blow from Sengoku, who had gone on the attack as soon as it was clear Peter had a plan to deal with the lightning. Peter tried to twist his body towards that attack, trying to inhale Whitebeard in turn, but when Peter's attack and Whitebeard's met, the quake fruit proved stronger, shattering the vacuum-like wind howling out from Peter's mouth. The tip of the bisento went on to slam into him, cracking and shattering teeth, bone and scale for a second. The damage was already healing as Peter righted himself in the air, but he winced as one of the lightning bolts that he hadn't been able to devour yet struck him.

All around him, the lightning crashed down, slamming into marine vessels near their position and back of their position into the large island. But Peter had dealt with most of Luffy's attack, leaving the front lines of the center of the marine formation only a bit battered, not wiped out as would otherwise have been the case.

Within seconds, his wounds had healed, and Peter charged forwards, thrusting out his neck like it was a battering ram. "You will die here, Whitebeard. You, Ace and Straw Hat. All of you will be fuel for a new age of peace!"

Despite Peter's neck suddenly lengthening again, Whitebeard dodged, trying to lash out at the neck.

This time, Peter was ready. Not using his own attack at present, he could concentrate on his Busoshoku, which he did now, blocking the blow from Whitebeard. He twisted the bulk of his worm-body around up over the blow and then down to bite at Whitebeard from above, the length of wormlike neck showing all the mobility of a worm. When Whitebeard ducked under that, Peter recoiled his wormlike length like a recoiling cannon, allowing it to shrink back down to a more manageable level as his sword came up this time to block the next blow from the bisento.

"You will die today. The good of the world demands it!" Peter repeated, his voice garbled, but so deep, it rocked the world around them like he had just used a bit of Haoshoku.

"Gururarara! Peddle that snake oil elsewhere. No one here is listening," Whitebeard retorted, one fist blocking a blow from Kong, twisting them both in Sengoku's direction, using Kong as a shield against Sengoku's attack. Before Whitebeard could concentrate on the attack from Peter, a punch caught Whitebeard despite his best efforts. He rolled with it, shifting

around into an attack with his spear, lashing out at all around him with quake power. All three of his attackers were hit, with Sengoku and Kong both crying out in pain, while Peter simply took it, his large head shooting forward again to bite.

Whitebeard grimaced as he could feel the added strength of each battering-ram-like blow coming from Peter, threatening to knock him off of his feet where he stood on the prow of a slowly sinking warship with every hit that hammered into his spear. Grunting, he began to use his quake powers again to cover his fist, foot and weapon. He also concentrated his Haoshoku into the technique, adding still more brutal power to his strikes. This helped a second later as Kong was sent flying, unconscious, completely out of the fight now as his internal organs ruptured under a strike to the chest. Whether or not he would live or die, Whitebeard couldn't tell, but Whitebeard had to smile as he had felt that blow go home and knew that, unlike Peter, neither Sengoku nor Kong had any semblance of healing ability.

The weaker of the three is finally out of the fight, but I suppose up to this point, it could be called a warm-up, Whitebeard thought, as the pain of his exertions started to get to him again, the wound across his chest throbbing with time to his movements. Nevertheless, he pushed through it, keeping his fierce grin on his face as he roared, "Come on then! Let's see if you can do any better now than you were before, little worm!"

OOOOOOO

Across the battlefield, other Marine officers looked up in horror as the attack from Luffy crashed down. Two vice admirals, Hound and Pomsky, had been a little higher up in the air on the right flank of the battle. They had been doing what they could to turn the tide of the battle on that flank, where the forces of the World Government were strongest even after Garp had arrived. If they could turn that entire flank, they could start rolling up the Whitebeard pirates. Garp's arrival had already stopped that plan, but they had still gone forward.

Now, they became the first to die from Luffy's massive attack.

Having both been given some Green Goo, their metal forms gave the pair some defense against feeling the lightning strikes, but this early version of Doctor Vegapunk's attempt to create artificial Devil Fruits didn't truly change the user deeper than the outer layer of his body. Much like Busoshoku, this could not defend the user against being electrocuted, and the two vice admirals fell, their brains literally fried to mush by the lightning that coursed through their bodies even while their bodies looked to be perfectly fine, metal statues without any life to them as they fell towards the blood-soaked waters below.

They were not the last. Luffy's Raigo fell across the whole battlefield and only Kizaru and Peter could defend against them.

Whole ships, indeed, entire divisions, were swallowed up by the attacks as they crashed down, incinerating, melting and killing. Moments before, the marines had finally brought their

numbers to bear thanks to Akainu's island. They had broken the pirate line, almost separating the entire battle into three parts, isolating the center and leaving both flanks cut off. Now, the tide turned back on them, as they lost more ships in this single moment than they had since the initial moments of the attack from on high. The clumps of battleships that had pushed into the Whitebeard Fleet's line were almost entirely gone, and throughout the rest of their fleet, other ships joined them.

Although not near the lightning ball assigned to the left flank of the fight or the one that struck the rear of the marine formation, Tsuru, Hancock, Vivi, and the rest of the fighters embroiled in combat around the Kuja vessel stopped, turning to stare at the strike as it came down. Broken up but not destroyed by Kizaru's last second defense, a few ships that still floated despite Franky's contraption and the Kuja arrows were now sinking, their forms burnt to the waterline by continuous lightning strikes. Only five battleships were in sight, and all of them were badly battered. Not a one within arrow range remained to fight the Kuja vessel.

"Oy, oy, oy!! Man, Captain, that's mighty impressive there, you know?" Franky grumbled, pulling his glasses down to watch in surprise.

The only one who had expected anything similar to this was Hancock, and she took advantage of the moment instantly. Both the Pacifista and the K9M she had been fighting had turned away from her. The pair of robots' systems forced them to concentrate on what their computers determined were the larger threat, losing sight momentarily of the more present danger they were currently dealing with.

This cost the Doberman look-alike first, as a Mero Mero enhanced foot smashed into the K9M from the side. Hancock's Devil Fruit enhanced kick first turned the creature's head into stone before shattering it. The next second, Hancock flicked sideways through the air dodging around a blast of laser from the Pacifista. Before it could dodge away, her punch succeeded in breaking the creature in half in much the same manner as her first victim.

The next second though, her Kenbunshoku blared a warning. Hancock ducked low, flipping herself up into a kick that was blocked by a new person on the scene who had just rocketed through where Hancock had been sending a second ago from below.

This was Chaton. He had initially been assigned to the right flank, but had been unwilling to engage with Garp when he showed up, and had moved towards the center of the battle at that point, along with a few commodores, who got involved quickly with the overall battle against the Whitebeard pirates. But instead of following them, Chaton had thought to check on Tsuru, but had then spotted that Hancock had not engaged. Using Geppo and Soru, he had been able to cross the entire battle, thanks to Geppo being somewhat unique among the vice admirals. Instead of using it to gain altitude on all of the ships around them, like most of the high-end combatants on both sides had been doing since the battle was joined, he hugged the top of the waves. Bouncing along there as fast as possible, he burst through any wave or splash that came his way from cannonballs,

As Chaton did not have a Devil Fruit, this didn't bother him and allowed him to arrive here, where he could aid his old friend Tsuru without anyone seeing him.

"Well now, aren't you a pretty one? I'd heard rumors of how pretty the Empress of the Sea was, but I thought it was an exaggeration." The speaker was a middle-aged man, his face blocky and heavily tanned, with thin arms compared to how wide his shoulders seemed. He was of normal height, somewhat shorter than Hancock was. On his head, he wore a fedora, but his clothing almost resembled some kind of middle-aged layabout or fisherman, with a wide yellow haramaki, blue shirt and rumpled pants. He didn't have proper seaboots on, instead wearing a pair of wooden sandals. Yet on his shoulders he wore the cloak of a marine officer, and on his chest the rank tab of a vice-admiral was set on his blue shirt.

Despite the compliment or even the way this man looked, Hancock could tell he was anything but a joke. Still, she smiled when suddenly at him, and as he wolf-whistled, lashed out with a Mero Mero Mellow Beam. As she had feared, though, he simply punched out himself, interrupting the attack with an airstrike of surpassing strength, before launching himself towards her.

"Sorry darling, but I like my women more mature," Chaton snorted, tossing his hat off and to the side. "Although I wish she had the same sense of style as you. Imagining **her** in something like that little number that's enough to make my pulse race. And even if I'm not about to fall in love with you, the view is fantastic."

"Judging by your age, I would assume that would be someone in the grandmotherly area of life, and that is a disturbing thought, no matter who is actually the recipient of your affections," Hancock drawled back, even as she felt herself being pushed backward and away from her vessel yet again. *Still, he will not keep me away from it for long. Let us see how well his Busoshoku withstands my Mero Mero powers!*

On the pirate vessel, Franky had recovered from his surprise and finished off the last of the low-ranking seamen who had recently tried to board the vessel via the grapnel, only to duck under a slash from a strange, thick, curved blade that he had never seen the like before. He had heard a description of the user before, as well as the pink-haired youth who stood behind his attacker, his eyes wild as he stared towards the lightning strikes.

"Luffy, that was Luffy, I could feel it! Since when could he use lightning?! It's gotta be a Logia Devil Fruit, but... Why did he... that goes against everything he... why..." Koby mumbled, staring at nothing as he began to shiver, his eyes wild and unseeing as he nearly buckled to his knees. *My training, my training to try to push into sensing technique, it's it's getting overwhelmed now!*

This was a case of bad timing and the result of Koby's gift for Kenbunshoku. He had mastered Kami-E to such a level that Garp had begun to train him to awaken his sensing technique before his mutiny. But now, as it finally awoke, he was hammered by the feeling of

thousands of dead and dying on both sides. He could feel them go, their lives snuffed out like tiny candles, lost for all time. And astonishingly, Koby had a gift for Kenbunshoku, the ability to take it to an even higher level than most vice-admirals. He could feel some of the emotions of the fighters within his range, a range that was quite a bit larger than it should be for someone who had just pushed through from Kami-E to Kenbunshoku.

The death, destruction, hatred and fear on all sides hammered into him from as far away, almost as the central area of the battle. A range that even Aokiji, the best of the three admirals at Kenbunshoku, would have been surprised by.

Added to this, Koby was also having a somewhat existential crisis. The root of this was his mentor's violent defection from the Marines that Koby had dreamed of joining all his life.

Why! Why!? First Garp goes rogue, then this? Hiding away, figuring out a way to play dead, sure I could maybe understand Luffy doing that, even if it was the catalyst for Garp going crazy! But this, why is Luffy even here?! Why is he fighting so hard for Whitebeard and to rescue Fire Fist Ace?! Why is the same person who told me to chase my dream, who even helped me become a marine, wiping out thousands of my comrades!

"Dammit, get it together, Koby!" Helmeppo shouted, watching his swords be battered aside by the massively if somewhat strangely muscled man whose equally strange contraption of guns and gears had shattered so many marine vessels around them. "I need your help here!"

"Ow, I say you do, and from more than just like him if you want to try to take on the suuuuper Franky!" Franky shouted, only to have to duck, yelping as Vivi was sent flying over and hit her head, her forearm turning into sand in midair before the Sanji body crashed into and almost through the railing at the prow of the vessel. "Oy, nee-chan, you all right?!"

"Vivi's body reformed from a small portion of sand, the rest of her previous sand body basically tumbling over the vessel's side, grimacing as she did, sending a wave forward towards the charging Tsuru. One hand went to her side where Tsuru had gotten in a blow that might've cracked a rib.

As she passed him by, Tsuru lashed out with a chop towards the side of Koby's face. The slap sent him to the ground but also knocked him out of his spiraling panic attack. "You heard your friend, officer! Get up and fight!"

As she sent sand daggers and a series of sand fists and formed spears towards the woman, Vivi again cursed herself for being unable to use that strange air walk technique that she had first seen Luffy, her Captain and several of their crew doing. *I knew the exercises to build up leg muscles, but I'm not there yet, and now here I am in a fight where everyone and their mother seems to be able to do it!* She thought half-frantically. The fight against Strawberry, Tsuru and the rest was pushing her to her utmost now with most of the Kuja having retreated below decks.

She was honestly thankful that Franky at least wasn't able to. Seeing a complete unknown, someone who must've joined the Straw Hat crew after she had left them, be able to use that technique would've made Vivi feel even more inadequate. Her eyes widened than seeing something to the side of Tsuru. "Marigold! Look out!"

Blinded by someone tossing some of Vivi's own sand into her eyes, Marigold had been stabbed through her side by Strawberry a second ago. Although her Zoan healing ability had begun to deal with the wound almost immediately, she was still weak, only moving a little bit, unable to dodge or attack.

Vivi's warning came too late. Tsuru had changed direction towards Marigold in an instant. With Sandersonia locked up with Strawberry, she couldn't move to protect her sister before Tsuru slapped Marigold in the face. Tsuru's Washu Washu no Mi activated at that touch, and, with a pop of displaced air, the woman's entire body turned into a towel.

Instantly, Tsuru grabbed at Marigold's towel-form, and then, using a technique that almost resembled something that Vivi had seen Luffy do, she somehow hardened the towel and began to use it like a weapon against Sandersonia. Still distracted by Strawberry, Sandersonia found her arm wrapped up in in the towel form of her sister before she was flipped through the air over the side of the ship.

Sandersonia bounced up and into the air for a moment, using her skill in Geppo. But instead of diving right back into the fight, she dove through one of the gun ports displacing a few of the Kuja there for a second. There, she dropped off her sister, and charged up the stairs back to the main deck, her hair already twisting and lengthening to form her Yamato no Orochi attack.

Above, Vivi found a Busoshoku-clad finger suddenly thrusting for her head by Strawberry, the vice admiral having somehow figured out where her consciousness was within the sand. It skittered across the side of her head as she reflexively dodged, somehow having sensed the attack coming but too fast to dodge or send her spirit out into the sand all around them.

The strike stunned her briefly, but Vivi pushed through it desperately. *Got to move, got to transfer, got to transfer my consciousness!*

"Feh, sneaky little girl," Strawberry grumbled in annoyance as his next blow passed right through where the defecting princess's bosom should've been. Then, from the sand spread out all around the main deck, sand spikes came at him from every direction, hardened and turned into stone almost as they lashed out before being broken in turn.

Only one attack got through, smacking into his wrist with punishing force as another point burst out the side of one of the sand spears already aimed towards his chest, surprising

Strawberry through his Kenbunshoku. As he hadn't been coating his limbs with armor type Haki, the blow was enough to deaden his grip for just a second. "Damn it!"

Several huge fists burst out of the sand, hardening and grabbing both, and before Strawberry could grab up his sword, it disappeared into the growing mounds of sand. "Damn it, not again!"

His only reply was a sand mouth appearing nearby and a somewhat forced giggle as the blade suddenly shot out from the sand to one side, flying out and down from the broken gunwale nearby. With a plop that appalled Strawberry, his sword disappeared into the waves. "NO!!"

Although not named blades, as the pair he had broken during his battle with Luffy during the aborted Buster Call on Water 7, the swords Strawberry carried were not normal by any means, crafted to his specifications. He'd had months to get used to them, their heft, reach and everything else so that they worked with his Busoshoku as well as a sword without a will of its own could.

And now they were both gone. One shattered by a blow from Hancock, and the second disappearing into the depths of the ocean. Months of effort and time, wasted in a single battle.

The momentary horror of this, seeing so much time put into the blades wasted, broke his Kenbunshoku, and a spear of sand took him in the side. Strawberry got his Busoshoku up in time to stop himself from taking any damage, but the blow still smashed him backward into a hastily retreating Koby and Helmeppo, knocking both younger men to the ground.

Before Tsuru could move to help, her Kenbunshoku flared, and she twisted, barely getting her own arm up in time to block a blow from Hancock. She had indeed been able to push Chaton back and had returned to the sky above the ship in time to see Marigold be turned into a towel.

The impetus of the blow hurled the old woman often off of her feet, breaking Tsuru's arm almost under the power of the blow. She danced in midair, scowling and wringing out her arm as Hancock landed on her ship, glaring up at her and the Vice Admiral who had come to help, who bounced over to stand beside her.

Strawberry did the same, grabbing Koby and Helmeppo to regroup with their fellow marines. He bounced easily in the air, both younger men held in either hand. "This isn't going well. We've lost our cyborg aids, and if we could free Lance from his stone prison, that would give us the edge again, but..."

Sandersonia burst out from below decks on the Kuja ship as he spoke, and Vivi reformed out of the sand. "The Kuja have removed themselves mostly from easy access, Sandersonia is

dangerous almost at a Commodore's level, and Hancock looks almost as hale as she did at the start of the fight."

"I'll say," Chaton chuckled, his eyebrows wagging up and down.

Tsuru growled at him but didn't do anything else, knowing that Chaton and Strawberry could control their emotions to the point that the Mero Mero power could not affect them as it had Lance. Instead, she frowned, surveying what she could see and sense of the battle, realizing reluctantly that Chaton might be the last help they would get. Most of the marine vessels, which had been around the Kuja vessel as the battle began, had been sunk or set alight by the fire from Franky's strange contraption at first, and then any ship that tried to fire on them, ate numerous Kuja arrows. Their Haki-enhanced arrows had sunk several more, and then had come that insane blast of lightning that had dealt with the majority of ships that could even see the Kuja from their current position, let alone actually join the battle.

