

One Piece: Halfway Broken

(Chapters 121-123)

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Chapter 121: Joint Training

Even as Luffy dodged Haki-infused arrows, sending moderately powerful bolts of lightning back at the Kuja who'd shot them, he idly mused that he never thought he'd been playing Pretend Fleet Admiral. It made sense completely, of course. He was, by far and away, the closest stand-in they had for Borsalino, after all. He could come at least *close* to matching the Admiral's speed and attacks with his Lightning, allowing the combined Kuja and Strawhat crew to practice 'repelling attacks' from him.

He wasn't the only one that they did so against, of course. Nojiko could, at this point, come at least close to mimicking Kuzan's general abilities with ice as well. Even if doing so at the same *scale* pushed her. Honestly, that fact was only a bonus, as it was forcing Nojiko to stretch her Devil Fruit's brute power in a way she normally didn't. Likewise, as far as others went, Yamato could mimic some of the Giant Admirals, and Zoro and Kuina could stand in for a few of the more famous swordsmen among the Marines.

Since arriving on Amazon Lily and working out how to handle joint training, they'd cycled who acted as an 'assailant' and who helped the defenders. Mostly, they'd been focusing on getting the Kuja Pirate Crew and the mid-tier Kuja who *weren't* part of that crew, to work together with the slightly-less powerful members of Luffy's own crew. Individuals like Perona, who could grant a major tactical advantage by forcing most fighters to dodge her Hollows, or Nojiko who could act as a very mobile shield. Working out tactics that could be deployed with each crewmate who was likely to be part of the general defense, as it were.

Which notably *didn't* include Luffy, Yamato, Kuina or Zoro.

The four of them were the major 'heavy hitters' of their own crew. If they were called in to help defend their allies, they would likely be locked into one-on-one fights against enemy officers. Which wasn't to say that they *weren't* training among themselves. It was just that for the four of them, they were only really likely to fight alongside Hancock and her sisters. Possibly Ran, as well, who was the next-highest ranking member of the Kuja Pirates. Since the pirate crew made up the Elite of the Kuja in general, considering anyone outside of the Kuja officers was mostly pointless.

It was thus that most of *their* 'joint training' took the form of two-on-two or two-on-one skirmishes. It was unlikely that they'd get to gang up on targets more than that, so simply making sure they were familiar with each other's basic combat styles was enough. At their level, specific team tactics weren't that useful, leaving it mostly a case of 'don't get in each other's way.'

As he dodged another volley of Haki arrows, he idly reflected that even just those spars/skirmishes had been...enlightening. Neither of Hancock's sisters could legitimately match him or Yamato, though two on one they could give either of them some trouble. The Empress herself, though, had been a wake-up call, of sorts. Even *excluding* her bullshit Devil Fruit, the brutal truth was she was legitimately as tough an opponent as Borsalino. Probably. At least one on one. He and Yamato had tag teamed Borsalino, so it was a little hard to compare. Doubly so as they were considerably stronger now than they had been when they'd fought him.

In reality, even excluding her Devil Fruit, Luffy legitimately didn't think he could have taken Hancock before training with Rayleigh for three months. Yamato *might* have been able to, possibly. At least if she didn't get caught by Boa's Devil Fruit at the wrong moment. Even now, after they'd both gained so much with over a year of intense training, she could *keep up with them*. He was *fairly* sure in an all-out-fight, he or Yamato would best her now. But it would be *close*, and he wasn't actually *certain*.

It was an unpleasant reminder that, no matter how dangerous the World Government and its minions were, there remained *other* powers that were just as potentially lethal to them. Hancock admitted, privately, that she genuinely didn't know where she stacked up against any of the current Yonko. She'd avoided any direct confrontations with them, and the Kuja crew as a whole didn't venture too often into the New World. She *did* have enough familiarity with New World strengths to give them a good idea where they stood, at least.

Thankfully, she currently rated them at a level similar in strength to the various Yonko's top officers, a few of which from the Beast Pirates and Big Mom pirates she *had* clashed with. It was a relief to know that, while there were still major dangers out there, he and Yamato were at least within *shouting distance* of the top of the food chain. Well, the *known* top of the food chain at least.

Rayleigh, when he'd eventually explained what he knew about the God's Knights, had flat out told them that Luffy and Yamato would need to work *together* to take one down, even as they were *after* he'd finished with their Hell Training months. Though if Luffy could finish refining his Awakened state, he'd admitted that would likely let him take one of them on one-on-one, with the Elders also being on a similar level. According to Rayleigh, the Elders were technically more powerful, but rarely saw direct combat, meaning the God's Knights tended to make up that power gap with experience.

Jerking in surprise as his Observation warned him he needed to *move*, Luffy just barely got clear of an arrow that was *far* sharper than it should have been and laced with more than just Haki. Ah, his opponents were trying something more clever than just arrows now, after luring him into a false sense of security. Unless he missed his guess, Kaya must be with this group, this time. That arrow had been *invisible* and coated in spiritual energy instead of Haki. Not to mention he hadn't sensed the source, and only Kaya could hide from his Haki like that.

Time to get a little bit more serious, in that case...

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Luffy grimaced as he felt his careful mix of Haki and Spiritual Energy fight the power of Hancock's Devil Fruit. It was something they'd *needed* to test, if they were going to fight together at

any point, and the first attempt had been unpleasant. As in, he'd failed to resist being turned to stone at all, and there'd just been a *blank* for a minute or two before she'd reversed her power. He had *not* liked the fact that he'd been vulnerable to something like that. Less because of Hancock herself, who was steadily becoming more than just an ally, and more because of what it implied about *other* Devil Fruits with similar effects. He had, in fact, exhaustively gone over all the Devil Fruits his System provided summaries of after his fuck up in not realizing the Gomu Gomu no Mi was actually the Hito Hito no Mi, Model: Nika.

The results of his research had honestly been fairly thoroughly horrifying.

