

Howdy all. I can't draw and am not Japanese.

Soo.... This chapter kind of got away from me. It's huge. The biggest in this story. I hope to change that trend going forward, but GoD some of these scenes just kept growing! That's what happens when you are on a major One Piece trip. Anyway, hope you enjoy it, even if a large portion of the chapter has to do with world building.

Chapter 46: Building Up, Heading Out

Ninja albatrosses were made for one purpose: to go everywhere that a bird could fly and remain undetected, unseen, flying high, high above even the best Kenbunshoku could sense or spyglass could see. Armed with binocular goggles that could heighten their already incredibly good eyesight, ninja albatross had feathers that could shift colors almost like a chameleon's scales would. This let them blend into the sky, although they did have trouble with particularly rainy days. Their feathers also didn't shift quickly from one color to another, meaning it wasn't a perfect system. Despite that, they were immensely useful spies, the eyes and ears of Big News Morgans, ready and able to hunt down any news story, although most of the time, they were only sent to areas where Morgans suspected he could already find one.

Currently, this ninja albatross had been assigned to follow one of its normal brethren on his typical journey to the island of the Kuja. It was hoped that the ninja albatross would be able to see anything going on down there or, if possible, get in contact with the Straw Hat crew if they had retreated to Amazon Lily with their allies after Whitebeard's War had ended. Morgans wanted to have those interviews even more now than when he had learned Luffy and company had survived and somehow befriended the arrogant, standoffish Pirate Empress.

And if Boa Hancock and the Rookie who wasn't one any longer weren't there? Well, the Kuja were mostly hot women, and the World Economic News wasn't the only paper Morgans published. It... wasn't even the one with the widest circulation, really, although it was the one that Morgans was tied to publicly. Porn sold, whatever sea you were in.

Because of that, this particular ninja albatross had been carefully chosen. Well, that and the fact the Ninja Albatross Squad had been somewhat incensed at one of their own being discovered. That just wasn't supposed to happen. So they had decided between them to send someone who could sneak in and, if Straw Hat was there, make contact with him on their terms rather than the human surprising them again.

This ninja albatross was a veteran who had never been discovered, not even by one of the world's greatest Kenbunshoku masters, Charlotte Katakuri. It was well known he had a vast Kenbunshoku range and was so good with the skill he could use it to predict what people would say, let alone what they could do.

Unfortunately, while Luffy wasn't near that level of mastery with Kenbunshoku as Katakuri, he did have far, far more range. That range extended as far upward as around, something Katakuri, who had never been to one of the various sky islands, could say.

As the ninja albatross began the movements of his claws to dial up the zoom function on his binoculars, Luffy had already disappeared into the Umi-Sen-Ken, flashing upwards with a crackle of lightning. Seconds later, Luffy, a grin on his face came out of the technique directly behind the ninja albatross. *Now, will it go for shock and horror or violence?* He mused, reaching forward to tap it on the head.

Even as its heart stopped and the veteran ninja albatross let out a wild squawk of sheer astonishment, the veteran bird ninja was moving. The NAS weren't just trained as spies but to defend themselves as well. Losing altitude as his wings and heart froze, the ninja albatross twisted around, lashing out behind him with several feathers, their edges marked with a metallic edge, showing that they weren't natural feathers at all but rather metal ones that had replaced his original feathers.

Snickering, Luffy stood there in midair, bouncing idly from one foot to the other using Geppo as he let the feathers pass through his upper body in his lightning form, whereupon they instantly began to melt into puddles. While this process didn't kill all their forward momentum, it certainly sent them off in different directions, plummeting down toward the ocean far below. "Nice reaction time, my guy."

This didn't seem to make the intruder feel any better as it continued to launch several feather daggers Luffy's way as it fell, forgetting the need to actually fly for a second. Luffy followed it down as it quickly lost altitude, doing nothing but letting the bird get its shock out of its system.

This went on for a surprising amount of time, but eventually, the ninja albatross hastily began to beat his wings again, gaining a little bit of altitude and circling around, while Luffy kept pace with him. The pirate smirked, one finger pressing up into the rim of his straw hat as he flashed a grin at the bird, who still looked torn between affront and shock. "Are you done? If I'd wanted you dead, dude, you'd already be fried to a crisp. I'm just here to follow up on an agreement I made with Big News Morgans. I'm hopin' he was smart enough to send you here with some information or how I should contact him or something?"

The albatross sent him a final dirty look, then, still flying in a circle, twitched its talons up towards a few pouches on its waist. It wasn't easy, but those pouches were made to let talons hook into the flaps and open them from the bottom at need. Catching what fell out of it was a simply hand-talon bit of coordination after that, and the next second, Luffy caught the rolled-up piece of paper the bird threw at him.

Pulling it open, he read the content quickly.

This note is for Monkey D. Luffy or his ally, Boa Hancock, the Pirate Empress.

If you had any way to get your hands on a newspaper over the past few weeks, you'd have been able to see how I had agreed to the bargain you made with one of my albatrosses. I gotta say it was really hard sitting on news that big, but now, with everything that's happened since, I hope that the story will be an even bigger one when we break it!

Unfortunately, given how big this news could be, it's going to take some work to meet with you, and I think it needs to happen in person... especially given a few of the bounty posters that have gone out recently with my newspaper. I don't want to be seen meeting with you openly, or else my independence is going to go out the window one way or another.

Thus, you need to come to me. If, however, we can communicate via an albatross sent on the Calm Belt route, I will send an albatross specifically to lead you and your crew to some place we can meet freely without anyone bothering either of us or the news of it getting back to the World Government.

This was signed by Big News Morgans, who added a little cartouche of a bird with its beak grasping what looked like a bullhorn or something similar. Yet despite how oddly cute that little stamp was, Luffy had to shake his head. "A...huh... yeah, that isn't gonna happen. I don't know enough about Morgans to lead my crew into what might be an ambush. We'll meet here on Amazon Lily, or somewhere else we can both agree on. I might wanna get the real story about Whitebeard's War out there... Oooh boy, do I, but not that much. If we have to slow things down so we can both be satisfied, that's fine by me. Wait here a second."

The Ninja albatross watched as Luffy disappeared in a crackle of lighting. "Squawk, hiss, squawk, CAW, CAW, hissS..." the creature grumbled, snapping his beak between each word. If Chopper had been there, he could have perhaps translated this to: "Asshole, honestly, sneaking up on us like that, it's just not supposed to happen. UGH," perhaps accompanied with a sneer and the face of an elderly person who had just seen something dirty on his foot.

Reappearing on the ground, Luffy smiled over at Vivi and Hancock, who had been waiting for him where he had left them in the dockyard area. Looking around, he saw the others had moved deeper into the valley where the Kuja city was situated, a hidden valley that ran from the dockyard area, itself hidden, deeper into the island, which was mostly dominated by bluffs and a jungle, as well as one amusingly shaped main, incredibly tall mountain in the center of the island.

The snake heads I get, as does the carving of their name in stone, it pays to advertise. But the rest of that thing looks way too much like a McDonald's arch for me to ignore, Luffy thought, trying hard not to snigger. *Biggest damn fast-food restaurant ever.* Not voicing that thought, Luffy explained to the two women what was going on.

"That makes sense. It always takes a long while for the leaders of two parties to come together," Vivi mused, tapping her lips thoughtfully. "I would say that meeting here would be a good idea on our end, so long as Morgans takes our word that he won't be harmed and that he can get here without being followed or spotted. But... perhaps a place in Paradise would work better? I have to believe the World Government has someone watching Morgans to make certain he doesn't become too independent, so to speak."

"You're thinking of doing the interviews on Alabasta?" Hancock guessed, shaking her head. "That would be good enough for you and Luffy but not the rest of us."

"True. But it would maybe do to start with, and then we can set up a way to do the rest of the interviews in person on an island where no one will be able to get the word out we're meeting," Luffy supposed.

"Even that is a big risk on his part. With your strength proven to the World Government, Luffy, our own position is actually somewhat stable. Once we get your flag flying over Alabasta anyway," Vivi explained, shaking her head. "Morgans' position is far more tenuous. At least, I think it has to be. You'll note he's not asking for protection or anything, just **discretion**. Let him make the details of how he arrives, but we choose the when and we both have to agree on the location. Like you said, an island where the news can't get out quickly. That way, we're both satisfied."

"That will do for a start. As for a meeting point, hmmm... Perhaps Cactus Island or one of the islands known to be only slightly connected to the main routes through the Grand Line? Although we will have to come up with a way to get there ourselves" Vivi frowned. "Come to think of it, I suppose that getting there will be much harder for us than Morgans, considering he sends his newspaper to nearly every island out there, and his birds can find ships wherever they are. Huh... how come that never occurred to me before? That is a rather disturbing ability in this world we live in."

Luffy grinned cheerily, but there was a bit of something in his eyes that put Vivi in mind of a shark for some reason. "Don't worry about our getting to wherever we decide to meet. I have ideas there. Something for you and me to do when Vivi and me get back, Hancock."

Hancock smiled. "That sounds fascinating. But for now, get up there and give that albatross our reply. Depending on how long you take, I will meet you when you return in the arena. You can't miss it from the sky."

Nodding, Luffy disappeared in a flash of lightning, zooming upwards. This time the albatross saw him coming and wasn't so startled when the lightning bolt shifted into a human form beside him. "Okay, so we talked about it. And..." He quickly relayed his, Vivi and Hancock's thoughts, and the albatross nodded, using a kind of ink-filled pen device on one of his talons to write on a piece of paper. After a moment, that page was stuck in his beak before another was pulled out of a pouch.

“Huh, it can’t be easy doing all that and flying at the same time. Ya sure ya don’t want ta land somewhere or let me hold ya—forget I said anything,” Luffy hastily rescinded his offer at the nasty look the bird gave him as if insulted by the offers.

It finished what it was writing, which Luffy read quickly, which was just a question of whether he and Hancock could both be reached in the future at Amazon Lily. “We will for a bit. I... I don’t want to tell ya anything concrete, but I’m going to be leaving here in less than a week. But Hancock and I will be able to contact one another easily, and she’s got full authority to make deals on when and where to meet up. Even then, I’d want some reassurance from Morgans that I’m not going to be walking into a trap. Mind you, at this point, he’d have to bring one of the surviving Yonko’s fleets along to really make a trap for me to work, but...” Luffy shrugged, still taking some amusement in how this albatross was doing things.

That, and in the light of day, the ninja albatross just looked cool. *Seriously, if anyone made a toy that looks like this guy, it’d be a bestseller!*

This did not seem to be agreeable to the albatross, and the two of them haggled back and forth, but Luffy was unmoved. Morgans could choose the time and even had a say in the place, but both sides would need to agree on that, which would let them both make certain it was safe. Seeing this, the albatross, despite knowing how quickly his creator wanted to move on to this story, reluctantly agreed. Putting the bits of paper with the notes he’d made back into his pouch, the bird gestured down towards the island, then up to his helmet.

Much like the rest of his outfit, that helmet was a very nice piece of work. It went over his head, covering only the back of his head, letting his face and ear openings bare. Built into them was a set of goggles that thrust out far enough to make it very obvious that they were binoculars.

Understanding what the bird was saying, Luffy shook his head, his arms up in an X-shape. “Nope. I’m not gonna let you just keep on spying. Head back to your boss with my message, and that’s it. The faster you do, the faster he gets his interviews with us about what we discussed and a whole lot more.”

The albatross scowled a bit, which was an interesting feat with a beak, but it managed it. Evidently, it didn’t like being a simple messenger, but Luffy felt the bird could lump it for now.

He remained there, watching as the albatross turned away, winging off over the ocean until it was completely out of his Kenbunshoku range, well beyond what his eyes could actually see. “Now, if I had a compass, considering we’re in the Calm Belt, I might actually be able to figure out what direction he’s heading in. But I don’t, and frankly, it doesn’t really matter. Hopefully, Morgans will be as good as his word, and our interviews can do more damage to the World Government and the Marines.”

With that, Luffy turned his attention down to Amazon Lily, bouncing down more leisurely than he had ascended. As he did, he shook his head once more, taking in the island from on high. Most of the island looked pretty normal. It was maybe a little bigger than Drum Island, not as large as Alabasta, and was covered by mainly jungles and large buttes jutting up from the lowlands, dominated by a single mountain. From the air, Luffy could barely see any sign of the docks or the Kuja city, hidden as it was in a valley set between several of those buttes.

It was the shape of that mountain that was so unusual, though. Like the buttes, most of its lower area was a sheer cliff face, on which had been carved the name 'Kuja' in story-tall letters. Above that, the mountain split up into mounts of its own, most of whom had been carved into snake heads looking in every direction. One such head was carved out of the side of a central tower-like pillar of stone that rose still higher into the sky, being even taller than Drum Island's drum-like mountains. To either side, two more portions of the mountain had somehow been shaped to resemble arches, meeting the central pillar just below its top. "Yep, still looks like a McD's arch."

Chuckling at that, Luffy descended further downward, needing to pass by the snake heads and the next tallest group of buttes before he finally started to see the Kuja city. Like Hancock had said, the first thing he saw was a giant arena of some kind, and he descended down into it. The arena was circular, with a moat like construction between it and the watching crowd, which also had a short wall protecting it from the fall.

Luffy found Hancock waiting for him, smiling up at him despite the shouting of the old woman beside her. Luffy arrived just in time to hear, "-so many men at once on the island before for such a long time will—" before the woman cut off as Luffy, showing off a little, turned into lightning and teleported himself down the last few stories.

She slowly shook her head then, staring at him. "An element-type logia, and one of the most dangerous too. I saw you zoom off before, and I know that Hancock told me you had that fruit. But the implications are still barely sinking into this old brain of mine."

"Yeah, well, it's certainly come in handy so far," Luffy answered with manifest understatement before looking over at Hancock. "Where did the rest of my crew go?" He could probably use his Kenbunshoku to find them easily enough, but he figured it was polite to ask. This was Hancock's island, after all. *And whatever my flag says, we're equals in this partnership, in mind if not in power.*

Hancock understood that and smiled at the courtesy, holding out her hand. "I'll show you. I believe that the others were heading over to the feast area. It's an open portion of the city where communal meals are taken, overlooking the ocean to one side and the rest of the city to the other. My fellow Kuja started preparing a feast for our arrival and victory, although I believe Sanji wishes to join them. That should make for some interesting moments in whatever kitchen he decides to join."

“So he’s Sanji now, not just ‘the cook’?” Luffy teased gently, tugging lightly on Hancock’s hand as he moved forward. Instead of taking her hand, he looped his arm with hers as they walked towards the bridge leading to a doorway that would probably lead them out of the arena, the old woman bobbing beside them, silent now.

“Your entire crew has grown on me, Luffy, not just Robin and Vivi,” Hancock answered primly. “I do not think that Sanji and I will ever be friends given his flirtatious attitude and how he lost control of himself around me at least six or seven times a day on the journey here. Yet, I will at least give him the courtesy of using his actual name.”

“I don’t know, I think he liked being called cook-san by Robin when she was doing it. Maybe you can make up a cutesy nickname for him. If you want to wrap them around your little finger any further, I mean.”

“I do not wish to do so, nor does it seem needed.” Feeling a little daring, Hancock leaned in, whispering into his ear. “Although having you wrapped around my little finger would be quite nice. Or, or would you prefer my hand wrapped around a certain something else?”

Luffy blushed a little, staring straight ahead, his pigtail sticking straight out from the back of his head so much it nearly tipped his hat off his head. “Er, I see that you are taking lessons from Robin about flirting. I’m not certain what I think about that. Cute, sexy and now able to flirt with your words and not just your looks? What can’t ya do?”

Pulling back, Hancock giggled a little, a verbal acknowledgment that the line had been rather out of character for her, even if she had enjoyed watching Luffy’s reaction to it. For all that they had done together, and for all that Hancock appreciated the fact that he was able to control himself around her as very few men could, the romantic evenings when they could get the crow’s nest to themselves on the voyage here, had shown her that getting Luffy to react was most pleasant. Similarly, getting a blush out of Luffy from her words alone was quite fun, and almost empowering enough to bring out her normal haughty stance for a moment.

It didn’t take them long to reach the feast area, as the feast area was simply an extension of the palace area, which itself abutted the arena. Between them, these three areas marked the center of life on Amazon Lily. There, Nami was the first to see Luffy. She waved her hand, causing Vivi, who she’d been talking with, to look up and smile. “Did you find that albatross you were looking for? I still can’t get over how far away you can sense things like that and so accurately, too.”

“Do not get me started! Just because I like the person using that power now doesn’t mean I don’t have bad memories of how it was used against me and my tribe,” Laki grunted from where she was sitting nearby next to several of the locals. Marguerite had introduced her to a few of them already, fletchers who made their own arrows and trainers. These were Kuja who helped their fellow Kuja bond with the snakes of the island, which could act as a bow for their partners.

Laki had been fascinated by watching the shift from an arm ornament into a weapon and even had one of the snakes in her lap now, gently stroking its head. It wasn't as useful for her, given how she preferred guns, but even so, the snakes were fascinating creatures.

"I promise to only use this power for good," Luffy quipped, shaking his head. "And yes, I did find it. I gave him the message. Hopefully, Morgans will be able to get back to us quickly up and about setting up everything. Before we do give those interviews, though, maybe you should walk us through how to give interviews in general, what information we should share in, what we shouldn't and so forth, Vivi."

Vivi nodded happily. They hadn't talked about the agreement that Luffy had made with Morgans before Luffy had sensed that ninja albatross floating around the island since then, she'd several ideas of how to take those interviews, and just like Vivi understood how a meeting between two unaligned parties went. Vivi also knew what kind of reaction she wanted to get out of the article Morgans would release after interviewing her and her friends. "That sounds good. I wouldn't be a very good public relations officer for you all if I wasn't willing to do that. Do you want some suggestions now, or do you want to wait until we make firmer plans with Morgans before going over everything?"

"Why don't you write up some notes for us to think about over the next few days, darling," Hancock stated, reaching over and gently stroking a finger down the side of Vivi's face, watching her flush spectacularly. That always amused her, much as it did with Luffy even if that was a far rarer event. Although, seeing Vivi look down and fidget that faint little smile along with the breathy little gasp added still more to her enjoyment of it. "I think Luffy, Zoro and Sanji, in particular, will want to know what you think."