The Kuja ship had continued despite their best efforts to stop it. The lightning attack had destroyed much of the marine formation closer to the front line and several around here, allowing the Kuja ship to burst out and away from any marine vessels on this flank. Now it was in danger of escaping entirely.

"As much as I don't like saying it, it's good to see you, Chaton. But I wish you had brought a few more real fighters with you," she grumbled. "Commodores at least could be helpful here."

"Now that hurts, Tsuru! Surely, my arrival like this through all this chaos should've at least gotten me a heartfelt thanks. You can take playing hard to get a little too far," Chaton tsked, shaking his head. "Keep that up, and I might just transfer my affections towards Gion."

"As if she would give you the time of day, you old pervert!" Tsuru shot back, but without any heat. While Chaton was a bit of a flirt, he actually wasn't much of a pervert anymore these days. *He has definitely mellowed quite a bit from our time as green seamen.* "Here's what we're going to do. Koby and Helmeppo concentrate on holing their ship below the waterline. That might slow their ship down. Strawberry and Chaton work together and take the fight to those four. I will join you in a bit."

"Oh? What're you planning?" Chaton asked while Strawberry grumbled, still incensed by the loss of his sword.

"With all those ships gone, we might be able to get a call through on the Den Den Mushi," Tsuru stated, pulling a small Coms Mushi out from her jacket, wincing at the movement. *Fuck but my arm is throbbing. It isn't broken but that was way closer than I like.* "If so, we might be able to get a few of the other vice admirals on this flank back to us."

"Maybe, but maybe not. A few of Whitebeard's division commanders are down, but most of their ships are intact. And unlike us, the Whitebeard crew has a large contingent of fishermen to help their wounded out of the drink, he thought grimly. I saw at least three of those division commanders get pulled out of the water before they drowned. It's the vice admirals and commodores who are keeping the fight going on this flank at all," Chaton warned before shuddering. "And I know that lightning ball thing took out several of us, not just our lower-rankers. I saw it insanely close."

"All the better then to get them to leave the main fight. We've still got a slim numbers advantage near the central area of the Tarai Current," Tsuru answered, taking in more of what she could feel through Kenbunshoku at a glance. Within seconds, the Great Staff Officer weighed the options and decided. "Hancock and cutting whatever strange connection she has to the Straw Hats is more important than finishing off normal Whitebeard pirates. Most might have a high bounty, but not to the range of a Shichibukai, and cutting out whatever support that woman could give Straw Hat Luffy if he escapes from this battle," *which a Lightning user could do as easily as Kizaru*, Tsuru thought unhappily, "is most important. As is simply stopping a rogue Shichibukai on its own."

"And what of the princess?" Strawberry growled, the humiliation of a moment before flashing through his mind, as did what Vivi had said of her loyalty to Monkey D. Luffy. . "What about her?"

"Kill her," Tsuru growled, not noticing how both Koby and Helmeppo flinched, staring at one another below the trio of higher-ranking officers.

"That's cold, Tsu-chan." Chaton shook his head. "Whatever blackmail we used to get her involved in this won't stand up to the shock of us leading a princess of an allied country to death."

"Maybe so, but it is better than her escaping to spread confusion on what happened here. We will need to prepare that narrative carefully," she stated coldly. "Now, let's just get this done and see what we can salvage from the rest of this debacle."

Chaton nodded seriously, although he was hiding a wince as he did. Having traveled practically the entire battlefield to get here, Chaton knew precisely how much Tsuru was actually underselling things by calling this battle a debacle. This fight was a disaster for the marines already, and it wasn't over yet. It would take years of recruitment to get their numbers up again after this and far longer to replace the number of trained fighters. He had seen at least a few commodores die to Straw Hat's lightning strike, and he also had seen only one surviving member of the giant squad still fighting and a few other vice admirals, their bodies floating among the jetsam. And then there were the lower ranking seamen to consider. Thousands of them had already died before the Goro Goro no Mi user had struck. Now, that number had probably doubled, if not more. Whole fleets were just... gone, now. What that would mean for the future, for the peace of the world, Chaton could barely imagine.

"And the day isn't even halfway done," he murmured, even as he launched himself down towards Hancock as Hancock hopped to the air once more, closing with them in turn. *Only victory will make the price we've paid worth it, and perhaps, he reflected, not even then.*

OOOOOOO

One area of the battlefield was completely outside even Kenbunshoku range of Luffy's lightning attack: far out on the left flank, where the Straw Hat Crew fought two CP0 assassins sent after them. They were intent on killing Nico Robin, ordered to slay the ghost of Ohara by their Master, Shepherd Ju Peter.

Unfortunately, their arrival had coincided with attacks from below, not only having been helped by the sudden arrival of Dellinger, a Fighting Fish man of the Doflamingo crew. Currently, he was rather neatly distracting Jinbe from the tougher fight in the air.

And as Sanji had feared, Chopper's shouted exclamation about the CP0 agents having a weakness in that they were unused to protect their faces with armor-type Haki, had not gone unheard. Worse, in the ten minutes since that shout, the two assassins had changed tactics. Instead of trying to close to board the ship, they shifted away and began to launch more long-range attacks toward it, forcing Zoro, Sanji and Chopper to rush out to meet them. While the Adam Wood was able to take a lot of damage, there was still a limit to the hits the ship could take from up high, especially after the hit the deck had already taken from Kizaru.

This meant that they were outside the range of any help Robin could give the others, and Robin watched through dozens of eyes scattered along the prow of the ship towards the fight going on in the air from her position on the bridge. "The boys are not having a good time of it out there. In the air, those two are incredibly maneuverable and almost Luffy-like in the number of tricks they have."

"You think **you're** annoyed by that or the boys? **I'm** a Shandian warrior, trained in aerial combat since before I could pick up an awl. And not only did they outmaneuver me, those assassins beat me so damn easily! Despite all the toughness training our Captain put us through," Laki grumbled from where she manned the wheel. "I faced the Buster Call at Water 7 alongside our Captain and I didn't get nearly as hurt in that fight as I did just now."

The amount of bandages that Chopper had wrapped around her middle and thighs was a mute testament to that. Added to this were the previous burns that she had taken when Admiral Kizaru bombarded the ship with his Yasakani no Magatama. The fact that Laki was still able to stand was a testament to how strong she was despite dealing with several broken ribs and the pain coming from her shoulder, pierced as it had been by one of Kizaru's attacks.

Robin winced, watching as Sanji take a hard hit from one of the twosome and nearly be smashed into Chopper. The two of them had trouble disentangling themselves, allowing both CP0 members to turn on Zoro. Instead of breaking through the Straw Hats, both of them had

seemingly decided to simply wear them down. *They mean to kill the other members of my crew before coming for me.*

As she thought that, the old fear, the fear of the Buster Call, the fear that the World Government would wipe out of existence anyone she worked with rose in her once more. But it couldn't stay in her mind for long. Not after what she had seen from her crew up to this point. Not as she watched Zoro fight both of them off, twirling into one of his attacks for just a second, then bouncing up and over a strike that went through that attack from one of the CP0 assassins, bringing his swords down in another strike. Red Mask barely got an arm coated with Busoshoku to block. The blow still smashed home hard, hurling the assassin down towards the ocean below. *Even without Luffy present, this crew is strong and will grow stronger.*

"I think that the boys are doing the best they can. We should do what we need to. Keep the ship on course, as Nami said, shifting around the battlefield to where we can better link up with the Kuja." With that, Robin created a mouth set aside where Nami was out on the deck, twirling her Clima Control staff. Thankfully, Eve had stepped up to take over running the engine, so she had concentration to spare. "Nami, how much longer do you think it will take us to get back within range of the main battlefield?"

"We took a wide loop around it, so we're basically coming in at the back of where the battle began at an angle. I don't have any idea what's going on there, though, not any more than Jinbe was able to tell us when he dropped off Makino and Brook, anyway," Nami answered, still twirling her staffs even as her arms began to twinge with pain. Luffy needed all the help he could get to use his lightning powers, and if that meant her arms would be sore tomorrow, so be it. "Maybe... another seventy leagues? Or about thirty minutes at our current speed."

The two former bounty hunters sat nearby on the deck, leaning against the main gun turret. While Makino was far better now than she had been back before the crew left Alabasta, when it came to heights and using Geppo, she still didn't want to trust it in a battle against someone like their current opponents, not above the unforgiving ocean. As for Brook, he had no ability with Geppo, although he did have his own somewhat strange technique that could allow him to skate across the water for a time. The Yomi Yomi no Mi user was still recovering from his recent bout with being dragged along by Jinbe through the ocean to the Everlasting Resolve in the first place.

This left only Chopper, Sanji and Zoro to take the battle to the two assassins, with occasional help from Perona's ghosts. *Although Perona's being very cautious in using them, worried about catching one of the boys.*

For just a moment, Robin wondered why she always labeled Sanji and Zoro as boys but had only rarely called Luffy that, even before they became involved romantically. Then she shook her head and set the odd thought to the side, turning to the here and now. *And honestly, from what I am seeing, Chopper might have been better to have stayed behind...*

That thought was accompanied by a wince as Robin saw Chopper, in his Guard Point, be used like a giant bowling ball to slam into Zoro from behind. The swordsman whirled around in time but, unable to use his swords on Chopper, soon found himself almost literally enveloped in the giant furball of the reindeer Zoan's furry globe of a body. A blow from below sent both of them skyrocketing, and then, once more, Red Mask shifted to help Long Arms, who had been holding off Sanji. "Their teamwork is truly incredible. Either Zoro or Sanji could possibly take on one alone, but combined, the two of them are beating all three."

In the battle Robin was observing, Chopper shifted into his speed point at that point. Bouncing around like the air had suddenly become full of trampolines and the reindeer was on some kind of narcotic substance, he zoomed in, trying to ram his horns into the back of one of the attacker's heads. Or at least, that was the plan.

Red Mask shifted his head sideways, letting the reindeer pass, stabbing upwards with a single finger, the finger slammed into the bottom of Chopper's chin. "Shigan." It was all Chopper could do to shift his head sideways so that instead of punching through skin and bone, the auger-like attack skittered across the side of his jaw, causing a blast of pain to go through his jawline but doing no real damage.

Zoro attacked then, forcing Red Mask to pause his next attack on Chopper as Chopper continued on his way via Geppo. Instead, Red Mask moved into a series of Kami-E style dodges around Zoro's swords, one of them nicking hit the side of his knee, but not deep enough to actually penetrate, simply slicing through his pants legs there. The next second, the assassin's leg came up in a kick that Zoro was forced to block, crossing his swords, but instead, he caught the leg between his blades, holding the legs there. "Gotcha!"

Chopper came back in on the attack, but the back and forth swirl of Long Arms and Sanji's battle burst through the area, blocking Chopper for a second, which was obviously Long Arm's plan as he used Chopper to interfere with Sanji's assault before flicking around him in a quick, short-ranged Soru. Sanji desperately ducked under a blow from one of Long Arm's blades but found his face eating a knee.

Busoshoku met Busoshoku for a second, then Sanji was blasted away. Steam came off of his head for a second as his Busoshoku faded. Blood dripped from a smashed nose, his Busoshoku having failed against the WeeGee assassin's and the blonde snarled, wiping it away. "The only blood a cook should see is as an ingredient, blast it."

Zoro growled, lowering his blades as he began to bounce to one side of the pair once more, both of them twisting around, one to watch him, the other to watch Chopper and Sanji. "This is getting tedious! None of the few strikes we're actually landing on these fuckers are doing enough damage, and the moment it looks as if we will, their damn teamwork comes into play, turning the momentum against us again!"

"I think it's more like we need to work on **our** teamwork than we need to work on breaking up theirs," Chopper muttered sotto voce, his thoughts mirroring Robin's of a moment ago as he bounced in the air a little lower than the other two, exhaustion starting to get to him. He didn't have the endurance of either of the two other fighters, having mostly worked on his speed, strength, and overcoming the need for his rumble balls to transform since joining the crew.

He could use Geppo. He could even use a very slow version of Soru, but Kami-E was out of the question. Chopper hadn't seen the point of Tekkai, although he had gone through the toughness training all of them were forced to endure because their captain was a sadist. At this point, he didn't need to use his rumble balls to achieve any of his forms, bar the massive bestial form, the one that stole away his self-control. *And that form wouldn't be any help here, since I can't use Geppo when I've gone psycho.*

All of that, coupled with his training in Anything Goes Aerial Style, had allowed Chopper to keep up, but he knew that he really wasn't making a big difference. The reason for that was that the two assassins seemed experts in forcing their enemies to get in one another's way, and with the Straw Hats being who they were, that tactic was working magnificently. "I'm just glad they haven't knocked you or Sanji into one another again," Chopper said in a louder voice. "Seeing the two of you ready to fight while the two of them turned their attention to me wasn't exactly fun."

Despite the scowl on Zoro's face or even Chopper's maudlin comment, Sanji was actually in high spirits. "You're forgetting something very important. These assassins are operating under a time crunch. We're not."

Both of the assassins frowned behind their masks at that, not needing to glance at one another to know that they were wondering the same thing. What was Black Leg talking about?

At first, Chopper and Zoro didn't get it, then Chopper did, and he grinned viciously. "You mean—" He began, only to be cut off as Sanji clamped a hand over his mouth.

"That's right," Sanji snickered. "All we need to do is hold them here."

Wondering what that was about, but deciding that it wasn't a bluff of some kind, the two assassins charged forwards. Zoro met Long Arms, who was in the lead, blade against the blade. Knocking the short sword to one side with one of his swords, Zoro twirled into an attack with the sword in his mouth even as the other stabbed to the side, trying to hit Red Mask. He succeeded, although a second sword in Long Arms' hand blocked his strike against him before disappearing back into Long Arms' sleeves.

The one against Red Mask landed but did no damage. The man had covered himself with Busoshoku again, and while he was knocked sideways through the air, he wasn't hurt. This

allowed him to launch himself at an angle toward Sanji, who was forced to turn in that direction, blinding him to a series of thrown balls from Long Arms.

Chopper leaped up, getting in the way of the attacks, shifting into his Guard Point and simply absorbing the Finger Bomb attacks, grunting a bit as one got through his fur to hit flesh, but with most of its momentum removed. Zoro's swords flashed, chopping to aim his way in half while he closed, battering aside both blades of Long Arms' hands, watching as one of those blades disappeared into his voluminous sleeves once more, almost cutting off the man's hand as he held his arm forward, tossing out still more Finger Bombs.

For a few seconds the trio of Straw Hats fought desperately, with Long Arms and Red Mask pressing in from two angles, forcing Zoro, Chopper and Sanji back. Thankfully, the trio of Straw Hats had learned a bit of how to work together by this point. Chopper stayed on defense, bouncing in between incoming attacks. There he would change into his Guard Point for a brief second to take the attack before shifting into his small form, letting Sanji or Zoro leap up over him easily, crossing the intervening distance.

At one point, Red Mask was just a bit too slow to back away, and his Busoshoku was once more tested by Sanji's Diable Jambe. A series of heavy kicks landed on his shoulder and neck and the top of his head.

Yet his attack did no real damage. Instead, Sanji was forced to flip back and away as a hand came up, intending to grasp his foot as the other hand shot out a Finger bomb. The grab missed, the Finger Bomb was caught by Chopper.

Meanwhile, Long Arms' blades flashed in a series of cuts and parries against Zoro, the two of them exchanging so many strikes in so short a time that the noise of one segued directly into the other a loud series of clanging noises that sounded almost like a strange song. Then one of Long Arms' blades once more disappeared into a sleeve, and a few more Finger Bomb strikes lashed out forcing Zoro to cut them in half. This let Long Arms close faster than Zoro could react.

The next second, a Shigan took Zoro in the thigh, the meat of it rather than anything important. In return, Zoro was able to get in a cut of his own, stabbing forward, recovering from the strike to his leg far faster than Long Arms expected.

The strike took Long Arms in the center of his chest, hurling him backward, but once more, doing no damage thanks to a hasty use of Tekkai. Since Zoro hadn't covered his blade with Haki at the time, that was enough.

Then, from below, there came a geyser shooting up from the ocean. The unexpected blast of water caught both of the assassins right on their feet, flipping them up and over despite their best efforts to fight against it.

Both of them were able to recover and moved to regroup, but that single geyser was followed by two more. Two more geysers followed, hitting them both unerringly. Both of them were smashed into different directions, putting them further away from one another than they had been since Red Mask raced ahead to engage the Straw Hats on the Everlasting Resolve.

This was beyond the calculation of either of the assassins. While both of them had been taking hits from the Straw Hats, it was very clear that they were giving better than they were taking. However facing a Shichibukai, even if both of them were fully prepared for it, was something well beyond their abilities. Perhaps if more of their fellows were on the scene, the rest of CP0 that could have been possible but just the two of them against a Shichibukai? That was a losing proposition, regardless of the Shichibukai in question.

Yet they had their orders and once more, their strategy shifted. Instead of trying to link up again, they put on speed, shifting further away from one another and then around the battlefield towards the Everlasting Resolve, closing with the ship as fast as possible from two angles, leaving the others in the dust.

This proved to be a fatal mistake. Jinbe fell back down into the water below and, a second later, punched upwards, aiming toward where he could sense the two assassins. "Yarinami!"

