

I can't draw, ain't Japanese.

So, as I mentioned to everyone since I'm in such a One Piece mood, I decided to let **Stallion of the Line** stay in the Ranma poll this month. And to no one's surprise, despite GDWHOM getting the carry-over effect, it won handily. Now, this chapter may seem to drag a little bit, but it is the only chapter that will have Luffy and co. stuck in real travel hell. In the upcoming chapters, I'll just ignore the travel time bar a few lines of Grand Line-ness. I also decided to use the conversations back to Amazon Lily to show the general shape of the next few months of training time so I don't have to go into detail on the actual training. Beyond that I use worldbuilding going on elsewhere to break things up a bit.

Beyond that, Warning: WAFF inbound.

Oh, shout out to **Primordial Vortex** for a little homage I use in this chapter. **Supernova** is awesome, and so is **Crossed Lines**. In other news, the fic **Convergent Devil** is just screaming out to be continued if **Epsi110** is no longer around by someone. Not me though, sorry, too many other fics -_-;. Seriously, go and read it. I've read it several times through, and I love this version of Luffy, the way he interacts with everyone, Buggy the accessory and the multifaceted nature of Luffy's powers.

This has been Grammarlied and seen by **Tomon** and **Hiryo**. As always, **Hiryo** was great at pointing out spelling mistakes, getting attacks and facts right, and **Tomon** was fantastic about helping me keep the characters true to the way I've been writing them, and had me rewrite two scenes in this chapter for the better. Thank both of them, please. Now, without further ado, enjoy!

Chapter 47: Life Just Goes Speeding Along

As they left the small port, the ship moved so fast, Luffy felt the acceleration pressing his physical upper body back into the seat, it almost reminded him of the first time he'd sat on top of a bullet train in Japan, that same kind of burst of speed. *Even without the wind, this is amazing*, Luffy thought enthusiastically, grinning like a fool. "WOOO!!!"

Next to him, Vivi, the closet adrenaline junky, yelled in delight, her eyes wide as the ship sped along. Thanks to being in the Calm Belt, there weren't even any waves. It was just pure speed at this point, acting almost like an overlarge jet ski in Ranma's previous life. "Blessed Osiris, look at us go!! It's like we're in a cannonball!"

"Bah, cannonballs wish they could go this fast," Luffy shot back. Admittedly, Luffy moved **much** faster in his lightning form, but this thing was making the speed he could reach while sprinting with his physical legs seem slow as hell. It was made even better by how low in the water they were going. Franky's latest masterpiece was made to basically skim along the top of

the water, which meant it was a lot closer to that water than the deck of any normal ship could be.

For a time, all they could do was to gape and stare out of the cockpit of the small craft, simply delighting in the speed, the sound of the waves passing underneath them, this bloom of water on either side as they zoomed along. Within a few minutes of their leaving Amazon Lily, Luffy announced they were already out of his Kenbunshoku range of the island. "Which is just incredible considering how wide my range is thanks to my Goro Goro no Mi. I think Frankie severely underestimated how fast this thing can go."

"Or perhaps he doesn't understand how much power your Devil Fruit allows you to put out, or would it be output?" Vivi frowned, wondering about the nomenclature there, before shrugging. "Regardless, I imagine that you can put out a lot more energy than he realized. In fact, we might want to slow it down just a little bit, just in case some of the parts might fail because of how fast we're going. Um, that is a thing in engines, isn't it? I know it is with sails and steam engines."

While undercover as a Baroque Works member, Vivi had never needed to learn anything about engineering, and as a princess, she had never visited any of the more technologically advanced islands in the world, of which there were only two in Paradise. She could name the parts of a clock and had spent quite a bit of time with Luffy and the other girls in the engine room occasionally on their trip to Amazon Lily, so she understood the basics, but that was about it.

Luffy hummed thoughtfully, closing his eyes for a moment, causing Vivi to gape and reach for the controls just in case, asking, "What in the world are you doing?! This better not be some kind of strange training regimen of yours. Even you have to admit this is not the time for it."

"Heh, no, nothing like that, although I'm tempted to say my normal 'anything is training' motto. But no, I'm just feeling along the lightning I'm sending into this thing. Just because it leaves my body, doesn't mean I don't control it, after all. We're in no danger of failing, but the batteries Franky mentioned already look like they are getting overloaded.

Sensing that somehow through the lightning he was running through the ship, Luffy instantly decided that the batteries, which were supposed to let him get some sleep for a time, were probably not going to last very long. Just like the battery on a laptop could be ruined by having it plugged in all the time, it seemed as if the more that Luffy was plugged into the ship, the more the batteries would start to degrade.

Crud, that means I can't let the energy enter into them while I'm powering the engine until I start to get tired. Not certain if my concentration's up to controlling...

For a moment, Luffy tried to force his lightning to flow into the engine only, rather than the engine and batteries, but thanks to how the internals were set up, the batteries were right in front of the engines. So, he had to basically shrink the electrical flow so that it wouldn't touch the exterior of the conducting equipment. That was hellaciously hard, especially since he also had to keep up the voltage at the same time. All of which took his attention of his Kenbunshoku.

Not that Luffy realized that on his own. No, it was Vivi's shout that drew his attention to that, and back to the world at large. "AHHHHH!!!"

Opening his eyes, Luffy instantly saw the source of her distress: a veritable mountain of scale and muscle that had just risen out of the water. Why it had done so, Luffy had no idea, but the why didn't matter as the ship was barely a few dozen yards away from the massive creature's side. "It's just a Sea King. Information please, don't just scream!"

"Well, excuse me!" Vivi huffed as Luffy wrenched the controls to one side just in time to avoid the monster. "It just reared up out of nowhere. And I don't have a built-in cheat code to every Devil Fruit user's worst nightmare unlike someone I could name."

The next second, there was another one directly in front of them, and Luffy again had to wrench the vessel to one side, slowing down slightly as he did. The wave that this move caused slammed into the Sea King with enough force to toss it onto its side. A loud rumble of surprise and shock came from the monster, which resembled something of a brontosaurus paired with the fish, as it found itself splashing back into the water. Luffy knew enough about dinosaurs back in his old world to know that there was a specific fishy kind of dinosaur that looked like that, but he couldn't remember the name of it offhand.

This new heading drove them towards another Sea King, but this one was already ducking down. Or rather, not just ducking down, but diving, which meant that the rest of its body was coming up. Luffy didn't realize this until a second later as the rear end of the beast hit the underside of the vessel with more than enough force to send them airborne. They zoomed through the air for several minutes, and Vivi began to laugh again, with Luffy joining in. "HAhaahah!"

Then they were down, creating another splash, and continuing on their way past the pod of Sea Kings. "Windows, we really need windows in this thing. I would love to feel the wind on my face right now."

Blinking, Vivi nodded and turned to her side of the small craft. *I refuse to call this ship the Super Frankie Special or whatever Frankie had called it. Not only is that name too unwieldy, it's far too embarrassing.* "I can do that."

Vivi held up her hand, and the hand turned rapidly into sand, which began to shave at the inside of the glass. Realizing what she was doing, Luffy winced, expecting a loud noise from that action, but for some reason, there wasn't much; it just sounded like a kind of rumble or a

sander going to work. *Which, come to think of it, makes sense, although, I would've thought doing it on glass would have made it much louder.*

Soon, Vivi had a hole around the size of her shoulders and head carved out of the side of the vessel, whereupon the princess instantly stuck her head out, followed by an arm as another Sea King reared its head up out of the water nearby. This one looked more like a plant eater than the ones they'd run through earlier, and it looked at them with an inquisitive look, putting Vivi in mind of a dolphin despite the body shape of the animal in question. She found herself waving at it and then watched in bemused wonder as it bobbed its head back at her in reply.

Pulling her head back in, Vivi looked over at Luffy with a bright grin. "Did you see that? I'm loving this! This adventure, being back with you all. Despite all the trouble that forced me to join the Marines and everything else, I will never regret joining you as I did, if only for moments like these."

"And we're happy to have you join us again. I'm happy to have you here. With me," Luffy said simply.

Her smile turning tender, Vivi leaned in, kissing him. The kiss deepened quickly, and Luffy's widened even as he tried to concentrate both on kissing Vivi back, his tongue dancing with hers in his mouth, and making certain that no more Sea Kings popped up in their course. This wasn't the first time that Vivi had initiated a kiss, but it was one of the few times that she had initiated tongue action. Vivi preferred to be more docile about even that aspect of their relationship.

Not that Luffy was at all complaining. *Nope, not complaining at all. Now...* Pulling away one hand from the wheel, Luffy wound it around Vivi's waist, pulling her into his side, before his hand dipped down to her rear now that it was within range. He had found early on that Vivi loved having her rear played with.

Vivi moaned a little into the kiss but pulled back rapidly as she saw, Luffy's eyes widening. A hasty swat on her rear wasn't necessary, but it did cause a little louder bit of a moan, and she turned around to see Luffy begin to guide the ship through another few Sea Kings for a few seconds.

Once the hectic moments subsided, the two stared at one another, and then Vivi began to giggle, looking between her and the view out front. "Well, now, that was a bit too much excitement."

"Ehh, maybe a little," Luffy snickered, pulling a hand from the wheel to hold up two fingers a little under an inch away from one another. "Not that I'm complaining, but what exactly brought that on?"

“Nothing much. Just adventure, fun, being here with you. Isn’t that enough, Cap~tai~n?” Vivi asked teasingly, employing some of the skills she had seen Robin use on occasion.

“It is for me,” Luffy said, holding his hand out to her. Vivi cupped it to her cheek, nuzzling against it for a moment before turning her attention back to the outside world, still holding his hand with one of her own.

Ahead of them was another, much larger group of Sea Kings. This group looked more like a disturbing cross between some kind of shark and a turtle. Smaller than the others they’d been dancing through, there were still a lot of them, and all of them seemed to have come to the surface, stretching out their short necks and trying to bite at the ship. However, Luffy’s reflexes and their ship’s response time, along with their straight-ahead speed, were such that he was able to dodge through them while also pondering the blue-haired girl next to him, thinking about how they had met and the impression she’d made on him.

Once the Miss Wednesday act had dropped, there had been something so down to earth, so real about Vivi, despite the fact that she was a princess. She had been so grateful to wear normal clothing, to just be a girl again rather than act like a vamp, which had brought a grin to Luffy’s face, as well as the teasing from Nami at the time. That down-to-earth nature was at the core of Vivi’s personality, something that she seemed to partially share with Robin, although Luffy doubted that anyone would say Hancock had any such thing.

For just a moment, a chibi version of Hancock appeared in Luffy’s mind, complete with a little speech bubble shouting, “Why should I need any such thing? After all, I am beautiful.”

This was joined a second later by chibi Vivi holding out her hand to help someone offscreen, a kind smile on her face. *And whereas Hancock can be haughty and cool, just like I can be arrogant and mouthy, Vivi’s kind.*

Indeed, Vivi was kind to practically everyone, courteous, warm and inviting. She could be forgetful, and Luffy well remembered the times that that forgetfulness had caused them a few issues. Vivi was also insightful and smart, something that she **definitely** shared with both Robin and Hancock. *And she’s also an adrenaline junkie, although not in the same way Hancock and I are, more like Robin in that too. Flying, diving, jumping, adventure stuff rather than combat. Although I don’t know, maybe there’s a bit of that too? Not actual combat, I doubt Vivi will ever enjoy the idea of hurting someone. But maybe pushing herself, getting better, we’ll see.*

Luffy and the others had learned about Vivi’s adventures before she joined Baroque Works, the Sand-Sand Clan, led by Koza and the adventures they’d gone on, and Luffy wondered precisely how many of the gray hairs Igaram had when they met him had been caused by the little princess even before the whole infiltrate Baroque Works thing. It was that, along with her kindness and gentleness that had really called out to Luffy. *She’s almost like a royal version of Kasumi in a way. Her personality’s almost like a perfect counterweight to my own, calling to the better parts of me. Not like Hancock, where the two of us are far too alike in a lot of ways. Or*

like Robin, who calls out to my desire to defend someone and my desire to banter, as well as feeding my curiosity about this world.

As Luffy had been thinking, they had passed through the Sea Kings. Looking at him quizzically, Vivi drew his hand up to her lips, kissing the back of it, causing Luffy to glance at her. "What are you thinking about so deeply? Is there a problem with the ship after those last maneuvers?"

"No, none of that. I was just thinking about you," Luffy answered, blunt and earnest. "Just thinking about what drew me to you."

This caused Vivi to blush rosily, but Luffy went on, staring into her eyes. "Despite all the reasons against it, it was really hard to not take it further that night, you know? Although, in a roundabout way, realizing that I had been falling for both you and Robin at the same time was kind of what gave me the courage to admit to Robin and myself later that I was also falling for Hancock. Funny, I didn't realize that before this, but it's true."

Vivi's lips quirked a little at that. "You know, normally admitting to a girl that you had feelings for another girl when she was throwing herself at you would be a very bad thing. A woman could take that the wrong way."

"But you don't," Luffy pointed out, pulling his hand out from between Vivi's to reach up to her chin, tenderly stroking her cheek with his thumb. "Not after you've seen Hancock, now do you? Seeing you around her is always so cute."

That earned Luffy a full-on pout, and she huffed, pulling away from him. However, Luffy simply allowed a portion of his arm to turn to lightning, and his hand followed her. A second later, it moved up to pat her on the head. "Yep, so cuuutee..." he teased.

"Ugh. Fine!" Vivi groused, her pout turning into a wry smile as she shook her head. "Yes, I hadn't really been all that attracted to your female form, even when I knew I was kind of falling for you. When I had fantasies about, um, us, it was always with you in your male body. But Hancock is just..."

"So hot she turns a straight girl bi and a gay man straight? Makes you want to see 'yes mistress,' kiss her feet and work your way up from there?" Luffy quipped.

Considering that was all too accurate, Vivi shook her head, her pout returning, and turned to look out the window again. She stuck her head out the window just as the ship had to make a slight turn to the other side to avoid a surge of water coming up off the back of the Sea King. This caused a bit of spray to hit Vivi in the face, and Vivi laughed, enjoying the sensation. She then blinked, raising a hand to touch the wet spots on her face, before turning to look at Luffy. "Come to think of it, what happens if you get wet while driving this thing? I'm still not going to call it Frankie's name for it."

“How about just calling it like the Swift or the Arrow? Simple is better,” Luffy agreed before shrugging at her question. “And if you’re talking about me getting splashed with enough water to change me into my girl form, the batteries would take over for a little bit. Not very long, at the moment I’d wager only about twenty minutes at this speed. At lower speeds they would last longer, although, I think even there the batteries are a bit of an issue,” Luffy explained what he’d found out before, before grinning, shifting his head to the other side, a slightly naughty idea occurring to him. “I’m willing to take the chance for some actual breeze on my face, too. Would you mind?”

Thinking nothing of it, Vivi leaned over, only to find herself pressing her chest into the side of Luffy’s face to reach the other side of the cockpit. Luffy grinned as, in his mind, a chibi version of himself at a desk appeared, tenting his fingers as a little speech box with the words ‘all according to keikaku’ appeared. As Vivi worked, he turned his head lightly and began to pepper kisses on her chest over her clothing.

Currently, that clothing was pretty similar to what she had worn when she first was able to leave behind her Miss Wednesday persona, yet even so, the T-shirt and bra she was wearing wasn’t enough to stop the sensation of Luffy’s nuzzling into her chest. “OOOh, you, you... ugh!” Vivi quickly finished her work, pulling away to stare in mock outrage at Luffy, who merely grinned back unrepentantly. His arm wound around her waist again, pulling her down into a kiss that lasted for a few moments until they came to the next group of Sea Kings.

While Luffy turned his attention back to dodging through this school of giant monsters, Vivi leaned back in her chair, taking his hand in her own again, amused by the grumbling that Luffy couldn’t quite stop from escaping. “Now, now, this is the Calm Belt, after all. We were obviously going to run into Sea Kings far more here than anywhere else.”

Alabasta was nowhere close to Amazon Lily. In fact, there was no point of reference or even any information about raiding or even just traveling between the two that could tell you where one was in relation to the other, unlike with the Shabondy Archipelago, thanks to Amazon Lily being in the Calm Belt. Hancock and Frankie alike could’ve told any of the other crewmembers who asked, as Nami had, that it had taken them four and a half days to get from the archipelago into the Calm Belt and Amazon Lily.

The Eternal Pose that Vivi had brought along with her when she was forcefully inducted into the WeeGee’s fighting forces for Whitebeard’s War had begun by pointing them out to sea. At the moment, the Eternal Pose was taking them on what looked like an extremely shallow diagonal through the Calm Belt towards her home.

Vivi glanced down at the hand that she was holding, looking at it thoughtfully, turning it this way and that, staring at the electrical scars that were scattered across hand and forearm alike. She hadn’t brought them up before, but they made Luffy look a little more rugged, in her opinion. They were the latest in a tapestry of scars of a man who was always trying to become

stronger, and that, combined with Luffy's general attitude, appealed to Vivi in an almost instinctual way.

She now began to trace those scars with one of her fingers, watching as Luffy twitched a bit, the scar tissue slightly more sensitive than the rest of his skin. "You know, I've never outright asked any of you about your adventures in Sky Island. I've gotten bits and blurbs of it from Nami, Chopper and Sanji, but I haven't heard the full story yet. They always talked more about Thriller Bark, the alliance with the Kuja and the battles inside Impel Down. You fought someone with a God Complex up there, who had the Goro Goro no Mi, right? Were you all your usual selves and simply came into conflict with the local tyrant wannabe or was there something deeper going on?" she questioned teasingly.

"I wouldn't call it any deeper, just annoying. And I wouldn't call Enel an actual wannabe, he was in power for quite a few years before we arrived, unlike Croc," Luffy snorted before shrugging and asking where she wanted him to begin. The obvious answer, from the beginning, had Luffy chuckling a little but he complied.

For the rest of the day, Luffy talked about that particular adventure, from meeting the two monkey people of the Saruyama Alliance, who apparently she'd already gotten a description of, then to the minor conflict in Mock Town. Luffy talked about Blackbeard, too, scowling as he did. "If I knew he'd go on to capture Ace-nii, I might've been tempted to throw down with him right then and there, or later, when we were ambushed over the Knock Up Stream, even if I think I might've lost."

It hurt to admit that, but it hurt worse to know how close he had been to the person who would set all the death and sorrow and violence of Whitebeard's War against the Marines into motion and hadn't done anything. "I didn't get much of a feel of Blackbeard at the time. I didn't have much in the way of Kenbunshoku since I'd apparently been doing it all wrong because my Gramps didn't bother to try to teach me. Yet I know from Ace's description of the fight against him and his crew that my armor technique at the time wouldn't have been up to his weight class. I might've been able to out endurance him, if I could stop him using his Devil Fruit on me somehow, but with that? No. Only a point-blank Yama-Sen-Ken would've worked if that."

To that, Vivi merely squeezed Luffy's hand, not saying anything. Going down the 'what if' road always ended badly, and the last thing Luffy needed was someone encouraging him to do just that. Just like Hancock and Robin, Vivi also knew Luffy had nightmares about what he'd been forced to do in Whitebeard's War, having seen them during the journey to Amazon Lily. Luffy wasn't a natural killer, and the lives that he'd taken, more particularly the lives of the common sailors among the Marines, had left a weight on his shoulders. A weight that Vivi and his other two lovers had allowed him to ignore after a fashion, even though Hancock hadn't been the best when it came to empathizing with Luffy's sadness.