Hancock chortled haughtily. "As for myself, the public's opinion of me has never mattered before. After all, I am beautiful. The public has and will always fall over themselves at my feet for my pleasure."

A part of Vivi, the part that always strove to see the best in people, really wanted to protest that. She really, really did. Yet when Hancock was looking down at her, no matter how arrogant her stance was, well, Vivi just did not have the willpower to ignore it and she nodded meekly.

On the other hand, Luffy simply snorted, shaking his head. "Yeah, ya probably don't have to worry about public relations. Even now that you're no longer a Shichibukai, people's opinions of your beauty won't have changed unless they're suddenly blind. On the other hand, the rest of us probably do need to choose our words and what we share carefully."

"Hey! What are Laki, me and Robin, chopped liver?" Nami snorted while Laki recently rolled her eyes. "But yeah, I think we need to figure out what we really shouldn't say and how we all should come across to Morgan."

“Oy! What are you sitting around for?! We’ve got bounty posters to look at,” Zoro shouted from nearby. He didn’t really need to shout because he was so near, but that was more a declaration from Zoro about his complete disinterest in things like the upcoming interview with Morgans, public relations and so forth. Luffy completely understood and wouldn’t normally care one way or the other now that their infiltration of Impel Down was done, but Vivi did. So he would, and further, it was a way to poke the World Government in the eye again. Luffy was all for that.

Quickly, Hancock shooed off some of the Kuja who were already in the area laying out food, although it took a while for Sanji to be found and pulled from what he was doing, as well as Franky from where he’d wandered off to, along with Chopper. With Chopper perched on Franky’s shoulder, the two of them were talking quietly to one another when they arrived, although what about, Luffy had no idea. Chopper’s one eye had turned into a star, and he was staring at Franky with awe, so whatever it was, it must’ve been something interesting to the two of them.

Jinbe also joined them, nodding respectfully to the older woman, who nodded back, looking at him thoughtfully. “I didn’t greet you earlier, Knight of the Sea, but you’re the only man here I’ll welcome without reservation. Honestly, our Empress working with you is far less surprising than anything else that is, recently.”

“Yes, well, I can still remember certain events from more than a decade ago, when I was still serving under Fisher Tiger, Gloriosa-san. Times have changed, but I suppose it was naïve of me to think that the World Government would also change its stripes, so to speak,” Jinbe answered.

Luffy stared at him, his eyes narrowed. “Was that a pun?”

“A very poor one,” Jinbe agreed, then smiling, moved over to lean against the outer wall of the feast area. This overlooked a sheer drop down to the ocean below. “However, we are not here to comment on my oftentimes poor excuse of humor.”

“Indeed we are not,” Robin said, coming up behind Luffy and gently working her fingers into his hair for a moment, causing him to shiver, before she sat down on his other side from Hancock at the table Zoro was already sitting at. She smiled at him, and he smiled back before they all turned their attention to where Perona was holding the newspaper.

Seeing she had all of their attention, Perona puffed herself up for a moment. This was kind of hilarious, considering she was only about as tall as Vivi. Which was to say not much at all. “All right, Straw Hats! Now, as mistress of ceremonies...”

“Get on with it already!” Zoro grumbled. “Mistress of ceremonies? Feh, you just took the newspaper from me a minute ago when I claimed it after that old woman chased after Hancock.”

"While that one Amazon was challenging you to a sword fight, yep," Perona snorted, scowling a little. "Way to keep your eyes on the prize." *And I know among these Kuja that's the equivalent of flirting. Hah, not knowing about men, indeed! I'm watching you skank, and unlike your Empress and Robin, I don't fucking share.*

Perona knew she wasn't going to stay with the crew. She had no desire to go into the New World, and no dream to really make her want to grow strong enough to do so. Thus, Perona also knew that Zoro and her 'relationship' wasn't going to be a permanent thing. Yet that didn't mean Perona was going to let some Kuja make eyes at her man as long as she had him.

"Don't hate Perona-chwan because she's right, Mosshead. That's no way to talk to a lady anyway," Sanji said, glaring angrily at Zoro. For some reason, he couldn't quite get the idea that something was going on with the ghost princess and Zoro, a feeling that had magnified over the rather peaceful trip they'd had through the Calm Belt to Amazon Lily. That, and he was always looking for an excuse to fight with Zoro, as always.

That last point was something Zoro shared, and he growled as he pushed himself to his feet. "You want to go, Aho-cook?"

"Just start, Perona," Luffy said as Franky pushed his big hands between the two other boys, first pushing them away from one another, his large hands engulfing their faces, then pushing them back down. "There's no ceremony for this. Just start."

"Really? Moh, Master Gecko Moria made a big production out of it." Perona pouted. "I never saw the point of being happy my bounty increased but the ceremonies were always fun."

With a sigh, she obeyed Luffy's suggestion, flipping to the back of the newspaper, pulling out the bounty posters and tossing the rest of the newspaper over to Gloriosa. "Should I look through them and put them in order or..."

"Get on with it!" Franky, Chopper, Zoro, Laki and Luffy all shouted, and Perona twitched before finally doing so.

"First up, Black Leg Sanji, 225 million beli..." Perona said, her voice trailing off a little in shock as she held up the bounty poster after reading it, setting it in the center of the table.

Sanji hopped up, thrusting her hand into the air. "Woohoo! You see that Marimo?! The world has finally acknowledged my primacy over you!"

"As if! Wait till you hear my new bounty before you boast like that, number four," Zoro taunted, referring to the fact that Sanji had heretofore only been the fourth largest bounty on the crew. "And I notice they haven't given you a new picture, still using that masterpiece for your ugly face!"

At that, the two men got into one another's faces again before Franky played peacemaker again, grumbling. "Ugh, now I know why you lot left a seat open between these two."

"Yep, sorry Franky, but a sacrifice had to be made," Laki snickered. "Since Zoro doesn't care about us delicate flowers if he's in a mood to flirt with Sanji, none of us could have done it, so..."

"Hey! What are you calling flirting, woman?" growled Zoro, while Sanji also looked horrified and began to fall over himself to explain that there was nothing like that going on here.

Luffy looked down at the picture thoughtfully, humming. "You were a major pool part of how we got into the prison, even if ya were a passive one for most of the plan. And I'm wagering that there were a lot of reports about how well you fought those beast jailers and everything else in the prison, too."

"Don't forget that Sanji took part in the battle against the two CP0 assassins that were sent after me," Robin pointed out from beside him. "It is certain that Gorosei, the one that took part in the battle, sent them assuming that they would be able to overcome the rest of our crew."

Oi, Oi, I heard about that, but I wasn't aboard at the time. Were these Cipher assassins really that arrogant, thinking that only two guys could take you all on?" Franky's asked, shaking his head.

"Yeah, they were. They were also incredibly good fighters. If we hadn't been able to separate them, their teamwork and ability with Geppo and the rest of the Rokushiki as well as Haki might have been able to grind us under eventually," Sanji said, becoming serious a little and turning away from Laki. "It was Jinbe who really turned the tide there, and our own skill with Haki that let us keep up with them long enough for him to get involved."

"Well, regardless. Our Angel of Death and Cat Burglar don't look to have gotten much love from the World Government," Perona teased, drawing the attention back to her as she laid out the next two bounty posters. She had actually begun to think of the two girls as friends and was much closer to them than any of the rest of the crew bar Zoro. "45 million and 30 million for the pair of you. And Tony Tony Chopper, I'm sorry to say you haven't gotten anything changed on your bounty poster at all."

"That makes sense. I mean, the three of us didn't really do anything. We were only ever on the Everlasting Resolve. We didn't take part in any of the direct combat, except for you, Chopper, against those two assassins. But maybe they didn't factor that fight in at all? After all, there weren't actually any witnesses to most of it," Nami murmured, shaking her head.

"Nami is right. Sanji's bounty is certainly entirely based on what was going on in Impel Down," Robin agreed.

"And... ooh, looking at this, Perona is wrong. My amount might not have changed, but remember? I was wanted 'alive only' before. Now it says dead or alive like the rest of you. Um, is it strange that I'm actually kind of happy about that? Even without a bump in the actual bounty, it makes me feel more piratical, you know?" Chopper said, causing Franky to nod in agreement and for the other men at the table to chuckle.

Looking at Chopper's bounty poster again, Luffy noted that the doctor was correct. He was now wanted dead or alive. Reading the other posters, though, he saw that Sanji was still wanted alive only.

He was about to say something but Zoro beat him to it, having noticed the same thing. "Okay, who the hell did you sleep with, love cook?" he asked bluntly, pointing from Sanji down to the bounty poster. "I mean, seriously, if they don't want Chopper alive any longer with all the medical skills he showed off back on Water 7, why the hell would they **still** want you alive? Did you sleep with some kind of World Government princess or queen or something? One of those Celestial fuckwads who went slumming wanting their boy toy back?"

"How dare you!" the blonde serial smoker shouted. "I am no one's boy toy, and I have never slept with someone from the World Government," Sanji added the last bit as an afterthought before blinking and holding up his hand, counting on his fingers. "I mean, I don't think... There was that one marine girl, and I know that another girl was some minor nobility, um, and then there was the time I seduced that older woman away from the rest of her party for a quickie but..."

Vivi frowned, her brows furrowing as she stared at Sanji, then looked over at Luffy, shaking her head. He looked back at her in confusion, but Robin had also seen what Vivi had noticed and leaned in, whispering, "I believe that Sanji might be keeping something a secret. He looked a little shifty for a second there before Zoro spoke up."

Nodding, Luffy interjected before Zoro could send another dig Sanji's way or vice versa. "Enough of that, sit down and let's move on. But Sanji, let me ask you this first. Is whatever is causing you to only be wanted alive going to cause us trouble in the future?"

Noting how formal Luffy sounded for a second, Sanji answered just as formally, his teeth gritted around his cigarette. As he did, a part of him was very thankful that the locals grew their own tobacco, even if the other cooks hadn't accepted the fact that he could smoke and cook at the same time without getting any ash on their food. His protestations on that point had fallen on deaf ears despite how many years of the taken into master that art from Zeff, and he'd been ordered to put it out or leave before Hancock had found him and told him to join the rest of the crew.

"I don't think so, Captain. It's just a story that I'm not really in any rush to share. I doubt it will make the marines or the World Government come after us any more or less than they already would be, and it shouldn't matter as we go forward into the New World."

"What about my dream about making a world map? Will it interfere with that?" Nami demanded archly, crossing her arms as she stared at the cook.

"I promise I won't let it bother your dream or you at all Nami-chwan!" Sanji nearly shouted, looking appalled at the very idea.

"That would be a yes, it will then," Luffy decided dryly, to which the rest of the crew nodded. "We're going to need to talk about that in the future, Sanji. It's not a priority, but if there could be trouble brewing there, I'd like to know about it, if only to be ready to punch whatever shape this particular trouble comes in when it does show up," Luffy said, looking over to Perona, who was staring at the next poster her eyes wide. "Perona?"

With shaking hands, Perona put down her own bounty poster. "I, I was only 15 million before! How did I jump from that to 78 million?!"

Sanji and the others all frowned, but it was Chopper who spoke up, shaking his head. "It's got to be the lethality of that fight we had with that first group of marines." The others all looked at Chopper quizzically, and he shrugged his shoulders, staring back at them from over the edge of the table, not having transformed into his larger form to let the others keep a certain amount of elbowroom at the table. "That first giant and the group with him, the ones that showed up right after Kizaru? All of them had Devil Fruits, but very few of them could fight off Perona's ghosts. The depression would hit them so hard they'd lose control of their Geppo skill and..."

"Fall into the ocean," Vivi finished, her eyes wide. She'd been on the receiving end of one of Perona's ghosts at one point on the journey to Amazon Lily when she hadn't vacated the bathroom fast enough for Perona and knew how deadly that sudden downfall into depression could be. "That would do it. Good grief!"

"..." Vivi's words seemed to break Perona out of her stupor for a second, and she nodded. "Um, yeah, I think I might've seen at least three or four of those officers drown. But, I, I'm honestly not certain if I like the idea of my bounty jumping so much!"

"I'm still not certain why these are important. I'm not exactly steeped in the pirate mythos as much as the rest of you. But I gather that the bigger the bounty, the more you can brag about it. If so, I think I'd prefer to have a higher score, even if I know I wasn't exactly much help against the Marine Officers and so forth," Laki grumbled.

"Yes, but this also means that the WeeGee think I'm part of your crew. I don't know what to think about that either," Perona said, shaking her head. She then looks down at the

next bounty poster in her lap before smirking and pulling it up, displaying it proudly before slamming it down in the center of the table to one side of her own. "And after this, I bet I won't be the only one who has mixed feelings! Sand Princess Vivi, 105 million!"

These eyes went wide as she stared at the bounty poster, while Hancock frowned pensively, and Robin shook her head. "So much for thinking that the World Government would want to hide your defection for a bit. It looks like you're just another traitor who made the battle far harder than it should've been to them," she mused.

Turning to Luffy, Vivi looked at him earnestly. "You do know this means we will need to leave for Alabasta faster than we thought?"

"Actually, it does not," Robin disagreed. "Considering how badly mauled the marines were in the war, I doubt they have anything even now after a week or so that they would be able to spare to take revenge on your kingdom for your part in the war. Moreover, your country's military is even larger than its size would suggest, and it can see to its own defenses well enough. I'm not arguing with the fact that Luffy should take you home where you can explain everything to your father, Princess, but it doesn't have to happen right away."

"Robin's right. And remember, we can travel like lightning," Luffy said with a grin.

"OW! On that note, I've been working on a plan for something really super! Chopper here told me about your brother's personal ship, the little flashy thing he used near the desert kingdom? Give me a day or so and I can come up with something like that for you, Luffy, so you can have a few passengers along as you're zooming through the air or whatever."

"That sounds amazing, Franky. Thanks," Luffy nodded. "Get with Eve first, though, because I think you also should maybe look into redoing the engine room a bit. Something that can hold a charge for longer periods would be an amazing help and free me from spending time in the engine room. Maybe another way to charge the rail gun while I'm on the deck, too?"

"Ow, OW, yeah, I'd already thought of that myself, Captain," Franky stated, standing up and doing a pose for a moment. "The energy transceivers I've got down there don't hold a charge nearly as well as I had hoped. Still, I can figure out something better. First thing I'll need to do though is set up a Mother Mushi. Our Den Den Mushis won't be able to send or receive over long distances without one."

Scowling just a little at the fact that Luffy was being so cavalier about what she thought of as a threat to her home. Vivi shook her head and, before the two men could get sidetracked on Den Den Mushi biology, turned back to Perona expectantly. The pinkette obligingly, tossed the next bounty onto the table without saying anything.

The others all looked, and Robin chortled, staring down not at her child poster but a more recent picture that the World Government had somehow gotten their hands on from Water 7. "My word, but I am coming up in the world, aren't I? 295 million beli."

"Hmm... that has to be almost entirely based off of the fact those two assassins died. You weren't part of the breakout at all," Makino said, shaking her head. She hadn't spoken up before this, not getting as much enjoyment about their bounties going up as the others did. At heart, she was still the same civilian bartender that she had been before Shanks came into her life, though she wasn't about to get in the way of the others having fun with it.

"Perhaps, although it could be what my original poster was about, being the Ghost of Ohara and now being on a crew with a captain like Luffy," Robin agreed.

Vivi and a few of the others who hadn't been told the full story of Robin's past blinked at the name of that particular island, but it was Vivi's eyes that widened the most. She stared at Robin, saying nothing as Robin shook her head at the younger girl indicating she didn't want to say anything.

"Well, similarly to Nami and Laki's, I think Franky only got a new bounty of 65 million because he was sidelined for so much of the battle," Perona intoned, sliding Franky's bounty poster over to him.

"Agreed. The ships you destroyed or set on fire with that multi-turret cannon thing you created aboard my ship is a rather small change in comparison to the rest of the fight," Hancock said almost apologetically. Or, as apologetically as she ever said anything, a feeling that was rapidly added to as she went on. "They have no way of knowing how much help you were behind the scenes, creating that ship for my crew, helping to man it and so forth."

Franky thankfully took it with aplomb, and Perona moved on, creating two small explosive hollows, letting them pick up one of the bounty posters and carrying it over the heads of the others towards Jinbe. "Well, looks like I'm not the only one that's being labeled a Straw Hat."

Smirking, Jinbe took the bounty poster from the two solid-state ghosts as Luffy got in on the teasing, saying that was proof positive that Jinbe should stay with their crew before Jinbe shot that idea down. "438 million is actually not a new bounty for me; it is what I had before I became a Shichibukai, so your assumptions are misplaced. They simply know that I am fully turned against the World Government at this point." He glanced at Luffy. "Anything farther than that, we will need to talk about."

Luffy nodded at that, then turned to look over at Perona, who continued. At that, Perona handed Zoro his own bounty poster. He read it swiftly then grinned, laying it on the table quickly so everyone else could see it, too, particularly Sanji. "You see, love cook, this is

what you get when you get all arrogant. 300 million! A nice even number and way bigger than yours."

"Way bigger, it's not even a third of the way bigger!" Sanji shouted back, the two men glaring at one another.

"Considering everything else, I'm sort of surprised that he wasn't given the same increase to his previous bounty as Sanji was," Laki mused, her lips twitching with the need to tease but keeping it inside for now. *Low hanging fruit, girl. Keep it in check for now.*

"You forget, Zoro wasn't only part of the breakout from Impel Down like Sanji was. He also killed two Tenryubito before he and Sanji-san were sent to the prison," Brook reminded them all. Like Makino, he had been relatively silent, simply playing on his violin to accompany everything in the background.

"I'm sorry, what?" Hancock asked, staring at Zoro, along with many of the other Kuja nearby. Her two siblings looked very interested suddenly in the proceedings, whereas before, they hadn't been. "We talked about how you were captured by Gion and how that battle occurred at the auction house before, but what is this about you killing Tenryubito?"

"The who?" Zoro asked, frowning in confusion. "I don't remember everyone I've cut down."

Sanji also looked confused, and Luffy chortled. "You'd remember these idiots. They were the ones at the slave auction with bowls on their head."

"OH, them!" Sanji and Zoro said as one, then spent several minutes growling at one another about who was imitating who before Hancock threatened to turn them both into stone unless they answered her. At that point, Zoro huffed, shaking his head. "Those idiots. Two of them were there to buy slaves, I objected, they had their men attack me. The love cook butted in where he didn't belong--"

"OY!" Sanji barked, his teeth turning into daggers for a moment.