Things like the Hobi Hobi no Mi were a special sort of nightmare fuel, given that it could apparently not just turn you into a *toy* and *mind control you*, but also *erase any memory you'd existed* in the first place from others. Nor was it the only example of something arguably far *worse* than Hancock's own fruit. Big Mom's Soru Soru no Mi was disturbing enough on its own, but going over the other Devil Fruits known to be associated with her crew had been just as alarming. The ability to wring all liquid out of a living person, memory alteration, and more. All in the hands of a crew of deranged psychopaths as far as Luffy could tell. Nor were their fruits even remotely the end of the list. Frankly, Luffy didn't like thinking about some of the ones he'd read about and marked as particularly dangerous, and did his best *not* to dwell on them.

It had, however, driven him to try finding a solution, which meant experimenting with the one Devil Fruit in allied hands that fell into much the same category. Thankfully, after that first failed attempt, there had been progress. Specifically, Kaya had been observing and had taken note that the *hooks* for those types of Devil Fruit abilities seemed to be latching onto a person's Spirit. Which is why Haki, which was a subset ability focused on Will rather than the Spirit as a whole, offered little protection from Devil Fruit abilities like Hancock's. She might well not have made the leap of logic and observation if not for the way they'd tracked down Vader Decken, but she *had*, and that had made all the difference.

It had taken a lot of careful observation and even more careful experimentation, but they'd eventually figured out how to take principles from Haki Infusion in order to add raw spiritual energy to Armament Haki. Now, Luffy had just effectively 'walked off' getting hit by Hancock's beam, with little more than an unpleasant stiffness that lasted for a few seconds. Shaking his head as he sped that up, purging the last of the effects with a manipulation of his internal spiritual energy, he spoke up.

"That was still *unpleasant*, and it's going to take serious work to make it a reflex. It's proof of concept, though. Even if I think only seven of the crew will be able to learn it."

Hancock, looking a bit incredulous, muttered 'only seven, he says,' which caused Luffy's lips to twitch. Though her next question was one that made him wince.

"Can you teach me how to do this? Obviously, I don't need protection from my own Fruit, but there are others out there with effects that are concerning, and Haki is *known* to be an unpredictable defense against some of them. Big Mom's Devil Fruit, just for starters."

Thankfully for Luffy, Kaya was the one to answer, with a considering look.

“I’m not sure we could teach just anybody. They need at least *some* measure of Spiritual Sensitivity. Yet, I’d wager we might be able to teach you specifically enough to defend yourself, by using the feel of your own Devil Fruit as a shortcut.”

Luffy blinked, then frowned as he thought that over. Slowly, he nodded.

“There *has* to be some level of feedback, doesn’t there? Just like Robin and her body parts. Hancock, can you *feel* the people you’ve turned into statues?”

The Empress blinked, pursing her lips to consider that question, before nodding slowly.

“I’ve never thought about it before, simply attributing it to my Haki and the knowledge they were technically still alive, but yes. I do get a general sense of those frozen, until they are shattered at least.”

Well, that was both disturbing *and* potentially promising.

“In that case, Kaya might be right. It’s possible we can work *backwards* from that feeling to gaining some general awareness. Enough to defend against similar vectors of attack, at least. I assume you’re going to want that to be a major focus for training with us, going forward?”

The Pirate Empress’s nod at that was firm, just as expected. Well, that was fair enough, since he intended to use her Devil Fruit to train those of his crew that could learn the trick to resist such influence. This way, both sides would be getting something out of the exchange...

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Luffy watched with a critical eye as Kuina and Zoro dueled the hybrid forms of Marigold and Sandersonia. The two pairs had become a routine match up, as they were fairly evenly matched in both teamwork and raw power. Despite the Hell Training Rayleigh had put them all through to improve their Haki, the Boa sisters were still the more skilled with Armament and Observation. The pair of them had been using Haki since they were children, after all. On the flip side, Kuina and Zoro had reached the point where they edged the sisters out in raw skill, making the overall matchup one that routinely went either way. That said...

“I think this is paying off for your sisters quite well. They’ve been noticeably improving, enough to keep up with Kuina and Zoro’s own ridiculous growth rates.”

Hancock hummed next to him, nodding with a satisfied look on her face.

“Yes. I hadn’t realized how much having no other strong opponents, aside from me, to properly train against had caused them to plateau. The various matchups have pushed them in new ways. This joint training was unquestionably a good idea. Enough so that I may try to schedule one with Fishman Island as well.”

Luffy nodded at that, even as he looked over a handful of other pairings. Snaji was being forced by Hina to at least *defend* himself from a group of Kuja, the blonde still having some lingering issues with his ability to fight women. Though he’d gotten at least *somewhat* better under Hina’s influence. Ran was dueling at range with Usopp...and Usopp was legitimately struggling. Ran was next in line for skill and power after the sisters on the Kuja crew, so even restricting herself

to her arrows and snake-bow, she was making Usopp work to hit her. Something he wasn't used to, with very few people normally being able to compete with him at mid-to-long range. Other pairs were scattered around, some working *with* Kuja Pirates, others dueling against them, all working out kinks and stretching their abilities.

"Not a bad idea, though I'm usure how many truly strong fighters Neptune can field at this point. Jinbe would come, of course, and if he brought the rest of the Sun Pirates it would be a decent combined showing. I wasn't overly impressed with any of the King's actual army, though, or the Royal family either. Neptune was clearly a powerful fighter *once*, but has declined. Fukaboshi showed signs of basic Haki, too. But aside from him..."

Hancock responded with a nod of her own, obviously having noticed the same thing. If not for the physical power and speed that most fishmen and mermaids had, Fishman Island would blatantly be the weakest link in their little alliance. As it was, that greater physical power, raw numbers, and Fishman Karate being a force multiplier in the water let them hold their own.