From the surface of the water erupted two spears of water. Zooming forward faster and far more powerful than any of the Finger Bombs the two assassins had used before this. They crossed the space between Jinbe and his targets within seconds. The watery spears forced both of them out of their charge towards the Everlasting Resolve.

In turn, this allowed Zoro to close the distance with Long Arms. His arms pumped up to an enormous degree, he shouted, "Your fight is with me! Ichi Gorilla, Daibutsu Giri!"

While powerful, the series of horizontal sword slashes that made up this attack really wasn't meant to break through Long Arms' Busoshoku. Instead, it was simply meant to push him further away from his fellow and the Everlasting Resolve alike as he was forced to defend against each one in turn, the hammering power of it threatening to interrupt the assassin's Geppo. And it worked.

For one of the few times since the fight began, Zoro's attack utterly overwhelmed Long Arms' Geppo technique, and even though he used Busoshoku to deaden any of the actual damage he might've taken from the strikes that got through his defense. The momentum of them still sent him skipping along the top of the water like a stone for a few seconds before getting his feet under him. By which time, Zoro was between him and the ship, charging forwards.

On the other side of the ship, Red Mask had been able to dodge Jinbe's attack far better than his teammate and quickly righted his course back toward the Everlasting Resolve. Jinbe,

Sanji and Chopper were already charging after them, but he closed quickly with the Everlasting Resolve.

“Yohohohoho! Now it is time for me to redeem myself in the eyes of the lovely ladies of this crew! Perhaps so much so that one of the other might allow me a glimpse of their silky darlings.” Unaware that he had just caused a shiver to go down Luffy’s spine, which cost him in the form of a blow to the side of the head that would’ve put nearly any combatant below the rank of vice admiral out of the battle from Kizaru, Brook stood, balancing on the gunwale as he stared up at the incoming assassin.

All around him, an aura of cold chill began to appear as he held his sword at his side before leaping upwards. He put all of his strength in his legs into a single leap forward and moved forward so fast and so strong it looked almost like he used Soru to close the intervening distance. “Hanauta Sancho: Yahazu Giri!”

Red Mask scowled, holding in place for a second and, his Kenbunshoku flaring a warning, decided to use Busoshoku instead of Tekkai. From the sheer force of the first strike that hit him, Red Mask knew that had been the right move. Stumbling back through the air, he attempted to grab at Brook’s blade, trying to hold it in place as Brook seamlessly shifted into a new series of attacks. However, Brook was coming on too fast, and he was forced to dodge still more before he was able to get in underneath Brook’s attacks, his fist lashing out with enough force to shatter bone.

Brook folded around the attack, his blade coming up in a strike toward Red Mask’s neck that connected but did no damage. Instead, his sword bounced off, and Brook was forced to twirl in place with the move. “Ara, that Tekkai is quite the amazing mood.”

Red Mask tried to slice at his head, but a Ghost zoomed down from above, forcing him to dodge. This let Brook continue his attack. “Who would have thought that the Ghost Princess and I would be on the same side of a fight? Yohohohoho!”

Grimacing, Red Mask twisted around, smashing Brook’s arms and chest with enough force to break a normal bone, rattling him even as Red Mask turned. A series of Finger Bombs dealt with most of the ghosts, and then Red Mask was in close with Brook again, too close for Perona to interfere.

Twin pistol shots rang out, coming in from dangerously close to Brook, but one of them struck Red Mask’s right cheek right over the mask and the other his lower leg, followed by still two more as Makino began to fire up at him. Moreover, those bullets were covered with Busoshoku. While she hadn’t sat down yet with the Kuja and learned how they were able to make arrows strike like cannonballs via raw Haki, Makino had long since mastered the skill to coat bullets with Busoshoku. They wouldn’t last for long, obviously, not away from her body and her will, but they lasted long enough to be used in battle.

Grimacing, Red Mask finally succeeded in grabbing Brook's sword, twirling around and using him as a shield, only to realize that this failed miserably, when Makino's bullets passed through his ribs to still hit Red Mask's chest. "Yohohohoho! I'm sorry to say, but because I am all skin and bones, literally bones, I don't do well as a shield! Yohohohoho, skull joke!" Brook shouted before thrusting his head back.

The headbutt to Red Mask did nothing, but Brooks' afro succeeded in blinding him, yet Perona's attempt to bring a ghost in again failed thanks to Red Mask's Kenbunshoku.

Yet Red Mask couldn't dodge as Brook hit him with a palm strike to the chest. A palm strike helped along by an impact dial, courtesy of Laki. That dial had taken several powerful shots over the days leading up to this fight, although Laki hadn't gotten a chance to use it before this. Now, though, it hit with all the power of a thundering herd of elephants, hurling Red Mask backward and up, breaking his Busoshoku entirely for the first time in the fight.

The momentum of the strike also landed him directly in the waiting arms of Jinbe, Sanji and Chopper. Red Mask recovered just in time to eat a rose cross from Chopper, which did nothing but halt him in place for a moment. Then a shout of "Fishman Karate: Soshark!" sounded.

Desperately, Red Mask gathered his Busoshoku again, but to no avail. The raw strength and power of Jinbe's grip shattered Busoshoku's shoulder and collarbone alike. The shoulder almost literally exploded under the power of the strike, bones shattering almost as if a bomb had exploded under Red Mask's skin, completely tearing the limb away from his body save for a thin stretch of skin at the bottom of his armpit.

Sanji finished him off, the man already going into shock from his wounds. Unable to muster any more Busoshoku. He took a kick to the head that, despite his last desperate efforts to call on Tekkai, struck with all of Sanji's strength behind it. Red Mask's head was caved in by that strike, and he fell, dead before he hit the waves below.

Looking around, Sanji could see that Long Arms and Zoro had covered a great deal of distance and were far enough away from the ship to be no more threat. Seeing that, he took out a cigarette, lit it, took a drag, and pointed it at Jinbe, who was also gazing out into the distance where the first mate and assassin were doing battle. "So, what happened to whoever was attacking Eve from below?"

"Unfortunately, rabid animals do not only come in the four-legged form," Jinbe intoned grimly. "He was a member of Doflamingo's crew, brought in to fight the Whitebeard Pirates, I presume. He decided to challenge me, and it did not go well. I dislike killing other fishermen intensely, but in his case, I rather think I did the World a favor."

"Speaking of the World, what is going to happen with you on our crew going forward? I mean, you can't be a Shichibukai after all this, right?" Chopper asked as he began to hop down

towards the ship where Brook had already settled down, having used an umbrella borrowed from Perona to almost float through the air back to land.

Jinbe opened his mouth, then closed it, thinking. "I don't know. My name and my position as Shichibukai protected my crew. I will need to know what is going to happen going forward. I suppose it will be determined by the outcome of this war, as with so many other things."

"Isn't that the truth," Sanji muttered, turning his attention in the direction where distant thunder could be heard, the sound of cannons going off continually.

While his crewmen took the time to gather themselves a bit before heading back down to the Everlasting Resolve, Zoro found himself locked in deadly combat with Long Arms. With no backup, the two of them went at it hammer and tongs. Long Arms used a primarily stabbing kind of style, almost reminiscent of the style a rapier user would use, despite the fact that his short swords were more like spathas or Roman gladius than anything else. Short but with thick blades, made to withstand a lot of punishment, with a heavy point and a merely decent chopping blade to them. He also could switch from one weapon to two, to using Finger Bombs or Shigan. And like his friend had shown against Brook and Chopper, Rankyaku-style attacks from his legs could come at any time.

In contrast, Zoro was a pure swordsman. He didn't have any other weapons or tricks, and he used his legs to Geppo, being too tired at this point to do anything more and not in favor of using kicks in his own style anyway. That kind of thing smacked too much of the Love Cook in his mind.

Each Rankyaku was sliced through by his swords, each Finger Bomb deflected or cut in half. He tried to stay close, forcing Long Arms to use his blades more often. And more often than not, it was his third blade, Wado, which took Long Arms by surprise or pushed him onto the defense. He simply could not seem to get a handle on Zoro's three swords style without his companion there to cover his mistakes.

Between one exchange and the next, his Busoshoku wasn't quite fast enough, and Long Arms found his mask sliced away across his nose, the bottom half falling away to reveal his actual mouth beneath. Once revealed, his face was pasty white, unused to the touch of sunlight, with a stubble for a beard and thin, almost flappy lips. But in return, Zoro took a Shigan to his neck that should have torn open his throat. His hasty use of Busoshoku saved him, the blow bouncing away but still causing him to gag, opening himself up to several more blows from Long Arms' swords.

The fourth blow, which would've been a stab, was blocked by Shusui as Zoro recovered. He twisted around, shunting the blade to the side, with Sandai Kitetsu coming up in a strike. Black with Busoshoku, it hammered into the second blade of Long Arms, Busoshoku against Busoshoku, the sound a clang louder than most before it.

Zoro allowed the technique to fade from the rest of his body, concentrating his Haki into his blades, and the two of them disengaged from one another for a few seconds. Then, they were coming in once more, with Long Arms completely covered in Busoshoku in comparison to Zoro's blades.

For a few seconds, it looked as if Zoro had the upper hand, and then once more, Long Arms' legs came into the action. A point-blank Rankyaku caught Zoro, pushing him backward, breaking his forward momentum and his series of strikes alike. Instantly following up Long Arms stabbed out, breaking through Zoro's hasty defense, cutting into Zoro's side and chest with his blades.

Blood spurted as Zoro fell back with a grunt of pain. Losing his Geppo for a second, Zoro only regained it just as his feet hit the water below, kicking out hard to regain some altitude.

Instead of pushing on back towards the *Everlasting Resolve*, Long Arms twisted around in midair, staring down at Zoro, still covered in Busoshoku. "Objective, kill Nico Robin, is now impossible. Bringing your head back at least will let me redeem some of CPO's honor from this."

"HAH! A WeeGee assassin talks about honor?" Zoro spat to one side, grimacing as the pain of his injuries began to tell on him. He was also losing blood badly from the saw cut to his side. The one across his chest wasn't all that bad, a shallow slice cutting across the wound he had taken there from Mihawk, something that infuriated him more than hurt. Strange though it might be, but having that wound honorably taken in his battle against the Strongest Swordsman in the World marred by another wound from this bastard hurt Zoro's pride as a swordsman almost as much as taking a wound in the back would have.

The wound to his side was much deeper and was bleeding profusely down his side, dark red droplets dripping down to the ocean below. "You don't know the meaning of the word! And if you think you can take my head, come and try it!"

Long Arms dove down towards him and this time, the exchange was very definitely in the assassin's favor. Zoro was bleeding and could barely use Geppo any longer to stay above the waterline, let alone dance around.

This was what Long Arms proceeded to do, bouncing this way, then that one coming in on Zoro from every direction he could as fast as he could, blades and body coated with Busoshoku.

But as he did, each time, Zoro met his attack calmly, his own swords once more coated in his own willpower. And when Long Arms tried to attack from behind, Zoro twisted, bringing Sendai Kitetsu and Shusui together into a defensive strike that forced Long Arms to block with both his blades. One of which Zoro's Shusui sliced clean through, his Busoshoku overcoming Long Arm's will where their blades met. He was able to defend his body from the strike that

followed, which smashed into his side and his other arm, but was still hurled sideways from the blow.

He recovered, bouncing up all out of the water quickly, but by then, Zoro had readied one of his powerful strikes. "Santoryu Ogi: Rokudo no Tsuji!"

He crossed the intervening distance so fast that Long Arms couldn't dodge. All he could do was thrust his sword forward and hope to take it as six slashes came in, far faster than he could dodge as Zoro brought all three blades into play, his body twisting into an s-shape for a moment. Although his own blade was able to track Zoro's movements and caught Zoro in the side, Zoro's strikes hit, too. Busoshoku meant Busoshoku, one used as a shield, the other as a cutting edge.

Once more, the cutting edge won.

Long Arms looked down at his body and saw one arm falling away, followed by the next, staring up at Zoro as he bounced slightly upwards, taking Wado Ichimonji out of his mouth before sheathing his blades one after another. Pulling at the blade stuck into his upper pectoral, tossing it into the water, remarking quietly, "The best thing about using Busoshoku on your swords like that might be that when you remove the technique, there's no blood on them."

He watched the light leave Long Arms' eyes behind his mask as the upper portion of his body, right up above the stomach, slid sideways, followed by his leg sliding the other way. The man's Busoshoku remained covering his body for a few more seconds, and then blood and viscera began to spray everywhere as the dead assassin's corpse fell down towards the waters below.

Zoro smiled, then gasped and lost control of Geppo, falling back towards the waters only to find Jinbe bursting out of them, grabbing at him as he fell. "Damn, you've got some good timing, don't you?" the swordsman gasped.

"I actually was watching from below for several minutes. But, considering that you were facing that assassin as a swordsman, I determined that you would not accept any interruption. Then, too, there were other reasons for my remaining out of that fight." Zoro looked up in confusion at Jinbe's face for a second, then turned his gaze to where Jinbe was looking.

Nearby was a wrecked ship that had somehow gone floating out of the Tarai Current. His masts had all been smashed off, and its sides had been sliced open in numerous segments.

And at the prow of the ship stood Hawk Eyes. He looked a little battered around the edges, a thin cut on one cheek, his clothing ruffled in numerous places and cut through in others. But otherwise, he looked hale and hearty as he looked at Jinbe and Zoro thoughtfully. "You're stronger than the last time I saw you, Zoro." He held up the black blade, holding it in the air in front of him. "Do you still desire my title? To be the World's Strongest Swordsman?"

Grunting in pain, Zoro made to push himself up out of Jinbe's arms, but Jinbe held him, glaring up at his fellow Shichibukai. "I know not what has passed between you two, but surely you have not become a carrion eater, Hawk Eyes, to go after someone already wounded near to death?"

Hawk Eyes didn't answer his fellow Shichibukai. *Or should that be former Shichibukai* he thought as he examined the fire in the younger man, the ambition still blazing hot in Zoro's eyes despite being close to bleeding out in Jinbe's arms currently. The way he gripped the hilts of his swords, ready to draw and fight if need be.

And then, Mihawk smiled. "Grow stronger than even this, Zoro. Grow strong enough to stand at the center of a maelstrom of violence and destiny like that." Hawk Eyes gestured towards the center of the battle, almost invisible to them where they were over the horizon. Yet it was still audible to their ears despite the range, the sound of cannonballs, the lightning strikes, the shaking of the whole world caused by Whitebeard's quake powers, and the weird bellows of some monstrous creature carrying to them like the battle of distant giants. "Grow strong enough to stand beside your Captain on the largest stage as we are already doing, and I will see you in the New World."

With that, he turned, leaving Zoro and Jinbe behind, along with the body of Vista of the Flower Swords, who we had slain, along with most of the man's division. The battle between them had been magnificent, a true clash between expert swordsmen, with none of the tricks he had seen in Zoro's fight. Afterward, he would willingly have let the small fry leave. But such was their loyalty to Vista they had attacked him, even knowing they stood no chance.

But it was over, and now he made for the center of the battle. *My own interests in this battle are mostly met by this point, but for one thing. To challenge Whitebeard myself, to see if he truly is still as strong as they say. And perhaps to witness the dawn of a new age. That is a certainty. It only remains to be seen what kind of age it might be.*

Behind him, Jinbe slowly shook his head. "Whatever happened between the two of you? I have never known Hawk Eyes to be a master of prose, and that almost sounded like encouragement."

Zoro didn't answer. The instant Hawk Eyes had turned away, his eyes fluttered back in his head, and he had collapsed unconscious into Jinbe's arms. Still holding the hilts to his swords in a white-knuckled grip.

OOOOOOO

Grimacing as his Kenbunshoku informed him of the deaths of nearly half the marine's remaining fleet, Aokiji decided he was now thoroughly done with this entire damn day. "Dammit, what would it take to just let me go back and go to sleep and have all of this be a bad wild-ass dream brought about by too much grog?" the Ice Logia User muttered.

Part of his Devil Fruit allowed him to think coolly and logically regardless of circumstances if he wanted to, somewhat like the soul of ice did for Luffy, if nowhere near as robotic or inhuman as that technique made Luffy. He was one of the better Kenbunshoku users within the Marines, and his battle with Ace had slowly pushed the pair of them back towards the main battle. Right now, they were near where Aokiji could sense Garp going crazy.

The former hero of the marines was now shattering marine ships and morale alike, but was being careful not to kill many of the low rankers as he fought Doflamingo. Nearby, Aokiji could also sense Marco, one of the few fighters in the world Aokiji knew he could not beat in a straight-up fight. The phoenix flame and healing ability were a complete counter to his ice, and Marco was known as a Busoshoku user of some repute, too.

He had been sensing the deaths of dozens of people but then had come of crescendo death accompanied by the crash of lightning across the battlefield, snuffing out practically everything that remained of the Marines on this flank and a large chunk of their main body that was within his range.

*I should be back there! I should be fighting it out with Straw Hat. I'm the only one of us who has faced him, who has seen the odd tricks he can pull out. If he can use a Logia Fruit and those strange **nothing** attacks of his, then he is a match for any one of us admirals. Fuck, I would've never thought that he had eaten the god damn lightning fruit! Hina was so certain that the Goro Goro no Mi had disappeared, and I wanted to believe her, too. But could Hina have been suborned—*

His teeth clenched shut, his paranoid thoughts set aside as a blow to the side of the head nearly broke through his armor technique. Ace had suddenly crossed the distance between them using his Afterburner technique, where before Ace had been careful to keep his distance, happy to keep wearing Aokiji down rather than chance his Busoshoku against the Admiral's.