"I then sliced Rosie-something and his wife in two," Zoro answered as if it wasn't a big deal. Which, to him, it wasn't. Bowls or not, the pair had been weak and evil, and that was all that had mattered at the time. "It wasn't as if any of the three put up a fight, also what's the big deal. Hell, even the one who shot Baka Blonde was weak enough for him to kick to death with a single hit."

"It doesn't matter if they were personally strong or not. They were Tenryubito!" Jinbe shouted while Hancock laughed gaily. "Whole islands have been wiped out of life for far less than killing one of those accursed beings! I am surprised you both weren't executed on the spot."

"I was told they were going to make a big ceremony out of it after everything with Ace and Whitebeard died out. Just another show of the World Government's might and all that," Zoro said with a shrug.

"Even if we weren't celebrating our victory, hearing three of those creatures getting their proper comeuppance would make me call for a feast, Zoro!" Hancock said with a laugh, while nearby grandmother simply shook her head. "That bounty, the notoriety that will come with that and with your deeds once they get out, you'll be just as feared as a Shichibukai!"

"It is indeed actually a bigger bounty than Crocodile had before he became a Shichibukai," Jinbe agreed, calming down. *They've killed Tenryubito, and Zoro did it because they were trying to take slaves, one of whom was a mermaid friend of theirs. That is a most incredibly positive sign for the conversation I need to have with Luffy.*

For his part, Zoro snorted, waving his hand lazily. "I don't want to be a Shichibukai. I'm shooting for a far higher goal. After all, Hawkeyes might be a Shichibukai, but is he known as that or as the strongest swordsman in the world?"

To that, everyone nodded. Yes, Mihawk was a Shichibukai, but his more common appellation was simply the world's strongest swordsman. Jinbe understood that there had been, well, Shichibukai and then Shichibukai. Crocodile and Gecko Moria had been far weaker than the others had, but even with the likes of himself, Bartholomew Kuma or Doflamingo among them, Hawkeyes was easily been the most dangerous of them all. *What would you expect from someone who regularly goes looking for a fight with the only true swordsman among the Yonko?*

"Yeah well, speaking of Shichibukai, guess which bounty posters up next?" Perona said, shaking her head. "Our very own Hebihime."

With that, Perona slammed Hancock's bounty poster down on the table, pulling her hand away quickly so that everyone could see the bounty on it, causing stares and shouts of surprise, as well as for Gloriosa, perched on her staff to see over the group's shoulders to fall off, hitting the ground side-first, her eyes wide yet unseeing.

Chopper noticed this and instantly turned away, shouting, "Ahhh, she might have had a heart attack, doctor, we need a doctor... oh wait, I'm a doctor." With that, he knelt down beside the old woman. The rest of the Kuja didn't notice and instead crowded in, staring over the shoulders and heads of the Straw Hats to gaze in shock at the 700 million Beri on Boa Hancock's new bounty poster.

To Chopper's surprise, Gloriosa recovered quickly, leaping to her feet and bouncing off his head to land on the table, staring at the poster in shock. "With a bounty poster like that, with a bounty like that, we will never know peace!" she shouted. "We will face attacks every

time we turn around now! The Calm Belt will not be enough to defend us against people looking to take that bounty, let alone the World Government itself!"

"If someone tries to take on Hancock, they'll be digging their own grave. As for the World Government, I've said before, but they're in no position to move on us and won't be for years. Even if we were, we're not their priority. Stabilizing everything after their losses and getting over those losses will be," Luffy said, shaking his head at the old woman's statement. "By the time they're able to move after us, we'll all have gotten stronger than we are now, and I'll have really taken up Whitebeard's place as one of the Yonko. Or maybe Marco will have stepped up too, and I'll be the Goko? Heh, regardless, they won't be able to move after us without destabilizing the world again."

Luffy knew that the World Government would probably come after them regardless, but he also knew that the Revolutionaries would be their priority for a while. As long as he and his crew didn't stay still, kept on growing, kept on moving, they wouldn't be a very easy target. Even Amazon Lily would be a very hard nut to crack if they could give Franky time and all the material he needed.

"I don't think you need to worry about anyone coming after you, Empress, or after any of us. In your case, it's because of who you're allied with, and the rest of us... Because the Lightning King's our captain."

Luffy blinked at that, and Perona hesitantly laid down his bounty poster in the middle of the table, slumping back and staring at it in shock. 1 **billion** beli, dead wanted dead, the Lightning King, Monkey D. Luffy.

Somehow, some extremely enterprising marine had caught Luffy mid-change from his physical body into lightning. One half of his body was still in his physical form, while the other half had turned into a crackling bolt of lightning, presumably heading sideways away from an attack.

"Wow, way to leave the rest of us in the dirt, Captain," Zoro snorted, shaking his head and now looking a little frustrated at his own 300 million bounty. *It's all right. I'll get there eventually. This is just a step on the journey of the world's strongest swordsman.*

"How, why..." Nami was panicking, staring at the bounty. "That's, that's too much!"

A lot of the other Kuja were also shouting in the background. Some of them were shouting that Luffy should never have been able to get a bounty poster higher than their Empress, while others were just astonished, and those who had any grasp of money matters were simply shrieking in shock. Gloriosa was also staring at the poster, her eyes wide and looking almost as if she was going to have a heart attack. "That, that... That's almost as much as that brat Shanks had when he was building up to become a Yonko!"

“Actually, this is a little low,” Robin’s voice cut through the tumult, and she frowned pensively. “I believe that is probably the highest they were willing to go in terms of keeping to the story that they have told the world about what really happened, building up Whitebeard’s part and downplaying yours. But if you consider everything, they could’ve gone as high as three billion.”

“Come to think of it, Robin-san might be right.” Vivi frowned pensively. “You helped kill one admiral, and you beat another into retreat. You broke Ace, the reason behind the war against Whitebeard, and Garp out of prison, and well, caused a complete and utter prison break from what we’ve learned since. On top of infiltrating Impel Down, the government’s secret, super important prison in the first place. And then there was that large-scale attack you used on the Marine Fleet. With all that, with your connection to Garp, and the Revolutionary Monkey D. Dragon... Yes, I think that this is a compromise. They have to acknowledge your deeds, but they also don’t want to really hype you up to the true scale of what you did. But they obviously know precisely how dangerous you are, Luffy, and will not move against you or your crew hastily.”

“Makes sense, and this should be more than enough for you to start using my flag to defend your home island,” Luffy said, looking over at Vivi.

She beamed back at him while nearby, Jinbe shook his head. He agreed with what Luffy had just said; it would make Vivi’s job easier, and it would make his own job easier if he asked Luffy for help. Yet even not a large part of Jinbe, the part of him that was pure fishman, wondered what Luffy would want in turn.

Whitebeard was dead. His flag would no longer have the power it had previously to help defend Mermaid Island from other pirates and, even more importantly, slaving bands. It would take time for this fact to settle into people’s minds, especially given how the man had gone out. That would keep the terror of his name going for a few weeks or more. The massive damage he had done to the Marines, the fact that they had been forced to admit to the destruction of their prison and so forth would simply add to Whitebeard’s legend.

When it came, the reaction to that weakness would be even worse, especially for places like Mermaid Island. With Jinbe’s position as Shichibukai no longer blocking them from directly preying on mermaids, the Tenryubito would no doubt pile in, wanting to get their hands on mermaid slaves now that the marines would help them do so, and it wouldn’t lead to war with Whitebeard.

By this point, Jinbe had gotten a decent grasp of Luffy’s basic character, his strength and good nature. Nevertheless, his mind still wrestled with what Luffy would want in return for using his flag. He and Jinbe might be friendly, and Luffy might be trying to convince Jinbe to agree to join up with his crew, but that was a far cry from using his flag to protect Jinbe’s home island of Mermaid Island like he was going to with Vivi and Amazon Lily without demanding something in return.

Luffy roused Jinbe out of his thoughts, and he looked over to see Luffy standing up, smirking a little. "So, with all that said, I think it's time to go over specific plans for the next few days. While Franky works on building this lightning-powered coaster or whatever for me and Vivi, that doesn't mean the rest of you lot are going to be idle. We're now on an island. That means space, and that means training!"

Nami and Makino both groaned but didn't voice any complaints to that, while many of the Kuja all nodded sagely. Even the Boa sisters grimaced but agreed, with Sandersonia speaking up for the pair of them. "Our Devil Fruits gave us a major advantage in the fight, but facing off against vice admirals showed us precisely where we are in relation to the real powers of the world. Maybe we should start trying to learn how to use concentrated Haki rather than the diffuse form we Kuja are so known for."

Luffy nodded, gazing at the two complaining women, then Laki, Chopper and finally Franky. "Exactly. I think I've got some stuff to teach you all, while you Kuja have stuff to teach my crew and me. Laki can probably get a lot out of your diffuse willpower technique, same with Makino. Nami, I think your training regimen should probably concentrate on Kenbunshoku. It's just a feeling, but I think you're close to pushing through."

"Ran," Hancock called, and one of the crowd of Kuja around them pushed forward, going to one knee. Luffy recognized her from her crew as one of the more serious and calm members. "I want you to take Makino and Laki under your wing. You're one of our best trainers when it comes to using diffuse Haki arrows. Take over whatever portion of the training ground you need and a workable regimen for them over the next few days. We'll be staying here for at least a few months training and getting stronger."

Above and beyond the threat from the WeeGee, Luffy knew that most of his crew wasn't ready for the New World. Luffy himself, Sanji and Zoro were the only ones he felt could handle that sea now, with Makino and Robin being a step below them. Luffy would have put Robin equal with Zoro if she could use her Haki for longer and had Kenbunshoku, but she didn't quite have enough stamina for a battle against a similarly trained opponent just yet.. As for Franky and Chopper, while Luffy knew Chopper just needed more training he wasn't certain how much Franky would get out of simply training. Yes, it would help him a lot in terms of building experience and tactics, but Luffy didn't know if he had enough flesh yet to learn Busoshoku, and they'd already tried to teach him Geppo and Soru, only for Franky to not achieve either even as Nami began to learn some.

Hmm... thinking about it, Robin and Vivi can both probably make that leap through training alone. Our Sand Princess doesn't have any Haki yet, but she's close to Kenbunshoku, and her logia powers are really well trained given she hasn't had them for even a year yet. Nami, on the other hand, needs some new tricks, and Laki and Makino better weapons on top of their existing skills and further training. Nami hasn't shown a hint of Busoshoku yet, but like Vivi, she's close to Kenbunshoku. Yet her personal style, well it needs some work.

Laki instantly hopped to her feet, moving over toward the shorter woman. Nami and Makino were a little more reluctant to go but did so. Perona decided she would also head over with them, shaking her head. "I'm not going to stay with your crew, I don't really have a dream or ambition that would push me to the extent of yours," she said with a sly glance towards Zoro. "But I'm willing to put in the time to get stronger to defend this place if I'm going to stay here. It isn't my first choice. It isn't dark, gloomy or with ghosts around. Still, it's what's on offer, and being free makes it worth protecting."

"Sister, Luffy, is it all right if we take over training Chopper? We'll also take over sparring with Franky once he's done with whatever he's building for you and the little Princess. But I think as fellow Zoans, there's a good deal we could teach Chopper. Our little tanuki friend needs more training in working with his Zoan forms, as well as more simple sparring work," Marigold stated, smiling down at the little raccoon creature.

"Gosh darn it! I'm a reindeer, not a raccoon!" Chopper bellowed as he grew bigger, causing snickers of amusement and laughter among the Kuja.

"That sounds like an excellent idea. As do you and Sanji heading off into the woods to spar for a bit," Hancock stated firmly, looking over at the two boys.

"I believe myself and the Princess can also train against one another, for the rest of the day at least," Robin stated, sharing a faint smile with Hancock. "I can teach her what I know of armor technique, and I think she actually might be just as close to learning Kenbunshoku as Nami, Luffy."

Sanji and Zoro needed no urging and were instantly up and off, arguing with one another, interspersed with Sanji flirting with the occasional Amazon as they moved through the crowd. Only Zoro's continued retorts brought him back from Mellorine Mode.

Vivi looked at Luffy, then over to Robin, shrugged, and stood up. "It does sound interesting. Although you will forgive me if I don't tell you any of my tricks before we actually spar, Robin-san."

Robin and Hancock exchanged glances again, faint smiles on their faces. The two of them had talked early that morning when Luffy reported he could sense minds in the distance as they closed on Amazon Lily, and they had agreed between them that Hancock could have the first two days of their stay on the island. It was Hancock's home, and while her relationship with Luffy was as solid as his with Robin, it wasn't quite as deep just yet. The pair needed some time to themselves without being interrupted by the rest of the crew, something that had proven impossible with how crowded the Everlasting Resolve had been on the way to Amazon Lily, just as it had been when Robin first became aware that Luffy and Hancock might have grown feelings for one another.

To say nothing of Vivi joining our relationship as she has. That has worked remarkably well, if I am honest. But helping Luffy and Hancock deal with their nightmares and how cuddly the young bluette is, even getting Hancock used to subtle touches and small intimacies from Luffy in his male body, is not the same thing as true one-on-one time, Robin reflected. Plus, while having Vivi around has been very pleasant, particularly at night, she and I still have things we need to talk about between us.

While Vivi and Robin had exchanged numerous kisses and touches of their own during their time aboard the Everlasting Resolve, getting used to seeing one another romantically, they had not really had time to just talk, and there were parts about their time in Baroque Works, Crocodile's machinations in Alabasta, and Robin's role in them that they did need to speak about. *And I still find it highly ironic that Vivi, of all people, received Crocodile's Devil Fruit after his death, Robin thought wryly. A kingly gift for a princess indeed.*

With Robin's permission to monopolize Luffy's time for the rest of the day, Hancock eagerly moved away from the others, leaping up and alighting on a nearby wall. "In that case, Luffy, let me show you around. There is more to see of Amazon Lily than just the arena and the port area."

Not having noticed the byplay between the three women, despite turning into one, Luffy was not fluent in woman-ese, Luffy stood up, gave Robin a kiss on the cheek, then hopped up after his other girlfriend. From the wall, he and Hancock bounced down over a series of rooftops down into the city proper, where Hancock started to point out various buildings.

One of them was a public library, something that Luffy would not have thought that the Amazons would go into. He took one look at that and shook his head, saying, "Well, I won't need to use my Kenbunshoku to find Robin while we're on this island."

"Probably not. We actually have a good deal of history books about our people and this island itself. Robin will find it very interesting, I'm certain." Hancock smiled, then reached up and wound her fingers through Luffy's hair. Luffy leaned into it for a second before Hancock, with no change of expression, yanked hard on his hair, pulling Luffy around to look into her eyes. "However, right now, I want all of your attention on me."

Instead of getting angry at the hair tugging, Luffy simply grinned, leaning forward and giving her a light peck on the cheek. Since a few Kuja were coming in and out of the library and moving around the street, that was as much as he would allow himself. They were already getting a lot of looks, and he poked her in the side, where he knew she was ticklish, causing her to let go of his hair with a little flinch. "You got it. Although I don't think my full response would make me all that popular with your people at the moment."

At that point, Hancock also became aware that there were Amazons around them, with many of them staring in shock at the kiss Luffy had just given her. While most of the Kuja didn't know much about men, they did know about romance and relationships. Enough to understand

what that kiss might imply anyway, and that, in conjunction with Hancock being their Empress, was enough to grab the attention of everyone there.

Of course, there were several women, mostly of Gloriosa's generation, who **did** know how things between men and women worked, so to speak. The Kuja could not reproduce between themselves, after all. Further, Kuja custom dictated that such things were forbidden to talk about, lest the Kuja culture become contaminated with it. That, and there was a real sickness among the Kuja, called Love Sickness, that their folk could fall into if they fell for a man and that love was unrequited. If such a thing happened, the woman in question would weaken and eventually fade away, literally dying of a broken heart, a horrifying end for any Kuja.

Yet despite knowing why everyone was staring, Hancock shrugged, uncaring. Whipping her neck around, Hancock sent her hair to swirl around her head for a second as her normal haughty expression flashed across her face. "Of course they are watching. I am beautiful, after all. You are of secondary concern to that basic fact." Looking at Luffy's deadpan expression, Hancock chuckled, turned away and leaped back up onto a nearby rooftop.

Luffy followed, but the instant they were out of sight of the Kuja on the streets below, Hancock twisted around, lunging towards Luffy, only to find Luffy waiting. His arms instantly went around her waist, pulling her into a kiss as her own lips sought his.

The kiss went on for quite some time, tongues playing with one another first in Luffy's mouth, then Hancock's. Back and forth they went, their hands moving up and down one another's backs, then further. Only reluctantly did Hancock pull away to breathe, tugging on Luffy's hands to get him moving once more. "C, come. That is enough of that for now. A rooftop is not the place for more than that."

"Eh, I'd argue the point, but when on Amazon Lily, do as the Kuja do," Luffy quipped, following after Hancock as, with a laugh, she resumed her job as a tour guide.

Below, the Kuja who had seen their empress allow someone to kiss her on the cheek, only slowly became unfrozen. "Di, did we just see that?" one of them muttered to another. "Someone being brave enough to not just t, touch Hebihime-sama, but to kiss her on the cheek?!"

"I had heard from Blue Fan and Dahlia that said Hebihime-sama had softened a bit," another Kuja mused thoughtfully before going on hastily, feeling the glares of several of her fellows on her. "Not weakened, just her general attitude, that's all! How else would you explain what we just saw?"

"True," another Kuja stated, one of the vast majority that had never left the island or seen a man in person before. "It isn't so much that the flat-chested one was brave enough to try it, but that Hebihime-sama let her get away with it. What amazing feat of skill and strength must she have done to gain the Empress's favor to that extent?!"

That brought on thoughtful expressions from most, but none of them were in any hurry to follow the pair and try to get answers. Whatever the Empress was up to, they would go along with. Such was her strength, and above and beyond anything else, in Kuja society, strength meant beauty, and beauty meant authority.

The rest of the Amazon city was pretty normal. The Amazons were not some other strange race. They were simply human and seemed in a lot of ways like the Amazons he had dealt with in his old life, only way more advanced in terms of combat abilities, living conditions and so forth. Indeed, even how their buildings were constructed reminded him somewhat of China, if not the Amazons. Stuck in their little village, Shampoo's clan would never have been able to build something as magnificent as this city, which sprawled along the valley, covering the valley's floor and built up into several different terraces along the sides.