"Any worthwhile training would have to be held down in their territory. That might not be a bad idea anyway, given we might have to fight there if they summon us for aid."

Ah, she *did* have a point, actually. He might need to consider setting up at least some basic training exercises with them as well so his crew could fight under those conditions better. He said as much, getting a smirk from Hancock as he acceded it was a good idea, and they moved on to discussing who to pair up for the next round. She had a good eye for possible pairings, while Luffy had a better one for spotting new ways individuals could leverage existing talents. Together, they were seeing more progress than expected, and both fully intended to make use of the gains to strengthen both their crews and the Alliance as a whole...

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The island shook as Shichiseiken clashed directly with Salome, deflecting the large Haki-infused snake as Handcock whipped him around like a giant *urumi* of all things. Luffy was barely familiar with that style of weapon, having only ever *looked into it* as a possible replacement for Vivi's Peacock slashers, which neither he nor Vivi were truly happy with. They'd given up on the idea at the simple realization that they had no idea how to train her to *use* the exotic whip-swords. Something Luffy was forced to reevaluate now, as Hancock engaged, using both Salome's tail and head as if they were two separate urumi.

Frankly, until this clash, he hadn't even known she actually used her overlarge snake companion like a weapon, as many Kuja did.

Something he was now realizing was because she *very rarely needed to*. All their previous exchanges had been under restricted conditions, not wanting to destroy their environment. *This* time, however, they'd moved the entire fight to the far side of Sixis. It was a section of the island well away from the Strawhat Base here that had been selected early on for 'serious sparring between Luffy and Yamato.' Something that had expanded later to also include Zoro and Kuina when they started developing their new styles. To say that the area was *already* devastated was a horrific understatement, making it a good place to take a fight when he and Hancock had decided they wanted to *genuinely* see who was stronger.

So far, Luffy's expectations had been utterly shattered.

He'd known that, out of the seven warlords, there had truly only been four that were genuinely the sorts of monsters that had given the group its reputation. Crocodile, Moria, and Kuma had been the *lower* rung of the Warlords, in that specific order. Of the others, the truth was that *no one knew* who was the strongest. Mihawk had, until his loss to Shanks just before the Whitebeard War, been the one considered to be at the 'top.' But even that had been mostly a guess, with Doflamingo, Jinbe, and Hancock herself known to each be powerful enough to make it genuinely *difficult* to determine any sort of standings. Luffy had been fully aware that they'd gotten *insanely* lucky, killing Doflamingo the way they did, given both what he'd already known of the man then and what he'd found out since.

Even so, until this fight Luffy hadn't quite thought Hancock was on Jinbe and Mihawk's level. He'd known she was *strong*, able to go head-to-head with either himself or Yamato in their spars until now. But there was a *big* difference in doing so in a place where they were both trying not to *break their surroundings* and fighting *somewhere that didn't matter*. Something he'd discovered when, after he'd managed to more-or-less best her in an initial hand-to-hand exchange using his Stormtiger form, she'd broken out Salome and proven she was a bloody Boss Battle with multiple stages!

Now, even *with* Shichiseiken, he was genuinely unsure how the hell this was going to end. While his blade had serious powers of its own, it turned out that the bloody snake *could use Haki on its own*. Meaning that it was effectively doubling down with its own Haki *and* Hancock's layers on top of it. He'd made the mistake of trying to block *without* Haki just once, and had felt the risk of Shichiseiken *breaking*!

Now, as they pushed away from each other, both breathing heavily, with wild grins on their faces...Luffy had no fucking clue which of them was going to come out on top. He had more power than her and a greater variety of tricks, but between her and the snake they had a deeper pool of Haki to call on. *Plus* he'd never fought anything quite like the 'swords' she was turning the snake into. Add in the fact that any mistake on his part was punished with a blow that carried her Devil Fruit power, taking deep chunks out of his spiritual energy reserves to shield from being turn to stone? There was a *very good* chance she could outlast him.

Not to mention her clothes were pretty much a wreck at this point, which was very distracting.

Pushing that thought aside, again, he launched himself at her just as she did the same. Another shockwave rolled over the island, and this time it didn't stop, dozens more bursting out from between them as fist, sword, foot, and snake all impacted each other again and again. Luffy pressed hard, doubling down as he decide it was now or never. Dipping just a little into his Awakened state, which he'd only just recently gotten *reliable* and *partial* control over, he pushed Hancock hard with the extra power. He could see it in her body language, the moment she realized something had changed, but he also could read that she wasn't going to back down.

That was fine with him. Time to see for sure which of them was stronger. Hopefully, they didn't kill each other in the process...

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It was half an hour later when a barely conscious Luffy stared down at a nude and battered Boa Hancock, too tired even to appreciate the view. Knowing he'd only just *barely* eked out a win, he stumbled over to her, his own clothes barely hanging on, and pulled a blanket out from his Inventory. He collapsed next to her and threw it over the both of them. The part of him that was still vaguely thinking clearly was sure whichever one of them woke up first was probably going to be embarrassed as hell by their position. The rest of him had no fucks at all left to give as Hancock instinctively curled into his warmth and the healing energy he was radiating blindly off his body with the last of his strength.

Given the last thing he saw before he passed out was the dazed-but-awake eyes of Salome looking over them both, he wasn't even sure this counted as a win for him. The snake could probably have finished him off, if it hadn't stopped fighting when Hancock finally went down...

Chapter 122: At the Heart of the Amazon

Kaya was surprised to admit, at least to herself, that she rather liked Boa Hancock.

That hadn't been the case, at first. The infamous Pirate Empress had initially been rather acerbic. Which, her persona had been extremely off putting when they'd first met. Doubly so since she could feel just how much of that persona was fake...and yet how much wasn't, too. Some of the arrogance was real, and the entire Kuja culture was very much a 'might makes right' society that Kaya didn't care for.

Yet, after their first visit to Amazon Lily, something had changed.