Thanks to Vivi's silent support, Luffy didn't dwell on Blackbeard for very long, and his tale moved on, although he did tend to bounce around a bit. Eventually, though, he finished, and Vivi laughed quietly. "Well, while I know more than enough about characters like Big Mom and Hancock to understand that Laki doesn't need to prove a woman warrior can be the equal of any man, I can at least sympathize with the other reason for her leaving."

Luffy blinked, and Vivi shook her head wryly. "Before I joined Baroque Works and even more when I resurfaced once you had defeated Crocodile, princes were coming by trying to ingratiate themselves with me. Several kings have outright offered arranged marriages to my father. It's never easy, and always quite annoying, to turn them down. It would be even worse for someone who had to deal with such things coming from men she'd grown up alongside, although at least she wouldn't need to worry about harming international politics."

Luffy growled, and Vivi watched in some amusement as his upper body became armored, the hand she was still holding gently turning just as black with Busoshoku as the rest of his upper body. "Just tell me what they look like, and I swear I'll pummel any of them who got too touchy-feely with you!"

Vivi laughed, shaking her head. "Oh, you don't have to worry about that. Pell or Igaram were always nearby, and after, well, I had the Suna Suna no Mi. A minor little comment about how abrasive sand can be on sensitive skin, a show of turning a nearby vase or table into dust, and the princes I dealt with after coming back out into the open all proved intelligent enough to get the point."

She shook her head again, chuckling a little bit. "Although, it is interesting to learn that Sanji was actually able to... Well, I always thought he was a little too... flamboyant and over the top to truly gain any woman's attention." Her eyes narrowed then, and she frowned. "And he had better not have ..."

"Don't worry," Luffy said, interrupting her quickly. "Believe me, I interrogated him on that point. Sanji got Conis a morning-after pill from a local doctor. He even watched her take it, apparently."

Vivi nodded, then smirked. "You know, while I was drunk that first night on Amazon Lily, I wasn't so drunk that I forget everything that happened. I remember enough to know that sex and its potential outcome aren't exactly known among the Kujas. I wonder how those two girls, Marguerite and Aphelandra, who are so interested in Sanji because of his cooking skills, are going to react to that little bit of information."

Blinking, Luffy stared at her, then began to laugh, the noise soon joined by Vivi's more demure chuckles.

OOOOOOO

In point of fact, back on Amazon Lily, Marguerite and her exceedingly tall companion had been approached by the Mistress of the Crèche for just the purpose of informing them of certain possibilities when sleeping with a man. Currently, as Luffy and Vivi shifted the conversation to Vivi and what had been going on in her kingdom, both of them were green, with Marguerite having grabbed a nearby trash basket, holding it between her legs as she tried to get control of her gorge. “Babies come from inside us?! We have to... to do **that**!?”

“There’s no way I’m going to, to let **that** happen!” Aphelandra shouted, getting to her feet and stalking around the room, staring down at the older and far shorter elder. “With everything that’s going on, with our island no longer being protected by Hebihime-sama’s status as Shichibukai there’s no way that I’m going to take a year off to, to...” She shuddered, shaking her head. “No way!”

“Right. Sanji’s interesting, and... well, he knows what to do with his hands in the kitchen and elsewhere,” Marguerite agreed. “But no. Why would anyone want to so weaken themselves? If that’s something we have to deal with, I’m fine with stopping it right now.”

“You’ll know when you’re older, dears. Although, I fully agree with your choice for the near future. Come back to me in five or six years or so, and you might’ve changed your minds,” Nyola teased, cackling on the inside. This never got old to her. *Perhaps that’s why old mistress Nessa chose me to take over for her? She could see the sadistic streak in me before I could.*

She was still laughing as both women rushed out, shouting, “**NEVER!**” over their shoulders.

The older woman blinked, then chuckled. “HAH. They ran off so fast I didn’t have a chance to tell them about the medicine to prevent pregnancies. Oh well, no skin off my nose. They’ll figure it out eventually... right?” Shrugging, Nyola turned and went back to preparing more of the anti-pregnancy medicine. It paid to have a ready supply on hand.

“So we’re agreed?” Aphelandra asked, looking down at her shorter friend. “We start avoiding Sanji and, and never speak of, of that again, right?”

Marguerite nodded firmly. While babies were cute and tiny, the idea of having one inside her, growing like some kind of parasite, was a horrible one. “Agreed, while Sanji and what we’ve been doing with him is fun, it’s not fun enough to stop being a warrior for. We’ll just have to avoid him... and maybe warn the other girls who have acted interested in him too.”

Elsewhere on the island, Sanji frowned, turning away from where he had been instructing Chopper on various types of kicks and knee blocks, a shiver going down his spine. “What was...”

Chopper blinked, dropping out of his stance, “What was what?”

"It just felt as if, as if something had just stolen away any chance of having adult-type fun from me, while on this island," Sanji murmured, shivering again. "The horror, the horror."

"...I'm just going to smile and nod as if I understood that," Chopper answered, shaking his head. "I know the old folktale about sneezing or shivering if people are talking about or threatening you, but that's a bit too specific." The young doctor's face firmed, his eyepatch turning into a scowling face on his head. "Now come on, let's get back to training. Or else Hancock will be along to turn you into stone again."

"Oh, she doesn't have to try very hard there," Sanji murmured before shaking his head. Chopper was right and whatever that had been couldn't have been as bad as he had feared. Could it?

OOOOOOO

"Huh, so you all decided to split the military into separate parts? That sounds like a pretty good idea, coastal defense versus inner defense. And Pell being in charge of the outer defenses is an easy choice. Chaka, I hate to say it, but he didn't make as much of an impression on me as Bird Man did," Luffy admitted.

"That's just because you were busy defeating Crocodile for us," Vivi said, but Luffy shook his head.

"For **you**. While I understand it, I'm not the sort to care about complete strangers unless they're in trouble right in front of me, and I don't care at all about nations. I care about people. I defeated Crocodile mainly for you," Luffy corrected her.

This earned him a kiss, but only a short one for the moment, even though Vivi stayed where she was, leaning her head on Luffy's shoulder. "Well, regardless, it's almost undoubted that Pell will be the first of my friends and companions that we will meet when we return. I told my father we would be returning, but I couldn't give them an exact arrival time."

"Of course not. Giving an exact arrival time at all from one island to another on the Grand Line is something only Nami could do, and even then, she'd have had to make the trip at least once," Luffy joked, to which Vivi could only giggle in agreement. "We'll need to circle the island to make sure that there's not a large marine presence anywhere. Even if we don't see any ships, I'm going to want to push my Kenbunshoku out just in case. And speaking of..."

Vivi looked forward again as another group of Sea Kings surfaced ahead of them. These were even weirder than the others, looking almost like ostriches crossed with some kind of swimming mammal, and they had weird pink skin along with fur in places. "Oh my, they remind me of Mr. 2 for some reason."

"Eh, me too. Huh... I wonder if Bon and Buggy got away from the marines?" Luffy mumbled as he began to weave through them before a frown crossed his face. Cocking his head to one side, Luffy's brows furrowed. "You don't do ventriloquism, do you?"

Vivi looked at him in stark confusion. "No. Why?"

"I thought I heard voices for a moment there..." Luffy muttered, stirring all around him, unable to figure out where the voices had been coming from.

Luffy would hear those voices several times throughout the day as they traveled but couldn't make out any actual words. It was like hearing a voice through water, distorted to a large degree. Yet somehow, Luffy could feel some of the intent behind them.

Despite the voices in his head, Luffy kept them going throughout the night because, obviously, there was no spot to stop in the Calm Belt unless you came upon one of the very rare islands that dotted it like Amazon Lily did. In the middle of the night it occurred to him that maybe he could exit the Calm belt to the east, out into the Blue there. Right now, it wasn't an issue, but in the future, it might be. *Something to think about for certain.*

Vivi slept soundly that night but was up early the next morning, doing some exercises in the back that Luffy instructed her to do before preparing breakfast for the pair of them. The need to keep his lower body inside the power coil set into the driver's seat meant that Luffy couldn't really leave and keep up the same speed they were going on now. Vivi could easily control the ship, even if her reaction time was not nearly as good as Luffy's but the batteries had already begun to degrade despite Luffy's best efforts to not let too much of the voltage flow into them. After more than twenty-four hours, the batteries were to the point that it could barely spot him at the speed they were going for ten minutes, if that.

Nor could he turn his attention away from the controls, but thanks to his elemental powers, Luffy kept one physical hand on the steering wheel, while the rest of his upper body turned into lightning for a second, allowing him to reach around the back of his seat for a small plate of food and a glass of water with his other physical hand. "I think Franky messed up a little bit here, which is kinda surprising coming from him."

Vivi finished cleaning up the small kitchenette, putting away the utensils, and came back, her lower body shifting into sand as she took a brief second to lean over and give him a kiss before settling into her chair again. "I can think of a few things that he could have done better, although, I have to say, Sanji's rations are a marvel! All these different meals prepared in little packets to which we only need to add cold or hot water, and they cook all by themselves? Little pre-prepared meals that you only need to warm up with a low heat into their containers? Amazing."

"True and I think we should make a point of saying that to Sanji when we call in later today." It had been agreed that Luffy and Vivi would check back in with the others every other

day on this trip, both to be kept informed of everything going on back at Amazon Lily and to make certain the others knew everything was going all right for the pair.

“But I think that the main thing that Franky got wrong is well, the batteries, obviously, but also, how exactly am I supposed to eat while sitting at these controls? Where am I supposed to put my drink, let alone a bowl?” Luffy jokingly demanded, as he lowered the voltage going through the vessel, slowing down to the point where what little up and down motion they’d been getting faded to the point where they could easily compensate for it while eating.

Blinking, Vivi looked around, then nodded, indicating that she also couldn’t see a place to put her food down. With that, she began to laugh. “I can’t believe Franky, of all people, with his cola addiction, didn’t think of that!”

Snickering, Vivi conjured up two more arms of sand to hold the bowl and the cup above her for a moment. With them out of the way, Vivi held out her hand between the chairs and quickly created a small, well-controlled mound of sand, keeping it in place before looking over Luffy expectantly.

Understanding what she wanted, Luffy created another lightning arm, sticking it into the sand she had created, warming it to the point where the sand began to melt. With both of them working on it, they created what amounted to a glass mound with several differently sized holes at the top, where they could slide their cups and bowl in. Once it was done, the twosome looked at what they had created, then laughed, having enjoyed the experience for some reason.

After a second, Vivi turned her attention to her meal as Luffy did the same. Well, that and with the controls again, thanking his Kenbunshoku for knowing that there hadn’t been any Sea Kings around them for a few moments there. “Were you able to sleep all right?”

“I was. These chairs are remarkably comfortable, even in bed form. Although, holding onto just your hand was a bit of a wrench after the past few weeks,” Vivi admitted with a faint blush.

“Well, Franky told us that these chairs can be taken out and removed. Maybe ask him to follow up on that idea? Make it completely modular. Then we can have a sofa instead of two chairs in here.”

“Hehe, so we could make this ship into our very own love boat, just for you and whichever of the three of us is with you at the time? I don’t think there’s enough room for all three of us ladies on board at one time,” Vivi teased gently.

“I wasn’t thinking that!” Ranma answered, sticking his nose in the air in a very poor approximation of Hancock’s haughty stance, as if the very idea was beneath him.

Vivi called him out on that, idly remarking that Hancock could perhaps patent that look before gasping in delight as several large dolphins to both sides of the vessel. At the speed they were going now, the overly large creatures could keep up with them. She stood up from the chair, sticking her head out the window on her side, which had remained there throughout the night, waving at the dolphins merrily.

Luffy watched her out of the corner of his eye, also grinning and enjoying the sensation of the wind in his face as he had since Vivi had made the window on his side of the ship. The dolphins kept up with them for some time, releasing little squeals and jitters at one another as they did, which sounded as if they were laughing and just having a good time.

Eventually, though, the dolphin pod turned, dove down and left the ship to its own devices. As they did, a final set of squeals had Luffy look around in confusion. For some odd reason, he could've sworn that someone had just shouted, "That was a lot of fun! Pity human ships can't go that fast or can move so quickly from side to side normally."

Shaking his head at that, Luffy turned his attention back towards the front as he felt more minds in the distance, and these were not anywhere near as friendly feeling as the minds of the dolphins had been. Within moments, the ship was zooming through another group of Sea Kings. These looked again dinosaur-like and many of them lashed down towards the boat with long necks and mouths filled with pointed teeth while barbed tails and fins came up to attack from below.

Yet, Luffy adroitly drove the ship through them, shaking his head. "Eve might be way more responsive to our controls than any other ship, but this one is even more so. Don't tell her I said that, though."

"I wouldn't dream of it. Eve's a little darling," Vivi stated firmly. "And you should have your head chopped off for even thinking that this ship could be in any way better than her. Treason, treason, I say!"

Snorting, Luffy leaned sideways, his neck turning into lightning, allowing his head to stretch much further away from his body than normal. "I rather think that you and the other girls would be disappointed with me without a head. There are so many more things I can do with it after all, beyond the obvious."

Vivi might have continued that banter to its obvious conclusion, that thinking certainly wasn't something that Luffy did with his head very often, but instead, she simply accepted the kiss that he laid on her lips. A kiss, which deepened quickly, as he slowly pulled away from her, pulling Vivi along with him in order to keep up the contact until his arm snaked around her. Soon, his hand was on her rear again, as he pulled her into his side. With the amount of attention that being in the Calm Belt demanded, they weren't about to do anything but be touchy-feely with one another, but even that sent a thrill down Vivi's spine.

The rest of the day was dominated by more Sea King dodging than the first, but eventually, as evening fell, it was time for them to check in with the others back on Amazon Lily. Vivi dialed it up on the Den Den Mushi set into the panel between her side of the boat and Luffy's and soon had set the small speaker down as, surprisingly, Marigold was the one to answer. "This is Amazon Lily. I'm presuming this is Luffy and Vivi?"

"That's right. How is everything going on back there? We're making pretty darn good time, although we're still in the Calm Belt, and the angle on the Eternal Pose hasn't begun to change much," Luffy reported, having kept one eye on the log pose as any helmsman needed to do. *Helmsman, that can be Jinbe's position aboard our crew! I've been wondering about that. He's got more Chief of Staff vibes, than anything else but we're not nearly a large enough crew to need one of those aboard the actual ship.*

"I'll call your crew up here along with my sister. There's been only one really surprising development, but I figure you should hear that from the development in question," Marigold stated, her tone dust-dry for a moment.

Wondering what that was about, Luffy and Vivi exchanged a glance before waiting in silence for a few seconds as the sound of footsteps walking away reached them. By the time other voices could be heard coming closer, they were once more dodging through a group of Sea Kings, and just as the first voice spoke into the pickup on the other side, the ship was once more airborne thanks to a surprise move from a Sea King's tail directly underneath the ship.

This time, though, they didn't so much soar as tumble, and Hancock, the first to grab up the speaker, paused, staring at the Den Den Mushi in consternation as she heard Vivi shrieking and Luffy cursing. "Is everything all right?"

"Regular Calm Belt shenanigans, darling," Luffy replied, his voice a little tight for a moment as he calculated where the tumble would take them before disappearing out of the ship for a second. Vivi had barely a second to gape before Luffy grabbed the ship from the side, halting its tumble and then directing it downward so it landed keel first into the water before disappearing again from outside in a bolt of electricity reappearing where he had been sitting a second ago. The batteries kept the ship going as Luffy settled into the chair Indian style for a second, winking across the Vivi. "Just had to right the ship for a second. Marigold mentioned there was a new development?"

"That would be me appearing, I assume," a deep voice that Luffy had only heard a few times before this spoke up then. He blinked, trying to place the voice, but the individual on the other end of the line seemed to understand his confusion and stated, "Although I will warn you and Hancock both that normally, communicating in the clear like this is something you had best avoid, if you're going to be sharing secrets."

That caused Luffy to furrow his brows in confusion even as he kept on trying to place the voice. "What do you mean?"

"The World Government has access to Black Mushi. With them, they can break into any communication network. I have heard the Revolutionaries have a Den Den Mushi signal that can block it, but I have no idea how. In the Calm Belt, there won't be anyone around to try and pick up your signal, but once you leave it, that will be an issue."

"Gotcha." Luffy nodded, smirking a bit. "Codenames and phrases at Alabasta then?"

"Oooh, spy stuff!" Chopper exclaimed in the background.

"Or just no secrets," the older voice chortled. "The best way to keep a secret is just to not talk about it. I've certainly learned that lesson over my lifetime." He paused then, the Den Den Mushi showing a brief smirk over a very odd-looking beard. "This is Silvers Rayleigh. We met very briefly on the archipelago, although you made friends with Shaky when you stayed at her bar."

Luffy began to grin as Vivi gasped, her eyes twinkling. "Silvers Rayleigh!? The Dark King?" she shouted, her tone almost like a squealing fangirl.

"I think there's a little too many 'kings' being thrown around here." Luffy snickered, although really, he also felt a jolt of excitement at speaking to a legend of the former age. "I understand the whole lightning thing, but honestly, I would've been fine with just staying Straw Hat in comparison to my new moniker. Lightning King is a little too dramatic for me."

Rayleigh guffawed. "That's what I thought when I got the Dark King appellation! Still, that is neither here nor there. You and your crew interested me a lot back on the Archipelago, and with everything you have done since, that interest only grew, to the point that I'm willing to interact with the world at large again."

"And what exactly does that entail?" Luffy questioned eagerly, internally letting out a whoop. *Damn, but Rayleigh's gotta have more lessons to pass on than my old man, Cologne, Happy and all the other masters I ever knew combined!*

"It means that I'm willing to train you, train you and the rest of your crew. You're strong but don't make the mistake of assuming that there aren't other people stronger out there. Newgate should've shown you that," the former first mate of Gol D. Roger answered. "Edward was old, had heart issues, and suffered from an old wound that my captain gave him. There are others out there who are still in the prime of their lives, like Big Mom or, worse, Kaido. Neither of whom are going to let this upheaval pass them by. They've already made a lot of moves recently. They've had to, thanks to the Revolutionaries taking advantage of Whitebeard's War, but they will continue to grow in strength. Their logistical and strategic base is too large for anything else."

"Understood. We were already thinking about ways to get stronger, and having someone like you to advise us sounds fantastic," Luffy admitted earnestly. "So much so I wish I was there

right now. But I can't be, not with Vivi and me needin' to check in with Cobra, and everything else. Speaking of Nami, how long do ya think it should take us to get to Alabasta?"

"You're asking me to tell you how to get from one point to another through the Calm Belt and the Grand Line? Without having any kind of measuring stick to figure out what actual distance I'm working with?" The Den Den Mushi seemed to be getting a workout, its face shifting from Rayleigh's to Nami's, a pout appearing there.

That pout disappeared into a smirk at Luffy's instant reply. "For the greatest navigator in the world, the one who's going to guide the pirate King to Raftel, that kind of thing should be easy."

"Well, if you put it like that," Nami chirped, far more upbeat before pausing for a few seconds as she worked it out. "Along the Grand Line, it would take at least two and a half months to stop at all the islands between the archipelago and your kingdom, Vivi. From Amazon Lily, that probably means at least two months on a straight line for a ship that needed to rely on wind and sail. A coal ship, with unlimited coal, two, maybe three weeks less, I think. Something like the Everlasting Resolve? Around twenty-five days."