Cologne, eat your heart out! Luffy thought at one point as the idea of what that old crone would think about Hancock and the others came to him as he stared out over the city from the top of a building on one of those terraces. The image of Hancock smacking Shampoo and her grandmother around like beachballs brought a grin to his face despite it being more than two decades since he'd last dealt with the Joketsuzoku.

Yet most of his attention remained on Hancock because as they went through the city, the two of them talked. Most of what they talked about was random or planning for the future. Hancock's thoughts on that score were sometimes brought to the fore when she spotted this Kuja or that portion of the city. They talked about the weather, Nami, Laki and Sky Island, Franky and his inventions, and whether or not Chopper, Marigold and Sandersonia would be able to awaken their Zoan-type Devil Fruits like the Beast Jailers had, without the downsides those monsters dealt with. They talked about adventures they had been on and they flirted.

The pair flirted a **lot**. Unsurprisingly, given the pair's attitude, much of that flirtation was physical despite having learned from Robin about the use of innuendo and subtle verbal flirtations.

Hancock and Luffy started to ambush one another occasionally whenever they were out of sight of the people on the ground below them. Once, Luffy found himself suddenly tackled from the side to the rooftop, with Hancock's mouth locking on his with an intensity that took even Luffy's breath away. Another time, he caught Hancock up from behind. Nuzzling her hair to one side, Luffy began kissing her collarbone and neck from behind, continuing just long enough to pull a whimper out of her, Hancock's hands clamped on his forearms where his arms wound around her waist before he moved away, smirking at her. Another time, Hancock pinned Luffy against a wall, her hands moving up and down his chest, then lower down before twitching away as their mouths locked together.

Occasionally, these moments' backfired, dark memories of Hancock's time as a slave rising up. Thanks to the time they spent with Robin and Vivi since entering the Calm Belt, those moments were, thankfully, few and far between. None of them lasted longer than a single

twitch before Hancock controlled her reaction once more, feeling desire rising up slowly over time, threatening to drown all else. Yet Hancock kept control of herself... for now. There was no rush for such things. *I have Luffy all to myself at present, and I mean to make the most of it, not just for myself but also in terms of thinking about the future.*

As for the city itself, Luffy took an interest in some of the stores and stalls. The blacksmith area interested him a little bit, as he knew that his lightning powers could be used to mold metal, but it was a discipline he'd never needed to learn. Back in his old life, he'd only ever dealt with finished products, be they swords, nails or other things needed in construction. He had learned how to use his 'Gloam Paddling' power but could hardly call himself an expert on metallurgy, which felt like it could come in handy in numerous ways.

The large carpenter's guild was also of some interest to both Luffy and Hancock, where normally Hancock would have just ignored them and assumed they knew what they were doing. Like the shipbuilders, they would be very important when it came to fortifying Amazon Lily. There was also the fact that Hancock and her crew needed a new, permanent ship. The ship the two crews had put together for the Kuja back in the Shabondy Archipelago, which they had used to get back to Amazon Lily and then from there to Marineford and the battle, had been left behind to sink as they made their getaway.

Thankfully, Franky was right there with the two leaders on that score. The pair ran into the cyborg near the dockyard area. He was talking to several of the locals, who looked torn between annoyance and anger at needing to talk to a man and interest at some of what he was saying.

The Amazons also had a whole street filled with various doctors, each of them specialists in a specific field. Hearing this caused Luffy to quip, "And now I know where Chopper will be found when he's not training. Makino, Nami and Laki in the training yard, Sanji mingling with your cooks... or with those two Kuja who are still following him around, Robin in the library and Franky with the shipwrights. That leaves only Vivi, Jinbe and Zoro I'd have to use my Kenbunshoku to find."

"Actually, Vivi will probably be with my sisters at the training yards along with the other ladies if she isn't training against Robin or myself. The little princess seems to have a strong desire to improve, more than Nami or Makino do, at any rate," Hancock answered, leading the way to the district in question once more, bounding from one terrace to another through the jungle-like foliage that was interspersed with the Kuja's city. "Jinbe will keep to the docks or the palace district, I think. He seems somewhat uncomfortable here."

Hancock shot a smirk over her shoulder. "As for Zoro, I'm afraid you're on your own with that one. It wouldn't surprise me if he's already gotten lost somehow."

Laughing, Luffy shook his head. "Hah, no way! Sanji wouldn't let him get lost while they're sparring. Afterward, though, that's anyone's guess."

Alighting on the first rooftop in the medical district, Hancock gestured down into it. "And here is Chopper's domain, as you say. Although I'm uncertain how much he'll be able to actually learn from my specialists. I've seen him at work, and he puts most of these doctors to shame with his skills."

She paused then, pointing down to a small building at the end of the cul-de-sac. "Although, I have to wonder about old Nyola and her assistant. I've never actually understood what their specialty is," she confessed.

Since neither of them was interested in medicine and so forth, Hancock made no move to jump down onto the street itself. And frankly, by this point, she wanted to kind of get away from her people for a little bit. While she was fully aware that all eyes should be on her, that didn't mean that she wanted them to be at all times, and several times during this tour, Hancock had seen her fellow Kuja staring at her and Luffy in shock or shrieking out her name in surprise at seeing how they interacted with one another.

The practice Hancock indicated had a small but well-maintained frontage, with a discrete sign above the doorway saying something in the local language that Luffy couldn't read. An old woman was sitting out on a stool in front of the office, her legs up on the table in front of her, wearing a large, wide-brim hat, the type Luffy had seen was all the rage among the nobles in the Goa Kingdom when he, Ace and Sabo had been running scams and stealing from the rich to give to the poor. That hat contrasted sharply with the low-cut primitive bra and short skirt the woman wore, although it wasn't the oddest clothing combination Luffy had seen that day and didn't even rank in the top ten all time. Her hair looked as if it had once been almost as red as Luffy's in his female body yet was now distinctly going gray. She still looked about as tall as Hancock did, though, and looked about as good a shape as most of the Amazons did.

When Luffy looked her way, he found her staring back up at him and Hancock, her eyes widening under the wide-brim hat she wore. Her gaze seemed to flick between them for a moment, and then she began to chuckle, shaking her head and waving at the pair.

That chuckle somehow carried them up and sent a shiver down Luffy's spine, and he wondered precisely what the woman's specialty was before deciding he didn't want to know. Looking over at Hancock, he found her also twitching a little. "Shall we move on?" he asked brightly.

She nodded firmly, muttering about what that was about, before leading the way off. After a few rooftops, both of them had gotten over the scare the doctor gave them and began flirting once more.

Behind them, Nyola stood up, laughing to herself as she headed inside her practice. One that was far larger on the inside than it looked, and also more important to the Kuja as a whole, than most of Hancock's age group or younger understood. "Well, at least I don't see any sign of

Hebihime-sama falling into Love Sickness. Still, it's best to make certain that other complications don't come around in due time. I'd best get to work."

Unaware of the odd doctor making plans, the two lovers left the city behind, going from bouncing over rooftops to bouncing through treetops as they raced up the side of the valley and up onto the ground beyond. Here, they began to see animals, large tigers, a few panthers and wild snakes. Many of these animals would not hesitate to attack even a pair of Kuja warriors out on their own. Such was the dangerous nature of Amazon Lily's jungle, yet whatever calculation went through these animals' brains when they saw this particular prospective meal told them that they didn't want to mess with Hancock and Luffy.

Only one particularly stupid giant boar tried to jump up at them when Hancock led the way down onto the ground, gesturing to a particularly pretty cave with massive sprouting from the walls and ceiling. A single blow from Luffy sent it skyward, where it was soon lost to sight, and he and Hancock entered the cave, looking around.

"This is pretty, but I prefer a more living kind of beauty, you know? A running stream, a flower..." Luffy paused, then smirked. He looked over at Hancock letting his eyes roam her body from head to toe. "You. You're easily prettier than this cave or anything else we've seen on this island since we left the others."

"I will allow that caveat to pass by without comment," Hancock snorted, throwing her hair over her shoulders again and staring officiously at Luffy. "As for the rest, it is good to know that your eyes still work."

The two of them looked at one another, then began to laugh, Hancock's haughty expression cracking instantly. She then found herself gently backed into a portion of the cave wall between two crystals and Luffy's mouth on hers once more. It was an odd mix of demanding and gentle that kiss, ending Hancock's laughter but replacing it with the same feeling of desire and arousal that had been building within her in fits and starts throughout the day as they had played.

Yet this time, Luffy left the option of deepening the kiss up to Hancock, making no effort to open his mouth and let his tongue out to play this time. Nor did he move his hands from where they were, his arms around her waist and shoulders. He was letting her dictate where this kiss would lead them, knowing they were all alone out here but not knowing Hancock's plans.

Hancock returned the kiss but made no effort to deepen it. While the torches her people lit in this cave continually and the crystals that reflected the light from them gave the cave a nice light kind of feeling, it was still a cave. Even with the crystals helping, there were far too many shadows, far too many dark places that forced Hancock's treacherous mind to remember her times as a slave under the Tenryubito.

Eventually, Hancock pushed Luffy away then, as he released her, moved past him, taking his hand. "Come, there is another place on the island I wish to show you before we head back to the palace and... continue the tour there."

Swallowing a bit at the implications of that, Luffy obligingly followed, trying hard not to let his eyes rest on the sway of her hips as she moved out of the cave. If he had to rearrange himself a little bit below the waist, no one was there to see.

The two of them raced through the trees again, this time not going around the edge of the island, but rather up from where the cave had been to the top of the mountain that dominated the island.

Soon, Luffy found himself practically scaling up after Hancock along a nearly vertical surface of rock, the side of one of the large arches where the stone turned from regular brownstone into white, high above where the carvings of snakes jutted out from the lower portions of the mountain. As he did, he had to stop himself from laughing occasionally. *Yep, best keep that thought inside, boyo. Liking Hancock's island to a fast food chain would be a very bad idea, even without needing to explain everything else.*

Given how fast the two of them could move, the nearly vertical area of the arch was no impediment, both of them using Geppo occasionally until the vertical wall of the arches gave way to a gradual slope, then a level escarpment. This was the second tallest area of the island, the two buttes that basically acted like shoulders in comparison to the main pillar of the massive, carved mountain. *Yeah, there's no way this mountain's naturally this shape, even if you take the snake carvings out of the equation.*

From there, Hancock led the way forward through the forest, with Luffy noting absently that the trees up here were distinctly more forest than jungle, a marked difference from the jungle of the lowlands that dominated the rest of the island either on level ground or up on the top of the escarpments which made the rest of the island. *Then again, we're so high up here it's actually a good deal colder despite this being a summer island. It could be that simple for the forest versus jungle thing. Not so much the shape of this mountain. Who the heck did the carving, giants like that Oz zombie?* Shaking his head, Luffy decided to set those thoughts aside as unimportant.

Or at least, not nearly as important as watching Hancock's hips swaying in front of him anyway. *Fucking hell, I've heard the old saw about a face that would launch a thousand ships, but Hancock's got a backside, and body, really, that would sink a fleet! Not that Robin and Vivi aren't gorgeous, but Hancock's attitude gives her beauty a more in-your face kind of feel.*

Soon, they reached the next vertical area, although here, Luffy could actually see up to the top, as it was only around six or more stories up so above where they were currently balancing among the foliage of a pine tree. Gesturing upward, Hancock bounced into the air, disdaining climbing up the surface, as it was even more vertical here than the arches had been.

Once in the sky over the central pillar portion of the mountain, Hancock gestured down into the jungle there, ignoring the hundreds of large birds that had begun to fly up from the trees there. "Look, there. You should see a dome there."

"Man-made... oh, yeah, I see it. Kind of looks like an observatory, er, a building made to look at the stars," Luffy stated, uncertain if such buildings were a thing on the Grand Line, as he'd never seen one before.

"Indeed, yes," Hancock stated, leading the way downward, still ignoring the birds who squawked and shrieked at the pair for their invasion of the birds' territory. "Although this one does not stare up at the stars."

Hidden and almost overgrown with green was indeed the dome of an observatory. It was a very primitive one, admittedly, made of stone and tile rather than concrete, but the shape was equivalent, and there was even what looked like the parts of a massive telescope sticking out. Despite obviously not being finished, given how it was missing a lens and several portions of its metal siding were missing, the old telescope was easily the largest that Luffy had seen in this world, made of bronze, copper, and other softer metals, along with several large well-made bits of glass Luffy could see when he stuck his head into the opening. The last few weren't in place, but the others were, giving Luffy a very distorted view of the inside of the tube and beyond, thanks to several exterior panels also missing.

Another large difference between this building and a regular observatory was that it looked as if the massive telescope pointed almost like a cannon straight ahead, looking over the terrestrial world rather than the sky above. Looking at the sides of the building closely, though, Luffy saw the whole thing was on a pivot, with large gears around the edges, each of them as large as his chest. "So it's supposed to move along, huh, giving the crew here a three-sixty view of the waters around the island? Heh, on any other island, I'd say you'd need to get oxen or something up here to move it, but with you Kuja all being as strong as you are, I doubt that's needed."

"Indeed not," Hancock answered proudly. "I would assign a group of four to do such a thing, with another two on the winches to move the telescope up and down."

Moments later, the two of them entered the building, and Luffy could see more signs of what this place was supposed to be: a few large cranks set into a series of gears on either side of the bottom of the telescope, along with a raised seat. There were dozens of small desks around the room and a rolled-up tarp that looked almost new in comparison to the rest. Indeed, as Luffy looked around, he saw some other, more recent signs of work being done here, even though he hadn't seen any such outside. There was a dozen covered bundles pushed against the walls here and there, and someone had even begun to clear away the bits of greenery that had begun to grow inside the dome, although work on the outside hadn't started.

“Only the strongest of us Amazons have ever developed Kenbunshoku, and none are as good as I am at it. Yet even in ancient times, my ancestors knew that the Calm Belt itself was not enough of a defense. Thus, they began to build this. It had fallen into disrepair several Empress’s ago, but Shakky began its reconstruction. Then I...” Here, Hancock sighed, shaking her head as she looked around the observatory. “I was too arrogant. I believed we would ever need it. I thought that my strength and status as a Shichibukai would be enough. But when I returned here with Franky and the others, I ordered work to begin on repairing and finishing it. As you can see, it isn’t nearly done yet...”

Here, she scowled, smacking her thigh with a hand. “Indeed, there should be a work gang up here, as it’s barely pushing evening. I will not punish anyone for joining the festivities down below, but I will be on their rears about it tomorrow.”

Smirking then, Hancock reached forward, rapping a knuckle on the metal side of the telescope. “But once this is finished, it is very doubtful that Amazon Lily will be taken unawares even when you and I are elsewhere. More than that, however, I wanted to show it to you, because I want Franky’s input on building weapons to match the abilities of this observatory. The carpenters and metalsmiths among my clan are exceptional, of course, but when it comes to building cannons, well, we never saw the point given our training in imbuing Haki into our arrows. In that or any large-scale metallurgy project like this, really. You would not believe how long it took us all to finish the various gears and so forth, and as you can see, we are still not finished. Any help Franky can provide in that area would be greatly appreciated. I want a real... Franky Special I think he would call it, as my flagship, but putting guns up here might be even more important.”

Luffy frowned pensively, then nodded slowly. “I wager he’ll be able to come up with some guns to put on the, let’s call them the shoulders of this mountain, the forests we just passed through. The question will be what kind of resources he’ll need to do it,” he warned, moving over to one thin parcel. Pulling off the heavy burlap sack, he found a large, thin, curved piece of copper housing that was certainly destined for the telescope.

Pulling it out, Luffy moved it into position, finding the appropriate place with some difficulty. Seeing what he was up to, Hancock moved over and held the plate in place. One of Luffy’s fingers turned into lightning, and he placed it along the edge, slowly melting the two slabs into one another. “But guns to match the range of this observatory are going to take a lot of iron, although maybe he can come up with something that will do the job without it? Who knows?”

“Who, indeed? But that was what I want to show you up here.” She fell silent as Luffy finished, but when he moved over to get another slab. Hancock reached out a hand to touch his cheek before pausing. Looking at that hand, Luffy could see it was trembling a little as Hancock smiled, a shy, almost tremulous smile as she looked back to Luffy, “But that, that is the last serious conversation for the day. I, I did not bring you up here to start work on this project. I, right now, I want to show you my palace, I think.”

The way she was acting gave those words far more import than they would have normally and Luffy, if only perhaps because of his two lives, easily understood what those words implied. "Are you sure, Hancock?" he asked hesitantly. "We, we haven't, er, gone all that far together just yet. So there's no need to um, rush to the finish line..."

"I am not rushing to the finish line, my heart. This... what I want us to do, is but a starting point, not the end goal. And I... I want to take this step with you. Tonight. Here, on Amazon Lily. In my bed, in my castle."

With that, Hancock leaned in to give him a gentle kiss, then turned away, hopping into the air. Luffy followed, glancing above and behind them occasionally to the observatory. In an effort to ignore what the pair were going to be doing tonight, he remarked, "Well, at least your ancestors didn't think small. Although I have to ask, I don't think most of you Amazons are all that good at Geppo, not good enough to get up here easily anyway..." He trailed off as Hancock banked them around the back of the mountain, where a primitive elevator had been constructed, leading the way directly up the central spine of the mountain from the ground far below. "Never mind then."

Chuckling, Hancock continued to lead them down into the buttes below, then still further down into the valley of the Amazons. There, she began to bounce her way toward her castle. This was near the arena Luffy had already seen earlier that day and even had its own personal road and entrance into the arena. As for the castle itself, like many of the other, smaller buildings, it was built into the mountains surrounding the valley, specifically the far end of the valley from the dockyard area, the rest of the city spreading out and away from it towards the. There, they lived on a balcony high up in the central pagoda-like tower, making Luffy remark internally to himself again that Kuja aesthetics certainly looked Chinese to his eyes.

From there, they entered a room, a large sitting room with several couches where Hancock's personal snake, Salome, waited. He raised his head, hissing in welcome, before Hancock smiled and waved him off, the lazy reptile rapidly going back to sleep. She frowned then as she looked at a pair of filled goblets waiting for them on a table. "My servants are always excellent in anticipating my needs, but they are not normally that proactive," Hancock murmured, moving over to the two goblets, where she saw a note waiting beside them.