It was as if a massive, unseen weight had lifted off the woman, as well as both of her sisters, and her attitude toward their entire crew had lightened a great deal. It was the most noticeable with Luffy, who she seemed genuinely *grateful* to for something. Yet the shift had also bled over to the rest of the crew, and even to the Kuja to a lesser extent, over time. At Fishman Island Hancock been positively respectful compared to before. She'd done good work with the crew in helping with the Decken situation, in particular, without any seeming thought of personal gain. Save perhaps having Neptune a bit in her debt.

By the time they'd all met up on Spa Island, the change had become far more...dramatic wasn't quite the right word. Boa's basic personality hadn't really altered enough for that, but it had certainly *softened*. The arrogance was still there, but it wasn't borderline abusive any longer. She treated her followers better and seemed entirely willing to treat Vivi in particular as an equal. She'd even, much to Kaya's surprised approval, worked with Vivi to take Princess Shirohoshi under their collective wing. She still unquestionably considered herself above 'normal' people. Yet with those she had reason to consider *not* 'normal' or even 'near-equals,' she'd dropped at least some of her self-centered persona.

She still wasn't exactly *kind*, but Kaya could admit the woman was probably a good ruler and Captain both.

It was because of this, that Kaya had been willing to follow up on the interesting facts that Captain Luffy had shared. He was *right* that whatever was up with this island and the Kuja almost *had* to be spiritual in nature. Indeed, examining a few Kuja who had and hadn't been off the island recently had even allowed her to detect some difference in their spiritual presence. Though it was in a way she'd never seen before. The nearest similarity she knew of was the effects of her own Sick-Sick Fruit, even if it didn't *quite* match. A little detail that only made her more determined to try getting to the bottom of whatever was going on with them.

All of which brought her, trying not to be nervous, to a curious looking Boa Hancock.

"You wish to discover what it is on Amazon Lily that changes those who live here? What makes you think you can succeed, when we ourselves have never been able to determine the cause?"

Thankfully, Hancock didn't seem *offended*, so much as legitimately curious. Then again, according to what little Luffy had passed on to her, Kaya suspected that the Kuja leadership had gotten a bit of a wakeup call about issues they hadn't fully realized might have a *cause* to be found in the first place.

"While I would hesitate to call myself a priestess, I am the descendant of a family of such, specifically a lineage that called Asuka Island their home. I'm not sure if you're-"

Boa's gaze sharpened and she raised a hand to cut Kaya off. Which said she probably *was* aware, at least somewhat, of Asuka Island.

"I know the island. A place in paradise with a bloody history and rumors of quite powerful priestesses. In fact, the sword your captain carries reminds me of a tale recorded in the Royal Archives."

Kaya nodded, glad she had something to work with, instead of having to convince Hancock entirely from scratch.

"The blade Captain Luffy carries *is* Shichiseiken. Once a cursed blade, it has now been purified. Something that occurred on our visit to Asuka island shortly before the Whitebeard War. The Marines had foolishly unsealed the blade, and we were forced to confront it while it possessed a Marine Vice Admiral. We managed to defeat and purify the blade, with Captain Luffy taking it as his own with the islander's blessing. Frankly, I think they were relieved to have the blade gone, as it would have made them even more of a target purified than it had when it was still sealed."

The Empress's interest was clearly fully ensnared at this point, though a small frown developed on her face.

"I trust you do not intend to *purify* the Kuja? Even if the effects of the island cause us some problems, it has still made us who we are. I would see you dead before seeing our culture destroyed."

The threat wasn't idle, a hard tone laced under the casual words, but Kaya could legitimately shake her head 'no,' so it didn't really matter. That wasn't her goal at all.

"No. I don't believe you are under a curse, so much as some sort of spiritual effect. Mostly, my interest is to discover how it was done and why. Though, in discovering that, I may find a way to help you deal with some of the more...problematic expressions. If it is some sort of ritual or artifact, it's possible it was never meant to be left unattended for so long, and simply performing...*maintenance*, I suppose, might help. At the very minimum, there may be a chance to *understand* what has been done. So that you can mitigate the side effects better. As you have recently discovered was possible."

Hancock searched her face, her Haki almost rudely pressing into Kaya's as she took in what Kaya said. Finally, she relaxed and nodded.

"Very well. I will accept you looking into this issue, but I will accompany you personally. If we *do* discover the source of Amazon Lily's uniqueness, you will make no *changes* without consulting me. Are we clear?"

Kaya nodded firmly.

"Crystal clear, Empress. I mean no harm. I only seek to understand and, if possible, help."

Boa stared into her eyes for long seconds, searching for the truth there, before nodding back.

"Very well. What do you need to start?"

Thankfully, Kaya had a good answer for that question already prepared. Sure, it was just a guess, but it was a place to start, at least. She wouldn't have approached the Empress without *something* to go off of. Something she'd found hints of already in the few Kuja she'd been able to study since Luffy had mentioned his conversation with Hancock.

"I need some sort of signature to follow, if we are going to trace the source. I want to see one of the Kuja who has been on the island and as isolated as possible, then compare them to one that has very recently been to Alabasta. From that, I'm hoping to find a..."

Kaya explained her thought process, and was gratified when Hancock nodded along with her logic.

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Luffy was surprised when Hancock and Kaya came to him, both looking a bit...disconcerted. Blinking at the request that they'd made, he frowned and tried to feel out if there was any sort of trick here on Hancock's part. He *didn't* think she would do that. They had, in fact, been getting along far better than Luffy had ever anticipated. But the request was certainly out of the blue. When he found nothing but annoyed chagrin and a little bit of concern in her emotions, he resorted to verbally expressing his confusion.

“I’m not saying no. But can I ask *why* you want me to go into the heart of the island? You’ve been quite firm about not allowing men any farther than the outskirts, either the Alliance Dock or the defense installations. No where else.”