She laughed, the sound coming through the Den Den Mushi, joined by Franky shouting something in the background. "That ship with you powering it? Who knows? Probably around ten days? A ship that size, going as fast as I saw you moving, with no reason to slow down or need to take on more fuel? Yeah, probably around that long. But you shouldn't go straight there."

Ignoring Sandersonia gasping in the background at the very idea of not following the Log Pose, Nami continued. "My advice instead is to keep on through the Calm Belt. The Calm belts run straight east/west, and I know Franky put a regular compass on that—"

"Suuuper Franky Special!" Franky bellowed, the Den Den Mushi shifting with a most disturbing abruptness from looking vaguely like Nami's features to having a pompadour and chin like Franky.

"GAH, shut it you! I'll send you to Chopper if you shout like that in my ear again, you ass!" Nami roared, followed by the sound of her hitting something as the Den Den Mushi shifted back to its previous form. After a few seconds, the sounds of orange-on-metal violence faded and Nami's voice came back. "So follow a course straight west until the Eternal Pose points at a right angle from your course, then change to follow the Eternal Pose. That way, you'll avoid most of the Grand Line's Grand Line-ness."

Luffy laughed at that description but didn't exactly argue with that. *Who could?*

“Oh my word,” Rayleigh murmured. “You might have just created an entirely new means of navigating the Grand Line. What would you call this method? And what would my old captain think of it? Even with the threat of Sea Kings, I think he might call it cheating.”

“Well, I am a pirate navigator thief,” Nami giggled. “Some cheating should be expected.”

Luffy looked over at Vivi, a small tender smile on his face, reaching across and gently running his finger down from her cheek to her chin, then further down her front, causing Vivi’s core to clench a little at the touch and the look accompanying it, what it promised. That look told her, despite the next words he spoke, that he was looking forward to spending all that time with her.

“Honestly, we’ll probably make even better than that, even if it’s still way too slow. Ten days? Ugh. Still, that doesn’t matter much since if there’s ever trouble on Alabasta, I won’t be coming by ship but by lightning.”

At that, Vivi nodded, shoving aside her hormones for a moment. “Understood, Luffy and thank you for making that commitment.”

There seemed to another scuffle in the background, which Luffy took to mean that Sanji and Zoro were fighting again over something. A shout of, “—Take care of her you useless lightbulb!” seemed to confirm both that and what had caused the argument.

Regardless, Franky was the next one to speak, talking about the projects that he had begun to map out for Amazon Lily and the ship for the Kuja Pirates. “I’ve even begun to find some ways to create better batteries, more longer-lasting, anyway. Although, I’m still thinking that we might need to search for an alternate fuel source. Finding an island with coal that we could make some kind of deal with for long-term stuff is probably a good idea.”

“That or crude oil,” Luffy mused, frowning pensively. *Come to think of it, have I seen oil being used in this world? Going by what I remember about where it came from in my old world, wouldn’t Alabasta be the kind of place it could be found? Something to think about.* “Or maybe gas?”

“Oil is for cooking, massages or stuff like that, depending on the type,” Laki snorted, the only other one of the crew to take an interest in this kind of topic. “What are you talking about gas? You mean like a gas vent from a volcano or something?”

“How do you know about volcanoes?” Nami wondered, staring at the Shandian woman incredulously as the Den Den Mushi shifted yet again back to her appearance.

“We know that’s what creates the Knock Up Stream and what shoots Seastone Vapor into the air,” Laki answered swiftly, and Luffy watched as the Den Den Mushi seemed to gasp for a moment, its head drooping from all the changes in perspective it was forced to re-create.

Thankfully, Vivi was ahead of him and had already turned around in her seat, sending a tendril of sand out to grab a small water bottle and some fruit for the creature.

"I've heard of some people experimenting with gas and oil for ships, but those are rare as heck, bro." Franky shook his head. "One of us would have to have eaten the Luck Luck Fruit for us to get that lucky."

"Well, think about it. Also, if you're looking for materials, I wager anything that the world government has abandoned Impel Down completely. They probably pulled out everything they could, but there is undoubtedly a lot of steel, stone and stuff there that would've been way too troublesome to move. If you can break it down and transport it that would be a great source for iron and other simple stuff."

"We Kujas have incredibly good stone smiths. We could do something of that sort." Hancock nodded enthusiastic agreement, or at least the Den Den Mushi did, mimicking its user's movements even as it munched between words on the orange that Vivi had set into its small tray. The overall effect was kind of hilarious, and Luffy had trouble holding in his chuckles, cockpit again instead of at the Den Den Mushi, while Vivi did the same, leaning out the window to allow her giggles free for a second. "Whatever is so funny?"

"Nothing, just a weird Sea King we just passed," Vivi answered glibly while Luffy was still trying to control his chuckles. "Anyway, so you have offered to train up the crew really, that's amazing! I look forward to learning from you when we return."

"I was only actually looking into training Luffy and perhaps Hancock, but Hancock is most persuasive. Especially when she can get Shakky on her side and they can tag team me," the old man muttered, the Den Den Mushi drooping as if to show how tired he was at the very thought. "Regardless, it's good to know that your trip is going well so far. I will talk to you more in person when you return. For now, have a safe trip."

Brook and Laki spoke up then, with Luffy talking to them for several moments and then the others. The talk continued for at least an hour or more, by which time it was dark out, and Vivi had moved in the back to grab up her blanket, looking over at Luffy quizzically, but he shook his head. He hadn't slept the night before and wouldn't tonight. The batteries could last long enough for him to take a nap, but if so, Vivi would need to be awake to handle the controls.

Unlike Vivi, though, I've got endurance to spare. I've never stayed up for longer than five nights in a row, but I'd wager I could go even longer with my Goro Goro no Mi. The energizer bunny has nothing on me, Luffy thought with an internal snicker, remembering commercials from America he had seen back home.

The conversation was dominated by the ideas Rayleigh had already shared with the crew about specific training ideas. While Luffy had forced them all to create a good foundation of skills and experience, Rayleigh felt that they needed to specialize more. For people like Nami

and Laki, that meant a trip to a Sky Island that was apparently more accessible than Skypiea. For Franky, he had a few other ideas, while Chopper could further develop in Amazon Lily along with Zoro and Sanji. He also felt that any attempt to teach Nami or Laki Tekkai was doomed to failure, the same with Geppo. Since they hadn't developed the leg muscles for the move already, it was doubtful they would. Soru and Kami-E, however, were still viable ideas for the pair.

It was Brook, however, where Luffy's plans really had failed before they could begin. Brook hadn't had enough time with the crew to really get anything out of the little training they could do while Everlasting Resolve was so crowded after Thriller Bark. And frankly, Luffy had so little idea of how his Devil Fruit worked, he hadn't bothered trying to come up with a plan for training it.

Rayleigh did and already had him on some training in that and in his music. "Music can be used in various ways, auditory attacks, hypnotism and distraction for example. I think Brook might be able to do all three, combined with some further swordsmanship training to go with making further use of his Devil Fruit.

In contrast, when it came to Zoro, Sanji and Robin's training, Rayleigh had nothing but praise, even if he thought that Luffy had unconsciously concentrated on Zoro, Sanji and Chopper more than the others. For the three strongest Straw Hats, it would be a simple matter of training further along the path Luffy had set out, although in Robin's case, Rayleigh felt she needed to practice more with her Devil Fruit. Beyond that, for any real idea for Luffy himself, Rayleigh would need to see him in action.

Eventually, though, despite Luffy and Zoro's enthusiasm for this topic, the rest of the crew began to leave, leaving only Hancock and Robin behind, who had not spoken up throughout the conversation, although Luffy had occasionally heard her laughter in the background. Now, when she did, Vivi blushed, staring hard at the Den Den Mushi while Luffy also turned his attention almost completely away from the controls and his Kenbunshoku to stare at the Den Den Mushi.

Not because of any visual need, rather an auditory one. Vivi was the only one of his three lovers who could carry a tune, something they had discovered thanks to Brook on the trip from Impel Down. Yet the fact remained that Robin's voice was... well, it was like liquid chocolate in audio form, sensual, throaty and suggestive even through a Den Den Mushi.

"Now that your communication with your crew as Captain has passed, can we, Hancock myself and you two, communicate on another level? Are the two of you having fun? I must admit to some jealousy, princess. A several weeks-long cruise with our lover? It sounds as if, while you were the last to join, you are the first to have a honeymoon period," Robin teased.

"I will demand equal time from you, Luffy, and from you, Vivi, when you return. This is nonnegotiable!" Hancock added to Robin's words. If it were anyone else, Luffy would've turned her tone a whine, an almost needy one, but he knew better than to think that about Hancock.

Robin's tone, on the other hand, was most definitely a sultry promise. "And I would like to put my name down for equal amounts as well, darling~. Equal amounts of time, effort~ and attention~."

"Yes, Mistress," Vivi blurted before Luffy could reply.

There was silence from the other line, and Hancock's voice came back, a smirk visible in her tone even without the Den Den Mushi. "Excellent. I will hold you to that promise, pet."

"I as well," Robin murmured, her tone more intrigued than assertive and certain like Hancock, although it was more than enough to cause Vivi, who was already blushing a cute pink in the interior light of the ship, to turn into a veritable tomato.

"On that note, loves, I think we should sign off for now. Vivi looks as if she's going to faint in a second, and I've got more Sea Kings coming up. I promise to give you both as much time as we can when I get back and to hurry this trip along as fast as possible." Luffy shook his head at the younger girl before his Kenbunshoku pinged again, and he groaned a little. "We'll check in the evening after tomorrow unless you call us."

"Very well. Stay safe, and hurry back to us as fast as possible," Hancock nearly ordered, while Robin simply voiced her own love for Luffy in turn, and the call disconnected.

Saying nothing at still blushing at her response to Hancock and Robin's voices, Vivi pulled her blanket to her chin. Turning to look out the still-open window, she resolutely ignored Luffy's chuckle as the ship sped on through the night, the cockpit descending into a warm silence.

OOOOOOO

At the same time that Luffy was testing out his reaction time and having fun with Vivi zooming through the Calm Belt at speeds few other craft could even dream of reaching, in the New World, an island of tremendous size was currently shaking down to its bedrock. Even though, in this case, the bedrock in question wasn't actually rock.

The island itself was called Ironheart. This was not for any romantic reason but because that was basically a very good description. The island, from one side to another, was iron. The stones were iron, the sand was made of ground up iron granules and the mountains were made of various types of iron from the foot of the mountains all the way to the top. There was little to no actual soil, as most islands would have used the term. There was also no foliage bar a few scattered, insanely hearty trees that had somehow developed their roots to the

point they could both sink into the iron of the island and take nutrients from it coupled with the frequent rainfall.

They honestly looked like tentacle monsters at the bottom merged with inverted umbrellas up top. Even New World veterans thought these trees were a little weird. Which paired very well with the giant slugs that were the island's only natural living animals. Orange in color, they could move disturbingly fast for something that was literally a giant slug, and left long, indented trails into the iron behind them as they crisscrossed the island.

What little signs of human habitation were here had been built over time by the settlers of other islands who came here to mine the iron. While not exactly the most precious of resources, iron was a very necessary one and could provide a steady, low-level source of income so long as the island or company behind such trade used slave labor to mine the iron. Although even then, the slaves would have to be worked on starvation rations to make their masters any money, given how much time it took to transport the iron, along with how heavy it was.

Small, abandoned slave camps dotted the island even now, their ruined walls only slowly falling with the passage of time. Shanks had put an end to that practice when Ironheart became part of his territory.

Now, as he dodged a slash from his quasi-friend, quasi-rival, Shanks made an idle note to remind Ben to send one of their ships over. *There's going to be a lot of large chunks right for the plucking after this. It'll be even less work than normal to gather up a full shipment,* He thought, as a portion of one of the small mountains was sliced off, before falling away.

That was the last random thought the red-haired Yonko afforded himself before Dracule drove in again. Yoru smashed Shanks's sword out of the way before his massive blade, the gleaming black in the sun, came back in a quick, economical strike the likes of which very, very few swordsmen would ever have been able to do even with a short sword let alone a blade the size of that one. Rumor had it that Yoru had been made for someone built along the lines of Whitebeard decades past, but wherever the blade had come from, Mihawk had made it his own years ago while he was still known as the Marine Hunter and could wield the giant sword with all the finesse of a master fencer with a rapier.

The fact that his blade and Shanks's own were glowing black with Busoshoku and that they had not actually made contact would not have been lost on any observer. Although perhaps even in this part of the New World, those observers would not understand precisely what they were seeing.

Both men had Haoshoku infused into their blades along with their Busoshoku creating Emission, an advanced form of Haki. Just like in the past, when Shanks watched Whitebeard and Roger clash, this contest was a battle of will against will rather than merely metal versus metal or, as happened a second later, later, metal upon rubber.

Grimacing, Shanks allowed himself to be hurled backward, gaining some distance, then twisted his lower body around even as he jumped back, creating a small spring, which he used to jump over the next series of attacks, raining down his own long-range slashes from his blade. "Spring Storm!"

Dracule casually dodged between them, only needing to redirect one of Shanks' attacks before pushing himself off of the ground with a powerful shove into the air. He did not stay there over long; Dracule wasn't the best in midair combat despite his name, but it allowed him to become even with Shanks for just a second before Shanks could redirect his attack. A long-range slash lashed out, and Shanks barely got his sword up in time to block it, finding himself hurled backward through the air like a gunshot to crash into an iron mountain that dented around his body. This left Shanks none the worse for wear despite leaving yet another permanent reminder of their ongoing battle in the iron of the island.

Pushing forward, Shanks was ready as Dracule descended upon him, their swords clashing again with Dracule caught in midair. The world itself began to crack around them as if reality itself was breaking, accompanied by the sound of thunder. This time, Shanks was able to redirect Dracule to one side, but he couldn't capitalize, as Dracule's pommel came up to block his next strike. The man twisted around under his own blade, whirling it in place above his head to bring it back to bear against Shanks' second strike, battering it aside, even as Shanks himself whirled into a tornado. "Gum Gum Hurricane!"

Indents and slashes appeared all around them in the iron of Ironheart. Each attack had the power to be lethal or crippling, and the surrounding environment showed this in the meters wide gashes, the thin, but deep crevices and the massive fist shaped indents.

This was not the first time that Shanks and Dracule had fought, or even the hundred and first. It wasn't even the first time they'd fought since Shanks had eaten the Gomu Gomu no Mi, although doing so had cut down on their previously frequent spars. Shanks's entire combat style had shifted with the eating of the Devil Fruit, and Dracule took it as a personal affront every time Shanks, a previously avowed swordsman, used fists and feet instead.

This fight, however, was a bit more serious than most of their fights.

Sometimes, Dracule wanted to spar with Shanks in order to vent, mostly about dealing with the World Government and the Marines or having hunted down some swordsmen who had been making a name for himself only to find him wanting. Other times, he came by to spar to pass the time. Then there were the spars that acted as cover, with Shanks or Dracule wanting to pass on to the others some bit of news or something similar. That didn't mean that their battles would be any less titanic or damaging to the area around them, which, despite their friendliness, kept that friendliness from the eyes of the World Government.

This time, it was a little of column A and column C, in the Yonko's opinion. Shanks could tell that Dracule had some news he wanted to impart but also very, **very** much wanted to vent.

Shanks grunted as his blade was smashed aside again, and this time, he couldn't stop his instincts. His other forearm came up to block the next stab to his center. The tip of Dracule's sword stabbed into his arm, drawing blood despite his own Busoshoku and Haoshoku. "You've always been better at putting an edge to your Busoshoku than I was Hawkeye!" Shanks grunted, even as the Busoshoku-covered rubber of his arm hardened even further, holding Yoru's tip embedded in his arm for a brief second.

At the same time, his leg came up. Steam hissed from his body as his other leg pumped up and down. His body began to gleam a bit red under his Busoshoku for a second before Dracule somehow dodged out of the way before he could lash out with one of his newer techniques. He did, however, pull the tip of his blade out of Shanks's arm straight out rather than slice it sideways, so Shanks considered that a win.

Again and again, their blades clashed, with Shanks now lashing out with even more punches and kicks, shattering a mountainside around Dracule as he dodged through his attacks. Using his Devil Fruit power more liberally, Shanks bounced around the place, keeping the fight at midrange rather than in normal sword-slashing range with a wide grin and even a few chuckles. Yet always, Dracule kept up with him, his form flawless, his skill in all forms of Haki near the pinnacle of what they could be. As they clashed again and again, not for the first time, Shanks had to wonder about his oddest, most fractious of friends.

There was just something about Mihawk when he was serious, something... beyond human. When those hard yellow hawk-like eyes latched onto him, Shanks did not just see the man in front of him. With his Kenbunshoku, he could see Dracule's soul to a certain extent, and it always gleamed to him in moments like this as if someone had taken the soul of a hunting hawk, that perfectly predatory arrowhead of a soul and put it into a human body. Something about the implacable hunter was distilled into Dracule.

It was no wonder that, at one point, prior to becoming a Shichibukai, the various newspapers of the world had called him Marine Hunter or the fifth Yonko. Of course, Dracule had never really been a Yonko. He didn't have a fleet. Indeed, Dracule never even had a crew. He never held any territory. If anything, he could be called a squatter on the island he occasionally inhabited, something that Shanks had teased him about a lot over the past few years.

Yet, in terms of skill? In that area, in combat ability? Yes, Shanks fully understood that Hawk Eyes Mihawk was on the same level as himself and Big Mom in terms of skill, if not quite up to the level of Big Mom, Kaido or Whitebeard due to their far greater durability. While Shanks was durable and had pushed Haki to a level few people ever had, his body underneath that Haki wasn't anywhere near as durable as the monsters of the former generation.

And that's the issue today, isn't it? The vagaries of fate probably meant that you couldn't challenge Whitebeard as you wanted to, my friend, Shanks mused, even as he finally got in a clean strike, smacking Dracule's hat off his head, Shanks's own Kenbunshoku able to fake out

Dracule's for a split second. The next second, Dracule found his lower legs wrapped around by one of Shanks's as Shanks shouted, "Gum Gum Slithering Snake!"

The next instant, Dracule back slammed into the ground, and before he could roll, twin hammers, rubber fists enlarged to gigantic size, hammered down towards him. Dracule raised Yoru to defend himself, the Busoshoku-infused blade holding those two massive hands above him. It looked as if a giant was trying to squash a particularly troublesome normal-sized person, and Shanks fought down an urge to laugh wildly. And once more, neither attack nor defense actually struck one another. Rather, it was a clash of Haoshoku, and once more, little crack marks and lightning began to appear all around them as willpower strove against willpower, with the very world bending to their power.

After around twenty minutes, Shanks's technique began to fade. The impact to his body of going Giant Shift like this took a toll on his body, one that he wasn't yet used to. His fist shrank back to his normal size and then kept on shrinking, taking the rest of Shanks's body with them in response until he stood about the same size as a toddler.

Oh shit... I hope Dracule is done with this spar, or else... Shanks thought, scrambling away, having trouble even holding his sword thanks to how badly the after-effects of Giant Shift.

Dracule sat up and stared, breathing heavily, his clothing looking a little ratty around the edges, his hat lying nearby squished, but otherwise looking as if he could continue the fight. However, when his eyes locked on to Shanks again, Shanks breathed a sigh of relief. The inhuman part of his friend had receded, leaving the human aspect simply to stare at the incongruity of a child-sized Shanks staring back at him. A sight Shanks knew from experience with his crew that could not help but garner some reaction.