Picking it up, Hancock read it, her brows furrowing.

Empress, while I am never going to try to control your actions, some actions might have consequences that you don't intend. I talked to Gloriosa, and she's of the same mind as me. We might be jumping the cannon a little bit, but with the world the way it is, and your man being who he is, it's better to be certain and prevent some of those consequences. Drink the cups marked out for you, then wait at least a full half hour by the clock before doing anything too... strenuous.

Signed, Nyola, Mistress of the Crèche.

This was followed by an even shorter message from Gloriosa.

Just drink it girl! And make certain Mr. Lightning King does the same. This world's too dangerous to deal with certain complications.

Luffy moved over and read the note over her shoulder, flushing a little at the implications. *A crèche is a word used to describe where groups of babies and toddlers are kept, right? I think I read that in some sci-fi book in my last life?*

“What is this? Why do Gloriosa and Nyola both think we should drink these? What does she mean by strenuous? Strenuous for a normal person or for the two of us? And prevent consequences, what consequences?” Hancock wondered.

“Er... I’ll tell you later. Right now, I think I’ll just say that these two seem to have known what you and I might be up to,” Luffy said, biting his lip and looking away embarrassed. *Well, I suppose this is better than going to Chopper and asking him for meds.*

Blinking, Hancock looked between Luffy and the two cups before shrugging her shoulders, holding out the one marked ‘man’ to Luffy before taking the other for herself. “Well, regardless, I...” The hesitancy came back, her attempts to look haughty and arrogant fading almost as soon as she tried. “I...”

Luffy took his hand in hers, plucking the cup out of her hand, whereupon he gently kissed the back of her hand, then her palm, then her pulse point. “We don’t have to do anything you don’t want to. Remember that, Hancock. In fact, we can put these down and walk away right now if you want to. Maybe join the celebrations your people were preparing for our victory. Or, we can just go as far as we have in the past, hugging, kissing, just sitting together on one of these sofas. I’ll be happy doing whatever you want and I’ll never push.”

Breathing in deeply, Hancock nodded, taking further courage from Luffy’s words. “I, I may be nervous, Luffy, but from what Robin has told me, that is perfectly normal. I will not let that feeling stop me from doing something a large part of me is more than ready for.”

With that, Hancock impulsively downed the entire goblet marked for her before gagging at the taste. “What did I... if this was some kind of prank, I’m going to gut those two old women!”

Luffy grimaced but followed suit, gagging only a little. He still had the memories of Akane’s cooking, along with Sabo’s in this lifetime, to get himself through moments like this. “Well, medicine is never supposed to taste good, you know?”

“I have never understood that philosophy whatsoever, and I am very grateful that Chopper doesn’t ascribe to it,” Hancock said tartly. Despite the nasty aftertaste in her mouth, though, Hancock was determined, and setting the goblet down, she reached forward, taking

Luffy's hands, before turning their feet towards one of the empty doorways leading out and away from her sitting area. Through this particular one, Luffy could see steam gently wafting occasionally when the wind came through an open window beyond. "Come Luffy, there are a few more rooms in here I wish to show you. And I desire a bath before anything else."

Lemon Start:

The bathing area was somewhat like a natural hot spring, which could house at least four, maybe five people at once if they were friendly in layout, but it wasn't actually a natural spring. The hot water came out of several golden snake statues along the backside of the tub, sending hot water down into the large bathtub set into the floor. The streams continually moved the water around, where hundreds of rose petals floated across the surface.

Entering the room, Luffy could see that there was a ledge built into the large bathtub all the way around. There was also a chaise lounge set to one side of the entryway, where a long bathrobe lay.

Luffy's attention shifted back to Hancock as she walked forward. As he watched, Hancock worked at her blouse, her sarong-skirt thing already a pile left behind her. From where he was standing, that didn't matter much, since Boa's cape restricted what he could see, and honestly had more cloth to it than the rest of her outfit. As the belt keeping her blouse shut, for a given value given how much of her chest her current blouse put on display from the front, came undone. Luffy saw her drop it to one side before reaching up to her shoulders, where the cloak was attached to her blouse by a pair of epaulets, keeping the blouse around her shoulders.

As she did, Luffy could see her hands tremble and paused his step into the room. Speaking softly he said, "Hancock, if you don't want to..."

"I do," Hancock answered, turning her head just enough to look over her shoulder at Luffy. "I **do**, after the past week's teasing, flirting and kissing. I know that you saw my, my back while we fought on Thriller Bark for a moment, but I... I still need to show you. My, my **shame!**" she nearly hissed, turning away to look down at the tiled floor.

Luffy bit his tongue on the first words out of his mouth, which would've been, "They're not scars, and they're not your shame to bear," but they wouldn't matter as he could see that Hancock was in full self-loathing mode. Given how, even now, Hancock had occasionally twitched and seemed uncomfortable taking affection from him, the marks on her back were only a visible sign of the very real mental damage that having been a slave, and worse, destined to be a very... specific and loathsome... kind of slave to boot, had made on her.

"You know I'll still think you're gorgeous," he said instead, staring back into Hancock's eyes with all the earnestness he could manage. "I thought you were gorgeous when you were

trying to your best to kill me, and that includes after I accidentally saw your back during our battle on Thriller Bark.”

Hancock smiled at Luffy, then, perhaps because of his words, took several steps forward until she was at the edge of the bath. There, she finished working at the epaulet on her right shoulder, which apparently worked as a kind of clasp, allowing her to remove both her blouse and her cape in one go, letting it fall into a puddle behind her, as she took a step into the bath, sitting on its edge as she reached behind her and pulled her hair to one side.

This was the first time that Luffy had seen Hancock’s back in all of its glory for more than the second it had cost him to toss her a shirt on Thriller Bark, and it was glorious, just as gorgeous as the rest of Hancock’s body. Hancock had a trim waist, a svelte looking back, without any scars like Luffy knew marked his own and Luffy could see her muscles shifting under her skin as she moved a little. Her shoulders were just as broad as Robin’s, but perhaps with a bit more visible muscle to them and her arms despite Robin’s training with Luffy.

But of course, there was also the brand on her back, which was the source of her current anxiety and long-term shame. The brand, burned into her skin by the Tenryubito who had enslaved the Boa sisters when they were younger, looked like a large red dot set between her shoulder blades. There were two little prongs above and below it, which made the thing look like a strange animal footprint of some kind.

Sitting at the edge of her bath, Hancock trembled, staring straight ahead, as her free hand moved behind her back, tapping the mark before falling to the side as if it had lost all strength. “This, I, every time I bathe, every time I see my back in a reflection, I am reminded of those years my sisters and I lost, enslaved to the Tenryubito. The looks, the leers, the touches! I remember how it was only the fact that my owner had yet to find someone willing to meet his price that, that saved me from still **worse** a fate! I, I know you and I have, talked about this, but to, to I, my inner demons are...”

As she spoke, Luffy moved until he was standing right behind her, going down onto his knees there. Now, he put his arms around her, his touch causing Hancock’s words to stutter to a halt. As she released her grip on her hair, both of her own hands moving to rest on his, Luffy kissed her neck, then down her back. She shivered as he laid gentle kisses on her brand, licking, kissing and even nuzzling into her skin occasionally, keeping his hands where they were resting on her stomach.

“I don’t care about your past. All I care about is when I touch you, you see **me** doing it, that my touch can override the memories of what you went through. I don’t care about your brand! I didn’t care when we first met, I don’t care now that we’re lovers. Your past is part of you, Hancock, but it doesn’t define you. The attitude you normally had when we first met doesn’t define you. They’re just small parts of your general character, and that character is what I’ve come to love!” Luffy hissed fiercely, as he kissed this direct center of her brand, causing Hancock’s hands to grip his forearms hard, a moan coming from her mouth.

He licked and actually bit at the skin there for a moment, causing that moan to grow in volume, then moved back up Hancock's body to her neck, then back down as he allowed his hands to start roaming. One hand moved up her front, first into the valley between her breasts, then to one of them, gently hefting it in his fingers. Doing so, made Luffy realize again that Hancock was at least a size larger than Robin, her breasts having both more bounce to them, and were astonishingly even softer too. *Not that it matters much, both Robin's chest and Hancock's are glorious, and just go with the rest of their bodies.*

Setting that somewhat disjointed thought aside, Luffy squeezed, delighting in the moan this elicited from Hancock. His other hand went down to Hancock's thigh, then into the junction between her legs, very, very slowly, before squeezing her thigh. He then moved it up to her navel, circling there as Luffy's main attention remained on Hancock's back, kissing, nibbling, licking.

This had not in any way been the response that Hancock had expected or dreamed that Luffy would give her. A significant portion of her mind knew that her hesitancy to show her back like this to Luffy had been silly in the extreme. While clothing had never come off in any of their romantic moments before this, Luffy had indeed made it plain that he didn't care at all about her brand back when they had been fighting on Thriller Bark and Hancock had lost her shirt to the blast radius from one of Kuma's attacks. Indeed, he had gone so far as to promise to keep it a secret whatever happened, despite knowing precisely what the mark was.

Yet Hancock hadn't thought that he would go to such lengths as to treat her entire back as if it was an erogenous zone, and that, along with his words, the word 'love', which they had not used all that often between the two of them, had her body reacting something fierce. Which again, Hancock had not expected. *Who knew that having your back kissed like this would be so arousingGGG!*

That last word almost disappeared from her mind in a haze of pleasure as the hand that had been fondling her chest, going from one breast to another, finally began to play with her nipples. Yet Hancock shook it off, smiling over her shoulder at Luffy and deciding that she had put up with being a passive object of his attention for long enough. "Thank you, Luffy," she said breathily. "And I love you too."

With that, Hancock twisted around slightly, and even as Luffy made to scoot along with the movement to keep up his ministrations, she was able to reach over and tugged at pigtail, pulling him up into a kiss. That kiss instantly turned hungry, as had many of their kisses throughout the evening. As they locked lips, Hancock grabbed at Luffy's shirt with one hand, pulling on it so strongly that the buttons down his front shot off, causing them both to chuckle into their kiss, even as her tongue began to dominate Luffy's.

That kiss went on for some time, during which Hancock slowly maneuvered Luffy and herself so that they were sitting side-by-side, one arm around each other's waists even as they

kissed, while her other hand went to work on his belt, undoing, then pushing his pants off into the water where they slowly began to float away, looking especially odd among the rose petals.

When her hand gently stroked over his manhood after his pants were gone, Hancock paused, then began to work her hand up and down his shaft, somewhat bemused by the size of it. Yet she felt no negative reaction to the very visible sight of his Luffy's arousal.

Meanwhile, Luffy had kept on kissing her. Now he began moving down Hancock's neck, then back up to one of her ears, while his hands stroked her side thighs, and chest. *When did she remove her earrings? I never saw her do it. Weird feminine sneaky-type powers*, Luffy thought, confused and aroused.

When Hancock's hands both began to play with his turgid boy bits, Luffy felt that it was time to get a little more serious. The one hand still playing with her side moved in between Hancock's legs again, whereupon one finger very deliberately stroked up and down her flower there, finding it moist despite the fact that they were still sitting on the side of the bath instead of in it.

Hancock twitched, her hands squeezing Luffy's manhood to the point where he groaned, pulling away from the kiss to moan a little, pressing her forehead against his as she looked down between them. For a few moments, it was all Hancock could do to watch as Luffy's hand gently stroked a single finger down her slit. She waited, watching that very masculine hand move over her womanhood, waited for bad memories, the horrible experiences she'd had as a slave to flood her mind again, to end this moment with her lover.

Yet despite her anticipation of what Chopper had once called post-traumatic stress disorder, instead, all Hancock felt was a rising heat. There was no flash of memory, no flinch, and after a moment, Hancock smiled widely as the last vestiges of her hesitancy began to fade. *This was the last thing I needed, the last bit of positive reinforcement to banish those memories!*

With a semi-tearful giggle, Hancock dove into the kiss again, then slowly pulled away from Luffy, sliding down into the bath until she was standing in it, the water coming up to her waist where she turned. One hand having already grabbed Luffy's hand, Hancock turned to look back at him, smiling as she pulled Luffy to her through the water. For his part, Luffy was still more than willing to let Hancock guide where this went, and went willingly, initiating another kiss as his hands went down her back, slowly tracing her brand for moment with his fingers, before working down to her rear, gripping it, pulling her against him.

Again, for just a second, Hancock hesitated, waiting tensely for a sudden cavalcade of dark memories to pour into her conscious mind as had occurred in the past. Yet they didn't. Instead, as Luffy's cock gently began to slide up and down her waist, all she felt was arousal.

When Luffy pulled back from the kiss, his hands moving from her rear up to her front and where he began to fondle her breasts, Hancock threw her head back and moaned, her own

hands moving down to grab his rear, then to his front. She began to work the shaft again, up and down, rubbing the head against the small dark thatch of hair she kept over her womanhood. "Goddess... yes..." she moaned.

Luffy leaned down, taking one of her nipples into his mouth, sucking, then gently nibbling. One of his hands continued down her body, where he began to play with her slit again, up down, then gently from side to side, until finally, Luffy slid his finger into Hancock.

Hancock hissed a little, but did nothing else. Instead she continued to kiss him, then moved down to his neck, biting and nibbling, as her eyes went down to what was going on between their bodies, the movement of their hands as they played with one another. She remained there, licking and nibbling at his collarbone and watching as he worked that one finger inside her, then added a second, her eyes practically rolling back into her head when he gently curled them inside of her. "Luffy!" *Thank you, Robin, for teaching him that trick!*

For his part, Luffy had begun to move his hips a little, the feel of Hancock's hands on his shaft, the softness of her body against his meaning that he was edging towards his first orgasm of the night. For Hancock, that finishing line came a moment later as Luffy's thumb found her clit, gently moving up and around it, then pressing down.

With a loud mewling moan, Hancock bit down on Luffy's collarbone, muffling her own cry as best she could as her hips began to spasm rapidly.

The next second, that movement and the fact that Hancock had gripped his shaft even harder had Luffy pushed over the edge as well. Rope upon a rope of cum jetted out of Luffy's cock as he threw back his head, painting the bottom of Hancock's breasts and both of their stomachs a thick, viscous white.

The two of them leaned heavily against one another, their legs threatening to turn into jelly for a few seconds, then Hancock pulled away slightly, allowing her knees to give out as she fell into the water. Luffy did the same, grateful that bathwater like this with no seawater in it didn't activate their Devil Fruit weakness. The two of them began kissing again, only their heads above the water for a second, the water doing a magnificent job of washing away Luffy's excretions.

With both of her hands in Luffy's hair, Hancock began to move backwards, until she was sitting on the ledge. She spread her legs, and was delighted to find that Luffy's cock had once again risen, if, in fact, it had ever gone down. One hand moving down, she gripped his shaft, and aimed it at her womanhood.

Feeling the difference in what his caulk head was rubbing against, Luffy paused, opening his eyes from where he had let them close in the kiss, to find Hancock sitting on the ledge, her legs already wrapping around his waist. Pulling her his hands away from her chest and back, Luffy placed them on the edge of the bath behind her, staring into her eyes. "Are you sureEEE?"

Luffy couldn't even finish the question, before Hancock's legs pulled him into her, and his shaft slid into her pussy several inches. She gasped, her eyes wide, her hips frozen in place for second, but she gritted her teeth, and shook her head. "You're a little thicker than my toys Luffy, but I have at least had some experience!" Hancock had lovers among the Kuja before this, it'd only been the fact that Luffy was a man that had forced them to go slowly.

Hancock just knew at this point that she would no longer be bothered by flashbacks to her time as a slave, neither with Luffy, nor with the deed tonight. His admiration, his love for her had finally banished the last of her demons. "Do it!"

With that, Luffy slid home all in one go, and Hancock saw stars.

How long the pair of them had made love, neither of them knew, yet it was fully dark out by the time Hancock finally allowed Luffy to pull out of her entirely. She had lost count of the orgasm she'd had, the positions they'd tried, although by far the best for her had been when they'd been in a sitting missionary, staring into one another's eyes as Luffy slowly moved in and out of her. He would vary his tempo occasionally as well as the angle of his thrusts, while leaning down to lick and nibble at her nipples and breasts, Hancock's own arms around him.

And every time Luffy would come inside of her. This had filled Hancock up to the point where his cum was now leaking down into the bath in a veritable river from between her legs.

Yet Hancock's endurance could take it no longer, and she gently pushed Luffy away even as she slowly slumped deeper into the bath until her head was the only thing above water. "Enough my love, enough. I am spent for the night I think," she groaned, her head lolling against the side of the bathtub, her eyes barely open.

"Ara, that's rather good, as I think our dear princess here is also spent."

The two lovers blinked, then pulled their eyes away from one another to turn to the side. There, they saw Robin sitting on the chaise lounge, with Vivi next to her turned slightly away from them as she leaned against the taller woman's body. Vivi was still wearing her blouse and a skirt, but it Luffy could see several of Robin's hands playing with Vivi's lithe body, both over her clothing and under her skirt.

In contrast, Robin had pulled off her shirt, showing her bra-clad breasts gently shifting every time she breathed. Robin still wore a short skirt underneath, but seeing movement there as well, Luffy knew that she had conjured a hand underneath to play with herself as well.

"How long have you been there?" Hancock asked with chagrin. She pushed herself to sit on the ledge again, twisting around to stare at Robin, a faint smile playing across her features despite her embarrassment at how completely out of it Vivi looked.

"We came in as Luffy began to impale you in your previous position just now," Robin said, shaking her head as she stared past Hancock down into the water for a moment, licking her lips, a very slight slur to her voice telling Luffy she wasn't quite sober. "At that point, I was almost tempted to interrupt, but seeing the two of you so engrossed with one another, I decided to let you continue."

Robin smiled, one of the hands pulling away from Vivi's face, where it had previously been over her mouth, gently stroking up and down her cheek to rouse her. "It was a most amazing show." With that, the two hands underneath Robin's short skirt shifted, pushing it upward. A moment later, her womanhood was glistening in the light, the throbbing of labia showing precisely how much she had enjoyed the show and her own ministrations.

"I guess ya covered yours and Vivi's mouths the entire time?" Luffy asked. *I knew she was a voyeur and mentioned once she enjoyed watching, but I did not expect this! And how the heck did she sneak up on us?* "Although, I suppose with a woman like Hancock, the idea of taking your attention away from her for a moment is kinda hard to think of."