That much had remained true since Hancock had first had the small strip of sheltered beach turned into a dock for the visiting ships that had male crew aboard. As of now, only the Strawhat crew, Rayleigh, and Jinbe had actually used said dock and strip of beach. In *theory*, however, it would also allow ships from the Alabastian Alliance or Fishman Island to dock...if they could somehow reach Amazon Lily through the Calm Belt. Even for him and his male crew, however, the rest of the island had so far remained firmly off limits thus far.

Hancock grimaced at the question, seeming not to like whatever the need was, but she answered all the same.

“Priestess Kaya has managed to track down the source of the...*oddities*...regarding Amazon Lily to a specific spot on the island. One *within* the tunnels of the main mountain, but away from the valley where our main settlement resides. Unfortunately, we discovered upon trying to enter that there is a...requirement.”

The Empress hesitated, actually *blushing* and looking uncomfortable with the subject at hand. Kaya took pity on her and took up the explanation as clinically as she could.

“There is a potent barrier on the passageway that won’t allow women to pass without being accompanied by a man. It was difficult for me to even *notice* the barrier, as it repels anyone female. I had to surround it with Ofuda to make it visible to Hancock and I. I dare not break it, not without knowing what it guards, but I picked apart how it works. Men can enter freely, but women can only do so while holding hands with a man to pull them across the barrier. Hancock feels she *must* investigate such a place now that she knows its there, and you were the only one she was willing to allow so deeply into the island’s interior.”

Ah. From the way that Hancock was fighting a blush, Luffy suspected it might be a bit more than just being the only one she would allow so far into the island. Handholding was a gesture of intimacy, even if a minor one, and she hadn’t changed so much as to be *comfortable* with that, with most men. She, along with most of the Kuja, had very...out of whack...perspectives of such things.

She hadn’t hesitated at all in stripping down in front of him to have her *mark* removed, and neither had her sisters. At the time he’d thought it was just that important to them, but since then he’d interacted with them and the other Kuja more. The entire tribe didn’t seem to have much in the way of a nudity taboo at all. Which both explained a few things *and* made a certain degree of sense, he supposed. On the other hand, things like handholding were much more...lewd? That wasn’t quite the right word. So much as they had more extreme reactions to...

Wait. Extreme reactions. Bugger. It was probably tied into whatever was going on with this island, wasn’t it?

“Okay. So long as you are okay with this solution, Empress, I am willing to assist.”

Hancock relaxed as his careful phrasing and use of her title, though there was still a light dusting of pink on her cheeks. She cleared her throat.

“Very well. As I’m not willing to wait any longer. With an issue that may affect the safety of the entire tribe, we will go now. Come along.”

Luffy shrugged and followed after her and Kaya as they headed for a trail that led deeper into the island...

... ..

Looking over the barrier with a critical eye, Luffy was easily able to verify Kaya’s work. In fact, it was practically written in plain language to *him*, since he hadn’t had to jump through a half dozen hoops clearly meant to prevent someone female from messing with the thing. Thankfully, despite not exactly having any better a feeling about that little detail than his companions were likely experiencing, he was able to quickly confirm that bypassing it was just as simple as Kaya had worked out. It really did just need someone male to physically pull them through the barrier. There was even a section of rock outright highlighted to his eyes where a ‘secret’ latch was.

“Well, I don’t see anything you didn’t already catch, Kaya. So I suppose it’s just a matter of taking action.”

So saying, he reached for the latch and pulled a mechanism there. He’d expected it to be rusty or stuck with age. Instead it moved like it was freshly oiled, and a section of wall just slid away in near-silence. Shaking his head at that, hoping it was just more quasi-magical fuckery rather than the sign someone had *been here* recently, he stepped forward to try the barrier. It felt like stepping through so much cobweb, at worst, and he shook his head.

“The barrier wasn’t specific. But we should probably due one at a time. Kaya?”

He stepped back out and Kaya easily took his hand, letting him pull her through the barrier this time. It resisted more, but not *that* much more. Like passing through thin Jello instead of cobweb. Nothing horrible happened, so he shrugged and stepped back through once more to get Hancock. Silently, he held his hand out to her, letting her make the final connection. Which she did with a light dusting of pink back on her cheeks. Unable to stop himself, he chuckled, causing her to blush more deeply, but not let go. Grinning, he decided he couldn’t resist and shifted to tuck his elbow into hers, causing the blush to go *much brighter* as he tugged her through the barrier.

Kaya’s giggling at Hancock’s stunned expression brought the Empress out of her shock and she *tried* to glare at him, but failed since she was still blushing. Winking at her, he let her arm go and stepped forward as if nothing had happened. Thankfully, rather than smiting him, his fellow Captain just did her best to compose herself.

“I-I suppose you ought to lead onward. Just in case there is more...gender specific requirements.”

Her initial stutter was lost as a frown marred her features just a bit. On her, even that expression was gorgeous, but it still reminded both of her companions in this little quest that there was something *shady as fuck* about all of this. With that in mind, Luffy merely nodded and took point, all his senses extended at high alert. He wasn’t *quite* as sensitive to the spiritual as Kaya, but he was fairly close when he was properly paying attention, and in *here* something could well be hiding from her as the barrier had.

The passageway, at first narrow and simple, quickly opened up into a much larger space Luffy could only mentally label a 'gallery.' Incredibly detailed, mural-sized bas-reliefs were carved into the walls, and a dozen statues stood between equally decorated pillars. Notably, each statue was a *pair*, a man and woman, each nude and embracing. Such certainly drew the eye, and a blush from Hancock and Kaya both, at first. Yet, Luffy soon noticed something else. Specifically, that there were words carved over both the wall murals...and over an archway in the middle of the room that looked suspiciously like a *sign*.

"Huh. That's ancient script. Like what you see on poneglyphs. Robin will want to see this place if possible, I think. Though I've learned enough from her to give a rough translation."