"Your new power is ridiculous, and every time you experiment with new things, it becomes even more so," Dracule stated bluntly, while in the distance, the top of one of the mountains finally began to slide off the rest, cut cleanly through it by an earlier slash. It crashed somewhere out of sight, joining still more wreckage.

"I know," Shanks retorted, his voice squeaking to go along with his new form. "And believe me, training myself to use this Devil Fruit of mine wasn't exactly easy. Although it is hilarious at mealtimes, and you gotta admit, it's a lot of fun." With that, Shanks finally let himself laugh, partly at himself, partly at the ridiculousness of everything, and partly in relief that Dracule's bloodlust had been sated for now.

Dracule didn't laugh, but his lips did quirk upwards a little as he sat across from Shanks, his legs crossed under him, setting his blade lengthwise across his lap. "I have news, and... I wanted to vent a bit. Whitebeard is dead, and while I respect how he died, I was unable to challenge him myself. The vagaries of fate and my battle with Vista cheated me out of being able to do so by taking me too far into the Calm Belt to get back in time. I saw something impressive, a promise of a glorious future battle, yet that was not enough to sate me. Vista

was... he was a man who had accepted he had reached his own personal pinnacle, and lacked the will to push past it. I needed this.”

Shanks nodded, while internally, he screamed, *Freaking combat junkie! Why don't you go bother Kaido?! He or King would be happy to oblige, and I wouldn't have more scars.* However, he didn't say that aloud, as he really didn't mean it.

Admittedly, King, Kaido's resident swordsman, if he could be called that, wouldn't really be a proper challenge for Dracule, not when he was in a mood like this. As for Kaido, that matchup Shanks never even wanted to hear about, let alone see. Only one of them would be walking away from that fight, the two combat junkies would just stop caring about anything beyond their battle, and there was a reason why one of the epithets given to Kaido was the Immortal Beast King.

“I understand. While I never had any desire or need to test myself against Whitebeard, a part of me would've liked to be there at least to see his passing. I've already heard the rumors from the Whitebeard pirates about his final words. Is there any truth to what they are saying? They have been talking about them in every port they put into on their way to—”

“Dressrosa, yes,” Dracule interjected to show that he also understood where the Whitebeard pirates were going. “Distance and the time it takes them to get there will have allowed Doflamingo to prepare his defenses, but I rather doubt that he will be able to put up any significant fight against Marco, Ace and Jozu, let alone backed by Whitey and the rest.”

For a moment, Dracule's eyes flashed as he spoke the name of the swordswoman, that inhuman side of him rearing its head, but only for a moment. “His less than savory contacts, however, could be a complication that the Whitebeard pirates don't see coming.”

Shanks shook his head. “No, actually. Kaido's crew is busy elsewhere. Jack's been seen attacking a few Marine outposts along with a few of the Numbers, testing their resolve, I think, pretty much like Perospero and Smoothie of the Big Mom Pirates. Kaido and King, on the other hand, were apparently seen traveling in the direction of South Blue. My sources have no idea why, though. My information sources in South Blue are pretty minimal.”

“Intriguing,” Dracule mused, scratching his chin thoughtfully, an altogether human gesture that Dracule would not allow himself among most people. “But then again, the fact that you have any sources in any of the Blues is impressive.”

Given the nature of the world they lived on getting information from one island to another was often **extremely** difficult. Den Den Mushis did solve that problem to a certain degree, but they had to be set up ahead of time, their communications could be intercepted, and there were places in the world where the local weather patterns messed up those communication signals, particularly in the New World. Newspapers were still thus incredibly

important and really, the only way normal people could get any information beyond their own islands.

Since becoming Yonko, Shanks had tried to set up his own intelligence apparatus, much like the World Government had, with, admittedly, extremely mixed results. Even in East Blue, he barely had anyone willing to pass on information, and it was only luck that allowed him to know what Kaido was up to at the moment. *Ugh, and the less I think about how I messed that up with Makino, the better. She was supposed to just be another person who could pass on information and watch Luffy for me, but nooooo, I had to think with my dick along with my heart instead of my brain!*

Shaking that thought off, Shanks repeated his earlier question. "So, is it true?" he asked again. "Did Whitebeard really--?"

"The One Piece is real," Dracule intoned, interrupting Shanks again, his eyes now far away, a bit more of that hunting the hawk look coming back into them, before fading as he quoted Whitebeard, that predatory gleam in stark abeyance for a second, simple respect in his voice and face as he did so. "'Inherited will! Someday, someone, be it Straw Hat or someone else, will appear, carrying the weight of centuries of history within him. He will challenge the world, your system, as you so fear it, Peter, Sengoku. And when he does, your house of cards will fall.'"

As he listened to those words, Shanks fought back an urge to laugh, feeling his heart beginning to pound, the urge to leap up and dance, to cheer coming to him, for some reason that he could not quite describe. "That old man! Damn, but didn't he go out with a bang!" he shouted gleefully.

Dracule remained silent for a moment as he watched his old friend fight back the urge to break out into laughter, one rubber hand smacking the ground, his other hand raised to his face as Shanks shook his head from side to side, staring up into the sky. *Sometimes I do wonder about you, Red Hair.*

His friend had noticeably changed since eating his Gomu Gomu no Mi. Oh, Shanks had always been one to have fun, laugh, party hardy and look for the bright side of life regardless of whatever was happening around him. Yet now, it was as if all that was all he could see a lot of the time. All Shanks cared about was laughing and having fun, whereas before, he had his serious moments.

And let us not get started on how his combat style has changed. Shanks spoke of it before, and I have drunkenly ranted on that subject several times in the past few years, Dracule thought to himself dryly. Honestly, using kicks, trickery and punches in what is supposed to be a clash between swordsmen? How demeaning!

"You do not know the half of it," Dracule said aloud once he felt that his friend had gotten his urge to chortle under control. Moreover, Shanks was his friend, odd though that thought might be.

When Shanks looked up at him, Dracule went on, a smile appearing on his own face. Dracule knew himself well enough to know that that smile wasn't exactly warm or welcoming, but it was the best he could do. "Whitebeard killed one of the five elders, Shepherd Ju Peter."

Not having made the connection when Dracule had quoted Whitebeard, Shanks stared, his small child-like body completely frozen in place before his jaw unhinged in a way that only his Devil Fruit could allow for, the bottom half of his jaw slapping into the ground at his feet, his eyes going wide and comical, as the Yonko stared at the Shichibukai, completely unable to comprehend what he'd just been told. "How!? Why was one of those old shadows there?!"

"He was apparently called in for some reason. I was obviously not told why. As for how... Once more, that inhuman side of him came back, and his teeth grit in a snarl, the hunting hawk staring at prey it somehow knew was beyond his abilities to take. "That creature had a regeneration to put a herd of awakened Zoans to shame, and Whitebeard's ultimate move broke Peter down into his constituent bits, so much so that no more than a few splashes of blood were left behind. I could not have done that, not with any number of attacks, even if my opponent just stood there and took it."

For a moment he glared at nothing, hating that admission and the fact that, even as the greatest swordsman this world had seen in centuries, there were still some heights he could not reach. Then he shook himself, and stated simply, "Whitebeard's final attack left a scar in the world, one that was still being filled in by water by the time I left the area, it was so powerful. Beyond that, the news's report on Sengoku's injuries and Red Dog's death is actually accurate, although they are downplaying their losses among the lower ranks tremendously."

"... That, that explains some of the moves that the World Government has been making recently. I'd wondered," Shanks said, his voice still squeaky, before his body finally recovered from the amount of air he'd pumped into his bones moments before, his body shifting back into its normal shape. "That's crazy."

"About as crazy as your Devil Fruit's impact on your body," Dracule drawled, causing Shanks to snicker. "Regardless, what will you do about it?"

"I don't know. Not yet. I've been tryin' to figure out a way to meet up with Luffy, or at least send him a message, but nothing's gone anywhere on that score. I really wanna talk to the kid!" Shanks answered, a wide grin on his face as he laughed again. "But with what little reports I'm getting about things here in the New World and everything else, I might have to postpone that for a bit. Heck, I might miss Uta's next concert, and she's not going to be happy about that!"

Shanks hummed for a second, discarding some plans and redrawing others for his near future, pushing aside the desire to just run off and find a way to wherever Luffy was, which would undoubtedly be extremely fun. Yet if one of the elders had died, it was very clear that the Marines had been hurt even worse than they had let on, and with Big Mom and Jack of Kaido's crew at least making noise, well, while Shanks didn't like conflict, he had no trouble taking advantage of it.

"I am certain the girl will get over it. You might also need to be aware of another piece of information before you plan anything, though. The second piece of information I came here specifically to tell you about." Dracule stood up, grabbed his sword and made to turn away as Shanks did the same.

The two of them walked back to the shore side by side. In the distance, Red Force could be seen just at the lip of the horizon, well outside the splash zone, so to speak, of their battle, while Dracule's ship remained where it was on the shoreline.

Little of that shoreline looked the same as it had when they had first arrived as the two had started their spar there. There were several new cuts into the island from the edge leading deeper, and saltwater was now pouring down into them, creating new rivers through the iron of the island.

"What's the government up to beyond what's been reported in the news? Let me guess, they've begun to fill in the Shichibukai positions again? Of all the moves they can make, that one would have an immediate impact."

"That would be correct. Some of the names are intriguing. Simon the Divine, Gild Tesoro, Chinjao. Added to those three is some odd 'Spore' person I never heard of before, and two others, whose name similarly I have never heard before. I would wager that they are not nearly as famous as myself, Hancock or Jinbe. I would put the unknowns at possibly Crocodile's level." Dracule's eyes gleamed for a second. "Although one name, Cavendish, interested me slightly when it was being considered. He is a fellow swordsman and could, perhaps, be worth hunting down."

Shanks winced a little, and not just at the thought of Cavendish's fate if Mihawk decided he wasn't worth calling a swordsman. "Chinjao, huh. While the old guy's not nearly as dangerous as he was in his prime, his fleet is one of the better led and organized combat groups out there. In any wet water conflict, that could make a big impact. It would also probably give the World Government immediately a force that they could use to launch attacks against the Revolutionaries without further stripping away their Marine forces. Smart old bastards." He acknowledged with a scowl before snickering. "Simon, though? They really want to give that asshole more reason to think he's been, what was it, blessed by the gods? Really?"

Once more, a small wintry smile made its way onto Dracule's face before scurrying away, terrified of being in such unfamiliar territory. "Indeed. I think it is a sign of their desperation. I

gave them my word, and I will not go back on it unless they do, but six of the seven Shichibukai are either dead or turned against them, part of the Lightning King's Crew. Worse, the Pacifista and K9Ms, while showing tremendous potential and being a major factor in the war against Whitebeard, was not the true game changer that they expected against New World level opponents."

Shanks nodded in agreement to that, and the two of them continued on their way down to the shoreline. There, Dracule turned to Shanks. "I've had enough excitement for now, and I will be returning to my island for a time. Whatever you plan for the future with this new knowledge I've imparted to you, I will not wish you good luck. You do not need it, considering how your bet on the future seems to be coming up aces as it is. Seeing Straw Hat stand on the same stage as Whitebeard was fascinating."

Shanks nodded proudly at that, then blinked, his smile suddenly widening. "Was that a joke? Did you seriously just make a pun, of all things? Dracule, I didn't know you had it in you!"

"And now I'm already regretting it," Dracule grumbled, hopping onto his ship as Shanks began to laugh. He settled down and used Yoru's point to push himself off of the shoreline for a second, allowing the waves to carry him further away. Seconds later, without any further word of farewell, his ship turned and made for the open ocean as Shanks continued to laugh behind him.

That laughter tapered off only after Shanks could see his friend dwindling into the distance, and he stood there on the shore of Ironheart, first looking towards Dracule, then the Red Force, then out into the distance, sadness bubbling up within him along with the giddy expectation of the world beginning to change. That change was going to be far more violent than he had anticipated, and Shanks wasn't really certain what to think about that. *But like I told Dracule, while I don't really enjoy conflict, I'm not going to just stand here and not take advantage of it...*

OOOOOOO

"Huh, well, it looks like Nami's suggestion is working very well," Vivi mumbled, around a bit of breakfast, having just noticed how different the angle of the Eternal Pose's needle was at the moment to when she had gone to bed. "Neat. That... that has some very interesting connotations for the future."

"And at our speed, I think we've cut down this aspect of the voyage by at least two days or more," Luffy answered, smiling at the obvious sign of making progress. *Don't get me wrong, I love spending time with Vivi, and even the calls back home are fun. But not having time or a place to exercise is really annoying.*

“Hmmm... come to think of it, we might want to repair the holes I made. Here on the Calm Belt, the weather’s always the same, warmish and without any rain or worse. Out on the Grand Line, that’s going to change rapidly.”

“Again and again and again, yeah.” Luffy snickered. With a thought, a lightning arm popped out of one of his shoulders. “You provide the sand. I’ll provide the heat, just like when we made the food tray.”

Vivi nodded, and within moments, the window on her side of the Swallow (they’d had an argument about the name that Vivi had won eventually, although not with her first choice, which would have been Carue II) was repaired. With a faint smile, she then leaned over Luffy, humming in pleasure as Luffy instantly leaned his head into her chest. Although her chest was smaller than Robin’s, let alone Hancock’s, the simple enjoyment Luffy took in touching her did almost as much for Vivi’s self-image as the looks of love he gave her every morning.

Despite Vivi taking her time on it, soon, Luffy’s window was repaired too, and she leaned back into her chair. For a time, the pair was quiet as Luffy dealt with another group of Sea Kings, then Luffy’s stomach rumbled, and Vivi laughed. She flew up out of her chair, and the conversation restarted, with Vivi first asking Luffy what he wanted to eat, then Luffy asking Vivi about her training with her Devil Fruit. Vivi could tell he still felt a little guilty for not really being able to help Robin or Chopper with their Devil Fruit-specific training, but Vivi, as another logia, Luffy could probably help far more easily. She also, along with Nami, was really close to cracking the Kenbunshoku secret, and Luffy felt that would be the second-best kind of training for her.

Luffy winced. “Busoshoku after that. Sorry, love, but that’s gonna be painful as heck. You don’t really need Geppo much or any of the Rokushiki beyond Kami-E maybe, but Hancock told me a line once, and I believe it: a logia who trusts in his Devil Fruit too much is vulnerable in the New World. That means both kinds of Haki.”

“Where we’ll be going eventually, once you think everyone is able to handle it. I know, trust me, after hearing how you beat Crocodile, I know.” Vivi scowled. “I don’t like the idea of just getting hit, but if it’s in sparring and pushing me to grow stronger, I’ll take it. I don’t think that getting stronger is the goal, as you and Zoro do, but I can understand the need to grow stronger to protect those you care about.”

She returned to the chair, and Luffy shivered, trying hard not to show more of a physical reaction than that to the sly, dangerous look on the normally kind princess’s face. “And I have to admit that the idea of controlling all the sand in Alabasta and burying whole armies like Crocodile did so many of our towns is a good one. Or better, mixing up sand bullets covered in Busoshoku inside a larger attack. Now that is a very nice image~,” she nearly purred, her voice reminding Luffy very strongly of Robin at her most sadistic.

Still trying to fight the urge to cross his legs to hide his reaction to that look, Luffy made a calm-down motion with one hand. “Hmm... that sounds neat and all, but I’ll warn ya now, it’ll

probably be reaaaally hard to learn. Pushing Busoshoku into your weapons is hard, bullets harder, and controlling both a logia attack and covering just a bit of your element, that's gotta be harder still."

"I know. But better to aim for the stars than the ground, yes?" Vivi stated.

"Well, unless you're trying to bounce your shots, yeah," Luffy agreed with a chuckle.

"Hush!" Vivi smacked him on the shoulder. "How dare you bring up actual tactics while I'm waxing poetic." Luffy just laughed, and she sighed before kissing him on the cheek.

The conversation on training continued, and then they called back to Amazon Lily a little early for the day. Hancock and the others were all happy to hear that they were making real progress now, and the Empress expressed the hope that this meant they would be back in her realm within a few weeks at worst. Something in Robin's voice when she agreed with that sentiment made Luffy wonder if the two of them were having trouble being around one another without him, but he couldn't find a diplomatic way of saying it, so set his concerns aside.

By the time the conversation with his other lovers ended, Luffy was pleased to note that the arrow in the Eternal Pose was pointing almost at a ninety-degree angle from the direction they were following. He waited another ten minutes, as outside the sun began to set, before twisting the ship's controls. In a few moments, they were on the new course, heading straight for Alabasta out of the Calm Belt.

The Calm Belt was a long stretch of water around the globe. It was in no way a wide one, particularly at the speed this ship could go. Which was far, far faster than any other ship in the world, even the Everlasting Resolve. Within an hour of turning, the pair could see actual clouds and waves ahead of them.

By that point, the atmosphere in the Swallow had become more romantic, the conversation about training left by the wayside for kissing, light touching and fondling. This had been the routine every night on the ship, although Vivi hadn't gone below the belt on Luffy for obvious reasons, and Luffy hadn't been able to give her quite enough attention to make her more than hot and bothered, thanks to the near-constant threat of Sea Kings.

As the difference between the ocean they were currently sailing and the one ahead of them came into sight, Vivi had her upper body pressed into Luffy's side, with one of his hands fondling her breast through her clothing as she laid gentle kisses up and down his neck. Yet as she saw the waves in the near distance, barely visible now that the sun was almost completely over the horizon, she frowned, an idea niggling at the back of her mind. "Um, Luffy, how will this ship react to actual waves?"

Luffy blinked at that, opening his mouth to reply before needing to concentrate on dodging through another group of Sea Kings lounging on the top of the water ahead of them.

These were more predators, and all of them tried to take a bite out of the ship, with several trying to dunk down then come up from below and for a few seconds, although that simply removed them from the board in terms of being actual threats thanks to the speed of the ship.

Just as they left that group of Sea Kings behind, they hit the first wave from the Grand Line.

It was like running into a low wall. The Swallow shuddered, a good amount of its speed suddenly died, and Luffy and Vivi found themselves nearly flung out of their chairs. Vivi actually was hurled out of the chair straight up and only changing into sand saved her from braining herself on the canopy. This was an automatic response Vivi had developed since gaining the fruit that had taken months to train herself out of when faced with sudden shocks or direct threats, only now she was very grateful she hadn't completely succeeded in doing so.

"OOOF!" she yelped, her mouth appearing out of the sand even as a cascade of it fell back down to her chair. "Slow down!"

Luffy was barely able to keep control of the ship and quickly began to lessen the power he was sending into the engine, slowing the ship down. There was another series of crashes as the waves hit them, but eventually, as the ship went slower and slower, it settled down to the same level as a roller coaster. "Well, that was interesting. And um, yeah, maybe we shoulda wondered about the whole hitting waves thing before this."

Vivi reformed her head from the mound of sand she had become there for a few moments, the rest of her body slowly following. "You think?" Vivi blinked, then began to laugh, pointing at something on the outer side of her chair. "And maybe the fact Franky installed these safety belts here should have also been a clue."

Luffy laughed, and Vivi also began to chuckle, settling into her chair and using the safety belt as the ship continued on its course. For the rest of the morning Luffy experimented with how fast he could go or if it was better to go side to side. That occasionally worked very well, letting him dodge around the odd random larger-than-average wave. Their straight-ahead speed though had slowed significantly. At the fastest they could go, was around a tenth of the speed they'd been doing in the Calm Belt.