There was the loud, gong-like noise from Buso Haki smashing into one another before Ace flipped himself away. Again, his entire body turned in the flame, roaring away to land nearby on the ice flow, melting a portion of it as lances of fire hammered into Aokiji, who grimaced at the heat of them even as he used armor technique to defend himself for a second instead of shifting his consciousness away. "Where the hell was your mind at Snowball? You think you have enough time to--"

Somewhat annoyed, Aokiji transferred his body down into the ice flow. Ice clones formed all around Ace, each of them sending out ice particles towards ace, trying to envelop the fire user in a cone of ice before he could respond. It didn't work, but it allowed Aokiji, who had kept his consciousness in the ice floe underneath them, to close in turn. An instant later, an ice clone rose a few inches away from the area where the ice was melting around Ace, hidden behind another for a moment. The real clone Aokiji meant to inhabit became flesh and blood for a moment before Aokiji's form was covered with Busoshoku. He was ready just as his work

on renewing the ice clones all around Ace failed under the tremendous heat the younger man was creating, and as the defending clone melted, Aokiji charged through.

For a few seconds, he pressed Ace backward, breaking through his defenses several times to land hard, punishing blows on the younger man, one of which knocked a tooth out. The next nearly caught Ace in the eye, which would have possibly cost him the fight, costing him half his vision. It was clear that Aokiji's mastery of Busoshoku was overcoming Ace with every blow they exchanged.

Suddenly, Aokiji felt his feet give. His Kenbunshoku flaring a warning, he kicked off the ground using Geppo and taking a blast of fire that sent him tumbling through the air, causing him to hiss in pain as the heat of the attack hurt him through his Busoshoku, the heat far worse than the aura of flame Ace had been using a moment ago.

Glancing down to where he had been standing, Aokiji grimaced at what he saw. Ace had used his flame to burn straight through the ice floe directly below them. This would have dumped Aokiji, in his Busoshoku form, down into the water if not for his quick reaction time.

Raising ice between himself and the ongoing attack allowed Aokiji to bounce away, but the damage had been done. Aokiji's entire body was in pain now under the skin, and he was sweating a lot, his heart pounding from dealing with the heat.

When he landed and looked across the ice floe at the fire user, the last vestiges of even his former serious air was gone, to be replaced by a glare of actual anger. "You're tricky, I will give you that. But I think we both know who is winning this fight."

Ace licked away the blood from his lips, grimacing internally. Aokiji had wrung his bell more than a few times in the seconds it took Ace to first respond and then set up his trap. Nevertheless, he was undaunted, even as he felt his endurance starting to fail. *Fucking hell, I was in those Seastone cuffs too long.* "Say that when you're standing over my corpse, Aokiji. Or else you're just spouting hot air..."

Both men paused, and then Ace shook his head. "Sorry. Didn't actually mean that pun."

"Good to know. One shouldn't have to deal with the pain of punnery as well as fighting for their lives." For a moment, the two men nodded in unusual agreement, and then Aokiji launched a series of towering ice glaciers and ice lions toward Ace, who responded in kind. The war of ice and fire would continue for a while longer...

OOOOOOO

Elsewhere, a battle between a pirate captain and a marine had come to a conclusion. In this case, the battle between the Shichibukai Blackbeard, who was trying to go where he should never have, and Vice Admiral Mozambica, who found himself the first line of defense between

Blackbeard and the goal he had in mind for years: the villains and scum of the sea hidden away in the depths of Impel Down. That was why he had become a Shichibukai, to use the cover of the government to gather strong crewmen for his fleet.

And what better place is there to do that than Impel Down? People strong enough to be sealed into the so-called Sixth floor, people who would be desperate enough to escape to swear allegiance to anyone. *Even a one-armed man like me*, Blackbeard thought.

Grimacing a little at the pain from some of the hits the guy had gotten in, he stalked past the broken remains of the Vice Admiral who had met him and Laffitte in the entrance hall of the prison. "Blast it. If only the Yami Yami no Mi was able to take away pain just as much as it makes me so dense that I'm hard to actually hurt. Those hits may not have busted ribs or even bruised, but they still hurt."

"So you say after taking on a vice admiral, Captain. Methinks you just like complaining," his navigator interjected from behind him, chuckling dryly.

"Zehahaha, well, perhaps there is some truth to that. After the wounds I took from Ace, can you blame me for taking pleasure in complaining about being further battered by life? If I don't take some pleasure in that, what's the point?" Blackbeard deadpanned, shaking the stump of his arm at Laffitte.

Laffitte chuckled, too. He had been appalled months back when he met up with his Captain once more after being sent to speak to the World Government about them. But like their former marksman, Laffitte had a somewhat jaundiced view of the world and what happened within it. If their captain was to be the first one-armed ruler of the world, so be it. *And at least he hasn't lost his sense of humor. That would be a true tragedy*, Laffitte thought as he stabbed one of the marines near the doorway leading deeper into the prison. The man gasped and then lay still, joining his fellows in death.

Soon, the pair entered the prison, but instead of making for the elevator, they turned aside, entering the logistics center of the prison. Quickly, they came to the door leading to the central communication center for the prison. Laffitte pushed open the door lightly with his cane from the side, bowing his captain grandly through. "After you, Captain."

"Zehahaha That--" Blackbeard laughed again, his words interrupted as a few musket balls passed through the doorway. "--loses some of its impact when you know I'm the only one among us that can survive being shot."

With another laugh at Laffitte's droll expression, Blackbeard entered the room in high spirits, although he needed to duck to get his head and shoulders through the doorway and even shift sideways through it. Doors were generally not made for people his size, he had found. *Funny, that is the one thing I miss from being among Whitebeard's crew. I hated having to act the part of a dutiful son, laughing and trading jokes with the others, especially Jose and his*

fucking knock-knock joke mania. But every ship in the fleet had hatches and halls built to his and the old man's size, which meant they could fit me, too.

As he entered, a female voice shouted, "Fire!" At that signal, dozens of musket balls were shot towards him from different angles.

Deciding he didn't want to just tank this attack, Blackbeard raised a hand in front of him. *And besides, they could be useful, just like the rest I've absorbed with my fruit.* A small black hole appeared, sucking in everything that was coming towards him. He held the black hole there until the final shot rang out, then allowed it to dissipate, waiting for some future moment to release them again.

Now, he strode forward, smirking at all of the security guards in the room. "Zehahaha. Well, which of you is in charge? Or rather, which of you is going to live Zehahaha by telling me what I want to know?"

"You can't believe you'll get away with this Shichibukai! The Marines will—" The only woman in the room began, but Blackbeard's laugh cut her off.

"Zehahaha Loyalty! I like loyalty. But only if it's paired with some common sense." He loomed over the woman, laying a hand gently, for him anyway, on her shoulder, threatening to press her down to her knees just by the weight of his hand, let alone his presence. "Now, prove to me you have some of that, hmm? Tell me what I need to know, and I won't kill all of you. I might even stop your former prisoners from doing the same... or worse... once I free them."

Domino gritted her teeth, glaring up at the man. "Never I..." Was all she could get out before the hand on her shoulder twitched sideways, grabbing her throat. Domino's fingers scrambled at that grip as Blackbeard lifted her up into the air, shaking like a rat in the mouth of a dog.

"That's the wrong answer. There aren't enough hot women on the planet for me to want to kill you, but..." There was a slicing sound from one side, and Domino, despite her hands clawing at Blackbeard's unfeeling grip, felt her eyes twitch in the direction of the sound just in time to see one of her fellow Mushi operators be stabbed through the side of the neck by the other pirate who had entered with Blackbeard. "That doesn't mean I won't kill someone else if you don't give me what I want to know."

Even so, Domino hesitated, tapping her throat, and Blackbeard loosened his grip. She breathed in quickly and, deciding to play for time for a second, the blonde woman asked what Blackbeard wanted to know in a bare whisper, as if she couldn't get the words out. And before Blackbeard could become annoyed, this attempt to play for time actually seemed to work.

There was a loud roar, and Minotaurus charged into the room, followed by Minozebra. Minotaurus almost gored the other pirate on his horns, even as he swung his large axe towards Blackbeard's back.

Domino found herself being flung through the air to crash into the right wall of the communications room. She slid down, nearly blacking out from the pain of hitting the wall, but not quite.

Blackbeard twisted around, a Busoshoku-clad fist smashing the weapon to one side as Minotaurus charged too quickly for him to use his black hole powers. For several moments the pair of Zoan types tried to get through his defenses, then from his burnt stump of an arm, a hole appeared, releasing what he had in his black hole for the second time that day. The bullets that he had absorbed moments ago, along with several hundred more items, daggers, swords, and still more bullets from the marines from the fight earlier, hammered into the two Zoans. Both rocked back on his feet, and then, Blackbeard grabbed Minotaurus' head, slamming him down into the ground and held him there with a knee, pummeling him with hard punches, so hard and so fast that the blows felt like they were Busoshoku-clad, but really weren't. Instead, they were simply powered by how incredibly dense Blackbeard had become after eating the Yami Yami no Mi. Just like it helped him against Ace, now it helped him against this Devil Fruit user's strike.

As he did, Laffitte dove forward, dueling with the purple and white-furred Zoan. He used speed and skill. A mastery of Kami-E, as well as the precision of his thin, long sword, was pitted against the overwhelming raw power of the Zoan and was able to keep him unscathed, if barely.

Seconds later, the Minotaur Zoan was knocked unconscious, and Blackbeard raised a hand, creating another black hole, sucking the unconscious form up, and then tossing it into his fellow. Laffitte dodged at the last second, and Minozebra was flung backward to dent the far wall. Before it could recover, both the unconscious form of Minotaurus and Minozebra disappeared into another black hole. Turning away from the doorway, Blackbeard sent a fierce grin at the remaining Mushi operators. "Zehahaha! Well, that was fun."

He looked at Domino, smirking now as she laid half-on, half-off one of the consoles, having fallen there after being thrown into the wall. "Now, are you going to tell me what I need to know?"

".... All of the keys to Level Six, cell or cuff, are kept by Chief Warden Magellan in his office. We don't keep any of them up here. His office is down on the fourth floor, off of Fiery Hell."

Blackbeard nodded at that and exited, heading towards the elevator shaft and leading down, only to turn back and point at her. "Laffitte, bring her. She's the only one of these fools with enough willpower to think of something, and I want her under my eyes for a bit. And not just because she's good eye candy either." He seemed to think for a moment, then stepped past

Domino and Laffitte. A fist was raised, and as Domino watched in horror, he brought it down, splattering the main Den Den Mushi, the mother of them all. Every other Mushi in the room instantly spasmed, shutting down, blood coming from their mouths. Some of them might survive the trauma of having the Matriarch Mushi they were tied to die like that, but most would not.

“And now, if any of them had any ideas, well... Zehahaha!” Blackbeard guffawed.

Grimacing in anger, the others watched as their officer was dragged away by Laffitte and Blackbeard.

As soon as the pirates were gone, two of them, men who had been sitting by where Domino had been thrown against the wall, looked at one another. She had hissed some whispered instructions to them, although now the easiest way to follow her orders was off the table. “I, I can run and, and use the emergency stairs to get down to the medical division.” The man’s voice firmed and he stood up decisively, “I’ll order them to evacuate the premises as quickly as possible.”

Everyone there nodded grimly. The medical division was only accessible via the main elevator if one had a special key to unlock a hidden door on the opposite side of the elevator than the rest of the prison’s floors on the opposite side. Even then, the medical division was down a hallway. Hopefully, that secrecy would last long enough for the man to take the emergency stairs down and get the wounded moving. Magellan and the other officers and enlisted who had survived this far could not be allowed to be found by Blackbeard or any of the prisoners he was here to set free. Because it looked like they simply could not stop him from doing so.

“Wh, what about Saldeath?” the other man asked, looking around, even as his fellow raced off. After a few minutes of scrambling, the staff officers stared at one another in horror. There was no way to call down to Beast Hell and Officer Saldeath. “T, the Beast Guards didn’t even slow that man down! There’s no way Saldeath and the Blugori will be able to stop him!”

“No, but we can hope that Blackbeard won’t stop at every floor. He only seemed interested in the sixth floor,” another man said glumly.

Nodding resolutely, the second man whom Domino had talked to raced for the door.

“Where are you going?” one of the other Mushi operators asked, looking defeated and terrified. All of them did. Today’s events had rocked their worldview to its core, and all of them knew they were still in danger.

“We need to get the word out somehow. There are a lot of marine ships out there, each of them with a Den Den Mushi tied to the marines escargatoire rather than the prison’s. It’s the only way we can get the word out!” the man shouted over his shoulder.

Racing outside, he gasped for breath, muttering under his breath, "Fuck me, I need to get more exercise," before stumbling to a halt. Ahead of him, an extremely small paddlewheel was pulling away from the docks. From here, he couldn't make out who was aboard, but that was the ship the external video Mushi had seen Blackbeard arriving in. "What the heck?"

Aboard the ship, Buggy laughed wildly, one hand holding the wheel, the other working to open a bottle of wine they had found in the ship's fully stocked larder. "We're away boys! Usopp, more coal in that engine, boyo, let's get well and hell out into the Calm Belt as fast as possible!"

Blackbeard and Laffitte had, perforce, had to use a ship designed to be worked by two people after the loss of the rest of their crew to Fire Fist's rampage on Jaya. Then, the pair had left their ship without a single guard to watch over it. Which had made it perfect for Buggy, Clay, Usopp, and the medical orderly currently looking over Alvida, who, within moments of hearing the fight within the prison's entryway die down, had raced aboard.

"Captain, are you sure that this was a good idea?" Usopp asked, even as he began to shovel more coal into the engine.

"What part? Escaping like this by stealing a ship from Marshall Teach of all people... fucker... or keeping that medical orderly with us?" Buggy grunted, becoming more serious as he began to work the controls of the steamship.

"Both. That guy didn't look like someone you wanted to cross," Usopp worried.

"He doesn't, and he isn't. Teach is a guy who is always planning, always on the lookout for the main chance. But hopefully, Teach will never realize who actually stole his boat. Hence, why we need to get a move on!" Buggy growled, his head making a full three-hundred-and-sixty-degree turn on his neck to glare at Usopp, who hastily bent down to load more coal into the steam engine.

"And the medical officer? Having a marine along with us is fine for the short term, considering how much help your lady friend there needs. But in the long term, he could give our position away the second we get to an island. And I am not going to kill him in cold blood. Don't even joke~~ about that!" Bon Clay stated, the look in his eyes saying that he would probably also stop any such move from either of the others.

Killing from ambush, killing in combat, those were fine. Killing a nurse or doctor after you were done having him help with one of your crewmen? That wasn't fine. *That might not be something in the code of Davy Jones, but it's a sin regardless.*

"I don't think you'll have to worry about that," Buggy chuckled, pointing to where the orderly was even now delicately replacing a few of the bandages he had initially placed around

Alice's body. The look in his eyes was practically turning into hearts as Buggy and the others watched, and the other two men nodded sagely. "Yeah, Alvida has that kind of impact."

"She's a real beauty, true. Still, where to now?" Clay asked. "Do you have a specific island in mind? Does Long-nose-kun have a secret Eternal pose or something~?"

"Anywhere, but here is our current destination, Clay. The main point of fleeing danger is to flashily get away, Bon, not the destination. The destination can handle itself," Buggy stated, who shared an outlook on danger reminiscent of a certain flat-world wizard. "And as for the nurse, well, my old crew was lacking a medical officer anyway. As long as Alvida winks at him every few days, he'll be flashy putty in her hands."

But for now, we'll make southwest. That will take us away from the Tarai Current and into the Calm Belt. Moving through it will either take us into the Grand Line or one of the other oceans eventually. I'd rather brave the Calm Belt than be anywhere near here any longer."

"And at least this time, we've got more than enough food aboard for all of us. No eating Sea Kings for us," Usopp said sagely before shoveling another heap of coal into the engine.

Buggy laughed in agreement. "Hahaha, yep! Teach was always a bastard, but he also always believed in eating well. The only problem we'll face is if any of us get tired of eating pies for breakfast!"

For a moment, the Mushi operator stared, wondering what he was seeing, wondering where notorious mass murderer Buggy the Clown had been hiding out, before shaking his head and running off to one of the marine battleships tied up at the docks. Most were damaged, but he hoped most would still have Den Den Mushis on them. *In comparison to Blackbeard invading the prison, Buggy the Clown's escape is a minor issue. Especially considering the other breakouts we've already had today. We have to stop any more from occurring!*

In the second, badly battered battleship, the operator got lucky, finding a Den Den Mushi in the captain's quarters. Taking a few moments to get his breath back, he then began, his tone shrill with urgency as he shouted into the pickup, broadcasting on an open frequency to anyone who could hear it. "Attention anyone who can hear this message! This is Impel Down. We have been betrayed! We have been invaded! The Shichibukai Blackbeard plans to free some of our prisoners. We need assistance! Repeat, we need assistance!"