Robin had been initially reluctant to teach him, given how much the knowledge had cost her. Yet, when he'd proven to her that he could get the *gist* of what was on poneglyphs with his *Voice of the World* ability, she'd given in. Lessons had been only in fits and starts when they had a little time here and there over the last year, so he still wasn't *fluent*, but in this place that very same perk was helping him out anyway. Of course, what he was getting made him groan, drawing attention from both women. Reluctantly, he translated.

"Welcome to the heart of Eros Island! May the blessed waters make your stay enjoyable!"

Both women looked at him in disbelief, causing him to give them a deadpan expression and wave at the archway.

"No, seriously. That's what the sign says. Worse, I'm getting a feeling I have an idea what this place was originally intended as, and why the island is the way it is as a result. Though we'll have to go farther in to be certain."

Hancock and Kaya both looked baffled and concerned, but Luffy wasn't going to spell it out for them. Doubly so in case he was wrong and it was more malicious than he was suddenly suspecting from the phrasing of that text. Instead of elaborating, he started moving again, the two women reluctantly following in his wake. Giving a side-eye to the various artwork as they went through the gallery, he became more and more convinced of his unfortunate conclusion as he saw what was depicted.

Namely, a ton of beautiful women who were seemingly lavishing attention on a handful of men.

Hancock saw the artwork too, her expression going stormy as she did. Hopefully she wasn't going to *explode* if what he suspected was true was, in fact, the case. If he was right in his guess, then this place hadn't been *meant* to be malicious. Yet he could see how it might very well stomp all over some of her past traumas. Thankfully, despite her increasingly angry expression, she didn't push him for an explanation as they moved past the gallery and...into a massive set of underground *baths*. There were a dozen pools of water, all clean and sparkling, some with steam coming from them and others not.

In pride of place, right in the center of them all, was a fourteen-foot, gently glowing statue of an absolutely stunning woman. One that could rival even Hancock in beauty, though with different proportions that spoke more of some sort of fertility goddess than a mortal. Wide hips, bountiful

bust, and a stunningly well-done depiction of semi-transparent *wet* cloth that clung to every curve in the stone. So well done was it, that if not for the size of it and the *feel* of it to his spiritual senses, he might well have thought the statue a victim of Hancock's Devil Fruit.

As it was, it was positively *glowing* with spiritual power. Which, as *actual* water poured over it's feet and into the pools, was carried along with the water. Every single one of those pools practically glowed with power and, if Luffy was right in his suspicions, they likely *drained* out into the water of the rest of the island. Of secondary note, but still of possible importance, the woman was wrapped in more than just cloth. A snake *very much* like the ones the Kuja used wound from her toes to over one shoulder. One of the woman's hands was stroking the serpent...even as the other held a *winged staff*. The combination *screamed* to Luffy's old memories, from his original world, practically shouting the iconography of the Rod of Asclepius.

It was like someone had mixed together the myths of Asclepius and Aphrodite. Which, if a single snippet of memory from writing a high-school paper was to be believed? A memory that had been half lost before he'd gained a perfect memory? There had, in that world, been *significant* archaeological evidence showing that the cults of those two 'gods' had been closely associated. For a long moment, as Luffy took it all in, he had a bit of a mental crisis as an old thought was refreshed. *Why* were so many of the old legends seemingly reflected between worlds? Pheonix, Kitsune, even his own Raijun Devil Fruit! Then places like *this* as well. Was One Piece actually some sort of alternate Earth? Were there higher powers that kept meddling in a dozen worlds to make similar myths?!

Once again, as he'd done in the past when the question bothered him, he pushed the thought *aside*.

The question was unanswerable, at least by him, and with his current knowledge. While the Void Century was a complete loss, the truth was that a *great deal more* of history was nearly as bad. Whatever cataclysmic war this world has suffered, it had erased vast amounts of historical information, to the point where Luffy felt he had no real hope of piecing together an answer to that particular question. Doubly so when the concept of *other realities* was one that he hadn't actually run into in his one just yet. Which was almost odd, given how many erratic bits of fantasy and sci-fi like concepts, like the existence of robots, *were* common knowledge.

"Well, I'm going to need time to sort out what the fuck that Statue is doing, but I'm almost certain now that my guess was right. This place was a tourist trap."

The girls, who had both been staring around at the intricate baths and statue a bit goggle-eyed, snapped their attention to him at his dust dry deadpan. Hancock seemed completely speechless, but there was an abrupt light of understanding in Kaya's eyes. Yet, she seemed reluctant to actually *believe* it, giving voice to the question an incredulous Hancock wasn't yet able to put into words.

"...What, exactly, do you mean by that, Captain?"

Luffy sighed, bit the inside of his lower lip for a moment as he considered the best way to explain. Delicately, he did his best to soften the blow a bit.

“It might not have *originally* been a tourist trap. There are certainly indications that it could have been a shrine of some sort at one point. The statue, in particular, reminds me of legends about an old god and goddess whose cults were known to work together. Asclepius, the god of healing and medicinal arts. Aphrodite, the goddess of love, lust, and beauty. Though...I *suppose* it could also be Demeter, whose domain included health, marriage, and fertility. She was more connected to agriculture though.”

Hancock found her voice as Luffy trailed off.

“That does not sound like a ‘tourist trap.’”

Her voice was a bit sharp, and Luffy winced at the tone, but sighed and went on with his explanation.

“Like I said, it might *once* have been a shrine, maybe. But that archway we passed through, as well as the depictions in the various artworks? Frankly, from the moment I saw the archway and greeting I suspected something was up, but the artworks confirmed it for me a bit. I suspect what this place eventually *came to be*, even if it didn’t *start* as, was a resort.”

Wincing, he forced himself to continue, even knowing Hancock might well *explode*. Pointing at one such mural, depicting a man in one of these very pools with a nude woman on each arm with a barely-clothed third feeding him what looked like grapes.