Luffy wasn't certain about that point: Franky hadn't installed any kind of speedometer, and Luffy doubted there even was such a thing in this world. Yet he estimated that the amount of voltage he was using was around a tenth of what he had been using before. Even at that speed, they were bouncing and bobbing along in a way that would probably have anyone who had even a hint of seasickness to empty their stomachs. Which, considering the ship didn't have any gunwales, would not be fun for anyone.

Eventually as the ship settled down into its new speed, Vivi began to flirt with Luffy again, who returned the attention. Better, at this speed and with his Kenbunshoku active, Luffy

was ready for any problem that could come to the point where he felt he could experiment a little more. *I've heard of electrotherapy. It should feel good, right?* Luffy mused, wondering if he could pull this off as Vivi began to nip and lick at his ear.

A moment later, Vivi eeped, then whimpered a bit. A slight feeling of heat had just gone through her thigh as one of Luffy's lightning hands appeared. It was tiny that spark, but it was enough to cause her a pleasant jolt. "Oooh, wh, what was that?"

"Heh, just, um, feeling like I wanted ta experiment a bit. Tell me if this gets too intense or hurts in any way, okay?" Luffy almost demanded.

Hesitantly but with a bit of eagerness, Vivi leaned in and kissed Luffy deeply, once more letting her tongue out to play with Luffy's for a few moments before she pulled away. "I trust you," she whispered.

Luffy stared at her for a second, then he smiled widely, his eyes lighting up like stars. Vivi had barely a second to realize she should turn on the lights within the cockpit before she gasped. A slightly larger jolt had gone through her where Luffy's hand had just touched her stomach with another lightning hand, And Vivi felt her muscles starting to un-tense, a feeling of looseness going through her while Luffy's conjured lightning hand moved around her body.

This didn't last very long before Luffy became a little more daring. Instead of going for muscles in her thigh, shoulders, neck, back and arms, Luffy went for her rear. A tiny jolt went through Vivi and she moaned aloud, flopping back into her chair away from him. "OOOHhh...."

With access to Vivi's rear cut off, Luffy began to run his lightning hand up and down Vivi's stomach, avoiding any really sensitive areas for now, despite an inner voice (he labeled it PervUffy) urging him to go for Vivi's chest. Even so, touching Vivi's stomach, neck, and thighs definitely had Vivi panting within a few minutes.

"Ummmm, I don't know what this is, Luffy, but the tingles, oooh, I think this could be dangerous..." Vivi whimpered, bucking up out of her seat a little, thrusting her chest in an effort to get Luffy's attention.

"Good to know." Luffy snickered. "And it's actually good training for me, controlling the amount of voltage I'm using."

"Y, you and your typical mantra about traininGGG!!" Vivi's whimper turned into a moan as Luffy took her invitation, his lightning hand flicking up to her chest. Vivi's clothing did not provide any kind of protection, and Vivi bucked and heaved as she felt her core becoming wet as a bit of electricity played over one of her nipples. "N, never mind, I will never complain about that againN!!!"

Her words were wiped out by a rising moan, and Luffy began to feel a little hot under the collar. *Okay, this is working way better than I expected. Ugh, and Vivi can't exactly reciprocate, given how close to my crotch my lightning legs start. Ugh... wait, what's that? Ooh... is that...*

Luffy let his lightning hand dissolve, causing Vivi to whimper for an entirely different reason. "Wha, what's wrong?" *Why didn't he keep going?* She thought, turned on to a level that even the days of flirting up to this point hadn't reached. *If he stops for whatever reason, embarrassment be darned, I'm going to take matters into my own hands!*

"Heh, nothing's wrong. Um... in fact, something might be right. There's a tiny island out there. I can feel the minds of a ton of birds out there perching on it. Well, it's either that or a whale that's staying on the surface. I'm hoping for the first choice, obviously."

"Oh?" Vivi hummed, her mind muddled with her arousal, unable to realize what Luffy was saying for a moment. Then it hit her. "OOOH!" she paused, thinking about it, then nodded. "UM, I, I rather think that any island would be nice to have some time on at the moment. If it's only a, bit of sand or what-have-you, we can still beach the ship for a time." The rocking of the boat in such a circumstance would be highly irritating, but right now, Vivi didn't care at all.

Frankly, she was close to just asking Luffy to drop the anchor if he could. *Huh, come to think of it, does the Swallow have an anchor? Luffy's been pushing our ship along without taking more than a few naps per day, so we haven't actually stopped... not that doing so on the Calm Belt would have been very peaceful.* Realizing that her mind was rambling a bit, Vivi sloughed out of her chair, heading back into the open area behind them. "I, I think Franky and the others packed some camping gear. I'll prepare some of it. I... um, I would very much like us to, to stop and turn our full attention to one another, Luffy."

Luffy blushed at that and the kiss to the back of his neck that those words were accompanied by. Not even in his past life would Luffy/Ranma have been dense enough to miss the implications of that statement. *Well, not on top of what we've been doing with one another the past few days, anyway.*

Soon, the ship came up next to what could only be charitably called a sandbank. It was barely as long as the ship, but it was much wider and had room enough above the water line for a small campsite. Luffy doubted it was nearly big enough to count as an island, even though the Swallow started to scrap along the bottom nearly two of its own lengths away from the sand they could see poking up out of the ocean.

More importantly, right now, with Vivi giving him bedroom eyes, Luffy wasn't about to suggest they not make use of it. Soon, he had the Swallow beached, a horde of birds rising into the sky, and Vivi popped the canopy, hopping out quickly.

She stood there on the sand for a moment, concentrating. Even as Luffy powered down the ship, Luffy felt it shift, and looking out of the cockpit, he saw waves of sand flowing out from

Vivi. Within ten minutes, the small sand bank was much larger than it had been before, building on the shallow area, making for a much more sizeable area for the camp. She also had covered the existing sand with several inches more of the grainy substance, burying any hint the previous inhabitants had left behind.

A wall had also grown around the island, almost like a berm, to keep out the waves at the point of impact. A wall that Luffy turned to glass, which then was covered by still more sand. After it was around the same height as the Swallow's hull, Luffy stepped back, smiling. "Nice Vivi."

"Hmm... thank you. That was kind of strange, I lost control of the sand the instant it touched the water and as usual when it began to melt under your power, but I could just keep up the movement, building on the sand I had already pushed into it. Odd. Also somewhat exhausting," Vivi said, grateful that her idea had worked and that the slight smell that had been here a moment before was gone now. *Bird doodoo is not romantic, neither its smell nor appearance.*

"Oh?" Luffy hopped out of the ship, carrying the camping equipment under one arm. "Does that mean you don't want to..."

"Bite your tongue!" Vivi nearly growled as she turned toward him before pausing as her stomach gurgled a little. "But um, perhaps some food first?" she added sheepishly, causing Luffy to laugh before sweeping her up into a heated kiss.

After parting reluctantly, the twosome retreated to the ship for a bit to have a quick meal. They sat side-by-side at first, but soon, Vivi was in Luffy's lap, the pair kissing between feeding one another, Luffy's hands roaming up Vivi's back and vice versa whenever they weren't holding a fork or cup.

Because of this, when they returned to the sandbar, Vivi's desire had only somewhat diminished, yet they still had things to do, and the pair broke apart there for a second. Luffy set up a fire and made sure the ship was staked into place using his Gloam Paddling skill to create twin spikes at either end that sunk down into the sandbank. For her part, Vivi laid out a single sleeping bag beside the fire along with a tent, just in case. They'd yet to see any kind of bad weather, perhaps because they were still close to the Calm Belt, but better safe than sorry.

Lemon Start:

Finishing his own tasks first, Luffy moved up from behind her, his arms going around her waist, pressing into her.

Feeling his powerful, muscled chest pressing into her back, his crotch tapping against her rear, a part of Vivi, removed now from the hours of flirting and cuddling, wanted to run away, to

tell Luffy to wait. As that thought skittered across her thoughts, an image of a small mini-Vivi looking scared and blushing appeared in her head labeled 'propriety' appeared in Vivi's mind.

Yet as one of Luffy's hands rose up her front to cup one of her breasts through her shirt, this part of her personality was gang-tackled by several other little Vivis, each of them labeled a different emotion, the largest of which was Desire. It was yellow-colored for some reason, and dressed as Vivi currently was, whereas 'propriety' had been dressed in a full gala-style dress.

Shaking her head at how her own mind worked sometimes, Vivi agreed with the implications. *Propriety be damned, I've wanted this since the moment he came to help Hancock and me, and I'm a pirate first now, not just a princess.* Leaning back up, she let her back rest against Luffy's chest, humming in delight as his second hand rose to join the first, cupping her breasts. One stayed there, gently squeezing. The other moved back down her body, equally gently as he traced a circle on Vivi's stomach.

"Mmm.. Luffy..." she whispered, turning to kiss him, moaning into his mouth.

Luffy enjoyed exploring Vivi's body like this every time he could, just as he had Robin and Hancock before her. Her stomach wasn't nearly as toned as Hancock's. Oh, it was flat, to be certain, and there was a surprising amount of musculature there on her sides. Yet, Vivi would never be built for power, even the martial artist type build that Luffy or Hancock possessed. Rather, the princess turned pirate's body was svelte and agile, her muscles built for agility and quickness of movement.

It's the difference between the body of someone who's a boxer and a swimmer mixed and the body of a gymnast or maybe a dancer? He mused to himself, playing with her breasts. They were smaller than Robin and Hancock, but still nicely formed, a good handful. Vivi also wasn't wearing a bra underneath her T-shirt, allowing Luffy to find her nipple with ease, whereupon he began to play with it between two of his fingers. His other hand finished tracing around her stomach, began moving down her body, stroking her thighs, then in between them, a single finger finding her still-sweatpants-covered slit.

No, Vivi was not wearing any underwear. She had discarded any plans to do so until she reached Alabasta the moment this journey began.

Knowing that Vivi wanted him to take the lead entirely was a new experience. Robin normally led when it came to foreplay, after which it was more of a give-and-take most of the time, with Robin occasionally wanting to be in charge. With Hancock, after the first time in her bath, lovemaking was more about mutual exploration, which turned into something of an endurance battle. Vivi was simply willingly going along with whatever Luffy was doing, letting him take the lead to an extent that he rarely did with either of the other girls.

Still, Luffy wanted to be sure. "Um, are you sure about this, Vivi? We haven't actually been together-together all that long, you know?" *In fact, if we're only counting just time spent*

as a couple, me and Hancock weren't exactly together for all that long before we went all the way. He and Robin had gone from flirting to boyfriend/girlfriend, and whether or not the flirting time counted, Luffy didn't know. And I don't think time unconscious counts either, just like time spent away from one another. So, what, two months max from Mock Town and then us getting together fully on Water 7?

Having spent the better part of the last five days flirting on and off with Luffy, getting to know him even more than she had previously, and kissing him as often as they could get away with, Vivi was more than ready to continue. The way she nearly lunged for Luffy's lips with her own after Luffy began to pull away showed that, as did the shoulder check that came with it, intended to push Luffy to the ground as if she had tackled him.

Normally, this wouldn't work, but divining Vivi's intent, Luffy fell back, twisting them around even as he did so to allow his back to land on the sleeping bag rather than the sand underneath. The two of them kept on kissing, Luffy's hands groping up and down Vivi's back before he gripped her rear with both of his hands, knowing that she really liked that.

The shiver that this action won Luffy proved his opinion on that point very accurate. Vivi whimpered into his mouth before pulling away, trailing down little kisses to his neck, leaning her head against the crook of his neck and shoulder, breathing heavily. "Luffy, I'm certain. Please, don't make me wait any longer."

Luffy smiled and, using his grip on her rear, rolled them so that Vivi was underneath them, claiming her lips again with a tongue-filled kiss that took her breath away. "I just wanted to be sure that ya wanted this Pirate King to have his way with you, Princess." He grinned at her, instilling even more humor into his voice. "After all, once you go pirate, you don't go back."

The exceptionally corny line had Vivi laughing, so much so that she didn't notice that Luffy had taken off his shirt and pants, leaving him only in his underwear, or that he had slid off her own shorts until the chill night air hit her nether regions. She gasped, then gasped again for an entirely different reason as Luffy's hand laid gently on top of her now naked womanhood, one finger pressing on top of her moist cleft.

Unlike Hancock and Robin, Vivi had barely any kind of fold to her pussy. Instead, it was a small slit with a tuft of wild blue hair above it. Currently it was so moist it was dripping down onto the sleeping bag below them.

Luffy looked into Vivi's eyes, watching for concern or fear, any hesitation to appear there. There was none. Instead, there was only anticipation, and Vivi actually allowed her legs to widen noticeably, giving him still further access to her flower as one of her hands wound into his hair, the other going up and down his chest, staring at his muscles as they twitched under her fingers, biting her lip.

Shivering a bit at her touch, Luffy leaned in and kissed her, any remaining hesitation leaving him. For several moments, they simply kissed, with Luffy's hand just resting where it was, getting Vivi used to someone else touching her down there. Then, when Vivi began to pant and squirm, Luffy's other hand came up, pushing up underneath her shirt to her breasts, while the hand he had rested on her moist cleft began to move, just generally stroking the area, not penetrating, just a slow and gentle massage of Vivi's most intimate area.

Vivi moaned, her arms going around Luffy and pulling him into a hug, even as she tried to push more of her emotion, more of her **everything**, into the kiss. Luffy went with it, their tongues beginning to duel, and then, her hand moved around his body to his front between them, moving underneath and grabbing his underwear, pushing it off. Once it was off, she began to work his shaft, pulling back from the kiss to look between them for a moment before her view was occluded by Luffy.

He moved down her body, licking, nibbling, and then, when he got to one of her bare breasts, her T-shirt having been pushed up to her shoulders, gave Vivi a gentle bite. He watched again her reaction to this, and she nearly lifted him off of her as she bucked, gasping, her eyes rolling back as she reached a mini orgasm. "Ahhh..." she whimpered.

"Good grief, you were on a hair trigger." Luffy chuckled a little, nuzzling into her chest, his arms moving again to pull at her shirt up and off of her head, which she raised obligingly while his lips found her light pink nipple. At the same time, Vivi's hands finished pushing down his boxers so they wouldn't get in the way later. If Luffy felt Vivi's arms go a little sand-like for a moment to give Vivi added reach, he wasn't about to comment.

"What can I say, our teasing today and everything else, well..." Vivi actually blushed a little, looking away, before looking back at Luffy, leaning up and kissing him again as hard as she could. Once more, their tongues began to dance with one another, and she pulled Luffy down in between her legs.

When she pulled back from the kiss, Vivi leaned to one side, whispering into his ear, "That's enough foreplay, Luffy. We can... can explore other options later, but right now, I need you in me."

"As you command." Luffy smiled, pecking her on the lips. Personally, he would've preferred a little more foreplay, but it seemed as if Vivi wanted this to go a certain way, and he was willing to do so. *Even though it does seem a little contradictory when she's so submissive most of the time.*

Luffy raised himself up slightly, reaching down and lining his cock up with her pussy with one hand, his other hand going to her breast, kneading it for a moment before his tip found her small slit and pushed in.

Where before Robin and Hancock had not felt any kind of pain at that intrusion, Vivi did. She winced a little, and Luffy instantly stopped. "Vivi?"

"Y, you're my first, er, obviously, um, but I was, um, always too embarrassed back in the palace to um, even sneak out and buy toys, and er, had no desire to while in Baroque Works," Vivi giggled a bit self-consciously. "Sorry."

His eyes widening, a part of Luffy wondered internally if a part of that was about her being a princess and knowing how her marriage had to be political thing like back in his old world. *A lot of books talked about how women married to other noble houses had to prove they were pure.*

Thrusting that thought away with a near vicious mental snarl, Luffy leaned nuzzling her neck, kissing and licking the smooth skin there for a second, then up to her ear, as she did the same. "I'm honored beyond reason that you wanted to give me something so precious, love."

"It's, hehe, my treasure. Mmm, and as a pirate now, I can choose to give it to whoever I want," Vivi answered, gently pulling Luffy a little deeper into herself, with her hands on his muscled rear, gasping a little at the mixed pain and pleasure of it, as she stared up into his eyes. "And there is no one I would rather give it to them you."

For a few breaths, they simply kissed, from neck to earlobe to cheek to lips, as Luffy rested with his length within Vivi's moist tunnel, getting her used to his girth. Soon, she nodded into their kiss signaling for him to move again. Slowly but surely, Luffy embedded himself deeper into Vivi until his pubic hair grazed her own, and he was fully sheathed inside. There, as blood could be seen around his shaft in the light of the fireplace, he rested, his eyes closed with the effort to control himself, before slowly pulling out, then going in again.

He kept it slow as Vivi twitched and whined underneath him, making no move whatsoever to stop him. A large portion of her enjoyed the slow torture and knew that he was doing so to let Vivi get used to it. The rest of her enjoyed the raw, emotion, the love she saw in Luffy eyes' as she kissed him on the lips, chin, cheek and anywhere her lips could reach.

How long did this go on, neither of them knew, but Luffy knew that his self-control was beginning to fray badly by the time he'd accomplished seven full-length strokes. Being inside Vivi, clamped there within her warm, wet, tight vise, was incredible, pushing his self-control to its very limits despite his experiences with Robin and Hancock. Indeed, Luffy knew that if not for that 'training' he would never have been able to even last a few strokes, little alone this slow, steady buildup.

Vivi eventually got used to it and pulled back, kissing Luffy again on the lips rather than on the neck or ear. At the same time, her legs, which had been splayed out, lifted, wrapping around him. "Go! I'm used to it now, Luffy, **faster!**"

With that order, Luffy, who had just pulled almost entirely out of her, slammed back in, groaning in delight. The suddenness of the piston-like movement caused Vivi to see stars as she wailed, but Luffy himself didn't last for more than a few strokes longer. He pulled out after a few more, even as Vivi bucked and heaved under him, coming all over her stomach and even up to her chest.

Vivi fell back onto the sleeping bag, gasping, but Luffy leaned down and kissed her, his cock beginning to poke her stomach after only a few seconds. Her eyes widened, and she stared between them, whispering, "I knew you recovered quickly, but **that** quickly?"

"What can I say? You've inspired me," Luffy answered, chuckling.

"Oh...I am very, very glad that that stuff that the Kujas make is one hundred percent effective," Vivi murmured, smirking just a little bit as she slowly pushed Luffy away from her for a second. They had both taken some of the Kuja medicine while eating earlier. She then rolled until she was on her hands and knees, looking back over her shoulder. "I read of this position in one of my maid's books, do you thinkKKK!!"

Vivi didn't get to finish before Luffy pounced on her, leaning over her. His hands went to her breasts, gripping them as his mouth found hers, his shaft entering her again in one full stroke. She moaned into the kiss, and once more, the two of them began to make love.

How long they stayed in that position, Vivi didn't know, but a few moments later, as she rode through her third orgasm of the night, Luffy pulled at her hair, causing Vivi's eyes to roll back in her head. The orgasm she was reaching became a series of orgasms almost, while Luffy began to truly get into his stride before cumming deep inside of her. That feeling, the intense heat and the full feeling this caused sent Vivi over the edge just as she began to recover, and she nearly moaned herself hoarse as she came.

Her arms losing all their strength, Vivi flopped onto her front, all of her energy gone, and blinked as Luffy pulled out of her, looking down her body to see a sticky trail of come beginning to drip out of her. Then, she blinked as Luffy hooked one of her legs over his shoulder and slid back inside of her, his shaft barely softer than it had been a second ago. "Good grief!"