The giggles from Robin and Hancock were the first sign that Luffy had said that last sentence aloud, but despite a bit of a blush, he plowed on, gesturing to Vivi. "And I'm surprised that our little princess was courageous enough to come with you. You wanting to watch us I can see, Robin, but Vivi?"

"After a talk with Gloriosa, your sisters decided to go through with the festivities even if you weren't going to join them Hancock, and that allowed for a good deal of alcohol to be imbibed." Robin paused, looking down at Vivi as she began to stir, smirking just a little. "Liquid courage allowed me to convince Vivi to come with me. Although at the moment, I rather have to assume that is not going to make her any less embarrassed."

Vivi looked up at Robin, blinking, then turning, staring at the upper body of Hancock, and where Luffy was still standing in the middle of the tub. The princess's face went bright red for a moment before she eeped, twisted around and placed her hands over her eyes.

"You see?" Robin chortled, pulling the shorter girl into a hug.

"I, I wasn't... I'm **so** torn right now! A part of me wants to look, a part of me is mortified to look, a part of me is mortified to be here, the rest is still feeling all tingly!" Vivi stammered, her words, still just slightly slurred from how much she'd had to drink, barely audible to Hancock and Luffy muffled as they were by Robin's chest.

Chuckling quietly, Hancock allowed herself to fall into the water, dunking her head in for a second, before standing up, and resolutely getting out of the tub, moving towards the other two women. As she did, she tried to cover the wince in her step, but Robin saw it and smiled faintly, knowing that her lover, or rather, their lover, had pushed the Pirate Empress beyond her limits.

The sight of the dribble of cum still trailing down Hancock's inner thigh, however, caused Robin to speak up even as Hancock opened her mouth to say something. "I do hope that you and Luffy saw the concoctions Gloriosa and Nyola left for you in your quarters before you began your festivities Hancock. I know I requisitioned some of the concoction for womenfolk before coming up here myself."

The comment had Hancock pausing, then looking down to where Robin was looking. She reached down, tentatively ran a finger up her slit and into herself for second. Shuddering just a bit, she then pulled her fingers out, watching a string of cum connect her pussy to her fingers before falling away. She tentatively raised them, sniffed, then shook her head, wiping them off on her thigh before looking back up at Robin while Luffy twitched behind her, torn between fear at what he knew was about to be discussed, and incredibly turned on at the show Hancock was putting on.

"Yes, we did, although for the life of me, I have no idea why Gloriosa wanted us to drink those. My concoction was particularly foul tasting," Hancock scowled.

Robin stared at her, blinking slowly, then shaking her head as Vivi also raised her head from her hands to stare incredulously at Hancock. "Hancock, you do know where babies come from right?"

"The crèche," Hancock answered bluntly. "At least here on Amazon Lily. The rest of the world might do things differently I suppose. Why? What does that have to do with anything?"

"Not it!" Luffy said hastily holding up his hand.

Scowling just a little at that, Robin shook her head and began to explain.

Outside, Nyola, several of the older Kuja, and Gloriosa were watching in some shock as Nami downed more alcohol after drinking Aphelandra, Ran and Daisy under the table, one after the other. The only person still drinking with her was Marigold and she was starting to look a little tipsy. "Where in the hell does she put it all? It can't all go to her boobs," Nyola wondered, her voice barely audible over the sound of Brook's violin and a few of the Kuja singing. Which was much better than his moving from one to another asking to see their panties.

"No idea. I--" Gloriosa began, before she was interrupted.

"Babies come from where!?!?" the shriek came from the palace, and was more than loud enough for every Kuja still awake to hear it. A moment later, the oldsters, every Kuja above forty, all began to laugh raucously, for once, not allowing the awe and respect that they felt towards their Empress to get in the way of a good joke. Soon Nami, Brook and Jinbe joined in, shaking their heads in amusement.

Back in the royal bathroom, Hancock whirled on Luffy, glaring at him so hard that he flinched backwards, holding up his hands. Although the look, which was accompanied by full frontal nudity, did nothing to make his hard-on die down. "Did you know about this?!"

"Yeah, I did, but I also knew that those concoctions were probably to prevent any trouble. I figured I'd, er, explain things to you in the morning, or better, force Gloriosa to do it for me, considering how embarrassing it is! Remember Hancock, I got my own female form, and the very idea of getting pregnant is horrifying! So, I know how terrible that is for you to think about. The body changing and everything."

"... True. And yes, I have absolutely no desire to go through anything of that nature! I am going to get Nyola to make us several years' worth of those concoctions, and every time we even so much as sleep in the same bed I'm going to take some just in case sleeping becomes other activities," Hancock decided.

"I did the same thing with Chopper and his little pills when Luffy and my relationship reached that point," Robin confessed, while Vivi simply sat there. She was once more covering her eyes with one hand, and was also shaking her head back and forth.

Seeing the small smile on Vivi's face, Hancock decided that the younger girl had had enough fun at her expense. She strode forward as much as her limp would allow, before pulling Vivi off of this chaise lounge and into her arms, causing the girl to yelp. "EEEE! H, Hancock-sama?"

"Well, I will do something nice for both of those old women tomorrow morning, and then smack them both upside the head for not telling me about, what did you call it, the birds and the bees? But that is for tomorrow. Tonight?" Hancock looked over at Luffy, then down his body to where his shaft was still standing at attention. *HMMF, I need to upgrade the power of my glare if he can still react to my and Robin's bodies like that.*

"I'm tired, and I desire bed. However, this room and that lounge you are sitting on, Robin, are still available for the two of you. Myself and the Princess will see you in the morning."

Robin smiled, thanked Hancock and watched for a moment as Vivi settled into Hancock's arms, going along with things docilely. *Who would have thought that fiery, independent tomboy of a princess would be such a submissive,* Robin thought.

Turning back to Luffy to give voice to that thought however, Robin saw that Luffy had crossed the intervening distance between them in a blink of an eye. He pulled her into the air, and Robin squealed a little as one of his arms cupped her skirt-clad rear, the other winding into her hair as Luffy pulled Robin into a kiss that took her breath away from the passion of it.

For several moments, the two of them made out there with Luffy holding Robin in midair, before her legs started to go around his waist, and she began to slowly work her hips against his, hands appearing on her body and releasing her bra and skirt. As she finished with that operation, Luffy pulled away slightly, whispering, "Did I hear you right, that you took some of that medicine too?"

"I did indeed, forward thinking woman that I am," Robin moaned. She then giggled a little, shaking her head. "Nyola actually offered me a different concoction, one that increases arousal along with having the effect of still not allowing me to get pregnant, but we certainly don't need that." Her voice was a throaty purr as she spoke into Luffy's ear. "I can't imagine a time when we will, do you?"

"Fuck no," Luffy growled, lifting her up into the air just a bit, before allowing her to drop down, impaling her on his hardness, as the night continued.

Lemon End

OOOOOOO

While Luffy and his lovers were having a very happy time of it on Amazon Lily, a certain eccentric (**not** mad, thank you very much!) scientist was extremely unhappy. Orders had arrived four days ago for him to prepare to move his entire research operation from Egghead Island, an island that had basically been uninhabited before he arrived, to the Holy Land.

He had tried protesting. He had attempted to obfuscate, to tell the Gorosei and everyone else that there were too many experiments at too critical a stage here on Egghead Island for his whole operation to be moved like that. He'd offered compromises, pointing out several dozen experiments that could be moved, and even created a timetable to move his operation slowly over a few years so as to not lose any time or data.

All of it had fallen on deaf ears. Indeed, by the end of his protests, one of the Gorosei had personally gotten on the Den Den Mushi and told him that he, St. Jaygarcia Saturn, would be arriving soon to oversee the operation.

That was it. There was no way out of it. While Dr. Stella Vegapunk would hold his hand up and say proudly that he was the most intelligent person on the planet, he had never made plans for what might happen if the World Government simply demanded he move to the Holy Land.

Well, that was a lie. Vegapunk **had** made plans for that eventuality. In fact, he had begun plans in that direction well before the demand from the marines for more Pacifistas and K9Ms had arrived following the Thriller Bark incident, only accelerating them afterward. That did not

mean that those plans were at all ready. As smart as he was, and there was literally no limit to how smart Vegapunk was, he only had so many hands he could trust, even if he had six more pairs of said hands than most people.

To look at him now, as he raced around the FabirioPhase, the area where the majority of his helpers worked on building things to his direction, Dr. Vegapunk would look like, well, as one irascible attendant had once put it, "A midget grandfather who's escaped from either an insane asylum or an old folk's home." He was indeed quite short and definitely looked older than he actually was. Save for around the sides of his head, he had very little hair, a bright pink nose, and wide triangular whiskers and routinely walked around with a bemused look on his face, complete with Vegapunk's tongue sticking out almost continuously. That wasn't the strangest thing about Vegapunk, though.

The strangest thing was the fact that Vegapunk was missing the topmost portion of his cranium. In fact, if you looked at him from above, Vegapunk's head was completely hollow. Although the majority of the hole at the top was covered by what looked like an apple's top on a stick, which continually swiveled around. This was, obviously, not normal. Normal people could not survive with half of their heads chopped off, something that most humans would not need to see in action to understand. Yet Dr. Vegapunk was seemingly the exception to this rule.

The reason for this was because of the Devil Fruit he had eaten when he was younger. The Nomi Nomi no Mi allowed his physical brain to continually expand with new knowledge that he absorbed. This made Vegapunk remember everything that ever happened to him or he learned, and he could understand new knowledge that he discovered almost instantly. Even things that would take a lifetime of study for someone to truly master, Dr. Vegapunk could understand within a matter of days at worst. This quickly made Vegapunk the smartest, most learned pure scientist in the world, although amusingly enough, his skill at actually building things always trailed well behind his ability to learn.

The human brain was not meant to continually grow over time beyond a certain point, a point that the Nomi Nomi no Mi had surpassed quickly after Vegapunk had eaten it. This had caused quite a lot of problems. At first, it had gotten so big that he just looked incredibly strange, with his cranium larger than the rest of his body by a factor of two, then three, then four...At that point, it had gone from being an oddity to becoming a danger to his actual life, his brain becoming so large it was threatening to crush the rest of his body.

To combat this initially, Dr. Vegapunk had come up with a kind of hover chair that allowed him to get around without using his feet while essentially propping up his brain on the device taking the weight of it off of him. However, even that had begun to cause issues, as his brain was growing all the time. By the time he came to work for the World Government, Vegapunk's brain had been as large as a small house, and the rest of his body was in danger of breaking down having to deal with it.

Therefore, Dr. Vegapunk decided to remove his brain. This had been a long, laborious process, but eventually, his brain had indeed been removed along with the top of his head. Stuck in a giant cylinder of amniotic fluid and kept alive there, Vegapunk's brain was now Punk Records, connected to his main body via radio signals, which allowed him access and allowed Vegapunk to continually update what was in his mind.

The scientist had not stopped there, hence how he came to have six more pairs of hands he could trust as well as his own. Instead of keeping all of that stored knowledge only for himself, Dr. Vegapunk had created six other versions of himself. Robotic versions, to be sure, but still other versions, or satellites, each of which was connected primarily to one satellite of his personality. Gluttony, anger, Pythagoras, morality and so forth.

A case in point was the little robot that was leading the packing project occurring around the dockyard area despite the continual snow coming down. Around the size of a young child, Edison, Vegapunk's 'thinking' satellite had a head shaped like a strange ball with two appendages up top that were designed to look like rabbit ears eyes bulging out of a rectangular black-pained opening in the front with the number 03 is branded on his forehead. He wore a green and white jacket with the word 'idea' printed on the right, while the other side resembled a monk's staff. Like all of Vegapunk's satellites, he had metallic fingers that were extremely dexterous. His legs were thin and barely looked able to hold up his own minuscule weight, but they and his blocky feet never stopped the most energetic and hyperactive of Vegapunk's satellites from zipping around, asking questions, making calculations and running experiments.

"Don't you dare drop that! Those notes will be incredibly important for the Green Blood project. Oh, Edgar, take these calculations over to the woodcrafters. I've made notes on how many boxes and in what dimensions we'll need to finish up packing Lab A and B. C is pending data from Lilith," Edison announced, his words nearly running into one another but still understandable as the original Vegapunk zoomed towards him on his small scooter. "That includes the additional buildings attached to A."

Just before Vegapunk came within talking range, Edison twisted around to address another man. "Charles, check in with the team leaders. They're supposed to have plans to evacuate FabirioPhase to one of our satellites in an hour, but I calculate they've run into trouble. If it's more calculating power they need, call me back. If it's human issues... Er..."

The FabirioPhase was the area where most of Vegapunk's assistants, researchers and attendants were housed, the people who worked on duplicating or bringing to life projects that Dr. Vegapunk had created in his mind. None of them had the sheer intelligence to keep up with him when he came to experiments, all of which were housed in the Labophase, itself separated into several different buildings, all of which were further segregated from the rest of the island by the fact it was all located on artificial island cloud, the cloud puffing up continuously from a cloud factory Vegapunk had designed, built and installed in the center of the island. The rule of thumb was that experiments and science happened in the Labophase. Building, engineering and construction all happened in the FabirioPhase.

Currently, Stella and Edison were both in the outer area of the Fabirio phase near the dockyard area.

"Understood, Sir. Don't worry, I'll warn them that if they don't get a move on for that project, Lilith or Atlas can come and take over," the man so addressed answered instantly, grabbing the papers and running off as Edison and Vegapunk both chuckled at his words.

The sound alerted the short satellite to his original's presence, and he turned rapidly, almost bouncing in place. "Oh, Stella! What can I do for you?"

"You're doing a great job out here, although I thought that Pythagoras had chosen to help move our various files like this?" Vegapunk asked, steam puffing out from his breath. *Pity I haven't finished designing that weather control system just yet. It's so cold out here!*

Edison shook his head. "I volunteered because we both thought that my energy would be better used here."

"Sound thinking. Do you know where York is?" Dr. Vegapunk asked.

"Um... she should be overseeing work in Lab B, preparing everything for the move," Edison answered, looking hesitant. "If, um, if she's gone off to eat or sleep, I'm sorry ahead of time, Stella."

"It wouldn't be your fault, Edison. I'll go see if she is actually doing the work. And Atlas?"

"OH!" Edison chirped, sounding happier than he had a minute ago. "That I know. She's in the scrapyard. Preparing to move..." his voice lowered as he looked around, "Emet."

"Good," Vegapunk breathed out. "Very good. I knew she and Lilith had been arguing about that, it's good to know they settled on Atlas doing the work. As Jealous and annoyed as Lilith gets around our... our ancient sample, I doubt she'd have gotten much work done."

Edison chuckled wanly at that, and Vegapunk waved him off. A moment later, his hoverboard's engines shifted configuration, and he rose into the air above the dockyard, zooming up and away to the island cloud that covered a third of Egghead's interior, shivering until a bubble formed around him, and warm air began to flow out of a grill set below his controls.

Soon, Dr. Vegapunk entered Lab B, grateful that the Labophase was at least well above the snow, if not the cold. This was where biological or Devil Fruit-based experiments occurred and were, in many ways, the most important of the labs. Entering one of the rooms within, he found, to Dr. Vegapunk's surprise, his satellite of gluttony, York, was here, her arms crossed and barking orders as she organized the effort to prepare equipment that wouldn't be needed to move the Lineage Factor samples of the Shichibukai and other similar items without the

samples dying. That was going to take some time, and Dr. Vegapunk was pleasantly surprised to see York becoming so involved.

In sharp antithesis to the diminutive Pythagoras, York was an android built in the image of a young-looking woman of incredible size, standing nearly sixteen feet tall. She had long and wavy blonde hair and aqua eyes with a few freckles under her eyes. Her mouth was broad, and she had rosy, chubby cheeks, although that was mainly because, as the satellite of gluttony, a large portion of her task on a day-to-day basis was to eat, sleep and go to the bathroom so that the other satellites didn't have to. Despite a bit of chubbiness, however, her chosen attire, a purple top cut off just below her breasts, purple bikini bottoms, black gloves and a hooded jacket, put her attractive body on display to the point the other satellites had heard many of the single engineers and workers comment on it when they thought none of the satellites could overhear. An earpiece that did as both ears and communication device to Punk Records was the only sign that she was not an overly large human.

Gluttony was his latest satellite, hence the Punk-06 on her breast. Work on her had been completed barely a few months ago, although, at this point, Dr. Vegapunk wasn't certain he should've done so. Most of the time, despite it being her main task, York seemed far too lazy and interested in food. She had yet to prove it could be as much of an asset as his other satellites, despite allowing the rest of them to work without needing to bother about eating or sleeping.

Or perhaps it is because she, Atlas and Lilith are female, the original Vegapunk mused. Should I have kept all of my robots androgynous or simply male? Two out of three versions of me that are female are troublesome in some fashion. Even the oldest, Atlas, has emotional issues when controlling her anger. I've had to pay off numerous assistants and rebuild several dozen buildings due to her anger, whereas Lilith likes picking fights, building too many weapons, and stealing from people! Still, right now might be a good time for some positive reinforcement.

Just as Stella was about to open his mouth to congratulate York on being able to stay up for so long when, she slumped down in place, grabbing up an apple from a bag beside her, sighing faintly. "This is **sooo** much work! I understand it's an order from on high, but good grief. The World Government better understand that perfecting the Green Goo into green blood isn't an easy process. And our plan to eventually replace the Shichibukai with our own, fully indoctrinated versions is going to be set back by at least three months, given how long it'll take us to rebuild our labs, make certain the samples haven't degraded and everything else."

York's attitude then did a complete three-sixty as she finished off one of the apples and barked out a command to one of the men who looked as if he was about to make a mistake. "If you mess up anything, that's going on a report! One of the rulers of the world is going to arrive here to oversee things, and everything had better be perfect before they arrive!"

There was actual anger and even some fear there, which was fair enough in Stella's mind, although there was also a little bit of awe and respect. Watching as York pulled out

another apple, Dr. Vegapunk sighed but left her to it, soon leaving Lab B behind him. So long as she was doing the work, he wasn't going to complain. *Although, I do not like how much reverence she seems to have for the World Government. They are simply a source of money and funds. After all, only science matters, only advancing our knowledge.*

Before he could ponder further on the strangeness of his newest satellite, a voice hailed him from one side, and Vegapunk turned, seeing his first satellite coming up towards him. "Stella-sama."