OOOOOOO

It had taken a while, but Kizaru had regained control of his emotions now and would not be goaded further into losing control of his style. When next Luffy closed, Kizaru beat his attacks off and then nearly gutted Luffy with a sword of light, causing Luffy to cry out in pain for the first time in the fight as the overly large light blade sliced through his lightning form, tugging at his very essence as it did.

He reformed into his physical body a second later, but the damage was done, and Kizaru now had the upper hand, beginning to batter Luffy once more, forcing Luffy to waste more of his ki healing technique, draining his reserves. In response, though, Luffy didn't back away. Instead, he held out a hand, thrusting it towards Kizaru's Haki-clad chest. "Kijin Raishu Dan!"

It was only his Kenbunshoku blaring louder than it had ever had before that caused Kizaru to switch from Busoshoku to his light form fast enough. And even that cost him. Blades of pure **nothingness**, vorpal energy sliced through him, causing Kizaru to howl in pain even though it didn't do any real damage, allowing Kizaru to reform himself, gasping and touching his chest and upper pectoral where the slices had struck. "What, what... That was no lightning!" he gasped through a haze of raw agony.

"I'd be a poor captain if I was a one-trick pony," Luffy snorted, substituting the word captain for martial artist easily after so long. The idle thought of what his father would think of him breaking out the Yami-Sen-Ken in order to kill someone passed through his mind for a moment, but it didn't stay. That was another life, another time. *It gave me a lot of skills and abilities that I'll use in this one, but I can't afford to think that right and wrong there is the same as it is here, that I can afford to keep anything up my sleeve.*

Even as he charged forward, Luffy let himself shudder for a second, acknowledging the fact that with that last attack he'd launched, Luffy had probably become a mass murderer. That didn't sit well with him. He would probably need to think about that a lot in the future, and he could feel his gorge rising even now as he acknowledged the fact that he might've killed hundreds of marines, perhaps even thousands of marines, despite looking more to destroy their ships than actually kill marines with direct lightning strikes.

That was a tough pill to swallow, especially considering that most of the lower-ranking Marines were, as Luffy had known all his life and even commented on more than once, simply people doing their job. The higher-ups, though? Luffy knew he was in for a few sleepless nights from the death and carnage he had caused today among the common marines, but he could add the lives of all three admirals and not lose a moment's sleep over it.

Eager to press his advantage, Luffy cut off such introspective thoughts and launched another series of large lightning attacks from every side, "Lightning Wolves!"

Almost completely out of it from the pain that the four vorpal blades had caused him as they moved through his light body, Kizaru could barely concentrate enough to shoot light bolts at several of the wolves and was slowly bringing up his Busoshoku, his will and thoughts frayed badly from the agony he'd been put through, unable to even concentrate on retaking his light form again. Indeed, the very idea caused his brain and soul to shudder at the pain he'd just experienced, worried that Luffy could close in and use whatever attack that was again.

One of the lightning wolves got through, biting down hard on Kizaru's head, but a last-second light glanced through its mouth, dissipating the creature. Then Kizaru was Busoshoku-

clad, grimacing as the lightning strike hit him, going through his armor form to start to electrocute his insides a little, but only a little. As an Admiral, his mastery of Busoshoku was up to stopping a lot of the electrical damage being caused by the hits. Not all of it, but enough.

A ball of magma burst through one of the lightning wolves, going so fast as to almost break the sound barrier. Akainu appeared, hopping up towards them. "Shiki is retreating for now, faster than I could keep up with. Let me join you. We can put this upstart down and then move back into the main fight with Whitebeard."

Luffy would've objected to being called an upstart, let alone being thought of as a sideshow, but in the distance, he could see Whitebeard battling it out with Sengoku and that unknown Devil Fruit User. "What the heck kind of form is that anyway?" Luffy asked aloud, jutting his thumb towards where the three main combatants were going at it, the smashing blows causing reverberations that could be felt even here and not entirely because of Whitebeard's quake fruit.

"Do you honestly think we will tell you that, Pirate?! It is enough to know that Whitebeard and his sudden appearance here on this battlefield instead of at Marineford forced us to go hat in hand to the World Government. That's stinging to our pride. We will never forget it! For absolute justice, you, Whitebeard, Ace, all of you will die today," Akainu growled, charging forward, one arm turning into magma, even as the other one became coated into Busoshoku.

"Well, nice to know what the stakes are, I suppose," Luffy quipped.

This reaction caused Kizaru's eyes to widen. The smirk on Luffy's face shouted that he knew something that Akainu didn't, and instantly, Kizaru charged forward. Akainu's arrival allowed him to regain his mental equilibrium from the agony that Luffy's technique had given him. "Watch out. He's tricky and has this strange attack that creates blades of, of nothingness. They carved through my light form like it was nothing! They don't leave any wounds in my Logia Form, but damn, do they hurt!"

Surprised by the amount of true concern and frustration in his fellow Admiral's tone, Akainu dodged to the left of the next strike from Luffy, then thrust forward with a palm strike with his magma-covered hand only to watch as Luffy smirked suddenly, shifting into lightning form right and lash out with his own punch, intercepting Akainu's fist.

Just like in the contest between light and lightning, no one really understood how one element type would react to another other than the more obvious ones. A case in point was the fight between Ace and Aokiji. There, fire was easily giving Ace an elemental advantage, one that he was trying to exploit to the best of his abilities, but one, which could be similarly over, thanks to the skill of Aokiji. But when it came to light and lightning, neither Luffy nor Kizaru had any idea how the two would interact. After all, laser beams like what Kizaru primarily used didn't exactly exist in nature, so no one had ever seen them interact with the lightning bolt. Both of

them had found out the hard way the advantages and disadvantages of their Devil Fruits against one another.

Similarly, Akainu had no idea how magma and lightning would interact. He had actually seen that in nature when a lightning storm struck a volcano that was erupting. The lightning hammered down into the magma, causing an explosion but nothing much.

Akainu expected lots of things. For Luffy's attack to dissipate or play along his arm. Perhaps it would hurt even hurt but, the lightning strike would do no real damage to Akainu's magma form arm.

But there was one thing that Luffy knew about lightning and magma that few people in this universe did. Lightning was actually a good deal hotter than magma. The impact that Akainu had seen was simply from the speed of the lightning striking the surface of the magma.

When lightning met magma, Luffy's arm literally carved through Akainu's, causing him to scream in agony as magma burst everywhere. And in among the magma was blood and bone.

Akainu lost control of his Devil Fruit for a second the pain of the hit causing him to fall away, and Luffy's next blow took him in the side of the jaw and teeth, but the real damage had been done.

"Sakazuki!" Kizaru bellowed, ramming a light-speed kick into Luffy's side, hurling him away from his friend.

"Gah... Gh..." Akainu grunted, trying to reform his arm but having no luck. Just as if Ace had caught Aokiji in ice form before he could transfer his consciousness away, so too was the wound Luffy had caused probably permanent. Akainu's arm was literally gone, and it would not come back. Yet he could close the stump of the wound at the elbow by transforming the rest of his body into magma. "I, I'm alright. That, that just goes to show we can't let..."

Whatever he was going to say was lost as Luffy recovered from the kick and came back into the attack. Both marines were quickly busy again, protecting from his attacks for a bit before settling into a rhythm. Akainu, his body covered with Busoshoku, would attack, while Kizaru handled defense. This had an immediate impact, as trying to suppress both Admirals' Kenbunshoku was next to impossible, and Luffy soon found himself on the back foot. *Fuck. I might have bitten off more than I could chew here...*

OOOOOOO

The shout of "Pops!" was the only thing that warned Sengoku that trouble was coming, his Kenbunshoku totally focused on keeping up with Whitebeard and Peter.

Peter was not used to working with other people. He hadn't actually fought anyone in a decade since becoming a member of the Gorosei. Before that, the blonde-haired man had been a solo assassin or working with a small, elite unit. Even now that he was very much the most dangerous one of the fighters on the side of the World Government, he continually got in the way of both Sengoku and, when he was still conscious, Kong. Worse though, was the fact that Whitebeard's own Kenbunshoku was blanketing the area in the way that only a true master of the technique could do, pressing down on everyone else's ability with the technique.

Sengoku's instincts, separate from his Kenbunshoku skills, was telling him that Whitebeard's use of Haki like that on top of his Busoshoku and quake powers was costing the old pirate. Indeed, Sengoku had seen Whitebeard grimace, his arms and legs twitching, and knew that Whitebeard had heart problems given reports on the man. With all that, Sengoku was grimly certain that he and Peter could grind the man down.

That didn't matter at the moment, as a diamond-coated fist to the back of the head caused Sengoku to grunt in pain. The giant Sengoku statue looked almost comical for a second as he flipped in midair from the impact. Instead of righting himself, he rolled to the side, bringing his staff up to smash at Jozu. The blow missed as Jozu continued his way past down toward the drifting bits of wreckage that was all that remained of Sengoku's flagship or the *Moby Dick*. There he set down surprisingly lightly for a man who probably weighed as much as half again as Sengoku.

Whitebeard's weapon, glowing white and crackling with Quake power flashed towards Sengoku's eye, causing him to flinch, but thankfully, Peter intercepted the next strike, blocking the blow with his own tentacle-covered fist. Busoshoku and mythical Zoan strength warred against Devil Fruit and the raw power of the strongest man in the world for a few seconds before they both disengaged, lashing out with kicks at the same time.

"Scintillating Array!" As a part of his training with his Devil Fruit, Jozu had learned to use his Diamond Body to concentrate light and release it in blasts. He couldn't do so to the point of creating beams of power, but blinding bursts, like a human-sized flashbang, were easily possible.

Sengoku and Peter screamed in pain as their eyes were assaulted, backing away and flailing wildly as both fell back on using just their senses of hearing and Kenbunshoku to know where their enemies were, losing control of their Geppo technique and falling down towards the ocean. Facing away from his crewman, Whitebeard was fine and he charged forwards trying to take advantage of their weakness.

Seeing this, Jozu also charged forward, jumping from one ruined marine ship to another before intercepting the falling Zoan. Before the creature's eyes could recover, Jozu hammered two diamond-hard blows into the side of the mythical Sand Worm man's head, turning him entirely around and allowing Whitebeard's next strike to go home. The Yonko's punch slammed into the man with enough force to shatter an island, but all it did to the Mystical Zoan was send

bits and pieces of worm meat everywhere, although the impact also hurled him away, sending him slamming into the side of a burning marine ship.

The man was already healing even as crashed into the burning wreckage, but this allowed Jozu and Whitebeard time to concentrate on Sengoku, forcing him back in turn. Unfortunately, Sengoku knew it, and even though he still couldn't see, he retreated, forcing Whitebeard and Jozu to follow. Which wasn't good for Jozu, who barely had any skill with Geppo to speak of and he soon fell behind.

"Jozu! Damn it boy, I thought you were working your legs recently?" Whitebeard grumbled, also stopping for a moment. Setting down beside Jozu on an overturned pirate ship from his first division Whitebeard breathed deeply, trying hard not to touch his chest where the wound that Roger had caused him was acting up again. That pain was near constant now, the battle taking its toll on him. But he could not relent. Not even for an instant. Not if he didn't want his opponents to turn their attention to his sons.

The next second, he charged forward as Sengoku recovered, his palms coming up, light shining from them as he began a Devil Fruit-based attack of some kind.

"Golden Thousand Palm Doskoi!" Sengoku shouted. From his palms, a golden aura erupted, adding still more power and searing heat to his palm strikes.

Grimacing, Whitebeard swung Murakumogiri this way and that, deflecting, blocking, riposting, trying to break through the monstrous defensive abilities of the golden Sengoku statue that Sengoku had transformed into, and only having a little bit of success. At the same time, below him on the wreck, Jozu's diamond hard blows flew in every direction. The sounds of the three attacks were almost reminiscent of the same kind of machine gun staccato that anyone who had fought Luffy would've recognized, only at a far higher level than the base Amaguriken skill was.

The two pirates held his strikes back until Peter attacked from the side, forcing Whitebeard to jump up over his son to block that attack, shattering the building Endless Appetite before Peter could begin.

"Talk to me, Jozu," Whitebeard grunted even as Peter's neck enlarged once more into a battering ram, nearly smashing him out of the air again. "What's been going on?"

"Ace and Aokiji are still fighting, Pops, but he's for sure free and clear. The flanks are in ruins right now. The Marines have taken one hell of a pounding, including Straw Hat's massive attack a bit ago," Jozu said proudly before going on more seriously even as he deflected another blow from Sengoku, grimacing at the pain of it. That one strike from Sengoku's staff had nearly broken his diamond hand, and he grimaced but took it with his diamond form. "I think we can still pull back, but we should do it soon."

“And by mentioning that, you mean to tell me you think we should,” Whitebeard grunted, smacking aside another blow from Sengoku, then ducking under a battering ram attack from Peter’s massive head before being forced to block two more follow-on strikes from Peter’s long limbs, followed by a few Rankyaku and their arm-equivalent. “What are our losses?”

“...” For a moment, Jozu was silent, and not just because he was concentrating on helping his father against Peter and Sengoku, grunting at the impacts he was taking from Sengoku, astounded at the strength of the man and avoiding taking any attacks from Peter straight on, leery of the Zoan. By this point, Jozu had put down several giants and vice admirals, including Yamakaji, Red King and Tosa, and even with most of their force deflected, Sengoku and Peter were both hitting him harder than any of them had, actually making him feel it through his diamond form. The blows were also coming in so fast he could barely deal with them. To make things even worse for Jozu, his footing on the slick deck wasn’t the best, putting him in danger of slipping with every strike.

“We’ve, we’ve taken a lot of losses, Pops. Most of our ships are still intact, but our high-end fighters? That part of the battle’s kind of gone the other way. That damn green gunk, it gives the users the same abilities as a second Devil Fruit and it’s made the difference in a lot of duels across our line.”

While the use of the green gunk had only slowed Jozu down a bit when his opponents like Lacroix had used it, the marine vice admirals also had the numbers advantage against Whitebeard’s division commanders coming into this battle. The addition to their strength of so many artificial Devil Fruits added to their existing powers was making the battle in the sky over the two fleets turn slowly against Whitebeard crew. “Marco is still creating havoc on our right flank but we have lost more than half of our division commanders,”

Whitebeard grunted at that, trying to look stoic, but that knowledge **hurt**, and worse, he knew Jozu was right. The vice and rear admirals, of which there were a multitude, could not be fought by the majority of them Whitebeard pirates, not in the air. On the ground and in the ships, it was a different story, which the vice admirals and rear admirals who actually landed on pirate ships to take them out were probably finding out. But only the best fighters among his crew could use Geppo or any equivalent.

From what Whitebeard could afford to let himself sense beyond his immediate surroundings, the battle had basically devolved into a kind of seesaw slaughter. The commodores or vice admirals rained down death from on high on the Whitebeard pirates, while the marine vessels, being now outnumbered across the board despite the upsurge caused by Akainu’s island of their ships into the battle, were either already wrecked or were being wrecked as they came into the conflict in small groups, the shattered remnants of their divisions moving forward through the wreckage caused by Luffy’s attack as best they could, still following the last orders they had been given.

Peter charged forward, lashing out with his long neck towards Jozu, trying to bite into his diamond form. Knowing instinctively, that letting the mythical creature in front of him do so would be a bad idea, Jozu dodged to the side, only for his footwork finally to fail. He stumbled, and took a kick to the head that sent his head back as if he had just walked into the mainmast drunk off his ass without his diamond form to protect them.

Jozu's diamond form gave him enough durability to take that strike, but he was in no position to block the next one. Peter reared up, bringing his neck around again to try to either smash Jozu down into the water like his entire neck was giant rubber whip or take a bite out of him.

This stopped as Whitebeard's bisento stabbed into Peter's side. The tip was unable to penetrate Peter's skin even with Whitebeard's ferocious physical strength behind it, but the quake power did the damage, shattering still more scales and sending the man sideways through the air with a growl of anger.

Not pain, though. I'm not doing enough damage to Peter any longer, Whitebeard snarled internally.

Jozu then jumped forward, putting himself between an incoming attack from Sengoku and his father. He took the palm strike on his chest, then smashed his fist into Sengoku's palm as Sengoku pulled his fist back, causing Sengoku to grimace in pain even as his staff swung in from the side.

The two of them traded blows, and although Jozu got the worst of it, he was able to hold Sengoku there for a few seconds, letting Whitebeard recover from the strike against Peter to twirl once more around Jozu's side, a quake-infused solid air punch slamming into the side of Sengoku's face. This time, the blow struck true, cracking the golden Sengoku's body as if it were made of metal and sending him rocketing away.

Underneath the gold, blood began to flow from the cracks there, signifying the bruises or cuts into the Sengoku statue's face.

"Gurararara nice one Jozu! This is just like the old days, isn't it, with you and me fighting side-by-side!"

"Hai, Pops!" Jozu said with a grin, even as he wrung his hands out to either side, grimacing at the pain lancing through his diamond body. He had always known that there were things out there harder than his diamond form, but slamming right into them like this was a different story. *And Pops has been fighting these two and that other old asshole all this time!?* Jozu was very afraid he couldn't stay here for much longer without being overwhelmed.

But before he could say anything more, something in his jacket pocket, which he had removed before activating his diamond form so as to not affect it, jangled. He reached down to

it, pulling out a small comms Mushi, which began to shout at him in Marco's voice, the snail's face shifting to match. "Hey Jozu! How's it going elsewhere? The right flanks ours down on the ocean, but I'm having a devil of a time fighting these vice admirals. Thankfully, I don't have to worry about Doflamingo anymore or hit his crew."