"You asked for this princess," Luffy leaned down to give her a soft, tender kiss even as his hips began to move in a slightly faster rivet rhythm. "We've got the whole night, and I mean to enjoy every minute of it!"

Vivi pulled back from the kiss, gasping for air before her lips twitched into a small Cheshire-like grin. *This will undoubtedly hurt like blazes tomorrow, but fuck it! I'm a logia, I don't need my lower half.* "I'm in danger, and I think I like it!" She laughed before Luffy kissed her again, and all thoughts of creating a single coherent sentence left her mind and would not return for the rest of the night.

Lemon End

OOOOOOO

At around the same time Luffy and Vivi left their little love island the next morning, morning had also begun on Amazon Lily. Thus far, while Luffy and Vivi were dealing with a somewhat inquisitive Sea King attracted by the odd smells coming from the tiny bit of sand, on the ledge the Kuja used for large gatherings, the Straw Hats and assembled Kuja were all sitting still, tense as a spring as they all looked toward Hancock as she walked out of the castle. Or rather, stalked out, her expression a mix between simple tiredness and an angry snake just looking for someone to bite, her face twitching, her fingers flicking, with Busoshoku appearing around them on and off.

To say that Hancock looked like she was ready to go off on the first person to so much as smile her way was an understatement. The fact she had done so several times over the last two days since Luffy had left only proved the point.

The Kuja were more uniform in how they showed their wariness, while the Straw Hats wouldn't know what uniformity was if you tried to explain it with a diagram. Makino merely looked tense, but her hands were hidden underneath the table, where they were grasping two of her pistols. Nami simply looked as if she was ready to duck and cover while Laki already had a small cloud road building up underneath her feet. Robin sat still and calm, a book open in front of her, but there were several eyes around her, all of them keeping an eye on Hancock.

Perona was simply nowhere to be seen. In her words, "Hancock's basically the picture-perfect image of **NOPE** these past few days. Even one of Sanji's meals isn't worth putting myself near that!"

Of the boys, Chopper looked as if he had decided to go into the exorcism business with how many crosses and other religious ornaments he had somehow acquired. Brook was softly playing the violin while ducking as low as he possibly could behind Shakky and Sandersonia, hoping that music would soothe the savage beast and he could keep out of Hancock's line of sight. Sanji looked as if he was trying to fight his urge to go into 'Love Mode', his self-preservation, perhaps for the first time in his life, proving just as strong as his love of the ladies.

It was honestly hilarious to look at, Robin reflected, one of her conjured eyes watching the chef. His lower body is going all wobbly as if he wants to dance in place, and the eye underneath his hair has turned into a heart, but his jaw's so clenched it looks like he's trying to bite through metal. Oh, and he hasn't pulled out a cigarette this morning.

Like Perona, Zoro was also missing. This wasn't unusual since he had missed most breakfasts before due to this training with Jinbe when he was around or Sanji and then Rayleigh. Nevertheless, with Rayleigh gone, Zoro had stated the night before he'd be there this morning. His absence had Nami wondering aloud if "That's because Perona decided they should

get in some cardio this morning together, or he just got lost between our quarters and here somehow. I'd wager on the second option, myself," moments before Hancock had appeared.

Hancock did not notice how wary and scared the mixed crowd of Star Hats and Kuja were. Indeed, she didn't even notice how even her personal snake retainer, Salome was keeping a few yards between them, slithering well back from where Hancock was stalking forward. Instead, Hancock resolutely marched towards the coffee machine that Vivi had left behind, actually, Robin had threatened her with bodily harm if she attempted to take it with her.

Since even Sanji had learned quickly that the time it took preparing her personal brew was almost as important as the caffeine itself, Hancock quickly prepared the proper mix, then waited. As she did, her fingers tapped on the stone of the balcony to one side of the coffee machine so hard that she was leaving little dents in the stone, while the Empress stared out to the sea beyond.

As one of her eyes was close enough to see the dents forming in the stone, Robin had the best seat available for this little show of force, and as it continued, she slowly shook her head. *And I thought I was having a tough time of it without our portable water heater around. I know I haven't been sleeping well without Luffy or Vivi around, but Hancock has taken it to a whole different level these past two days.*

The idea of a communal breakfast had been one that the Kuja had come up with shortly after their Empress and her allies had arrived on the island. After an early breakfast, most of the group would split off and do their own training or other things, but having at least some time with the entire crew together with their allies was important on a social level. However, over the past two days, these moments had been colored by the anger and uncertain temper of Hancock. Several times, she had blown up on the group, and more than once, those explosions had segued from shouting into chases through the city.

Luckily, here comes our resident sacrificial offering, Robin thought, as another one of her eyes saw Zoro coming towards them. *Knowing Zoro, he's either not going to notice the tension or notice and simply not care.*

Tromping up into the raised ledge-like area, Zoro sighed. "Finally! What the hell have you guys been doing, moving this place around, huh?"

"That's just in your imagination, you directionless Marimo," Sanji shot back, unable, despite his desire to not be noticed at present, to ignore his rival.

"Shut up! It's not my fault you all keep moving around shit! Or that your brain is obviously being choked to death from that stuff you call hair!" Zoro growled out, tromping over.

The normal floorshow of the Straw Hats was interrupted by Hancock, who turned to glare at Zoro. "No. I have had enough of this. Roronoa Zoro. You have no sense of direction. You

can barely tell left from right, and that's by using your arms to figure it out. If someone gave you a compass and told you to follow it north, you are the type to misunderstand which end the arrow is. I have watched you literally get lost between moving from one store to the next to the point you find yourself out in the jungle beyond our city. At this point I am convinced it is only the fact that even you know you should not be swimming between locations on Amazon Lily that has kept you from leaving my island entirely."

Nami whistled, grinning at the diatribe, while Sanji, Laki and Chopper nodded in agreement, and Zoro's face went so red with anger it looked like he was about to pop a blood vessel. "You, you bit..."

Perhaps luckily for peace between the two groups, Zoro did not get to finish that curse, as Hancock went on, her lips twisted into a sneer at once gorgeous and horrible. Many of the watchers felt as if they were torn between shouting undying loyalty to the most beautiful woman in the world or throwing themselves at her feet begging for forgiveness. "The only reason you do not understand that is because you are willfully blind to your own shortcomings both there and elsewhere, a trait that in man or woman is most unattractive. Wise up, learn to read a compass from your navigator, and better, to ask for help whenever moving from one place to another, no matter how short a journey, and you might rise a bit from absolute zero in my estimation."

Growling, Zoro grabbed at his swords for a moment, looking like he was within a split second of violence, but then Hancock turned away as the coffee machine warbled at her. The sight of her turning away helped Zoro to calm down, and after a few fulminating seconds, he growled, "All right, what's up with you, Hancock? Seriously, both you and Robin look as if you are about three steps away from biting someone's head off."

"Ara, are you volunteering swordsman-san," Robin inquired, reverting to how she had originally addressed Zoro way back when she first joined the crew on whiskey peak, somewhat annoyed that he had been able to tell that she too was just as frustrated and irritable as Hancock despite Robin's best efforts to keep her ire under wraps. *For all that he's an idiot, Zoro can be surprisingly perceptive.* "I am certain that if I started on one side of your face and Hancock on the other, we could have the skin off your bones in barely a few moments."

"EEEEK, Robin's possessed too!" Chopper shouted, tossing some salt at Robin from where he was sitting next to her before backing away rapidly, his eyepatch shifting to show an exclamation mark. "So scary!"

Shivering, Nami held up her hands to make an X in front of her face. "Yaaaah, jokes about cannibalism are a bit too far, even for you, Robin. Seriously, are the two of you just missing Luffy, or is there something else going on?"

For a moment, while Robin simply nodded, Hancock looked as if she was trying to fight her own ego. She really did not want to admit that she was missing her lover as much as she was, particularly considering how short an amount of time they'd been actually together.

Gloriosa, on the other hand, spoke up quickly. "We Kuja call it Love Time Withdrawal. It's a mood swing that Kujas go through if they have fallen in love with a man, had that love reciprocated, and then are separated from him for a while." She looked slyly over at Shakuyaku. "Shakky once went through it when she was younger, and I know several Kujas that have gone through it in my lifetime. I can't say it's worse than Love Sickness, as it doesn't lead to the death of the person who falls ill, but it can certainly lead to the death of someone else."

The woman smirked over at Zoro. "So if you are volunteering to be her target for the next few days, more power to you, swordsman."

"Don't tease me with a fun time," Zoro snorted, while Sanji lost his fight with his Love Mode and began to shout out how he was up for any punishment Hancock could dish out. "Remember, we actually hadn't gotten to spar since we arrived here, Hancock, and I want to see how I measure up against you just like I did against Jinbe."

That match had been exceedingly interesting. Even with Zoro's swords blunted, Zoro had fought Jinbe for nearly an hour before the former warlord had been able to overcome him. His basic speed and agility had been well beyond what Jinbe had gone into the fight anticipating, but Zoro knew that even if he had his swords sharpened, the former Shichibukai's Fishman's Karate would've let him defend himself, and it only taken one particularly powerful blow that got through Zoro's defenses to lay him out, despite Zoro covering himself with Busoshoku right before the hit struck.

"Ara, Chopper-san, I think that Sanji is in need of some doctoring," Brook called, pointing to where Sanji had slumped down after Hancock had eviscerated him. His eyes, which had been hearts a second ago, had turned into broken ones, and a wide stream of tears was coming from his eyes to go along with a bit of snot.

Chopper shook his head, waving one little hoof in front of his face as his eyepatch looked to have turned into a sad pout. "Ah, sorry. Even if I achieve my dream of curing all the world's diseases, I doubt I'll be able to come up with medicine that can cure stupid."

"EHHH!?" Sanji instantly recovered, moving over to glare down at Chopper. "What was that, emergency rations?"

Evidently, he hadn't heard Nami's early comment about cannibalism jokes.

Growling, Chopper instantly expanded to his hybrid form, slamming his forehead into Sanji's as his prayer beads shattered and he dropped his cross. His time with the crew had done

a lot to cure him of any kind of awe or fear he might have felt for most of his crewmates under normal circumstances. "You heard me, you love-baka!"

"But very well!" Hancock said, turning back to Zoro and ignoring the ongoing byplay of her last victim, grabbing at her coffee and taking a few sips. Instantly, as Zoro nodded proudly at Chopper's actions, some of the tension seemed to leave the Pirate Empress. "MMm... This cappuccino drink Vivi introduced me to is most delectable."

Robin rolled her eyes. "Ugh. Pathetic, yet another one who has been lured away from the true taste of coffee."

"So says the woman who drinks coffee that's about as black as Enel's soul," Laki snickered, shaking her head as everyone breathed a sigh of relief.

"Yeah, sorry Robin. You might down it like you're drinking water but that swill of yours is so powerful it makes the rest of us feel like we're going to vibrate apart if we take a sip of it," Nami agreed, gently poking Robin in the shoulder from her other side.

Hancock continued again as if this little byplay hadn't occurred, not even looking in Robin's direction. "If you are so eager to get yourself sent back into Chopper's tender mercies, I am more than willing to oblige, Zoro. I will have some of my warriors row us across to Rusukaina, and we can begin this very afternoon."

Rusukaina was a nearby island within the Calm Belt that was completely uninhabited. This was because it had so many seasons that it changed practically every week, and there were monstrously powerful beasts living there, so powerful that it made even the ones on Amazon Lily or indeed any of the islands that the Straw Hats had been on thus far seem tame and small in comparison. This made it a perfect spot for training, as nothing important, like buildings, cities, or the shoreline, would be sacrificed in any conflict. And if the animals attempted to interfere, that would just make it better training, a turn of phrase that Zoro had apparently taken from their captain and made into his own motto, much to Rayleigh's delight.

With her cappuccino in hand and the possibility of releasing some of her tensions on a willing victim, Hancock looked far more chipper while Robin went back to her book, drinking her coffee. Her **real** coffee. Powerful, dark and bitter, just as nature intended.

As she did, Robin reflected that Hancock might be the one to be going through love time withdrawal, but she had also been suffering. They'd attempted to share a bed together the first two nights after Luffy and Vivi had left, but it just hadn't worked. Both of them were prone to fits and starts in the night, old memories coming to the fore when their conscious mind could not defend them.

Even sleeping on my own last night was not nearly as pleasant. Admittedly, I have the time leading up to the battle around Impel Down to fall back on. Hancock doesn't even have

that. It is almost scary how easy it is to get used to the simple pleasure that sleeping next to someone you trust completely gives you.

The idea of rejoining Hancock in her bed came to Robin but was instantly discarded. *I'd rather not have to deal with a bruised eye or sore thigh again, thank you.* While the two of them had occasionally had some romantic moments over the past few days, at night was another matter entirely. Despite their growing affection for one another, set aside from their love for Luffy, neither woman could control how they acted once asleep, and it had proven quite painful.

With her afternoon itinerary now set, Hancock looked around at the others, including her sisters, giving them a faint smile, showing she was feeling more normal now. "I'm going to be heading out with Franky to the Den Den Mushi farm shortly. Are there any problems or issues with the day's plans for the rest of you? Sanji, I know that Zoro training with me leaves you free."

Normally, it would have been Zoro, as first mate of the Straw Hats, who would be planning out the group's training and everything but also not only was Hancock more experienced, she was also the island's ruler and had been left in charge by Luffy. As such, she had been the one to come up with everyone's daily regimen, with Rayleigh helping along with Shakky.

"Actually, there is," Laki interjected, holding up her hand before pausing momentarily to finish chewing, for commenting on it, unable to stop herself. "Sanji, seriously! Your food is amazing. You gotta stop spoiling us."

"Never!" Sanji twirled around in the place a few times before bowing grandly towards her, pulling away from the headbutting contest he'd been having with Chopper, causing the Zoan to stumble. "Ladies such as you and all the others who live upon this island must be treated with the utmost attention to your every culinary whim, or I cannot call myself a chef."

"Speaking of cooking, what's been going on with you, Marguerite and Aphelandra? Before a few days ago, the two of them were always following you around, demanding you share your cooking secrets and everything, right?" Chopper questioned, looking over at the cook. He hadn't picked up on the fact that there was more going on between the two Kujas and Sanji before this. As a reindeer, he didn't really have a good handle on human interactions and didn't care to. Yet he had noticed Sanji was a little depressed the day before. "Only, now, when they see you, they run away."

Gloriosa bit her lip, knowing precisely what that was about. For his part, Sanji seemed to crumble into dust for a moment, the mound of dust mumbling about Marguerite-chwan too low for any of the others to hear, while nearby, Makino snickered.

Deciding to save the chef from even more embarrassment that morning, the oldest member of the Straw Hats spoke up. "Let's just say that they've received certain information

about the reproductive process between a man and a woman that they didn't exactly enjoy learning, Chopper."

"Oh?" Chopper blinked, then nodded. "OHHH! I see. Well, whatever. It was just confusing me. I suppose there are downsides to human mating rituals and so forth."

"You don't have any interest in that direction yourself?" Brook inquired, looking as if he would be cocking an eyebrow if he had any.

"Not at all. You're all just hairless apes to me." Chopper shrugged. "And at the same time, regular deer don't interest me either. Nor would they be interested in me. Regular reindeer are too dumb to do anything for me, and they'd see me as a freak."

He looked a little depressed for a moment, so much so that Marigold, who would rather take a liking to the little creature, patted him gently on the head. "There, there. Don't worry about it, Chopper. There might be a woman out there somewhere for you. After all, someone like Zoro got a girlfriend, so nothing's impossible."

"OY!" Zoro growled, causing laughter to abound around the mixed crowd.

OOOOOOO

On top of an ancient elephant, whose body was the size of a rather sizable island and whose legs were so long even the portion sticking out of the ocean was far, far taller than even Drum Island's mountains, there was a large city. There, a people called the Mink lived. They were not normal humans. Instead, the Mink were a bestial race, who looked as if they were all Zoans stuck in their hybrid forms, although there was no Devil Fruit involved. They were instead a completely separate species from humanity, much like fishmen. Even if, in many ways, their body shapes were extremely similar, more so in the women than the men, again like mermaids and fishmen.

There, a young, extremely pretty-looking woman with reindeer-like features sneezed. The doctor who was looking over her broken arm, who looked much like an ancient goat, blinked, staring over the cast up to her face. "Are you getting sick, my dear?"

The younger girl shook her head. "No sir, it must have been a bit of dust."

The doctor nodded, and turned back to his work, while the young girl frowned, turning to look out a window. *Why do I think someone is talking about me?*

OOOOOOO

On Amazon Lily, Chopper laughed, shaking her head. "I don't think so. But it isn't that big of a deal. A lot of reindeer don't find mates, after all. It's just not that important a thing in our lives."

"Anyway, you were saying something, Laki?" Hancock asked, dragging the conversation back on point.

Laki nodded, gesturing to Makino. "I think I'm to the point where we can use Soru on command. Instead of sparring and sharpshooting training, could Makino and I concentrate entirely on that kind of training today?"

"Laki's also developing a new kind of gun for herself, and I think she and Franky need to talk about it tonight," Makino interjected, causing Laki to pout at being outed before she wanted to be.

"OW, suuuuper! Laki's ideas on guns are always interesting. She's helped me a lot in the design of the Super Franky Big Artillery Cannons," Franky enthused, having kept pretty quiet up to this point. He had enough experience from living with Kiwi and Mozu to know when silence was the best defense. "For my part, I'd like to spend most of my time sparring after we get done at the Den Den Mushi farm, nee-chan. You all've had me running ragged on various projects and I haven't had any time of my own to train. No way do I want to fall behind!"

Hancock scowled a little, leaning back in her chair, but a sip from her cappuccino seemed to help settle her down again. At least she didn't seem to be in any mood to turn them all into stone, as she had the morning prior... or the evening prior. Or the morning before that. Or the afternoon of the same day. Or after returning from her training. There was a reason why everyone, bar Zoro anyway, was walking on tenterhooks around her.

"You're certain we don't have enough material on hand for you to start building my new flagship? You brought that up last night, but..."

"Positive," Franky said firmly. "The plans are done, and we've cleared enough dry dock space for the ship. But we just don't have enough material on hand to really start, not even to put down the keel. We need copper for the coppering and guns, and we need the Adam Wood."

At first, Franky had wondered about maybe going for a full metal ship design, much like what he had seen in some of the books from the Rainbow Mist that Luffy and the others shared with him. However, that just wasn't a viable option. Not only would it be difficult logistics-wise in the future to repair such a ship, but it was literally impossible for Amazon Lily to build such right now. So they decided to go with a wooden ship design, yet the Kujas had no access to Adam Wood. And it was the special properties of Adam Wood, the toughness, the durability, which allowed the Everlasting Resolve to be shaped as it was, to cut through the waves like a dagger, and to reach the speeds that it could.

“Don’t worry about that. Rayleigh will come through for you on that score and on the iron and copper issue,” Shakuyaku said, speaking up for the first time at the meal. She was normally silent during the mornings, not because she was scared of Hancock, but because not only was Shabby a woman who preferred to watch and listen rather than speak, she was very much not a morning person, even with sufficient amounts of coffee to drown an individual on hand. “It will take him a bit to organize everything to arrive in the archipelago, but he will do it. After that, transporting it back here will be tougher but still doable.”

“Very well. If that’s the case, I don’t see any problem with accepting your request,” Hancock stated magnanimously, staring down her nose at Franky so Hard she was actually looking up at the sky. “Marigold, do you think you can work with Franky?”