“Specifically, a resort catering to rich men who wanted to have dozens of beautiful female ‘attendants’ hanging off of them. It would explain the barrier, certainly. This chamber was a retreat for wealthy men, where the women could only come if they were...accompanying one.”

Hancock looked *stricken* by the comment, seemingly staring into the distance, at things Luffy didn’t think it was probably good for her to be remembering. Casting about for a way to snap her out of it, he tried throwing her a lifeline.

“It *could* have also been a place of healing, though! The serpent and winged staff symbols are often used in medicine, usually combined these days. So it may have been a sort of...health spa, and the women priestesses?”

Kaya snorted, seeming to have come to her own conclusions. Her own method of snapping Hancock out of her surprise was also much more blunt, and caused Luffy to look at her in a mix of awe at her sheer gall and disbelief at the risk.

Specifically, she smacked Boa Hancock, Empress of Amazon Luly, Captain of the Kuja Pirates, firmly on the ass.

Hancock yelped at that, immediately coming back to the here and now, instinctively swiping at Kaya, who faded away from the backhand with minimal effort. She had the sheer cheek to put Luffy between her and the glaring Empress, using him as a defense, even as she waggled a finger at Hancock.

“None of that ‘woe is me, our history is a lie’ nonsense! These ruins are old enough that Amazon Lily was likely *abandoned* when your ancestors came across it. That the ‘blessings’ here had an effect on you, I have little doubt. But they aren’t part of *your* history or culture. Those are

things you created naturally, over time, based on the oddities of the island you found. I doubt whoever made this place intended to make a culture of powerful *warrior* women, after all. You did that all on your own.”

Possibly untrue, depending on what people of the time had considered beauty and if the idea of ‘battle maids’ had existed in whatever culture was here before. Also depending on just how long the Kuja had been here which was, as he understood it from a few conversations, something they themselves were uncertain of. Still, Luffy wasn’t going to mention any of *that*, given the way Hancock was calming down to a mere frown as she looked around. Honestly, he’d have preferred not mentioning the idea at all. But he had a healthy respect for Hancock’s intelligence at this point. He was quite certain she was smart enough to have come to certain conclusions on her own eventually, and might have done something rash if she’d done so on her own.

“Ah, why don’t Kaya and I take a look at what the statue is actually *doing*? That *was* the point of coming here in the first place, right? At a guess, whatever it’s doing is spreading into the very waters of the island via the fountain and pools, so this can probably answer a lot of questions...”

Thankfully, with a deep breath and look of putting aside thoughts for later, Hancock nodded firmly.

“Yes. Now, more than ever, I want to know *exactly* what is going on with *my* island.”

Thankful that they seemed to have dodged a bullet, at least for the immediate moment, Luffy nodded at that.

“Right. Kaya, we should probably avoid the waters for now. Until we know what is going on. Let’s see what we can pick apart about what the statue’s blessings are doing without getting too close.”

Kaya, ever reliable, hummed and produced some of her seal paper and a brush. Clearly, she was more than ready to start diagraming the patterns of spiritual energy infused in the statue, so they could figure out just what they all did...

Chapter 123: A Mystery Solved

“So, as you can see, there are three Primary and a good dozen Secondary Effects that are all stacked onto the Nymph of Asclepius.”

Luffy was gesturing at a large chalkboard he had pulled out from his inventory, he and Kaya had filled it out as they worked out each effect on the statue. A statue which, after they’d thought to retrieve Robin, had been identified by name. There was a plaque on the fountain’s reverse side, which she had translated more readily than Luffy would have been able to. Something which had ended up aiding he and Kaya as it had given proper *names* for the three Primary effects.

“**The Healing Waters of Aphrodite** is the first Primary effect. If someone bathes in the pools filled with the fountain’s waters, it slowly infuses you with spiritual energy, guiding it to reinforce your own spiritual form. The first effect of that is simple healing, but more than even that

it *restores*. I suspect every someone affected by the Mero Mero no Mi would be slowly *restored* to their proper form. Likely within a matter of hours. A trick that I am frankly pleased to learn about and have some hope of replicating.”

Kaya nodded and interjected her own two belli a moment later.

“Since you wanted to know about side-effects, I can say that *this* one almost certainly had one. Thankfully, in this case it’s likely an entirely positive effect, as the diffused version in the water of the entire island is likely why Kuja are born exceptionally healthy and with a natural talent for Haki. The diluted spiritual infusion, gained in a constant trickle for their entire lives, almost certainly accounts for that oddity.”

Yeah, there was a reason Luffy had started with that one. Frankly, as far as he and Kaya could tell, there wasn’t a single downside to it. If someone tried to do the same thing *faster*, there would be. But diluted amounts over a lifetime? It should be not just safe, but genuinely beneficial. Even if it wasn’t the sort of thing short-term planners would be able to make much use of. Unfortunately, the remaining two primary effects were...less purely helpful in their side-effects.

“**The Enchantment of the Lusty Maiden** is the next effect. This one is a doozy. Honestly, it would probably have confirmed my theory about this place even if Robin hadn’t found what amounted to product placement ads elsewhere. For all intents and purposes, this particular trick muddles with female hormones. It’s *intended* effects are to cause a low level of arousal in women who bathe in the pools here, while also inhibiting pregnancy. If one only had short term exposure, it would even work entirely as advertised...”

Luffy grimaced, and Kaya took up talking about the side-effects again. They’d agreed that such would be better coming from her. Both because she was seen by Hancock as a doctor/healer, and because she herself was female and thus a bit less of a potential target for misplaced ire.

“Like the healing waters, this would unquestionably have a longer-term effect when diluted into the waters the Kuja drink. This goes from the minor mystery of why you *must* leave the island to get pregnant, likely even needing to stay away from the island for some time, so it works its way out of your system. To the more major issue of hormone destabilization. While I’ll have to study in more depth to be *certain*, I strongly suspect this to be the source of your difficult-to-control emotions. Short term exposure wouldn’t have that effect, but *long-term* exposure would throw your emotional control into a blender. The longer you drank the local water for, the more this would take effect.”