This was Shaka. He was one of the more humanlike satellites, at least in size anyway... and you did not count his face because he really didn't have one. Instead, his head was a curved dome of black metal, ending in several ridges at the back of his head, while in the front, there was a small grill for a voice box at the front. Similar to all the other satellites, he didn't have ears. He had audio receptors built into a pair of antennae on either side of his head. On his face, he had the number '01' stenciled, showing he had been the first satellite Vegapunk had made, while he wore a long dark blue coat that covered his body from neck to toe, with the word 'hazard' on one sleeve and 'Vegapunk' on the other.

Shaka embodied goodness, or justice, as Dr. Vegapunk understood the term. He was the antithesis of Lilith, the next satellite that Vegapunk had created, who was supposed to be evil and destructive, although, to Vegapunk, she was more an annoyance. "Stella, Pythagoras has reported something that you might want to know about."

"I want to know about everything, everything, all knowledge, all science is worth knowing," Dr. Vegapunk answered with a laugh. Since all of them were satellites of himself, the other satellites called the original Stella, Dr. Vegapunk's first name. "What has Pythagoras discovered? In fact, what was he working on? He and Edison switched places today for some reason."

Despite being a brilliant scientist, Dr. Vegapunk, indeed nearly all of his satellites, could sometimes be a little scatterbrained. Moreover, it had to be said that Dr. Vegapunk had been **extremely** put out and discomfited by recent changes. First, the need to duplicate and emplace a laboratory to create K9Ms and Pacifistas on Marineford over his objections. Then, over his objections **again**, Vegapunk had needed to send out the entire supply of experimental Green Goo to help against Whitebeard and his forces. The fact that the Green Goo was only temporary, at best it would last a few hours, and that it would impact the health of the people who used it, shaving years off of their lives, had seemingly been completely ignored by the marines and the higher-ups. As had the fact that creating the Green Goo had taken years and that destroying his supply would set him back at least a year or more in perfecting the substance.

But at least there, the reports of the battles that had been sent his way had given Dr. Vegapunk a lot of new data to use for the Seraphim project.

To Stella's surprise, Shaka leaned down, his voice lowering to a near whisper that even Dr. Vegapunk had trouble hearing, despite the fact they were out in the open between two of the labs with no one around them. "Pythagoras was checking on PAW-1. Something has been occurring there, and he has been analyzing the data from the video recorders situated in the laboratory where that experiment is stored to discover for how long."

Blinking, Dr. Vegapunk stared at Shaka for a second, and then his face firmed to the point where he actually pulled in his tongue for a second to grit his teeth. PAW-1, PAW-1, well, it, it was **important**! An experiment from before he'd even begun work on Shaka, let alone the other satellites, a present, memory, obligation and experiment all in one. "Let's go."

Within minutes, the two of them were racing along in their own hover devices, heading deeper towards Storage 1, an old, semi-abandoned building deep in the Labophase that, for security reasons, did not exist on any record. Not even Punk Records had a memory of the very few experiments that went on there.

At the entrance to the storage building, they found Pythagoras. At around ten feet, Pythagoras was the third largest of the more robotic-looking satellites, with thin robotic arms and an oddly fat-looking metallic body painted red and cream. He was the fourth of the six Stella had made, the stencil of which was set into the center of its chest. Perhaps the most interesting thing about his body was that Pythagoras' head was a sphere with a turnkey protruding from the top. His eyes always appeared drowsy for some reason Stella had never quite figured out. Even odder was the fact that, on a whim, Stella had made it so Pythagoras' head could detach from the main body and move independently, including a small set of retractable arms and legs. This made him really good at fiddly maintenance work in small areas, although he wasn't using his head in such a manner now.

Pythagoras bowed in greeting to Stella. Then, after a surreptitious look over Shaka's shoulder, ushered them inside the observation booth of the storage room. Yet Dr. Vegapunk had to stop and stare at the sight of experiment PAW-1 through the glass separating the outer area from the old lab it was situated in, his tongue dropping back out of his mouth in shock.

In the center of the laboratory was a giant bubble shaped like a bear's paw. It was around two stories tall and pulsed with energy. If anyone had entered the laboratory who had dealt with or even seen Bartholomew Kuma's powers in action, they would've made the instant connection. It looked like an attack from that Shichibukai had been paused in place and then connected to various bits of technology.

There were significant differences, things that had not been here the last time Vegapunk had been in this building. For one thing, it wasn't all one color. It should have been, Dr. Vegapunk thought, it had been for several years: a huge bubble of light and dark red.

Bartholomew Kuma had become one of Dr. Vegapunk's friends rather swiftly upon their meeting, but Bartholomew had initially come to the marines, and through them Dr. Vegapunk,

for help healing his daughter, Jewelry Bonney from an incurable illness. In return for that, the World Government demanded his loyalty, and that he becomes both a Shichibukai and the center of the Pacifista Project, Kuma having already made a name for himself as a terror on the oceans.

When it became clear that the experiments being done on him to starting to take away his humanity, Dr. Vegapunk and Bartholomew had made several... agreements between them. Agreements that no one in the World Government would have liked to know about. Part of those agreements had been to spirit Kuma's daughter away. The other was to let Bart store all the memories of his daughter and his love for her here in Egghead, where Jewelry could access them. Those memories had colored the bubble in a deep pink and mixed red.

Now, though, those colors were not as prominent. The bubble was streaked with blue, green, white and yellow, along with the original red and Pink. The feeling the bubble gave off was also different, something that Dr. Vegapunk was slow to realize. It was almost as if the thing was giving off some kind of energy, along with an inner light of some kind.

"What is this? What has happened to Bart's memories?!" Stella demanded, looking over at Pythagoras.

Pythagoras shrugged his robotic shoulders, gesturing slowly as he did most things towards the container. "I do not know, but I can conjecture. We have long known that the Nikyu Nikyu no Mi could not only reject physical matter, but feelings and even injuries to a certain degree."

"Yes, yes! Along with specific memories and so forth. That was why this experiment was created in the first place," Dr. Vegapunk said, trying hard to sound brusque rather than extremely guilty. Vegapunk hated to think of his part in turning Bart into a mere creature of the government, regardless of how that loyalty had not removed the man's previous personality or loyalty to the Revolutionary cause.

"Well, with everything going on, we had planned to hide this below the Cloud Factory so that the World Government would not find it, just like Emet."

Vegapunk nodded, making a get-on-with-it gesture. The World Government would not like to know about the real loyalty of Bartholomew Kuma, to say nothing of all the accumulated memories and love for his daughter that was in that bubble. The best thing they would do would be to just destroy it. The worst? Try to absorb the memories within and use them somehow.

"I have looked over the video recordings. Around seven weeks ago, changes began to slowly appear over time, new colors being added slowly but surely." Pythagoras pulled up several graphs that showed data taken from a few sensors around the lab that was well beyond what humans could normally discern. "Look at this, Sir. There was a slow but steady increase in

DF energy, and then, as that reached a certain point, a corresponding rise in heat and simple energy.”

Staring at the graphs, Stella nodded his head as Shaka turned, staring pensively through the window at the globe within the main room. “I wonder. I wonder if in shifting so many of his memories into this, whether or not Bartholomew created his own satellite. That, that somehow has now reached cohesion, or... or did something happen to the original?”

“That is my own conjecture at this point.” Pythagoras hesitated. “I, I think that Bartholomew is dead. And somehow, perhaps thanks to his previous creation of this fragment and the Nikyu Nikyu no Mi, the rest of his soul was expelled from his original body, coming to rest here, as would one of us satellites in one another if one of us was destroyed. We have yet to discern a means to sense or quantify a soul... but...”

“Bart’s death might have been one of the reasons why we were ordered to recreate the Pacifista and K9M labs on Marineford,” Stella agreed uncertainly. “We are kept isolated here on Egghead, so would not have been told. As for your conjecture...”

All three fell silent as Stella continued to go over the data, and Shaka watched the video of the bubble in fast-forward. He was a scientist and didn’t really like the idea of something he could not prove or disprove. Yet, as fantastical as it seemed, he had to agree with Pythagoras. It certainly seemed as if more of Bart’s soul had somehow transferred, rejoining the other ‘satellite’ here. What that said about how much of Bart’s soul he’d originally put into this bubble, Stella didn’t know, but it was certainly a fascinating thing to think about. *Such is the love a father has for his daughter, I suppose.*

Yet there remained a question. One that Shaka voiced. “Stella, what should we do?”

Stella paused, then nodded firmly. “Pythagoras, finish work on the memory alteration device. The three of us are the only ones who will know about this, and even that is going to be erased when we’re done. Shaka, head down to the original island. Find a place we can quickly create a bunker, or there’s one already existing that will work for this. I’ll work on finishing up one of the almost-finished Pacifistas. We can’t let this chance pass us by nor ignore our duty to our old friend.”

Hours later, a hasty report from the docks reached Dr. Vegapunk, informing him that a massive fleet of transport vessels had arrived to start the process of carting everything off to the Holy Land. Leaving what he was doing at the time quickly behind him, Vegapunk made his way down to the dockyard area, knowing that disrespecting one of the Gorosei would make an already difficult time even harder.

There, he found the loading process already continuing under the eyes of York and Edison. Edison was his normal hyperactive self, racing around, letting out short, concise orders to this or that individual, always moving around, while York stood in one place, slowly munching

on an apple as she barked out orders. Both of them were obeyed equally, and the shifting of the first dozen or so experiments that had been prepared for transport was proceeding about as well as Dr. Vegapunk could have hoped for.

Those were not his only satellites who were there. Lilith and Atlas were also there.

Lilith was the most troublesome of Stella's six satellites, which Stella had ruefully noted he should have assumed given she was his satellite of evil, Shaka's counter. She was oftentimes violent for violence's sake, arrogant, aggressive, oftentimes ruthless, brash and had sticky fingers. Lilith was also a young-seeming woman with wild ginger hair and purple eyes, with her hair covering her right eye, an homage to an old friend of Vegapunk's. Similarly, she wore a pink full-body jumpsuit, her designation as his second satellite proudly showing on her chest. Coupled with a purple hooded jacket and a red aviator helmet, she had a certain style, but like York, her style did not take away from her beauty, something that Stella never tried to notice but which he had seen a lot of other men notice in turn.

While also a woman like York and Lilith, no one had ever mentioned how cute or sexy Atlas was. Predominately, this was because she had been made to resemble a child, as Stella had always thought getting angry at anything was rather childish. That, and she was about the size of a giant child at twenty-three feet tall, the largest of them all. Unlike the other aspects, she had visible ears, although one ear did contain the same radio equipment as the others, and her ears were in no way those of a human girl. Rather, they were floppy, doglike ears to go with a doglike tail that stuck out right below what looked like (and was) a large red jetpack. Coupled with this, Atlas had blue eyes and short, curly white and pink hair, one color to a side. The look was made even cuter by two long tails of hair that fell to either side of her face down to her belly. She had a long, bushy tail on her abdomen. She wore a short pink dress with her number on it as well as a downward-pointing arrow on the front.

While Lilith went out looking for trouble and enjoyed it greatly when she found it, either in the form of pirates or causing trouble herself, Atlas's temper, her anger, often caused the other satellites headaches. Of all the satellites, Atlas was the one that had destroyed the most property due to suddenly flaring up at 'stupid questions' or experiments not working out the way they should. Alternatively, snow suddenly coming down when she wanted it to stay sunny out, if not warm, considering the nature of the weather on Egghead.

Yet now, the two most troublesome satellites were frozen in place, literally slumped to the ground as if a tremendous weight was pressing down on them in front of an old man sitting on a throne that must've taken at least five men to move. This was Jaygarcia Saturn, Saint Jaygarcia Saturn of the Gorosei, one of the most powerful men in the world, however you measured such things. He was also the Saint of Science and Technology, Vegapunk's direct superior. They had rarely met in person, but that did not take away from the impact of the man being there. It was as if his very presence warped reality around him to a certain degree, and to Stella, it was obvious that he was using some kind of Haki trick to pin Atlas and Lilith in place.

No wonder York's working so hard, Stella reflected, noting that York kept on glancing at the Gorosei out of the corner of her eye. The same veneration and awe that Stella had seen earlier that day was visible there for a moment on her wide face before it disappeared, causing Stella's eyes to narrow.

Jaygarcia sat there for a moment, ignoring Vegapunk's satellites as he read a report, while nearby, a group of ten scientists stood, their backs ramrod straight as they stared straight ahead. Seeing that and the fact that three Cipher Pol agents stood around the group made Dr. Vegapunk frown. *Ah, so Lilith was right the other day. We did have spies among our workers. Pity, but we have taken steps there.*

Eventually, Jaygarcia finished reading and nodded to the group of men. That seemed to be enough and they fell out of their salutes, bowing deeply, their words of gratitude reaching Vegapunk as he moved closer on his little scooter. As he continued to watch, they ran past Jaygarcia and several of the World Government officials, racing onto one of the transport vessels. *Definitely spies, then. Well, there's a reason why no one but my own satellites are allowed into my deeper laboratories. There is very little that they will have been able to tell Jaygarcia or anyone else.*

"Dr. Vegapunk," the man intoned, staring down at the little man from his makeshift seat. "When will Punk Records be ready for removal and movement to Mary Geoise?"

"I, I had thought that would be the last thing to be moved," Dr. Vegapunk answered, shaking his head. "Punk Records is necessary for many of the experiments and analysis going on at any one time, it should be allowed to remain here along with myself and my satellites until the last moment."

"That is a scientifically sound. Yet it is not what is going to happen." Jaygarcia said simply, yet almost apologetically. He waved his hand, and suddenly, Lilith and Atlas could move again.

Both of them scrambled to their feet. Lilith looked almost furious and took a few steps forward, while Atlas growled, clenching and unclenching her hands as she worked to get control of her anger, something she would routinely rarely see the need to do. Yet a single glance from Jaygarcia froze them again for a few seconds before he released them from his look, a flicker of Haoshoku so precise and so powerful that it nearly brought the two satellites to their knees again while not even disturbing any of the other people working around the docks.

Jaygarcia looked between the two of them, Shaka, Pythagoras and Vega, his last two satellites having arrived on the scene with Vegapunk himself. "I will be going with you up to Punk Records now. I will then observe as you load it into whatever transport will be able to move it to the fleet, however long that will take. I will then personally see to it that it is delivered to the Holy Land. This is going to happen today. You are an important strategic asset,

Doctor, and given recent developments, that comes with more limitations to your freedom than we could previously afford you. I apologize for that, but I will not bend on this matter.”

Seeing no alternative, Vegapunk simply nodded his head, as did the other satellites, even if Lilith had to have her head pressed down for her by Atlas. Stella’s opposite was one of his most stubborn ones and least prone to going along with things. “As you wish. We can figure out some way of doing that, although I will request that at least three of my satellites go with it to help emplace it in the new laboratory in the Holy Land.”

“Two of them, and yourself I think.” Saturn allowed the first sign of anything but brusque efficiency to enter his voice for a moment, a faint note of amusement? Dr. Vegapunk couldn’t quite tell. “You can leave the most efficient of your satellites here to oversee the rest of the transfer of your various experiments.”

Jaygarcia’s sympathy or amusement faded, and he leaned forward on his walking stick, glaring down at Stella. “Those experiments that we have deemed acceptable at any rate. You will be under our eyes continually from now on, Doctor, and a large amount of your time and that of your satellites will be given over to directives that we tell you about. Again, the world has changed, and your role must change as well for world peace and justice.”

“I, I understand. But you realize, given the nature of the Nomi Nomi no Mi, of Punk Records and everything else that portions of my personality and thoughts will always be on other things. Regardless of how much you want me to concentrate on even a series of tasks, I simply cannot. My brain no longer works like that. It is too big and too powerful.”

While those words would have simply been hubris for most, for Dr. Vegapunk, it was simply fact. Given how intelligent the Nomi Nomi no Mi had made him, as well as how it continued to grow constantly in small increments, there had been numerous reasons why Dr. Vegapunk had decided to connect portions of the brain to new satellites rather than leave him as the only one able to connect to it. There were simply too many thoughts, too much stimuli for a single individual to handle, let alone act on.

“That is acceptable, so long as you also work on what we order you to.” Jaygarcia sighed faintly, tapping the top of his walking staff with a finger. “You have yet to see the true reports of what went on during the War of the Best beyond the initial reports of your Green Goo.”

The Minister of Science and Technology scowled a bit. The War of the Best was the name that the World Government had decided to give the recent conflict, but already their agents and PR people had reported it just was not getting any traction in comparison to the simpler Whitebeard’s War. A name that gave the now dead pirate far too heroic a sheen in Jaygarcia’s mind. Even with all the credit they were trying to give Newgate over the still-alive Lightning King, that was a step too far, yet it was not something the World Government was in a position to do anything about.

Shaking that thought off, Jaygarcia continued. "But suffice it to say that we need to rebuild our military strength quickly. You will be a part of that. The Green Goo experiments will also continue, and the Seraphim Project now has our full approval, to the point one of my accompanying CP0 agents will oversee the transfer of the samples."

He growled, shaking his head, a flicker of anger crossing his face enough to send many of the people around him to shiver. "No matter who we bring in, it's doubtful they will ever have the abilities or impact as the Shichibukai. Thus, creating our own in a very literal sense is a good one."

Jinbe and Hancock had turned. Gecko Moria was dead, along with Blackbeard, who had also been slain after turning traitor himself, the only true silver lining from Whitebeard's War. Mihawk was far too dangerous an individual to truly trust or call upon for more than the most important things. And Doflamingo... well. There were reasons why Doflamingo was still a Shichibukai despite fleeing the battlefield. *But who can say if he will survive all that much longer. We have gotten reports of the remnants of the Whitebeard Fleet moving to perhaps attack Doflamingo and his crew in Dressrosa. I am not going to bet against Fire Fist or Marco in that kind of engagement, even if Doflamingo's growing underworld contacts come to his aid. Regardless, despite his... unique status, Doflamingo is not important enough to force us to expend our currently limited strength to go to his aid.*

"We have already dispatched a team of Cipher Pol agents to acquire the samples that you requested for that series of experiments," Jaygarcia went on. "I do not know the timetable, not just yet, but hopefully within the next few months. Similarly, whatever satellite of yours is best at engineering will need to look into ways of making our marine vessels better so that they are no longer tied down to wind and wave."