“A chance to beat up on the man who gave us so much trouble on Thriller Bark? How could I pass that up?” Marigold snorted.

“OW, though you may be a super babe, don’t expect me to go easy on you!”

As the two of them began to bicker, Sandersonia transformed into her half-snake form, slithering around Nami and Chopper, lifting them out of their chairs gently and then squeezing them lightly. “In that case, the two of you are mine today for training. We’ll get you to using Kami-E and Soru without even thinking about it soon enough, Nami. And you, Chopper, that new form you’ve been developing definitely has some promise.”

At that point, the meal began to break up, but before they could fully break away, the Den Den Mushi set to one side of the balcony went off. Sanji, who was nearest, lunged forward, eager to talk to Vivi-chwan even if he had to deal with his idiotic captain, only for a hand to appear beside it, tossing the Den Den Mushi over his head toward Robin. The archaeologist/information officer caught it and smiled as she spoke into the pickup. “This is Amazon Lily. Luffy, Vivi?”

“Ahaha, I am afraid not, Robin,” Jinbe’s deep voice intoned from the speaker. “I have arrived on Mermaid Island, and I have a request to pass along. The King wishes to speak to Luffy in person before agreeing to use his flag to protect the island.”

OOOOOOO

On the second night out from the Calm Belt, Nefertari Vivi awoke, pleasantly surprised that all her... aches from the vigorous night on the sandbank were gone. Yawning, she began to stretch, turning to look out the cockpit of the small vessel, shaking her head slightly.

After leaving that little island they’d found near the Calm Belt the weather had, as weather was wont to do on the Grand Line, changed dramatically. That had been two days ago, and they had seen a lot of rain and a lot of waves since. The speed of the ship and its excessively pointy nature had allowed them to cut through those waves, but the speed and the waves

combined to create the effect of a low-level roller coaster. *Just without turning upside down or going backward.*

“Mmmm... I’ll say it again, I give thanks to the goddess Bastet that apparently my Suna Suna no Mi means I don’t get stomachaches. This kind of constant up-and-down, side-to-side motion would have me throwing up despite my time sailing around with Baroque Works and our crew,” she said aloud, causing Luffy to smile.

“Bastet? What kind of goddess is that?” Oddly, it sounded familiar to Luffy, and he wondered where the heck he had learned of it, in this life or his previous one. *That’d be a very odd bit of information to have come my way in this life though, considering the whole raised by bandits and Makino thing.*

Luffy did not consider what Garp did with Luffy actually helping to raise him, hence his lack of mention in that thought.

“An ancient goddess of my people, specifically devoted to cats, young children, general health and curiosities, or rather mysteries. Although there are some hints that other goddesses were consumed by her, such as Isis and Heka, sometime before the creation of the World Government,” Vivi explained as she sloughed off the chair in her sand form to stand in the open area beyond. She did not reform her legs, knowing that the up-and-down motion of the ship would cause her to lose her footing quite quickly. Instead, Vivi remained as a sand pillar from the waist down, even as her hands moved to Luffy’s shoulders and neck, kneading them slowly.

“MMM.... Sounds like a goddess version of Nami,” Luffy chuckled, before leaning slightly back into her touch. “Mmm...that feels good. Heh, just like on the Everlasting Resolve, I think Franky needs to rethink the whole one interaction point thing. Even with my lower body, you know, like this.” Luffy gestured to his lower body where his legs were only the barest mention of physicality, rather empty lightning from the waist down, much like Vivi was at present with her sand. “It still annoys me to just sit here for so long. Frankly, we might want to think of another way to get back to Amazon Lily. This is taking too long and I’m getting bored.”

“Oh, isn’t that the most horrifying thing I’ve ever heard,” Vivi quipped before leaning down and nibbling at the back of Luffy’s neck up to his ear. “Mmmm... or should I take it as a challenge?” With that, she then moved around to his mouth, kissing Luffy ardently. Another thing about being logia was that after changing into their forms, any kind of bad breath went away, too. Germs and diseases could not survive the shift from purely mortal flesh to elemental being.

And, as Vivi had hoped, it had even helped with the various pains that Vivi had been dealing with the morning after their night of lovemaking. She’d woken up sore and with bits throbbing in a very uncomfortable manner, but after transforming, hadn’t felt anything. She didn’t even need to transform back to her human body to let her soreness heal the natural way.

She simply kept her lower half as sand for a day, and the next day, her bits weren't nearly as sore after she transformed her lower body back to normal.

Luffy leaned into the kiss for a few moments before pulling back, his attention diverting as the weather around them changed from rain to hail. The pitter-patter of the hail on the glass canopy was a nice little sound for the first few moments, but then it just became annoying. "Yeah, well, with me stuck in this chair like this, the two of us can't exactly do anything that would take my attention away from what I'm doing too much, you know?"

Nefertiti chortled wickedly as she pressed herself into the back of the chair, her arms going around Luffy's middle. There, they slid up and down his hard chest, reveling in the muscles that practically rippled under her touch. "Well, just think of it as a down payment for the next time we find a little island for ourselves."

"Ugh, now you're acting like Robin," Luffy mock lamented. "Where did the innocent little princess go?"

"You slew her with your mighty 'spear'," Vivi quipped as she pulled away, giggling as Luffy burst out into laughter at her quip. She would never have felt comfortable making that kind of statement around anyone else, but being alone with Luffy here in their personal ship had been remarkably freeing from the start. Now, however, her stomach was growling at her. While she couldn't get seasick or anything similar, Vivi was still human, and she required daily sustenance.

She moved to the tiny kitchenette at the back of the open area, putting together a small breakfast for herself and Luffy quickly, a stew of some kind that had been specially prepared by Sanji. "Honestly, Sanji is something of a miracle worker! All of these ready-made prepared meals and all of them still able to be eaten."

"You've mentioned that to him every time we've called home, and he's there. Heh, he's probably still noodling around somewhere, thanks to the last time you brought it up," Luffy agreed, unaware of the darkness that now infested Sanji's life back on Amazon Lily. Which, if put into words, would be a perfect example of the phrase, 'water water everywhere, and not a bit to drink'. "Still, you have a point. This voyage would be way less pleasant if one of us had to cook."

"Ouch." Vivi held a hand to her chest as if Luffy had just dealt her a mortal wound. "Remember, I'm a princess. I learned politics, mathematics and the art of the deal. Then, when I was part of Baroque Works, I never needed to cook for myself or learn how. So I'm sorry if I'm not exactly all that handy around the place."

"Now, now, you know I didn't mean it like that," Luffy snorted, chuckling.

Vivi soon joined him again, handing Luffy over the small meal, with Vivi growing two extra arms, which reached over to grab the wheel in their sand-grip to let Luffy eat. While Luffy could have done the same, his lightning hands would have damaged the steering wheel, and the two of them had done this maneuver several times over the past few days. Luffy leaned over and gave Vivi a kiss on the cheek, then turned to his food, staring out into the canopy for a moment as the hail continued to come down. "I don't suppose you know if there's any winter island near your kingdom?"

"The exact opposite, I'm afraid. None of the islands that Alabasta links to directly on either of the routes we're on through the Grand Line are winter islands. Autumn, summer and the spring island of Ruluka. There is one winter island, two stops beyond on one of the two routes, but I couldn't tell you anything about it, I'm afraid," Vivi answered with a shrug.

The two of them fell silent for a few moments, concentrating on their food. Then, after Vivi took the containers of food back to the kitchen and cleaned them out before putting them away, the pair called Amazon Lily.

Initially, the thought had been to call home only once every other evening, but it'd been decided by the crew back on Amazon Lily that calling in the mornings would allow for Luffy and Vivi to check in with the crew while the nighttime call would be for the group of lovers alone.

This had turned out to be a wonderful idea in a few ways. It kept everyone abreast of everything. It gave Luffy some romance time, if secondhand, with Hancock and Robin. It also allowed him time to interact occasionally one-on-one with whoever answered the call that day before he or she called in the rest of the crew.

This was particularly good in the case of Brook. Luffy and Brook hadn't actually spent all that much time together since the battles on Thriller Bark, and at what time they had, they had been around both the rest of the crew and most of the Kuja with Hancock. These talks with Brook gave Luffy more of an idea about not only his personality, which Luffy already had a good grasp of, but his combat skills and where he wanted to take them, which he hadn't had even with the time they'd spent together undercover on Gion's ship.

Because of this, even with Rayleigh having left the island, Brook was training more with many of the other Kujas in dodging and balance training than he was with Zoro and the others in terms of sparring. Brook was a speed-type sword user, and there was only so much he could learn when sparring against a strength-type sword user like Zoro. It was still good for both of them, but it wasn't the best use of their time, especially considering the simple gap in their skills.

On the other hand, Vivi had learned that her captain could not hold a tune in his male body. The one time that Brook and Luffy had woken her up by singing Binks' Sake had been more amusing and painful than endearing, considering Luffy's voice. She had joined in

regardless, and the three of them had had a grand old time singing that song and others for more than an hour.

For her part, Vivi enjoyed talking more with Nami, Laki and Perona during this amount of time. The pinkette wasn't normally around. She was settling into Amazon Lily, partaking of a few strange rights that the locals had for when a woman from another island wanted to join them for whatever reason. Yet she was a font of fashion sense, and Nami and Laki were always nice to talk to. The plans going forward with their training at the moment pushed both of them hard, and the time they spent talking with Luffy and Vivi was occasionally the only free time they had that day.

Today, it was Chopper who answered the Den Den Mushi, with the first words out of his mouth being, "Help me! The little girls here keep on trying to kidnap me, and it's taking away from my training time!"

They talked to Chopper for a few hours, during which time the ship continued on its way, zooming through the wind and waves, bouncing and jostling in a way that would've set even the most stone-stomached individual to becoming sick without their logia-given abilities. However, gradually, it became a little chilly inside the ship. Feeling that, Vivi stood up from her chair, moved back and grabbed another blanket for herself before making two cups of hot chocolate.

Vivi handed one to Luffy, who thanked her gratefully, switching it to his other hand, as Vivi, once she was settled in under the covers, did the same. With two of her arms once more holding the steering wheel, they were able to hold hands as they drank their hot chocolate, staring out into the stormy sky above as snow began to fall.

However, moments after finishing up his hot chocolate, Luffy took a look to one side, and pointed. "We're approaching a winter island, look."

Vivi did so, nodding thoughtfully. In the distance, a wide swath of cloud had appeared out of the ocean, the first sight of any island. "Do you want to stop?"

"Yeah, I'd love a chance to stretch my legs or even to have physical ones for a bit," Luffy snorted.

When Vivi agreed, Luffy instantly changed course towards the mound in the distance, which did indeed turn out to be an island. It wasn't like Drum Island, where most of the shoreline was a rocky cliff. First, it was far smaller. Luffy could see where the edge of the island curved out of sight, back away from them in a way he wouldn't have been able to on Drum Island from this close. This place also seemed to be dominated by hills and giant trees of a kind that Luffy hadn't seen before. The leaves definitely looked like pine, but the tree trunks reminded him more of a picture of some weird tree from Africa that apparently grew in swamps, with hundreds of thousands of large roots going everywhere.

From where they were sailing, Luffy could see that several houses had been built underneath a number of those trees, using the root structures as either roofs or walls. There were enough of them to make what looked like a small town or village underneath the eaves. Lights showed out from within most of them, but neither Luffy nor Vivi saw anyone out and about. Several small docks jutted out into the ocean, with several to the left side of the island and more directly facing the duo as their ship closed.

A few other vessels were already docked there, but only one of them had a light on at present, shining from its main deck. The others looked to be battened down, despite it being midafternoon, which might have to do with the amount of freshly fallen snow everywhere. It looked as if a major snowstorm had just ended.

"Hmm... This matches the brief description I know of that island I told you about. We might be within a few more days of Alabasta!" Vivi exclaimed as Luffy gently nudged the ship against the dock area.

"That's good, although ya didn't actually share that description with me," Luffy teased, causing Vivi to pout at her forgetfulness. "Although, I definitely think we'll need to think of another, faster way to get back to Amazon Lily."

"That's fine, although I really do like this ship." So saying, Vivi leaned over to give Luffy a kiss, showing precisely why she liked it. A moment later, she turned to push the canopy open, hopping out and tying the ship down.

Luffy followed her ashore a moment later, stretching ecstatically, listening to his bones groan in a way that no martial artist's bones ever should. "Oof, that feels good!" He smiled down at Vivi, pulling her into a sideways hug for a second, noting absently that he could see movement inside the town now. People were coming out and starting to dig themselves out. "Do you want to go exploring a bit?"

"That would be nice. We could maybe get some snacks or something to add to our stores," Vivi suggested. Unlike Luffy, she had thrown on a winter coat, which covered her from neck down to her ankles. Like most of her clothing, it had come from Amazon Lily, but it was not only warm and comfortable, it was also modest. Something which few things the Kujas had made for her could be said about.

Luffy nodded then paused, frowning as he stared for a second at another ship that was docked there. It looked like it had seen better days. A steamship, one of the covers over the paddlewheel facing them was missing, its sides looked like they had been hit in several places by cannon fire, and a fire had burnt much of the prow area of the ship, although it hadn't done any serious damage. The ship's smokestack also looked damaged, but only a little bit and the ship still seemed to have all its cannons poking out of their portholes, at least on the starboard side, which was the side facing the pair of pirates.

All of this damage aside was the fact that large segments of the ship had recently been repainted and that it was flying no ensign. "That ship... It looks almost like a Marine steam galley." His eyes narrowed as he stared at the ship, just as the watchman aboard the ship became aware of them.

He stared, and Luffy stared back. The man's coif was roughly disheveled; he had bags under his eyes and a very un-marine-like stubble, but Luffy still recognized him. "Fullbody? What the hell are you doing---"

"AGGHH!" The man yelled, stumbling away from the gunwale and falling onto his rear before scrambling backward on all fours, shouting, "Captain! Trouble! Pirates! Straw Hat!"

"No freaking way..." Luffy hissed, a realization hitting him. *If Fullbody's here, then...* Lightning began to arc out from his eyes as he momentarily lost control of his anger before stamping it down. With a scowl, he marched along the quay and then around towards the ship, taking his time to allow Fullbody's captain to gain the deck, Vivi following after.

Hina rushed up from below decks, barely taking time to throw on her winter coat and was soon standing where Fullbody had been a second ago, staring down at Luffy. "Straw Hat? What in the world are you doing here?"

"I was gonna ask you the same question, only louder," Luffy growled, taking in Hina's looks for a moment, noting she looked about as ragged as Fullbody. Her hair was all over the place, she didn't look to be wearing her uniform even under her winter coat, and she had no makeup on, something he had only seen right after she woke up on his ship following the Knock Up Stream and her own ship sinking. She might have been getting more sleep than Fullbody, but she also looked to be dealing with an actual wound, a burn on the side of her face that looked to travel down below her jacket's neckline.

Fighting back an old urge to ask if Hina was alright, Luffy kept on glaring, while behind him, Vivi looked on, frowning in puzzlement herself. *Be nice after, get apology now*, Luffy reminded himself, not wanting to fall into old habits and just forgive Hina for selling out his crew as she had.

Vivi had heard about how the pinkette had joined forces with the Straw Hats in the desert kingdom, admittedly in more detail from Luffy recently than any of the others and then had turned around and handed over all that she knew about them to her superiors. Which had led to a lot of issues. *I can understand Luffy's anger, but given how ragged she looks, I can already guess what's happened.*

In turn, Hina noticed Vivi nodding her head at the younger girl. "Princess." It didn't take a genius to understand why the two of them would be in these waters, nor did it take a particular genius to understand why Luffy was looking so wrathful. *Thankfully, he's got enough self-control to not just lash out at me*, Hina thought ruefully.

Actually, Luffy's lack of aggressive action had little to do with self-control. In this world or the last, Luffy/Ranma wasn't the sort to hate easily or attack right away. Hina's betrayal hurt a lot, yes, but he wasn't going to just turn her and her ship into so much burnt kindling right off the bat.

Deciding there was no point in beating around the bush, Hina began, hoping to take the wind out of Luffy's sails before he could start attacking her in turn. "Luffy, Hina is sorry."

This blunt statement worked to a certain extent. Luffy blinked, crossing his arms as he stared up at her, no longer radiating violence but quite a bit of anger still. Indeed, a large part of him now was willing to forgive, if not forget just from Hina's apology alone and the overall ratty look of the pinkette and her ship.

The rest of Luffy, though, had a decisive majority, and felt he still needed to take Hina to task. "For what, exactly? For basically telling the World Government all they needed to know in order to sick not one but three Shichibukai on us? For telling them enough that they thought that initiating a Buster Call on Water 7 was a good idea!?"

Honestly, the Buster Call hadn't been that dangerous of a threat, or wouldn't have, if the whole crew had been together. Without Sanji to help them, it had been very bad indeed for Zoro, Chopper and Robin. As for the triple Shichibukai action, that was the definition of bad. It was only because Moria had been a fool and Luffy had Goro Goro no Mi which allowed them to get through without losses.

The memory of Chopper's missing eye and the horrible wounds Zoro had taken pushed Luffy on. "You could have lied, could've told them that part of our alliance was that you keep our secrets."

"That would only have gotten me tortured for the information. Also, recall Hina did keep one secret, one secret you used to invade Impel Down," Hina pointed out, shaking her head.

Luffy paused, then nodded, his anger further receding. "Alright, I'll give ya that, but damn it, Thriller Bark was bad, Hina and that's all on you! Nami, Laki, Franky, Chopper, Robin and even Sanji could all have died against Moria's crew and Kuma!"

Robin's death had been a reoccurring nightmare that had appeared a few nights after the crew left Thriller Bark: either Kuma or Moria smashing Robin's statue where Luffy had hidden it away, killing her instantly. It was a horrifying thought to Luffy: to die alone, paralyzed and unable to do anything to save yourself. Thankfully, Robin reported she had no recollection of being frozen like that, and because of her and his crew, Luffy got over it quickly.

"I swore an oath to the Marines. That oath made me give my superiors, a full board of inquiry, as much information as I could that was not related to your redheaded secret. But Hina did not have anything to do with the planning of the Buster Call or the ambush on Thriller Bark."

Admittedly, Hina had been forced to captain the ship Tsuru took to meet Hancock. Yet she hadn't given Hancock any information during that meeting than she had already written out. "Hina will apologize for what befell your crew after we parted ways due to her fulfilling her oath. Hina remorseful. Yet she will not apologize for things outside of her control."

Reaching forward, Vivi laid a gentle hand on Luffy's shoulder. "Luffy, she did keep your little feminine issue a secret. Without that... well... it seems as if Hina's higher-ups knew she had kept it a secret to boot." Vivi turned her gaze up to Hina on her ship's main deck.

Luffy nodded. "Vivi's right, it doesn't look like you lot are Marines any longer. Did the World Government decide they needed another scapegoat other than my grandfather, me, Jinbe and Whitebeard?"

"Even setting aside your aquatranssexual secret, Hina was certain that the moment you used the lightning fruit, her life would be forfeit along with that of her crew. Hina then decided that her oath did not demand that she die a martyr's death," Hina answered firmly. "Hina decided that her duty to her crew superseded Hina's oaths to the World Government."

Slowly, Luffy nodded, his shoulders sagging a bit as the last vestige of anger left him. "I can understand that."