"Why? And don't give me crap about fighting vice admirals, boy. I'm here fighting the adult version of those lackwits," Whitebeard growled out, smirking even as he said it, pleased to hear Marco's voice and the fact that at least on one flank, the battle was completely going in their favor still. He could sense the left was basically turning against them more, with several of the vice admirals starting to win their duels and turning their attention to the ships below.

"Pops!" Marco exclaimed, then went on, the Mushi's grin shadowing the one on Marco's face at the moment. "Well, Pops, you're never going to believe this. You know your old drinking buddy, Garp? Well, turns out that he apparently wasn't exactly happy to hear that the Marines had a plan to kill Straw Hat. Straw Hat might've been alive, but apparently, Garp turned against the Marines."

"WHAT?!!" Sengoku shouted, having listened in on Marco's report even as moved to attack Whitebeard and his subordinate from another direction from Peter, hoping to split their attention enough to get in a real blow. "Damn you, Garp! All this for a grandson who wasn't even dead in the first place!?"

"Gururarara, maybe next time you'll remember the old phrase about blood being thicker than water!" Whitebeard bellowed in laughter.

"It gets even better, Pops," Marco went on. "He was over here shattering ships and hearts alike, but now he's... tied up...Doflamingo entirely!"

Everyone within hearing range who knew about Doflamingo's Devil Fruit groaned at that pun. Even a few fighters nearby on the wreckage of pirate and marine ship alike gagged. Heck, even the comms Mushi did, the copy of Marco's face shifting into one of pain, as if the communication Mushi itself took horrible damage for relaying that pun.

Peter was the sole exception. Instead of taking mental damage from the pun, he hissed, his voice still coming out like he had gargled rocks, which was quite possible given his Devil Fruit form. "Garp. Garp and Straw Hat, and all those who carry the will of D!" he roared. "Everyone with that damn power within them, they're all more trouble than they're worth! This is why I backed Warcury's plans to see if we could somehow identify babies with the will of D before they were born, in order to eradicate them all before they can become trouble!"

Even as Peter surged forward, Whitebeard scoffed at that notion. He had sat down once with Gol, and they had talked about the will of D. After beating the crap out of one another, of course. But that had been the way of their relationship: friendship and rivalry all in one. *Fool. The will of D cannot be simply extinguished by killing the person who bears the initial. It will*

simply be carried on by someone else. Just like that straw hat that Monkey D Luffy was wearing. Inherited will, inherited dreams. Dreams will never die! No matter how much people like you, Peter, wish to extinguish them in the name of your so-called peace.

Yet he said nothing because his son Marco was continuing. “The funny thing is, they just seemed to stop fighting a moment ago. Garp then turned on a few of the vice admirals, shouted something, got shouted in turn, and ripped them a new one before talking to a swordsman I hadn’t seen before, although I could swear I saw ya fighting him earlier in the fight, Jozu. He’s a damn good fighter, though, beat Izou, although he left her alive. Doflamingo’s now retreating from the battle entirely, and Garp is coming your way!”

At that, what little self-control Peter had a moment before vanished. He roared, charging forwards once more, lashing out with an attack from his mouth. But this time, not in the form of an all-consuming vacuum. Instead, air bullets, hundreds of them, shot out, hitting both of the pirates despite their best efforts to try to deflect or dodge. “Endless Gut Bullet!”

The pirates were forced to simply take them, with Whitebeard using Busoshoku and Jozu taking them stoically on his diamond form until another attack from Peter lashed out. In this case, though, it was a far more condensed, slicing type of air attack. “Bite-Sized Slicer!”

While Whitebeard blocked the attack with his Haki-reinforced bisento, the strike slashed Jozu across his chest, almost cracking his diamond form. “ARGGHH!!” he howled in pain.

He might well have been unable to defend himself from the next one, but Whitebeard got in front of him, smashing that attack with his Busoshoku form and lashing out through his quake power once more. His return strike created a wave of cracked air, looking for all the world like the air between them had become a pane of glass with cracks in it. This attack broke the incoming attacks from Peter before going on, striking his mouth. More than a dozen teeth exploded at the impact, but beyond causing a grunt of pain, this didn’t do much to Peter, new teeth thrusting upwards, pushing out the broken teeth.

Sengoku pressed forward, his near-giant form glowing golden with the aura of semi-divinity that his Buddha form gave him, covering both man and hand. This was matched by the white crackling glow of the quake power around Whitebeard. The two of them exchanged punches and strikes from staff and bisento while Jozu and Peter recovered, with Marco still shouting from the communication snail that Jozu continued to carry in one of his jacket pockets. Although, it was clear that Marco had also continued to speak, even though none of them had listened, making them miss a large segment of his report.

“...Because of that, we seem to have been able to win most of this flank on the ocean. I’m moving in support of the center and should be there soon Pops. I thought about trying to get to Ace and finish off Aokiji between us, but I don’t think I’ll have to. I can see Whitey’s ship from here, and she’s nearly there. She and Gion are still dueling on it, but the rest of her crew are just going about their business normally,” Marco said in an almost jolly tone of voice. “How

much you wanna bet that she told them not to interfere. And I could swear I've seen at least a few Commodores or what have you heading down to that ship only to be shouted off."

Even as they continued to trade blows, Whitebeard and Sengoku both groaned, looking at one another in shared misery. "Swordswomen," Sengoku grunted.

"Only species more stubborn than swordsmen," Whitebeard agreed.

At that point, an even larger pain than usual went through Whitebeard's body, a searing agony starting from the scar that Roger had left him. His heart stuttered, and one of his legs gave out, not able to sustain his Geppo for a second. Because of this, the next strike from Sengoku got through, slamming into Whitebeard's chest, almost breaking through his Busoshoku in turn, hurling him backward.

This put him near a recovered Peter, and only Jozu charging in from the other side saved him from another attack. The attack from Peter went wide as he was forced to turn around to deal with Jozu's charge, which in turn opened him up for Whitebeard.

Better make this count, Whitebeard thought, pushing not just his Busoshoku but also his Haoshoku into Murakumogiri. Forming his conquering will into a cutting edge, he lashed out, nearly and this time, the attack struck true. The blade of his bisento bit deep into the side of Peter's neck, causing him to howl out in pain.

In response, Peter forced his neck to enlarge significantly to protect its inner workings better, pushing Whitebeard away.

Wrenching his blade free, Whitebeard bounced away from Peter's retaliating blows, thinking about all he had been told, thinking about the fight and reaching out with his Kenbunshoku at the same time. *We could still win this fight, but at what cost?*

He could already tell that a large number of his division commanders were down, dead unconscious or pulled from the fight by the Recovery Squad, the group of mermen who had allied with the Whitebeard crew under the now-dead Namur, slain by Dellinger before him, in turn, bit off more than he could chew in Jinbe. Without them, Marco and the remainder were hard-pressed to defend the lower-level fighters and sailors among them from the numerous vice admirals.

And I've already accomplished what I wanted to do. Hammered the marines as hard as we could for the temerity of trying to execute one of my sons and made certain Ace could actually escape thanks to Straw Hat's plan. Any more, and we would be giving the World Government a chance to snatch some measure of victory from the jaws of total defeat. And... and Shiki is still alive, that old schemer.

That brought a small, tight smile to Whitebeard's face. "Jozu. Retreat. Find the Old Lion. Get him to pull back with you. He'll know what to do."

With that, Whitebeard launched himself forward, not towards Peter or Sengoku, but instead towards two Vice Admirals, Draw and Ketagari. They had just finished off one of his ships to one side and down from where they had been fighting previously.

Even as that ship exploded, its magazines going from some kind of strike from one of the two vice admirals, Whitebeard's attacks slammed into them. The quake power broke one of their bodies almost entirely, despite his best efforts to defend himself with Busoshoku, and he fell screaming as every bone in his body shattered.

The other lived only so long as it took Whitebeard to cross the intervening distance. The man raised his weapon, but it broke from a single strike from Murakumogiri, which continued on its course to carve down into the man, slicing him almost in half despite his Busoshoku. The raw strength of Whitebeard's strike, even without any Busoshoku, Haoshoku or quake power behind it, was too much for the younger man's body to withstand.

"Damn you, Whitebeard!" The site of that enraged Sengoku, and he launched himself forward, massive palms coming down on top of Whitebeard's position. At the same time they charged, hoping to shift Jozu away from Whitebeard and finish him off.

But Jozu had already turned and raced away, hopping from one wrecked, sinking ship to the next, using Soru with a mastery any CP9 member would have envied, despite his near inability with Geppo.

Seeing that, Peter growled angrily before turning back and racing towards Whitebeard once more. *First Whitebeard, then Straw Hat. Neither of them, nor Nico Robin nor Ace can be allowed to live! And if Garp is turned entirely against the Marines, we need to finish off Whitebeard now before he can arrive and reinforce.*

OOOOOOO

As his fist slammed into Kizaru's side and his lightning-driven blow broke through his Busoshoku once more, Luffy grinned despite the injuries he had sustained from the two Vice Admirals. He could feel his energy reserves dwindling, his endurance starting to give out on him. *Heh, these two are fucking me up between them, but I suppose against Admirals, that should have been expected. Luckily, Akainu's already lost an arm, and while his Busoshoku is decent, I'll wager he's just as tired as Kizaru after fighting that old lion guy. Speaking of...*

Warned by his greater skill with Kenbunshoku, Luffy shifted into his lightning form as several dozen massive air lion attacks came from below, Shiki announcing his return to the fight in no uncertain terms. "You bastard, Akainu! You think simply taking one of my arms like that is going to... Wait, someone else already took one of your arms?! God dammit!"

Both Vice Admirals dealt with the giant lion-shaped constructs of attacking air somewhat easily, although several of the slashes coming in with them hit, forcing both users to use either Busoshoku or their elements to deal with it. After having had his arm literally explode off of him, when he tried to use his magma form against Luffy's lightning and apparently not being able to heal from that level of trauma, it was no wonder that Kizaru used his light form and Akainu, his Busoshoku. But even through that, Luffy could detect the grimaces from the man as each blow struck home. *I think the pain of that wound is causing him issues when he tries to concentrate on his Busoshoku.*

Luffy didn't say that aloud, nor did he rush forward just yet. Instead, he looked over at Shiki, cocking an eyebrow at his missing arm. "I think you're taking the whole pirates have to have a peg limb of some kind a little too far, oldster."

"Oh, shut up! And that stereotype was old when I was a cabin boy. If you're going to comment about my style, at least give me props for the awesome coat or the wheel in my head. Not the fact that on top of having to cut my limbs off at the knee to escape Impel Down, I let that young whippersnapper take my arm," Shiki grumbled.

Luffy snorted at that but had to acknowledge that the old guy still being willing to fight after having had his arm literally melted off up to the elbow via magma was pretty badass. *Not as badass as Whitebeard, But still. Just goes to show the old adage, fear the old in a profession where most people die young.*

"You think you can help me whip up a storm?" Luffy asked, grinning as lightning flared all over his body, numerous lightning clones appearing in a circle around the two admirals, Kizaru responding with his own light-based clones, and several bowls of magma appearing like ways around Akainu. "I could do with some background juice. Whatever is coming out from our west isn't cutting it."

"Just don't get in my way, brat. Just because you've taken one of his limbs doesn't mean that I'm not going to do the damn same to that little firecracker!" Shiki growled, launching several incredibly sharp air-slashing attacks, followed by raising his fingers into the air and launching what looked like several large galleons, or rather the wreckage of said, up towards the Marines from down below.

There didn't seem to be any people on those ships. At least four of them looked as if they had suffered from Luffy's Raigo-style attack earlier, while the others looked like the ships that had been damaged earlier in the battle between Akainu and Shiki. But the six ships were still giant chunks of wood, even if they were currently still smoldering or on fire.

Luffy's lightning clones charged forwards, and as more lightning came down from on high, changing into wolves and dragons mid-flash towards the two marines. Most of them were disrupted by Kizaru's light or absorbed by Akainu's magma, but Luffy transferred into one of the lightning bolts. In this way, he got into Kizaru's face, lashing out with another vorpal attack, but

the man dodged at the last second, his Kenbunshoku working overtime. His wild evasion opened him up to a mule kick from Luffy, which caught the man in his actual human form for a second, hurling him downwards into one of the ships Shiki had hurled up at them.

“GAHh!” Kizaru smashed into it, but he’d had time to armor himself before he hit, and the crash didn’t hurt much even as Kizaru found himself buried within the superstructure of the ship. “M~y m~y, I am to think that I hate that young man,” Kizaru grumbled as he pushed himself to his feet, wiping blood away from his mouth. Feeling at his chest, the Yellow Pheasant knew he’d added at least two more broken ribs to his growing list of broken bones.

Above, Shiki had closed with Akainu, who had turned the ships aimed towards him into so much falling burning debris with blasts of magma from his one remaining hand. An armor-clad fist slammed into an armor-clad stomach, but this time, it was the Admiral’s Busoshoku which won out, and Shiki grimaced as he bounced away, flicking the sword embedded into his right leg up in a slice, the tip of the blade going for Akainu’s throat, loaded with Busoshoku. Knowing how tough it was to defend from a strike so small and his current limits with the armor Haki, Akainu hastily brought up a large shield of magma as he backed away. The strike carved through it but did not hit his flesh.

In a flash of light, Kizaru appeared, bouncing off of Shiki’s blade as it shifted back into normal, an elbow catching the older pirate in the side of the head even as Kizaru redirected himself midair into a kick that was blocked by Luffy, who grunted under the impact of that and a blow from Akainu below catching him in the lower leg. Taking two strikes of Busoshoku overwhelmed Luffy’s own Haki, bruises already begin to form as he was flung away, his leg in particular throbbing at him angrily, going numb and useless for a moment.

One-legged for a second, Luffy hopped in midair via Geppo for just a moment, his ki healing already kicking in. A second later, he disappeared in a bolt of lightning, appearing next to Akainu, who was already ducking the incoming blow, warned by his Kenbunshoku even though Luffy’s own was pushing it down, giving him a real advantage there.

A case in point, Luffy had known he would dodge and brought up another lightning bolt from below, forcing Akainu to rely on his Busoshoku, hissing in pain from the heat of it. For the first time since eating the magma fruit, The Red Dog was taking damage from a heat-based attack, and he didn’t like it at all.

For several more moments, the four of them battled it out, ducking, diving, hitting, striking. None of the four were willing to take many more hits at this point. Kizaru and Akainu probably could have afforded to, given their better mastery of Busoshoku, but both admirals had already taken several dangerous hits. Akainu still couldn’t reform the arm that his mistake in thinking magma would be immune to lightning had caused him, the pain of which was cutting into his ability to use Busoshoku more than even Luffy suspected. Kizaru had also taken several significant strikes and was dealing with at least five broken ribs, along with the bruises he’d taken from Garp before tangling with Luffy in turn.

Moreover, like Kizaru, Akainu had noticed that Luffy was actually able to heal from wounds and was worried that if they didn't start dodging as best they could every strike they could, Luffy could simply outlast them.

The reason for Shiki's desire to no longer take any more hits need hardly be said. He was down to one full limb after all and the stump of three others. The fact that he was in the fight at all let alone willing to work with Luffy, was a sign of how tough-minded he was.

How long this stage of the fight went on, none of them could know, but then, something new was added to their own private battlefield in the sky.

"Glittering Roll!" a shout came up from below them. Akainu barely had a second to shift into magma, pushing his mind away into the wall of magma he created before his magma-form body was slammed from behind and below from a weight that his current Busoshoku would probably not have been able to deal with. Instead, the form of Diamond Jozu barreled through his magma-shifted lower body, doing the same to Kizaru's light form a bare second later.

As the two Admirals reformed, Jozu pushed himself to a stop with a hasty use of Geppo, seeming almost to lose control of it for a few seconds before Shiki and Luffy closed with him, Shiki reached out, and then Jozu was floating, not under his own power, causing him to breathe in relief.

"Nice entrance," Luffy gasped, feeling the lurking touch of exhaustion starting to hit. It had been a very, very long day after all. Even if the fighting inside the prison hadn't really taken much out of him, the battle with Kizaru had more than made up for it, and he had just taken another light-based strike, which had gone through his lightning-form neck at the time.

"What do you want, Jozu? Did Whitebeard finally decide that Sengoku is a little too much for him or something?" Shiki grumbled, although inwardly pleased at the aid. *And the fact Jozu's the one bastard I can use my fruit on is a positive too.*

Thanks to his Diamond Form, Shiki's Devil Fruit could treat him as a nonliving thing. As such, it could actually affect him, whereas if Jozu was in his normal human body, it wouldn't.

"He's having more trouble with someone he calls Peter than Sengoku, I think. But that's not important right now, Old Lion," Jozu deadpanned, shaking his head as below them, the two Logia Users reformed, with dozens more balls of magma appearing along with a half dozen clones of Kizaru in midair. "Pops has decided it's time to walk away from the table."

Shiki scowled, staring down at Akainu with hatred in his eyes. Then he looked around and down, scowling as he realized that their fight had pushed them almost into the air above a segment of the Marine fleet that had, prior to Luffy's Raigo's attack, not taken much damage. Even though this area had also been protected by Kizaru, far more of the lightning strikes

contained within the Raigo assigned to this area had gotten through in comparison to directly around where Luffy and Kizaru had been fighting before.