Kaya sighed, grimacing herself as she drew a circle around the word ‘spiritual contamination.’

“Worse, this *isn’t a drug*. Just like the Healing Waters, this works by manipulating the *body’s response* via the *spirit*. Which means that it can and will pass from one person to another via, for example, sparring with Haki active. Which, I imagine, lets you begin to see both why your best warriors were the most affected *and* how your elite fighters ending up leveling out by visiting other places spreads back to others. The spirit, like most other natural things, tries to *equalize*. Someone away long enough who sparred with someone who *stayed*, would bleed off some of the destabilizing effects from the person who stayed, absorbing it into themselves. Likewise, *too much* buildup of this in a spirit would become toxic. Leading to your ‘emotional sicknesses,’ I think.”

Hancock didn't look *happy*, but she didn't look riotously angry either. In fact, she felt to Luffy's empathic sense like she was grimly pleased to have a proper answer, if anything. She wasn't exactly *calm* when she spoke, but she wasn't in danger of flying off the handle, at least.

"...and since sparring is a huge part of our culture, of course it would create a pressure relief value, of sorts. Any other side effects from this one?"

Kaya shrugged, blushing a bit.

"Umm...almost certainly a degree of increased sex drive? How much, I can't say, but almost certainly some."

Hancock actually chuckled at that, not seeming embarrassed at all. In fact, from the wicked smirk on her face, Luffy suspected she might well say something that would make Kaya turn into a tomato if given the chance. Quickly intervening, since they *did* have one more major effect to get through, he tapped the chalkboard with the pointer he'd been using, cleared his throat, and spoke up.

"The third and final Primary effect of the statue is rather interesting. **Font of the Ideal Self** is *older* than the other two effects. Enough so that my theory about this, just possibly, originally being a proper shrine holds a bit more water than before. Unlike the other two, it is *meant* to create long-term effects, likely on worshipers or pilgrims who visited and stayed for a period of months or years. It influences the spirit to shape the body, but instead of *restoring* you to what your spirit 'knows' to be your 'peak state,' it encourages your spirit to *grow* towards what it believes its peak state *should be*."

Luffy gestured to Kaya, letting her take both the good and bad of this one, since they were interlinked. She, thankfully, had recovered from her brief embarrassment and took the cue smoothly.

"Someone bathing in these waters who wished to be more masculine, would become more masculine. Someone bathing in them that wished to be more feminine would slowly become more feminine. The same if they wished to be braver, nobler, or even greedier. It's a *slow* effect. Even directly bathing in these pools for hours every day, it would take months at minimum to make a significant impact. Unfortunately, it's also more...potent. It would dilute far less when mixed with the rest of the island's waters and, critically, would *amplify* the effects of the other two 'blessings' over time. Not massively, but over *generations*? Over *generations* it would cause certain facts to...solidify."

Hancock frowned, but nodded slowly as she worked through that.

"Like the fact that Kuja, even away from the island, almost always give birth to only girls. Typically beautiful ones. Hence one of the major reasons we are targeted by the World Government."

Kaya nodded, then shrugged.

“Yes. Though it isn’t all bad. It’s likely contributed to the near-universal Haki access and generally higher physical base abilities the Kuja exhibit as well. Your entire tribe is permanently stronger and healthier than baseline humans.”

Several complicated expressions, matched by just as complicated emotions, flashed across Hancock’s face as she considered that.

“You’ve given me a great deal to think about. I will want to know about all of the Secondary effects too, of course, and any possible side effects for *those*. Yet, for now, I believe this is enough for me to think on and mull over. Thank both of you for your efforts. You have done the Kuja a great service in unearthing this, even if I may choose not to explain it all in full to the entire tribe.”

There was a warning look in her eyes and tiny bit of steel in her voice at the last bit, implying that they shouldn’t share it either. To which both of them nodded to without hesitation. This was a *complicated* knot for the Kuja, given that it had likely *made* their culture the way it is. Two outsiders blabbing about it before Hancock had a chance to figure out how to deal with the subject would be wildly inappropriate. At least while it wasn’t causing the locals any true harm. Which it honestly *wasn’t*, so far as they could tell. Not aside from the ‘emotional sickness,’ which the Kuja knew how to mitigate.

“Now, you’ve said so much about the benefits of these springs, that I suggest we enjoy them. I, for one, could use a bit of relaxation while I mull everything over.”

Kaya, Luffy, and even the watching Robin gawked as Hancock stood from using Salome as a seat. With a sensual movement that said she knew *exactly* what she was doing, she shed her top and skirt. Like many Kuja, she apparently didn’t wear anything *under* it, leaving her gloriously nude as she sauntered toward one of the steaming pools. Kaya eeped, ripped her gaze from where she’d been staring at Hancock’s hypnotic beauty...and fled back toward the gallery room.

Luffy snorted at that, then exchanged a look that spoke volumes with Robin. They were going to need to speak more about this later, but for now the exchange of glances between them resulted in a decision. Robin was the first to start stripping down herself, sending a comment toward Luffy.

“Ara, ara, Captain-san~, I do believe it is rude to ignore a beautiful woman’s invitation...let alone that of *two*.”

Chuckling, Luffy followed after her, losing his own clothes in the process. Interestingly, Hancock paid equal attention to both of them, raking them over with appreciative eyes, though she didn’t blush. Truly, the things the Kuja both did and didn’t get embarrassed over were *very* out of whack. Which didn’t at all stop Luffy from considering the implications that Hancock was completely fine walking into waters that she *knew* would slowly raise her arousal, while *he* was present. He wouldn’t have thought her to be that comfortable with *any* man in such a situation, given her past.

That she was with *him*, combined with a few of her other reactions, bore thinking about. Not to mention talking over with the women in his life, of course...

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