Even setting aside the fact that Hina hadn't shared Luffy's curse with her superiors, Luffy, or rather, Ranma, was no stranger to oaths and what they could make someone do. More than a month had also passed since that initial moment of betrayal. It had stung like blazes at the time and still had weeks later despite knowing it was coming. But now, knowing that part of why Hina had been forced on the run was because she had not shared his primary secret that erased the last of his anger towards her.

"I...okay. I can't say I would ever put my oath to the government or anything else over friends, but I understood why you did it from the start, just as I knew ya were trying to keep some distance between us. We... I don't think I'm gonna offer you an alliance, let alone a place with my crew. Even if the World Government is looking to kill you for not telling them about my lightning fruit or curse, that'd be a step to far. But we can start at zero for now."

Hina nodded wordlessly, and Luffy nodded back, mentally remarking, *Funny ta think about it, but if Hina had become all teary-eyed at any point during this confrontation, I probably would've been much nicer to her. Hell, I might have offered her a place on my crew.* Despite the experience of two lifetimes behind him, Luffy was still extremely susceptible to feminine tears, regardless of their source. *Thank goodness I didn't, though. I don't think Nami, Laki or even Zoro would be so happy about forgivin' and forgettin' in this case.*

"What are your plans going forward?" Vivi asked now that the hard discussion was over. "And however did you get to this island?"

"Hina kept several Eternal Poses from her time as a Commodore in these waters," Hina admitted, shrugging her shoulders. "Hina felt that this island in particular, where she had never been called to or stepped foot on previously would make for a good start of her and her crew's journey going forward."

The pinkette looked as if she had swallowed a particularly sour lemon, her face scrunched up in distaste. "We are... currently debating amongst ourselves whether or not to split up or to, to become pirates ourselves. Hina disgusted. Present company excluded, of course."

"Hmmm... Actually, I think that you might not have to," Vivi hummed thoughtfully, trying to recall how large an area that Hina and her squadron had patrolled. *At least four islands in every direction around the Marine base on Port Iris, which included Alabasta, I think.* She glanced sideways at Luffy, who was giving her a look that implied he might already be following some of what she was thinking. "Tell me, do you have a Den Den Mushi?"

"No. Government issued Den Den Mushi can occasionally be tracked, and so we deposited ours overboard at the first island we stopped at. We have some money here, and might be able to purchase another one, however. Why? Hina curious," Hina wondered.

"Do so, and maybe make your way towards Alabasta. I can't speak for my father and everything, but he might be willing to hire you on as members of the royal army or the shore defense force," Vivi said, looking over to Luffy.

Luffy scowled a little, but as Vivi had supposed, he had seen that idea coming and simply shrugged his shoulders. "I, don't have a problem with that. Honestly, since she knows the Rokushiki, she could be a major help there, training your army to use 'em. If she can teach them to even a few hundred, that's be something, to say nothing about Haki. Just because I'm not ready to offer her a place on the crew doesn't mean I've forgotten how strong Hina is."

Fullbody and Hina looked at one another, and Hina slowly nodded, fighting back an urge to smile at someone like Luffy calling her strong. "Well, that's a thought. I will think about your offer, Princess. After myself and my crew vote on what to do anyway. Hina uncertain. This is the first island we've come to since leaving the battle they didn't have a Marine presence on it, and it gives us options."

"So it does." With that, Vivi felt the conversation had reached a natural conclusion. "I hope to hear about you and your men defending Alabasta." With that, she turned to follow Luffy back down the quay.

Behind them, Hina looked on, then shook her head, turning to look at her crew, all of whom had come up onto the main deck by this point, gesturing down into the ship. "Come. Tomorrow morning we will have our votes, and it will include a third option now. But at the moment, Hina wants to get a little more sleep before we decide our course going forward."

As for the two pirates, Luffy sighed, seeing a few of the locals now moving around in the towns underneath the large trees, having probably seen their ship the moment they had finished clearing enough of the snow to see the port. "Well, I still want to stretch my legs. What about you? Are you up for a little bit of exploring?" Luffy grinned like a child as an idea occurred to her, putting the confrontation with Hina behind her with an abruptness that was pure Ranma. "Maybe a snowball fight?"

"So long as we're not identified, I think we'll be fine with anything," Vivi agreed, pulling her hood further down her head to hide her face as she went along with the strange conversation change. *Isn't it just like Luffy to want to move past an awkward conversation as quickly as possible?* "Which means you need to do something about your face, Luffy. Unless we want it known that we're traveling back to Alabasta."

This was why, when the locals finally got out to her, that they found themselves talking to a red-haired girl dressed in warm climate clothing and a bluenette rather than a man and a woman. Regardless, Vivi found herself recognized despite her hood. "Princess Vivi!?"

Blinking, Vivi frowned. "Um, yes. If this is a prelude to you shouting about my bounty or anything, however, I would recommend not doing so. I'm not defenseless, nor is my companion."

"Oh!" the man who had spoken up stammered for a second, before shaking his head. "Er. No. Um, I'm Mayor Richtof, and I wouldn't believe the daughter of Cobra would become a simple pirate unless he himself admits it to me. We here on Snow Zen owe the Nefertari line a lot for help in the past. Um, I was going to ask yo both to pay the docking fee, but as it is—"

"We'll pay it," the redhead stated firmly, reaching into her ki-expanded pocket. "We don't want to be the sort of pirates who take advantage of people, even in little ways like that, not unless food's involved anyway. Or booze if Zoro's around."

Rolling her eyes at that, Vivi smiled and let the locals lead them off, happy to have yet another sign that they were close to Alabasta. Luffy followed after, shrugging. *The snowball fight can wait for a bit.*

OOOOOOO

A few days after Luffy's awkward confrontation with Hina, the newest member of the Gorosei, Figarland Garling, was helping his fellows deal with some unpalatable truths. He was a Tenryubito, of course, one of the highest pedigree, who could, like every other Tenryubito, including the other four Gorosei, trace his lineage to one of the nineteen royal families who joined with Imu to create the World Government.

Like Marcus Mars, Figarland was a tall, well-built man of advanced age, with a visibly wrinkled face and an aquiline nose showing his regal heritage. Unlike most of the others, he still

had color to his hair, a pale-blond, which he styled into a pair of side-facing spikes left and right on his head together with the crescent shaped one going forward from his forehead. Similarly, his long large beard, itself linked to his mustaches, was formed into a large spike below his chin, making his hair look like a mix between a star and a crescent moon.

Yet, even the Gorosei could not simply command the world to be as they wished, no matter how much they, or their master, wished they could. So long as free will existed, that would be a fact they would need to deal with, regardless of how they tried to stamp it out.

A case in point was that, despite the best efforts of the World Government to cover things up, the fact that the marine's upper ranks were so badly mauled in the war against Whitebeard had begun to become apparent to all of the other powers in the world, as had the moves made at the same time as that conflict by the Revolutionaries.

Some of the moves that Aokiji had made had prevented the situation from getting worse. Only one other island in West Blue had gone over to the Revolutionaries successfully. Five other attempted revolutions had been crushed. With local, allied governments stepping up to patrol the sea lanes, the marine's consolidation in the Grand Line and the entrances to it had cut down on the number of new pirate groups and had slowed down the advance of Big Mom's attempted expansion, although not without further losses in the form of the last of the Giant Squad and two more Vice Admirals, lost in battle against Katakuri and Smoothie of the Big Mom's Crew.

There were also small wars popping up in East, North and South Blue as local allied governments decided to take this opportunity to expand their power. Still, the World Government did not have a problem with that, so long as they only expanded such power on the backs of non-allied countries... or those who were too weak for whatever reason to actually matter to the World Government or the Levely.

Some of the moves Gorosei had set in motion had already begun to bore fruit. Two of the islands that the Revolutionary Army under Dragon had claimed had been retaken by the newest Shichibukai, Chinjao and his fleet. All for the prize of the title and three Devil Fruits, all Paramecia types.

More Pacifistas and K9Ms were beginning to be distributed across the New World and into Paradise thanks to the previously established factories on Marineford. Not enough, yet, to make up the Marine's losses, but enough to help them stabilize their lines, particularly their logistics.

However, other real crises were going on. For one thing, far too many islands were reporting that the World Government story about Whitebeard's War was not being believed by the majority of the civilian populace. That would undoubtedly cause headaches down the line, particularly in dealing with the Lightning King Luffy, who a lot of people the world over were blaming for far too much of what had gone wrong against Newgate.

That was the truth, of course. Yet the public didn't need to know the truth. The public needed to believe what the Gorosei told them. The stability of the world demanded it.

Worse, though, was the news that Topman had just shared. Marine recruitment had plummeted, and worse, a significant portion of the marine's latest crop of recruits had walked away. Thousands of regular sailors had attempted to hand in their resignation, and numerous captains, commodores and even two rear admirals had tried to do the same, only for Aokiji to not accept them, instead instituting a new stop-loss measure to keep them in uniform until they could be replaced. Which, given recruitment having plummeted so much, wasn't going to happen any time soon.

"We severely underestimated how Garp's betrayal would seem to the ignorant masses," Topman finished his report, his massive mustache twitching in a mix of wry understanding and fury. "Especially among the common marines. The majority of Vice Admirals remaining didn't see him through the same rose-colored lenses as the lesser ranks, but there, he was revered as The Marine, the example they all wanted to live up to. Symbols like that, well, I don't have to explain how powerful they are."

"Jack is still showing up randomly to attack some of our allied islands and the islands belonging to Whitebeard. He fought some of their allied forces, and we know he wiped out at least the Maelstrom Spider Pirates and two other crews before disappearing out into the ocean again. If that was suppose to serve some purpose, such as pulling the Whitebeard crew back from their assault on Dressrosa, it failed. Marco and Ace have apparently both decided on vengeance rather than simply protecting what they have," Marcus Mars huffed. "There are also signs that Red Hair is on the move, although Big Mom seems satisfied with her recent smash-and-grab after some of her forces were turned back. And we have a report of Kaido and King themselves being on the move, but we have no idea where they have gone."

"As for Paradise and nearer the Red Line in the New World, Aokiji's efforts have borne more fruit there," the man with the longest beard among them continued thoughtfully.

"Scratchman Apoo's crew was nearly wiped out recently, although the captain himself escaped. Trafalgar Law's oddly advanced submersible was nearly sunk, although that was from conflict with the Big Mom crew. Several other pirate groups have been captured or executed, and recently, Eustass Kid was reported slain in a battle with Magellan. Say what you will about how passive he seems to be on the surface. Aokiji's plan to play a defensive war has borne some fruit against the pirate scum, if not the Revolutionary Army."

"Is he still arguing against using Marine resources to oust the Revolutionaries from the remaining islands they conquered?" Ethanbaron grumbled, directing his question to Topman.

None of the Gorosei would ever use the word 'liberate' to describe what the Revolutionary Army had accomplished on any island, regardless of how accurate it might be to

the common person. That word was a dirty word in their lexicon at the best of times and would never be used to describe anything their enemies ever did.

"He is, and like it or not, Aokiji has a point. Kizaru is still in the hospital, and he needs the remaining Vice Admirals in the combined fleets he's created. Any losses they take at that rank would be significant. We just don't have enough commodores or other strong fighters waiting to step into their shoes," Topman grumbled. "I would prefer to be dealing with Akainu, blast it, but Aokiji is who we have at present."

The other three more experienced Gorosei all grumbled at that while Figarland had to nod in agreement. Absolute Justice was a far better, more easily directed philosophy than 'waiting justice' let alone Aokiji's original philosophy. "How many of the Vice Admirals still alive adhere to Absolute Justice? Could we... perhaps think about replacing Aokiji in the near future? Assign him back to the front lines while someone else takes over running the Marines? Surely, he would be better suited in combat."

At Figarland's question, the others all grimaced but it was Topman who answered. "Believe me, if I thought any of the Vice Admirals had the skills and respectability to replace Aokiji, I would do so instantly. He's pushed back at several of our demands and edicts of late and is focusing on maintaining the peace in the territory we control rather than going after pirates. Some pirate crews have even been allowed to escape in favor of others, and the less said about how he argued about the need to maintain security for any of the Tenryubito away from Mary Geoise the better. But they don't, and we can't. It will be at least another six months before enough Pacifistas and K9Ms have been built to let Aokiji have more strategic flexibility."

"We can't wait six months. The Tenryubito are already becoming restless at some of the actions we've had to take when it comes to food and the redistribution of the Tribute, let alone how the slave trade has impacted both the personal slave trade and the intake needed for the industrial and agricultural complex of the Holy Land," Figarland growled. "If this continues, we might even need to miss the Native Hunting Competition this year!"

"And the World Government's power is already being questioned by too many of our allies," Marcus agreed. "It isn't to the point of becoming troublesome yet, but it is a worrisome sign. The pushback Aokiji received from his recent Wartime Requisition Act is a sign of worse to come. We need to show the world that we are still its master, alleviate the rest of our food issue and alleviate our manpower shortage."

Topman scowled, looking over at Figarland. "Your Knights, could they..."

"No," Figarland shut that thought down quickly. "We would be able to perhaps turn the tide on any one island, but my Knights would be incredibly reluctant to become part of something so barbaric as making war on lesser beings like the Revolutionaries. Perhaps I can convince them to do so when we can also send in the K9Ms and Pacifistas. That is the best I can give you."

The others all turned to Jaygarcia, who had been silent up to this point, frowning as he worked over something in front of him. Feeling their eyes on him, the God of Science and Defense shrugged. "I have begun to pressure Vegapunk on producing more of his... Green Goop." He used the term with about as much disdain as a housewife getting rid of a dead mouse before going on. "However, that process is slow and cannot be hurried more than it already is. He has a theory there, but to make it happen, we need to discover a specific Devil Fruit user and copy her Lineage Factor, or Vegapunk will need to create an artificial one that mimics its power. As he has only recreated Zoan types before, the first option is more viable."

The old man with the crooked-seeming back leaned forward, tapping the papers in front of him. "There is another way to not just alleviate but completely solve our manpower shortage. Vinsmoke's cloning technology is even better than that of Vegapunk. And we still have positions among the Shichibukai to offer him."

"There are going to be a lot of internal problems with that idea, and well you know it," Ethanbaron argued back, shaking his head at his fellow Gorosei's plan. "We can sit on Caesar Clown when we recover him. We've already did so to Musshuru with the help of the little explosive device we inserted into his skull when we retrieved him from the island his father had exiled him to. But Vinsmoke is too intelligent to let us try to do something similar to him. His rivalry with Vegapunk, which you should understand better than any of us, would also make him incredibly difficult to work with, even as a Shichibukai."

"Setting aside all that, I do not think that the title of Shichibukai is a big enough carrot to entice Vinsmoke. The Germa 66 are a mercenary army, not pirates." Marcus shook his head. "One with a very specific goal: to reconquer their family's past domain, that of all of North Blue. We can easily afford to hire them, but bringing Germa 66 into the World Government entirely? Vinsmoke might demand too much. We might solve one problem but create a new enemy, a new enemy on the level of a Yonko in North Blue."

"We can at least open up a dialogue with him or gain access to his cloning technology in some fashion," Topman hummed thoughtfully. "Perhaps even with a few living examples of Germa 66's clones, Vegapunk could come up with a way to create similar basic soldiers? The so-called princes would be much harder to recreate, but that could be possible. At this point, I would willingly offer quite a bit more to bolster our position faster than our original five-year estimate."

He looked at his fellows one after another, his tone grim. "Because by that point, I do not know what we will have left in the New World outside of the nearest marine bases to the Red Line. Not with Shanks joining Big Mom and Kaido in making trouble and whatever the Whitebeard Pirates do after killing Doflamingo."

Figarland grimaced at that. Having been read into the secret of Doflamingo Donquixote, he loathed the very idea of someone with the blood of kings slumming it up away with the

riffraff of the lower world. The fact he was there because of his father's action or that Doflamingo was a king was barely compensation for that disgrace in Figarland's mind.

And if we lose all our foothold there, we might find ourselves facing another Gol D. Roger situation. Another pirate finding that which should be lost to history, without any forces nearby to stop it," Topman concluded.

That grim announcement brought silence to the Room of Authority, and all of them stared at one another thoughtfully for several moments.

Into that silence came the sound of running feet, and the Elders all frowned, turning toward the door. One of the tongueless servants moved to the door, holding it open for a messenger. He raced in, carrying a Den Den Mushi, one painted the colors of the Marines, blue and white.

The nearest Gorosei to the door, Figarland, took it, holding it up. "What is it?"

Fleet Admiral Aokiji's drawl came out of the device, sounding quite a bit more harried than he ever had as a mere admiral. "We just got a report from Rear Admiral Zephyr and the Clown Retrieval Team. Kaido is there, in South Blue. He and some of his Tobiroppo. They are currently engaging Zephyr's forces."

Rear Admiral Zephyr had actually been a full admiral at one point. However, after losing his arm, he had been relocated to the academy. Nevertheless, given the recent unpleasantness, he had been called back to active duty, and assigned to a specific mission.

For a moment, none of the Gorosei reacted. Then Saturn's grip on his walking stick shattered the top of it as the others began to scowl in irritation. "HOW?! Why is he there? For Caesar Clown!? How did he know we were going to bring him back under our control?"

"Caesar Clown's location was only known to us because he was the chief supplier of artificial Devil Fruits to the Tenryubito. Who is to say that they were not his only client?" Warcury murmured, frowning thoughtfully. "We should have stepped harder on that trade when it first cropped up, or at the very least, gotten one of our CP0 agents near Caesar Clown so we could shut it down the moment we wanted to."

"Caesar Clown's Devil Fruit makes him a danger even to CP0 agents," Ethanbaron demurred.

While knowing Kenbunshoku and Busoshoku was a necessity to become a CP0 agent, there was a vast difference between being able to coat the outside of your body and protect it from impact and slashing type attacks and the necessary ability to coat your insides in it to protect you from gas. That level of skill with the Busoshoku was insanely difficult to reach.

“Is there any chance of our agents being able to slip away with Clown?” Figarland questioned bluntly. “Or, if he’s already been taken by Kaido, then perhaps waiting until the beast King becomes complacent?”

“Possible, but that could be a matter of months or years.” Marcus scowled.

Topman looked back at the Den Den Mushi and, after some back and forth, scowled even more angrily. Aokiji had already ordered his forces to retreat, unwilling to lose still more officers and sailors on what was obviously a lost cause, and refused to try to reinforce them with any troops nearby. Only Kizaru had any chance against Kaido, and not much of one, particularly injured as he was. Aokiji himself couldn’t travel nearly fast enough to get there in time to make a difference, and the forces nearby would simply die.

With this setback, the debate on Jaygarcia’s proposal ended. After a few glances between one another, consensus was reached. “Reach out to the Vinsmoke, Jaygarcia. We can at least begin negotiations. Whatever Vinsmoke wants, within reason, we will pay.”

So busy were they with this latest disaster that it would be several days before they realized that an even more dangerous dagger to their public persona was being prepared. Prepared in the mind of a young princess who was just then stepping ashore onto her home island once more.

End Chapter

So a lot of WAFF, travel time, and plans, along with still more moving pieces elsewhere. I had wanted a few more scene here, but while one scene is ready to go, it’s supposed to break up the other scene, and that, the Alabastan stuff, isn’t ready. I did not treat certain secrets with the gravity they should be treated. I will correct that. The next chapter will see a return to Amazon Lily and a return to more martial-arts type zaniness as the romance is relegated to second place, followed by another trip, this time on Eve.

Despite this chapter not covering a lot of actual action, I hope you all enjoyed it, and I will see you probably next month, as I’m still in an OP mood.