Dozens of ships were still on fire, their mainmasts gone, their top sails burnt away to crisps and sides lined with scorch marks. Numerous dead could also be seen, laid out where they fell, turned into crisps by the lightning. But the ships were still floating, still had most of their crews, and were still moving forward into columns, pushed forward by the Tarai Current. Over the horizon, Shiki could see the clashes going on in the center of the current on the other side of the large island that Akainu had raised.

All that, along with Jozu being there at all and what he and Whitebeard had talked about prior to this battle at one point, told Shiki what Whitebeard wanted. "Fine! But when this is over, Whitebeard will owe me big time!"

Jozu grunted at that, and the old pirate bounced higher up into the air and away, zooming away so fast that Luffy and Kizaru would have had to use their Logia Powers to keep up.

Jozu stood there for a moment, looking at Luffy, then down at the Admirals. Akainu and Kizaru were apparently talking about this latest development, and Jozu decided to use the moment to back away. No reason to fight these two if he didn't have to just yet, after all. "It's time for us to pull back," he said to Luffy's questioning look, his voice almost a whisper so as to not carry to the two admirals below them. "We'll be leaving the same way we came, via the air."

Luffy nodded, wincing as he understood the amount of death those simple words were covering on both sides. The move and counter move of this battle had turned it into a seesaw slaughter affair, and Luffy guessed that while the Whitebeard pirates were probably on top when it came to how many people they still had, the Marines still possessed a larger majority of high-end fighters. "Gotcha. I'll..."

Suddenly, at the periphery of his Devil Fruit-enhanced Kenbunshoku, Luffy could sense Hancock. No longer embroiled in his own battle, Luffy could sense her there, almost leaving his range but not quite. And along with Hancock's mind was someone else, someone else whose presence he hadn't felt before. But there was something very, **very** familiar about that mind as if it was someone he had been around a lot but hadn't actually sensed via Kenbunshoku before. And a second later, moving in that direction for a few seconds, he could also sense Franky. And he sensed their distress at the moment, the amount of stress they were all under. "I've got some friends I need to go see. You pull back, and I'll go help Whitebeard in a second."

With that, Luffy turned into lightning and disappeared, zooming to the side and west of their current position. This left Jozu blinking, then looking down at the two Admirals. He growled, then, thankful for Shiki's power still effecting him, bounced higher in the air and away, retreating back towards Whitebeard in the center of the conflagration with Akainu in hot

pursuit as Kizaru disappeared into a light beam, shooting ahead. Not having seen where Luffy had been aiming, both Admirals had decided to concentrate on the larger prize for the moment.

OOOOOOO

Tsuru smiled grimly as she bounced around the Kuja ship, observing for a moment as Vice Admiral Cancer charged forward along with Chaton and Strawberry while a group of three commodores descended to try to attack the sides of the Kuja vessel along with Koby and Helmeppo.

They were the only ones who had answered her call for help. No one else apparently had a Den Den Mushi on them or they were simply ignoring all communications in favor of pressing the attack on the Whitebeard pirates on this flank. Which, with the loss of Vista and his division, had begun to turn against the pirate fleet, perhaps the only silver lining the marine fleet was seeing at this point in the realm of typical naval warfare. *Thankfully, Cancer is also one of the vice admirals given Green Goo. Pity he lost contact with the rest of his team in the fight before replying, but hopefully those youngsters can pick up the damn slack! I don't want to face a fucking Kuja-style arrow fusillade!*

With Hancock, Nefertari and Sandersonia to defend them, many of the Kuja had come up from below decks after Tsuru had retreated to try to get some reinforcements. She came back into what amounted to a ship putting out enough anti-air fire to down any of the vice admirals with Haki-infused arrows.

Now, however, the Kuja retreated back into the ship as numerous Finger bombs flashed down and the commodores raced in from just above the water line. They joined their fellows, putting out enough fire to keep the commodores and warrant officers away, but that was at least acceptable to Tsuru.

On the main deck, Franky was looking a little battered from taking a direct strike from a Finger Bomb. Hancock looked as if she was still going strong. Indeed, she didn't even look injured, but Tsuru knew that would not last as she was forced to protect the entire ship against three vice admirals and Tsuru herself. Sandersonia had also taken numerous strikes from the Finger Bomb while Vivi had been attacked several times by Strawberry, and had barely a moment in a human form before needing to hide her consciousness away again. Tsuru as bemused to note Strawberry seemed to have it out for the girl even more than Tsuru did at the moment for her betrayal of the World Government.

Finished with her observations, Tsuru charged as well. Hopping upwards until she hovered over the ship, she then dove down, something that would have been impossible when the Kuja had been keeping a lot of their fighters on the main deck. She landed between Franky and Vivi, her hands flicking out to either side.

Vivi somehow sensed her coming. *Damn it, it's as if the girl is on the cusp of Kenbunshoku like Koby was before this battle! Worse, she isn't getting as overwhelmed as he was.* Tsuru grumbled mentally as Vivi instantly turned to sand. As Tsuru's hand struck, a wave of sand erupted from the sand clone, grabbing at Tsuru even as it formed into a defensive wall between where she landed and Franky.

Tsuru gritted her teeth and smashed through the wall, reaching for the giant robot pirate, but he fell backward, holding out both of his hands and shouting, "Franky Barrage!" A large cannonball came from the palm of one hand while the other wrist shot out several dozen musket balls.

Tsuru dodged the cannonball, then reached out and caught the musket balls, turning each of them into tiny towels, showing she could turn things into towels just like she could people. Thankfully, that skill was limited by weight, so she couldn't do it to anything larger than a cannon, but musket balls were very easy.

She hurled them at Franky even as he backed away, the towels bursting through another sand wall from Vivi, who was hiding her presence among the sand that completely covered the main deck of the ship once more. Like little daggers, the tiny towels slammed through the sand and into Franky's body, doing no real damage, even as he turned aside to clothesline Cancer just as he landed on the deck.

This didn't do much to the metal-clad admiral, but it did pause his own attack long enough for Hancock to turn in his direction. A wink and a smile were followed by a Mero Mero Mellow Beam shot towards the now blushing man, who was saved by Chaton, who smacked him out of the way.

"Dammit Cancer! If you're just going to turn into statues like Lance over there, retreat. We need help here, not another burden!" Tsuru shouted as she stomped down on the sand below her. A burst of unrefined Haki sent a tremor through the sand, pushing it away from her, then she was leaping up and over Sandersonia, reaching down to touch her.

Faster than even Tsuru could track, Hancock zoomed from the other side of the ship to suddenly be between Tsuru and her target. A leg covered in Busoshoku slammed into her palm, smacking it away from her sister. Hancock whirled into another kick, which Tsuru hastily ducked under, only for a fist made of sand to catch her in the chin, hurling Tsuru up and over the ship's gunwale.

This opened up Hancock to a blow from Chaton, the first she had taken in the battle, which cracked into her thigh, hurling her sideways and into the forecastle but doing no real damage. For a second, though, Franky was left on his lonesome and quickly took several hard blows from Cancer, the metal body given to him by the Green Goo, causing Franky's chest to cave in over one pec and over his side, accompanied by the sound of glass breaking. Franky's

hair instantly began to droop a bit, and something that looked like brown goop to Cancer's eyes started to come out of his stomach, showing a previously invisible seam there.

At the same time, Strawberry pressed Sandersonia, demolishing her Yamato no Orochi technique with ease despite his lack of swords, his Tekkai making his skin far stronger than stone or steel. He was even able to keep up with her Snake Dance much to the woman's chagrin, landing several strong strikes that broke her own Busoshoku. A Haki-covered Shigan to the eye a second later might well have killed her if not for Vivi's intervention. A spike rose out of the sand right between his legs, shooting upwards with lethal intent.

Yelping, Strawberry bounced away instead of continuing his, dancing away wildly from still more spikes staring down at the sand murderously. "I am going to get you for that, Princess!"

Vivi didn't answer, having had to shoot off small spears of sand at Koby and Helmeppo again as they dove down to try to attack the side of the ship. The pair was hoping to put a hole in it that would slow the ship down, maybe even sink it. Yet the Kuja pirates, who had been ordered by Hancock to go below, were not defenseless. Two or more of them were firing out of every cannon port at the two, forcing them away. Neither youngster was good enough with the Rokushiki, to use Geppo and Tekkai or Kami-E at the same time, nor if they used Tekkai, they halted in place, falling down towards the ocean below.

But Vivi should have paid more attention to the main threats because the next second, Cancer slammed his hands together, creating a loud clang and a shockwave that lifted up large portions of the sand covering the main deck, hurling it into a pile at one end of the ship. The next second, somehow sensing where Vivi's spirit was within the sand, he slammed a Busoshoku palm down into the pile, causing her to cry out in pain as her body appeared for a second. The touch of his Busoshoku overcame her Logia Form. Almost as if she was being birthed from the sand, Vivi found herself pulled up and out of the sand, flailing as Cancer held her in the air until a spike of sand from her stomach slammed into the man, causing him to stumble, loosening his grip. He still struck her, though, smashing her the length of the ship and into the aft castle, which shattered on impact.

Groaning, Vivi pushed herself out of the wreckage that had been the officer's quarters, but before she could disappear into the sand again, Cancer charged forward, trying to grab her again. Eyes widening, Vivi summoned up dozens of sand hands around her body, almost transforming into a demonic-looking creature as she concentrated. *Have to concentrate and cut the deck, but no deeper, high speed, higgghhh speed erossion...* "Sand AXE!"

Before two could reach her, Vivi's sand arms slammed into a crescent-shaped area in front of her. What looked like loose blades of sand flashed out, the sand eroding everything that it touched in a straight line. This included two, who were hit with two of them. "ARGGH!!" he gasped, Bouncing up and away, blood pouring liberally through cracked, shorn lines over his

body, where the sand had literally scoured straight through the metal skin given to him by the Green Goo. "FUCK, that hurt!"

"Excellent job, princess!" Hancock called, as she almost seemed to dance between Chaton and Strawberry, beams of Mero Mero, kicks and punches going in every direction, fighting off both of the Vice Admirals. She almost looked to be having fun, something that caused everyone there to stare at the Pirate Empress, their eyes wide in shock even as Hancock complimented the younger girl. "That was a most puissant attack. Nothing in comparison to my own, but acceptable."

"Thank you, Your Majesty," Vivi answered, gasping a bit but showing now sarcasm in her tone. Vivi understood she would have been overwhelmed by any of the vice admirals in this fight, and Hancock had frozen Lance into stone, then two of the strange cyborg creatures already.

Tsuru recovered from the strike she had taken from Vivi and dove back down into the fight. She lashed out with a hand towards Hancock, only for Hancock to rear back, then bring her head forward covered with Busoshoku.

"GAHH!" Tsuru growled in pain as the strike hit home, breaking through her own Busoshoku, which was admittedly somewhat limited. Old age and lack of real fighting had caught up to her even more than it had Garp or Whitebeard. She had also never been a monster on their level. The blow broke something in her hand, and she hissed in anger as Hancock barked out, "Foolish wench! Don't you know a hag cannot beat an Empress?!"

Flipping through the air, Tsuru made to attack Vivi next while a badly bleeding Cancer ducked under a blow from Sandersonia. He then grabbed Franky's outstretched fist as he moved to attack as well. Metal groaned as the metal hand of Cancer dented Franky's fist before he whirled, hurling Franky off the ship.

"Oooow, you're not getting rid of me that easy!" Franky shouted. "Strong Right!" His other hand blasted off at the wrist, the metal fist connected to his arm by a chain.

The outstretched hand latched onto the side of the ship, but before Franky could do more than pull himself a tiny bit back to the Kuja vessel, Strawberry twisted around an attack from Hancock and kicked out. The kick shattered the gunwale the fist had latched onto, sending it plummeting down into the ocean.

"Oh, that was so the opposite of super!" Franky shouted, falling into the ocean. Luckily, he was a cyborg, not a Devil Fruit user. Unlike the majority of the other fighters up on the main deck, Franky was perfectly happy in the water.

Underneath the water, his legs split, shifting into his centaur form. Then, each began to move wildly, causing a spray of water to burst out from behind him as he roared back toward the ship. "Franky Swan's kick!"

With his upper body sticking out of the ocean as his lower body did all the work to keep him floating and moving, Franky began to use his machine gun arm to fire at a Commodore between him and the Kuja ship, catching him from behind. The man scream, lost control of his Geppo, and fell into the water before any of the other marines could help. As a Devil Fruit User, Franky had no idea what his power was, he sank like a brick but he had already done some damage to the ship. Several of the Kuja defending the starboard side of the ship had been knocked out by precise, but not penetrating type attacks. Four had been killed, but the others dragged themselves back to the gun ports.

A Rankyaku crashed through Vivi's hastily raised shield, and before she could transfer her consciousness down into the sands below, Tsuru's fist smashed into her shoulder. Vivi cried out in pain as she felt her shoulder break under the blow, and she was once more hurled backward into the wreckage of the officer's quarters. There, several small shards of wood stabbed into her, cutting her back and thighs, causing Vivi to cry out in pain again, the pain from her shoulder getting in the way of transforming into sand.

Tsuru shot forward, intent on finishing her off. "You are done, princess."

With Franky in the ocean, Sandersonia and Hancock battling three vice admirals between them, even Hancock could not get free to save the younger girl. Yet Chaton, the most observant of the trio, was surprised to see her sudden spike of worry disappear into an almost coquettish smile. One Chaton knew was not for him, whatever his hormones might want. *What the?*

He got his answer as lightning crashed above.

Luffy's lightning-based arrival carried him into Strawberry, who was in the air at the moment he arrived. "Strawberry," he acknowledged, even as his lightning strike slammed into the man, hurling him down onto the deck as he cried out in pain. His Busoshoku had saved him from instantly being electrocuted, but it still hurt like blazes. The next second, lightning blasts flashed down toward Tsuru and the other Marines, forcing them away from their opponents.

"FUFUFU, well, you certainly do know how to make an entrance, Luffy," Hancock said, straightening and tossing her hair back over her shoulders as she pointed at him dramatically. "Do not think that I needed your help, though!"

"You might not have, but Franky and your sisters, who I can see only one of at the moment, by the way, and..." Luffy paused, staring at Vivi. "...**Vivi!**? What are you doing here?!" *Was her mind the one I was feeling before, the one I couldn't quite figure out but felt like I should recognize!? Seriously, what the hell is Vivi doing here, fighting alongside Hancock!?*

From where she crouched in the wreckage of the officer's quarters for the second time in the last few minutes, Vivi stared. For a moment, Vivi forgot where she was, the ongoing danger from Tsuru, Strawberry and the other marines and even the overall battle. She simply stared at Luffy, a blush suffusing her features. *By my ancestors...*

To Vivi, Luffy had always been quite attractive in both forms, even though she had a much easier job of letting her think that when he was in his male body. Princesses were not supposed to find other women attractive, although even before her recent interaction with Hancock Vivi had known she had some interest in that direction thanks to her time aboard the Straw Hat ship, fed by a few of the more... erotic books she had been able to smuggle past her retainers. Looking at Luffy now, Vivi could safely say that the quarter of a year since they had last seen one another had been VERY kind to Monkey D. Luffy, despite the amount of trouble he had run into over that time.

His hair was a bit longer, tied in a long ponytail now rather than a pigtail. It seemed as if Luffy's shoulders were broader than they had been by at least a few inches. His biceps were bigger, shown to Vivi's appreciative gaze along with portions of his abs and chest by the rips and tears in his shirt. His abs looked just as flat and toned as before. Heck, even his thighs looked stronger, bigger around but just as toned, shown again through a tear in his thigh. His shoulders seemed broader, too, almost to Ace's level from what Vivi could remember. Those muscles looked fit to envelop Vivi's own small frame, able to both protect and... control her in many... pleasurable ways. The electrical scars on Luffy's forearms stood out starkly and combined with the hair, gave him a more worldly, experienced look without making him appear all that much older.

Overall, Luffy looked amazingly handsome to the Alabastan princess. Worse for Vivi's battered self-control at present, she had two favorites when it came to romance genres, both influenced by events in her life. Her original favorite had been stories where slightly older boys dated people they had, when younger, treated as siblings only to suddenly realize how attractive the younger girl had become. Her friendship with Koza had directly inspired that. Similarly, her time with the Straw Hats and how Luffy had saved her country, had created second favorite genre: that of heroic outlaws swooping in and saving the princess. Which Luffy had just done. Again.

For just a moment, all of Vivi's trained restraint left her, and Vivi lost control of her tongue, letting out her actual thoughts before she could filter them. "Pease plunder my treasure, Captain~..."

For just a moment, everyone turned to stare at Vivi. A blush began to suffuse Luffy's face as he stared at the blue-haired girl, although it paled in comparison to the one on the princess's face, as she clamped her hand over her mouth and began to dissolve into sand particles. "I, I didn't, that is..."

Chaton laughed, able to see the humor in Vivi's brain shutting down due to hormones despite the devastating consequences of Luffy's sudden arrival on this portion of the battlefield. *We've lost, but at least I can laugh at that! No wonder Boa Hancock looked so smug a moment ago. She must have sensed him coming, and none of us did.* "Well, at least we know why Princess Nefertari decided to switch sides," he laughed, "perfectly understandable, I'd say."

Luffy slowly shook his head, watching as Vivi continued to dissolve into sand, her face about as red as a lobster, then looked over at Hancock, worried about her response. "Um..."

But Hancock merely laughed, shaking her head. "Do not worry about me, Luffy. I well understood you had stolen the good princess's heart when we spoke about her. Her reactions were most amusing when I brought it up with her. And so long as she is into this Empress having some time with the little princess as well, and I rather think she is given her response to our interactions before this battle, then I think we can come to an... agreement."

She made no mention of Robin being part of that equation. It had long been a part of the trio's relationship that Robin's part in it was to be hidden. Given the hatred the WeeGee had for her, the only woman in the world known to be able to translate poneglyphs. If it was known she was not only part of Luffy's crew but in a relationship with the rising star of the pirate world, it would bring all it had down on top of the Straw Hats, ignoring all other considerations in a way that even the current plan wouldn't bring.

Such was their hatred for anyone who looked into the history written on those poneglyphs. They would let the world's balance crumble, peace to become a dim memory, if it meant keeping the past hidden. The Tragedy of Ohara was not the only such the Gorosei had ordered that the Kuja knew about.

That halted Vivi's transformation into a pile of sand, and she slowly regained control of herself as Luffy, deciding to tackle that later, turned to Tsuru and the rest of the Marines. "You'd be Tsuru, then? Gramps talked about you a lot. Pity that you and Strawberry over there are just another pair of dogs of the world government."

Tsuru gritted her teeth. "And where is the old fool now?"

Luffy gestured with an airy wave of his hand towards the center of the battle, which, while well beyond the sight of anyone there, was still within range of his Kenbunshoku. The center of the battle had actually shifted forward or rather deeper into the Marine formation from its starting point. From what Luffy could sense, the fight was now happening almost over the island Akainu had created, and he wondered if that was someone's strategy or just how the battle had drifted. But he shook that thought all for now, concentrating on everything going on around him personally.

"Heading that way, towards where Whitebeard is at the moment. He was fighting with some other guy, I don't know who but they broke off for some reason. As you are all going to do

now? I'm giving you a chance to leave, Tsuru. Or I'm going to add still more vice admirals to my tally for the day."

That was somewhat of a bluff. Luffy knew he had only actually killed two vice admirals with his Raigo. But he figured that taking Akainu's arm and giving Kizaru such a hard time of it was pretty equivalent. It was also a bluff in that he was getting a little tired by this point, but his tiredness didn't seem to matter much when it came to using his Logia Powers, just his Haki and ki. "And I'm only doing that because I know you are an old friend of Gramps. I doubt he'd be happy with me turning you into aged charcoal regardless of the fact that he's left you marines."

Tsuru scowled, trying to calculate their chances, but just then, Koby and Helmeppo pulled themselves up over the side of the ship, with Franky doing the same further toward the aft of the ship. One of the other commodores had been shot down by the Kuja and the last had died to Luffy's lightning a second ago, but the three of them had figured out that with Luffy's arrival, there would be a little break in the fighting and, without any conversation between them, decided to regroup with their respective sides without further conflict. Franky because he figured it was pointless and Koby because he was anxious to talk to Luffy.

"Koby," Luffy acknowledged the younger man, nodding his head towards him. *Oh, this is going to be interesting...*

"Luffy! Why. why did you... Why did you do that indiscriminate attack!? Why are you even here!?" Koby shouted, having so many questions they had to fight one another to get out of his mouth. "What's your connection to Whitebeard!?"

Luffy shook his head. "Ask the WeeGee why they decided to try to execute my brother, Ace. Ask Tsuru why she sent three Shichibukai after me. And you know that Akainu sent a Buster call at me on Water 7. I didn't set out to become the enemy of the World Government, Koby. The WeeGee made me their enemy!"

"You took on the Ghost of Ohara and have stood against the World Government's edicts several times! Fire Fist Ace is a legitimate target of the marines and the World Government and-" Tsuru began, but Luffy was in no mood to hear her sanctimonious attempt to shift blame.

"I did take Nico Robin on, and I will stand against any enemy of hers as part of my crew!" Luffy growled out, his voice overriding Tsuru's. "I will defend anyone who is simply being persecuted because they exist! Just because they happen to fly a pirate flag doesn't mean someone is automatically evil, you old bitch! Your idea of justice is nothing but tyranny."

He looked back at Koby, shaking his head. "That's why I'm here, Koby. I'm here because I have to be. Because I've already freed Ace, and everything I do here is to make sure that he, my crew, and our allies escape. Don't blame this on us. I may have started this dance, but it's the World Government who chose the tune, who decided to bring this fight to Whitebeard. It was Tsuru who knew that I would try to interfere only to end up bringing me in any way."

With her mistakes shoved in her face, Tsuru could only growl, looking between Hancock and Luffy. "And in alliance with one of our Shichibukai..."

"Oh, we're quite a bit closer than that," Hancock said, moving to stand beside Luffy, who obligingly put an arm over her shoulders, smirking as he cocked an eyebrow at the marines.

"Jealousy and disgust rise in equal measure within me," Cancer muttered, only to quail under a glare from Tsuru, even as Chaton began to laugh again.

Vivi also watched on, her eyes wide. She had known that Hancock and Luffy were together, along with Robin before this, but to see it in front of her like this was something else entirely. *I, I don't feel jealous just... intimidated. Very intimidated. Is there a place by his side now, with such beauties already there? Or am I just being a silly little girl, whatever Hancock might have said a moment ago?*

"Hancock and the Kuja are now my allies and Kuja Lily's going to be the first island to waive my flag as the Fifth Yonko," Luffy stated simply, an almost feral smile crossing his features for a second. "Judging by what I've done so far, I think I don't have to argue that I deserve that appellation."

Tsuru growled angrily, but it was true. If Luffy and his crew could get away along with Hancock after the day's events, he would surely have as large a bounty as Kaidou or any of the other two Yonko out there. *Which is to say nothing of the fact that he would probably also be allied with his grandfather and Whitebeard if they all escaped*, she thought, feeling a twinge of anger and guilt rolled into one at the thought of Garp.

Koby still looked distressed, but Tsuru looked at her fellow officers, and all of them nodded slightly. Luffy could not be allowed to escape. Even Chaton nodded, though he felt they had about as much chance against the lightning fruit as a wind in a gale. *Metal-clad Cancer, little old me, a swordless Strawberry and Tsuru. Nope. This is not going to end well, but better to take my burns from Garp's grandkid than lumps from Tsuru.* Chaton completely disregarded Koby and Helmeppo. Whatever Koby's ambitions and drive, he was not ready for this fight.

An instant later, all of them charge forwards, bar Koby. Even Helmeppo charged forward, his kukri flashing as he charged forward, quickly losing pace beside Strawberry. However, before any of them could cross even a few inches, lightning flared, Luffy disappeared, and suddenly, bolts of lightning were coming at them from above and behind. All four of the higher-ranking officers were forced to use their Busoshoku to defend themselves, and each strike of the lightning seared their bodies even so, the heat of the strikes penetrating even as they were able to defend her skin.

Cancer was in a much worse way, his lightning skin making for a great conductor even covered by Busoshoku. "ARGGHG!!!" he screamed as smoke began to waft from the skin visible in the cracks that Vivi had worn into his metal body despite his Busoshoku.

Chaton fell to the wayside for a second, and before he could write himself, the lightning around him cut off, and Hancock was there, a kick taking him in the chin. "Perfume Femur!"

Here, Busoshoku worked much better to protect Chaton, stopping him from being turned into stone from the Mero Mero assisted strike, but he was still hurled backward into the slowly collapsing Cancer, and Tsuru quickly hopped off and away from the ship, bouncing away through the air, glaring at the ship, Hancock and Luffy alike. Strawberry followed once more, carrying Helmeppo, whom he had protected against the majority of the lightning blasts aimed his way, although he was now looking very much the worse for wear.

Luffy's attack cut off, having left Koby completely unharmed, and glaring up at Tsuru, he gestured with one hand to Koby. "Help your oldsters up, Koby. It's time you all leave."

"I, I'm still going to be the Marine to bring you in! I'm going to bring you down before you can become the Pirate King! You're a mass murderer now, Luffy!" Koby shouted, glaring angrily at Luffy now.

"So are the Marines, many times over, Koby. So's the World Government. Every time they wipe out on an island because someone's researching history or just because the Tenryubito decided they needed a new group of slaves," Luffy growled out, stamping forward toward his friend. "I thought you wanted to serve justice when you joined the Marines, not just the World Governments status quo! Where is the justice in that? Where is the justice in capturing Kuja for slaves?"

Hancock smiled at that, once more moving to Luffy's side as she added her own words. "Where is the justice in forcing Princess Vivi to join this battle against her will via blackmail? Where was the World Government when Crocodile tried to take over her country? Would you have even been allowed to investigate him, given his Shichibukai status?"

"Where is the justice in starting a war to wipe out Whitebeard and his crew, a crew of mostly buccaneers instead of freebooters, whose name and flag do just as much as the World Government to keep the peace in this world?" Luffy demanded before glaring up at Tsuru, filing away the fact Vivi had been blackmailed to be here, probably due to his friendship with her.

Right now, he had a much larger axe to grind. "Where is the justice in hounding Ace just because he's the son of Gol D. Roger? Where is the justice in believing the son will always be as bad as the father?"

"It looks as if we were right in both your and his cases, son of Dragon!" Tsuru shot back before turning to stare as something came over the horizon. Coming towards them, moving faster than any marine vessel or indeed any other ship on the five seas could move, was the same ship that had fired that strange long-range attack hours ago. "Damn it..."

Luffy grinned, having sensed his crew coming in their direction long before they had come into sight. "Yeah, you're all about to be outnumbered. And while it ain't anywhere as close as my relationship with Hancock, I did make another Shichibukai-type friend in Impel Down."

As Tsuru began to curse like a sailor, Luffy turned back to Koby, shaking his head as the other young man seemed to stare into nothing for a moment, shocked by Luffy's words, forced to acknowledge the darkness at the heart of the system he served. "I'm not saying that every Marine I kill today deserved it, Koby. I will take the burden of their deaths to my grave. But if the choice is between doing what I feel is right, protecting my family and my friends, or letting them get slaughtered by the Marines in the World Government, I'll cheerfully deal with oceans of blood on my hands."

Koby glared at him again before turning abruptly away, reaching down, and lifting Cancer up onto his shoulder. Chaton had already pushed himself to his feet and was looking at Luffy thoughtfully. Luffy glanced his way, and the middle-aged man smiled, tipped his hat towards Luffy, and turned away, hopping up into the air to join Tsuru.

Huh, interesting response there. Looks as if that guy's about as reasonable as Momonga. Good to know there are at least a few within the Marines who still don't follow the whole Absolute Justice bullshit.

From the air, Tsuru and the other marines watched as Sandersonia went below, getting the towel Marigold, which he handed to Franky, who hopped over the side of the ship. The next instant, Marigold appeared, dazed and listless in the water, but the ocean had canceled out Tsuru's power. The rest of the Kuja pirates, who had been hiding below on their empress's orders, came boiling out, and quickly, as the Everlasting Resolve moved next to them, they transferred over to the Straw Hat's ship, leaving behind the Kuja ship, and the still stone statue Lance, surprisingly undefiled.

The sight of Jinbe with the rest of the Straw Hat Crew was just icing on the cake, and despite being ready for it, Tsuru felt anger boiling within her. They were going to get away. The entire crew. They had done it, she realized with a sort of sick horror. Straw Hat Luffy had led his crew into an attack on Impel Down, somehow infiltrating the prison, freeing Fire Fist Ace, Jinbe and Garp, and now they were going to get clean away. *Even if we take Whitebeard's head and wipe out his entire crew, the stain on our honor and that of the WeeGee will never be erased.*

That thought horrified and frightened Tsuru in turn, and perhaps because of that, she shouted what she did next. "You know you will never get away with this! Alabasta, Nefertari, it can't survive your choice here. Alabasta is going to burn for this. And yours, Hancock! Hell, all of your home islands will be targeted because of your actions today!"

The fact that Koby flinched at that, staring at her in horror or the fact that Chaton simply sighed and covered his eyes with his hat was lost on Tsuru. She was too busy glaring as she was

down towards Vivi, who had somehow become the symbol of all of today's failures in her mind. She even missed how the only one of the Straw Hat Crew who even flinched at her words was the orange-haired Cat Burglar. Everyone, even the mascot Tony Tony Chopper, simply watched on, their faces blank.

Vivi turned, having smiled and waved Chopper a way to deal with some of the more injured Kuja. She looked up at Tsuru, then over to Luffy, and moved towards him, ignoring how Sanji was dancing around her or how Nami looked as if she was a second away from glomping her. There was something she had to get out of the way right now. "Luffy, I realize that Amazon Lily will be the first island to fly your flag, but as I am going to be joining your crew again, can I assume that you have no trouble flying your flag over Alabasta as well?"

"You didn't even have to ask! Your home is mine, and I will defend it against all comers!" Luffy shouted loudly, then looked up at Tsuru, a challenging smirk on his face. "Besides, after today, I think the World Government's going to be too busy building up its strength again to want to tangle with me so soon."

Vivi smiled and formally bowed to him in thanks before looking back up at Tsuru, all humor leached from her expression, replaced with a cold fury. *How dare this old bitch threaten my country when the marines are the ones who set all this in motion!?* "If you want my country, Tsuru, I dare you personally to come ahead and try! Lightning and sand will be your only answer! Come at us if you dare!"

Having no response to either statement, Tsuru turned away, bouncing off through the air with Chaton and the rest behind her. The reckoning for the Straw Hats would come in time. Nevertheless, not now. Now, they had won the day.

There was a cheer at that, a cheer taken up by the Straw Hats as well, those who had enough energy to do so, anyway. While Brook had exerted himself against Red Mask, he was still dealing with the rest of the feeling of being submerged in water for so long by Jinbe and had collapsed onto his face the moment he was returned to the ship by the Knight of the Sea for the second time that day. In addition, Laki was in no condition to move, although she was smiling as the noise of the cheers reached the bridge. Zoro was down in the medical wing, tied to Chopper's operating table in chains.

Perona was the first to try to cut through the cheers, floating down from on high to land next to Luffy. The look on her face told Luffy that she thought he was being too nice and that they should've wiped out those three officers, at the very least. But she didn't say anything about it, simply asking pointedly, "What now, Captain?"

Luffy grinned and looked over to where Nami had finally pulled Vivi into a hug, which Chopper had taken a moment out of dealing with the wounded Kuja to join. "Hancock, do I presume correctly that you have an Eternal Pose to Kuja Lily?"

Hancock nodded, and moved over to Nami, who broke away from the hug with Vivi to hold out her hand eagerly. "Should I set a course, Captain?" Nami asked. Normally, when she used the word Captain for Luffy, it was in a teasing tone of voice, but now, it was both a teasing tone and a formal tone.

"Yep. I think you should--" Luffy frowned then, sensing Garp arriving at where Whitebeard, along with a few others. Including Kizaru and Akainu. *Yeah... no. Nope. I ain't about to let them all gang up on the old guys. Not without getting a few more licks in. I also wanna make certain Ace gets out with the rest of the WB fleet. I didn't go to all this trouble just to let him stay and be killed by Aokiji or any of the rest of this lot.*

He hopped into the air, looking down at his crew with a smirk. "Set that course and start on it. I'm going to be busy for a bit, but I'll catch up with you later."

Hancock quickly hopped into the air beside him, shaking her head firmly. "I'm going with you. The World Government will have known of my change of allegiance already, and you might need someone to watch your back if you're going to stand beside Whitebeard against Sengoku and the rest. And I can't trust your grandfather to do it."

Luffy grinned and pulled her into a hug quickly, causing Hancock to let loose the most adorable squeak that the people below on the ship had ever heard. "Oh no, she can be cute too?" Vivi mumbled, staring up at the couple and midair above them.

Nico Robin's voice from nearby caused her to twitch, and she looked over to see Robin wearing Luffy's straw hat, a certain sign of favor that made Vivi twitch again, once more reminded of her earlier thoughts on her future romantic prospects with Luffy. "She can indeed. But Hancock can also be kind underneath that hauteur."

Vivi looked back at her for a moment, then shook her head. She was too tired and too battered to think more about the future at all, let alone her own personal future with Luffy. *That will come later. Right now, rest and some time to catch up with Nami and the rest sounds great.*

Instead, Vivi turned to Nami, walking beside the other young girl up to the conning tower. She paused there, watching as Luffy said something to Hancock, his lower half turning into lightning, as his upper half remained human, carrying her in the princess carry as he turned and raced away faster than lightning. Only when the two of them were gone did she turn, following Nami inside. Below them, the rest of the mixed crews entered the ship as well, which began to power forward once more on a new heading.

The Straw Hats had won. All that remained to do was to make certain that as many of their allies escaped along with them.

End Chapter

This concludes the rest of the Straw Hats and Vivi's part in this war. Things are still very chaotic, because even as the Whitebeard Crew and their erstwhile ally attempt to disengage, Blackbeard and his actions are also coming to light. Now, the question becomes, what will Peter's priorities be?

See you next time for the answer, folks!