Jaygarcia hid a little grimace as he spoke those words. Ethanbaron's initial thoughts on transforming the Marine's fleet of ships into a fully coal and steam-based fleet had run into a massive bottleneck: coal was a rare resource and could not be found on every island. That meant they would need to always have enough coal on hand or retain the ability to use wind and wave. Building ships with both would cut down too much on the amount of armament such ships could carry. This had closed the door on the easiest and most large-scale idea that could have allowed the World Government to build up the marines to become even more dangerous.

Electricity, the energy, which powered most of the experiments here on Egghead Island, looked to be the way forward.

At that, Lilith had seemingly bounced back from her earlier moment of fear, rolled her eyes and waved her hands. "Oh, come on! That is so boring!"

The next instant, the pink-haired android was back on the ground, twitching and groaning as the pressure around her built up to the point where her mind, despite being

enhanced to an incredible degree thanks to the radio connection to Punk Records, began to crumble. "Was I asking for your opinion?" Jaygarcia ground out.

The pressure on Lilith continued for several seconds as Jaygarcia swept his eyes around to the other satellites and the other scientists and workers all around them. Many of these people would need to be killed after everything was said and done, and Vegapunk and his experiments all moved into the Holy Land, those that were deemed surplus to requirements there and who had seen Jaygarcia. Indeed, the whole island would be liquidated after they left. The secrecy of the Gorosei must be kept, and Jaygarcia knew all too well that leaving anything Vegapunk had left behind would be ridiculously foolish. *We are still looking for a few of his older labs in order to liquidate them.*

Seeing that none of the other satellites were going to challenge him, Jaygarcia allowed the pressure on Lilith to recede for a moment, raising his walking stick and pointing it at the original. "You may have your own experiments in your own time, doctor. But remember, you serve for the World Government first and foremost. I will allow you to go your own way only so far. The other Gorosei will allow even less freedom. Remember this."

Stella nodded, almost completely cowed by the older man, and within moments, his satellites had broken up, hurrying around. Stella and Pythagoras led Jaygarcia through the outer lab area and then up to where Punk Records was housed. Going along with things was all they could do, for now.

OOOOOOO

At around the same time that Dr. Vegapunk was running into difficulties on Egghead Island in various ways, someone else was having a no-good, very bad day. Although in his case, this meant just another day of isolation and repetitively being questioned and threatened in a loud voice. This someone was Coby, the young would-be marine acquaintance that Luffy had met in East Blue. Currently, he was sitting in an interrogation chamber in Marineford, across from an incredibly angry Commodore, who was pacing around the room barking out questions at him about his time around the Straw Hats.

Before this, Coby's acquaintance with Straw Hat (now Lightning King) Luffy and at least a few of crewmembers had been overlooked. In part, this was because of Garp's patronage. But mainly, it was because Coby had been very upfront about the majority of everything that had happened between him and Luffy when he first joined the marines.

Or at least, his superiors had thought Coby had been. However, recent events demanded that the World Government learn more about Monkey D. Luffy, and that led them to Coby as well, as researching every report about him and other pirates or, indeed, any unusual reports in general from the supposedly weakest of the Blues.

"Your timeline doesn't match up at all, Sergeant, there is no way that you could have met up with Luffy and this Makino woman in the timeframe that you supplied us with."

"Sir, I don't know what to tell you. I might've lost count of the number of days I was out to sea with the pirates who captured me, if that's what you mean," Coby answered, sweating very slightly as the man paced around the room. Recently promoted Rear Admiral Brannew didn't normally come off as a very threatening fellow, having spent most of his time in grade as a logistics officer. But that didn't mean he was any less of an officer, and apparently, when you reached flag rank, you were given a free upgrade to your glare, such that you could terrify the lower ranks more easily.

"Looking back on it, I honestly don't know how long I was a cabin boy for, Sir. They kept me mostly in the lower decks, and I know they worked me to exhaustion, to the point where I fell unconscious several times rather than just sleep. Who knows how many days I was there for?"

He sighed, leaning forward, staring earnestly up at the officer. "Sir, I realize that it looks bad. I realized that when I joined the marines. It was why I was so upfront about it. Trying to hide my association with Luffy, Makino, Zoro and Nami would have been far worse. But at the moment, I don't think my past with Luffy matters at all. Given what he was doing to our fleet, it's obvious he's changed since we parted ways."

Coby grimaced, staring down at his hands, clenching and unclenching them in frustration in remembered betrayal. "The Luffy I knew went out of his way to not kill even pirates, let alone marines. When we fought Axe Hand and his men, he said he thought normal marines were just good people doing a job. As much as he hated the World Government, he wasn't going to take it out on the marines. That's obviously changed. How that happened, where he got the lightning Devil Fruit or most of his abilities, I don't know. I'm afraid I just, I can't help you."

"OH, we know where he got the Goro Goro no Mi, sergeant. And that has caused certain other issues," Brannew shook his head. "Completely unrelated to your case."

Brannew paused, losing much of the anger in his face. Of course, this was just a sham. He still gets to bring out his trump card. Some information had finally reached the ears of the World Government from an island in East Blue that had dealt with the survivors of an attack on a luxury liner. With that, other... things had become clear, in particular, how duplicitous Straw Hat had been even back then. *No, it's the Lightning King now, never forget that. Although why the PR team decided to call him a King is a bother in and of itself. I heard the others, Tsuru and a few others, talk about how he was basically declaring himself a new Yonko even before Whitebeard had died. That name adds legitimacy to that title, blast it. But no one asked my or Tsuru-san's opinion there and Admiral of the Fleet Aokiji okayed it... I wonder why?*

Brannew set that aside for now, staring across the room at Coby, pausing his staring. "Tell me more about why you think that Luffy hated the World Government."

"He never went into details, Sir, but apparently, he was part of some large-scale fire in some kind of junkyard. A fire set to destroy the junkyard and everyone within it, where the poor people of the country had gathered. Apparently, it was done in preparation for a visit by the World Government." Coby frowned pensively. "He... was extremely open about being raised by bandits, which took me by surprise when Ad—er, Garp told us he was Lu-the Lightning King's grandfather. He also mentioned having a brother named Ace but it took me months after I joined the marines to realize who he actually meant by that."

"Did he mention anyone else?"

"...Savo, Savi?" Coby asked after a few moments of reflection. "Something like that."

"Could it have been Sabo?" Brannew asked intently, keeping his face from showing shock with difficulty. *How connected was Monkey D. Luffy before he ever went to sea?! Although, that gives us the last clue we need to find the Lightning King's home island. I wonder how much faster we could have found it if we had traced Garp's movements? But his personal ship's crew was spread out to hell and gone after he revolted the first Time. I can only get my hands on three I know of offhand, and they are far too damn loyal to that traitor's memory to give us what we want. Coby is right here and might know more anyway.*

"Yeah, that sounds about right. Who is it?" Coby asked.

Ignoring the question, Brannew shifted attention back to Makino, forcing Coby to describe her in detail, along with Nami, their interactions, how she spoke and her own relationship with Luffy. It was clear that Makino had shown Coby more of her basic skills, her initial bag of tricks, than Luffy had, although, at the time, Coby had lacked the knowledge to realize this. That allowed Brannew to build a bit more information into the profile they were building for her.

However, despite being pressured on it, Coby continued to not give any specific details about the pirates that Luffy and Makino had freed him from. He gave several details about their fight with the pirates, but Brannew, someone who had written After Action Reports and correlated them for more than two decades by this point, could spot inconsistencies.

"And you keep on saying that you can't remember what pirate group it was?" Brannew asked abruptly when Coby was about to bring the interview back to the fight against Axe Hand Morgan. They already had a decent enough idea of Luffy's fighting abilities. Now, what they needed was more information about... someone else entirely.

“That’s correct, Sir. My glasses at the time weren’t the best for viewing things more than a few feet away from me, and none of them ever mentioned what their flag looked like,” Coby answered.

Brannew straightened, scowling. He then reached into the dossier he had laid out on the table. *The fool boy didn’t even try to look at it. Foolish.* From within, he pulled out a picture, tossing it on the table between the two men. There, a pirate mark sat the grotesquely girly mark of the Alvida Pirates. “Would you like to rethink those remarks, Sergeant?”

Glancing down at the mark, Coby forced his face to show confusion rather than guilt with some difficulty. *Crap.* “The mark does look familiar, Sir, but I can’t see where I’ve seen it before. What does that have to do with me?”

“This is the mark of the Alvida Pirates. Their defeat was the first thing that brought a certain Bounty Hunter Ranko to the attention of the marines. Alvida later escaped, stealing the Sube Sube no Mi has she did,” Brannew said, his tone almost silky as he drove in for the kill. “It was the Alvida Pirates who attacked the luxury liner, Glorious Dawn. And it is on that luxury liner where several witnesses report having seen you, Coby.”

Brannew’s voice became clipped and precise as he reeled off the rules and regulations that Coby had broken by lying about Luffy and the women with him in order to hide Ranko’s presence with them. *And what is up with that, anyway? One boy, three women? And then there’s Tsuru’s report on the Lightning King being involved romantically with Hancock! For once, I agree with Chaton. Envy rises from within me almost enough to drown out my hate of the damn pirate.*

Once Brannew finished, Coby had begun to bite his lip and look away, a sure sign that he was now appropriately primed. “Sergeant, this could get you cashiered out of the marines **if** you are lucky. And at the moment, the World Government and the marines are not likely to allow you any access to that particular resource. You are more likely to simply be killed as a traitor.” Brannew waited a beat, then drove in for the kill. “Now, why exactly did you avoid mentioning that there was a third woman with Luffy?”

Slamming his hands on the table, Brannew’s voice shifted into a roar, leaning over the table to get into Coby’s face for a moment. “Where did she go between that and arriving in Shells Town?! There was no sign of her there. How is she related to Straw Hat Luffy and sharpshooter Makino? Were there other pirates with them? A living skeleton or another woman? You have a lot to answer for, officer, and only the truth can save you from the firing squad!”

Coby’s face went white for a second before it hardened. “Sir, I—”

“No! No more obfuscation, no more attempts to divert the questioning, nothing but the truth! We have this report on you being part of the Alvida Pirate Crew, reluctantly, according to

some of the eyewitnesses who told her story once they arrived on Sabine island. The bank on Shells Town has records that tell us the promissory note for the bounty of Alvida was cashed by someone matching Makino the gun wielder in Shells Town. If that isn't a correlation, I don't know what is. And we also know that Bounty Hunter Ranko is missing and was missing long before the outbreak in Impel Down. Which obviously means that she was involved in the breakout there."

And doesn't that make Gion look incompetent, Brannew thought to himself, shaking his head. That piece of information hadn't yet come to light in any of the reports, but he had talked to Gion about the three bounty hunters who had seemingly died during the ship-to-ship conflict. After that, Brannew had also been put in charge of looking into Luffy's past in East Blue, looking over the reports that had never made it to the desks of the main marine branch here in Marineford. At that point, some things had jumped out at him about the Bounty Hunter Ranko, her movements and a few other things.

"I, I gave my word, Sir. I promised I would—" Coby began, only to be interrupted again.

"You vowed to abide by the rules of the marines and obey the World Government! That oath supersedes all others!" Brannew growled.

"Sir, that's, that's not justice!" Coby tried shaking his head. "I, I won't---"

Again, he was interrupted but this time it was by a new voice he'd never heard before, but one that positively reverberated with power coming from a speaker. "Sergeant Coby. Your desire, your dream to become a marine is laudable. But you must come clean to us now. Anything you can tell us about either the bounty Hunter or Luffy can be helpful in the future. If you continue to try to obfuscate, however... you leave us no choice but to appeal to harsher methods."

With that last sentence, the words were suddenly accompanied by a pressure wave that slammed into Coby's brain. It sent him reeling, blood beginning to stream from his nose, as someone else's Kenbunshoku pressed down into his own.

Coby's ability with that technique was incredibly good, having awoken the skill to a level that few did during Whitebeard's War. Now it was as if Coby was being overloaded again as he had near the end of the battle against Whitebeard's Fleet, but instead of feeling the pain and agony of everyone dying or wounded in a massive area around him, the sadness of it overwhelming him, there was only **pain** as someone with a far better grasp of the technique used it almost like a kind of mental attack. "I, I... What..." he groaned.

"You will submit," the same voice intoned. If Coby had been in any condition to notice anything, he might have thought it sounded old, old and grim. It didn't shout or exclaim at all, but it didn't need to, the owner of that voice was simply stating a fact that merely had yet to

occur. "You will tell us what you know of Luffy and Ranko. What is their connection? Where did they come from? How long have they been working together?"

"All, all their lives. They're one and the same," Coby stuttered.

The pressure on him released as if the being who was using that strange ability had stumbled in shock, losing control of the technique. "What? How is that possible?"

Coby tried to gather his will again, but whoever was behind that technique didn't allow him to do so. Instead, another surge of pain slammed into his brain, accompanied by the words, "Explain. Tell us what you are hiding. What Monkey D. Luffy has hidden."

These words were added to by Brannew, who moved to one side of Coby's chair, reaching out to touch Coby's shoulder gently, all of his earlier annoyance and frustration with Coby gone. *Time to play good marine.* "Coby, Luffy hurt our forces even more than Whitebeard did. Without his and whatever plan he and Ranko came up with to get to Impel Down, the marines would've been in a far better position against Whitebeard's Fleet here in Marineford, with all of the advantages we'd prepared here. Instead, we were forced to fight a near-equal battle against the strongest pirate fleet in the New World."

Brannew tapped the table gently with a finger. "Now, around the world, thousands of people are suffering. Pirates are running amok not just in Whitebeard's old territory, but everywhere because we've been forced to reallocate our forces, leaving some areas to look after themselves. None of that would've happened without Luffy and his involvement. I understand that he was once a friend, but that is in the past. You have a duty to us, to the marines and to justice. Do the right thing, son."

The mix of suddenly gentle admonishment and the pressure on his mind finally got through Coby's stubbornness, and words began to boil out of him. "L, Luffy was hit by some kind of Devil Fruit that allows him to change genders with the application of cold water," as he spoke, the pressure on the pink-haired youth's mind receded, and Coby sighed, shaking his head. "I... Suppose you're right, Sir. It's just I don't want to be known as someone who breaks a promise. Especially not to someone who saved my life, who set me on my path to becoming a marine."

"He might've set you on that path, Sergeant, but you're the one who wanted to go down it despite the Lightning King trying to talk you out of it. You've kept whatever this secret is for long enough," Brannew stated firmly. "Keeping a promise is admirable, but not when he gets in the way of your duty. As this one most decidedly did."

Abruptly, Brannew sat down across from Coby, reaching over and gripping his hand again. "Kid, I'm not going to lie to you. The World Government is looking for scapegoats. It's as simple as that for some people in the bureaucracy. They want someone to blame for this debacle. That's why the former guards at Impel Down are going to be inducted into the marines

and why the entire prison is going to be shut down and sunk. Even that that might not be enough. The World Government is going to look for other scapegoats. Other possible traitors like Garp and Hancock. Personally, I know that's wrong, and I don't know many a man who would choose duty over family. But it is what it is. The world is imperfect, and we must do what we can. So tell us what you know about Luffy, and spare yourself a lot of pain."

"... I don't know how he came about it, although he said something about it happening when he was a baby? But whatever the case, Luffy can transform his gender with the application of cold water. I saw it happen. I know it's not a trick or anything like that."

"How do you know it's not a trick? What you're describing... that's not possible. There's no Devil Fruit on record that can do that kind of thing. There **is** a Devil Fruit that we know of that can change someone's gender, but only via direct application of its power. But it can't embed the ability to shapeshift into someone."

"Sir, I've no idea, honestly! But I do know it for a fact. I saw him transform from a girl, a redhead... in fact, that was how I met Luffy and Makino at first. Luffy was in his female form when we first met. It was in his female form that he fought Alvida. You're right about that, Sir," Coby admitted. "She was the one who had captured me, always shouting about how she was the fairest in the ocean and threatening to use her club on me at every opportunity," Coby confessed. "Then, after she returned from dropping off Alvida on the marine ship, she heated up some water, dumped it over her head and transformed into his male body."

"And you're positive this wasn't some kind of trick, some kind of disguise?" Brannew asked, his brows furrowing.

"Positive Sir." Coby looked embarrassed for a moment, reaching up to wipe some blood away from his nose, which had begun to bleed from the mental pressure from that unseen speaker's odd technique. "She, um, Luffy that is, had taken her shirt off prior to dumping the water over her head, and um, she hadn't been wearing a bra. I literally saw the transformation happen Sir, and it was kind of really disturbing to watch, er, the only pair of breasts I've ever seen transform into hard pecs."

Stifling a sudden, and very inappropriate, urge to chuckle at the younger man's embarrassment, Brannew slowly nodded. "All right, that... Honestly, that makes Luffy suddenly appearing in Impel Down far easier to understand if they are one and the same." *And that means that Gion is definitely going to be in for it. Honestly, letting the other two supposed Bounty Hunters convince her that Luffy was down with her period for so long? There's softheaded, and then there's softheaded Gion!*

"Is there anything else that you can tell us about him?" Brannew asked, bringing his mind back into the interrogation room for the moment.

"I've already talked about how he was open about being related to Ace, but I think he also might've mentioned the pirate Shanks and admiring him? I'm not certain about that score, but it came up in a conversation between the two of us. Other than that, Makino... She didn't set out to the ocean to be a pirate. She's hunting someone specifically, someone on the Grand Line. Other than that, Sirs, I'm afraid I can't tell you much more."

"Do you know of any connection between him and Big Top Buggy?" The strange voice from before asked, although without the pressure accompanying the words this time. "That was the other bounty delivered to the marines by Ranko, and his escape is the reason why she was able to convince Vice Admiral Gion to take the three bounty hunters with her to Impel Down."

"I don't think so, Sir. He mentioned going after every bounty he could in East Blue before raising his flag, but that's about it. And if you're going to ask me if he was involved in Buggy's later breakout, I'd have to say no. That just wasn't something he'd be involved in."

"Unless, Sergeant, he was hiding his true intent and personality from you all along. Think about that," the voice retorted before falling silent.

"Let's start from the beginning," Brannew stated, pulling up a pad and paper. "First, let's go back and talk about your time with the pirates. And this time, tell the truth."

Afterward, Brannew looked across at Coby thoughtfully, then shook his head. "You should have come forward with the news about Luffy's strange abilities the moment he got a bounty, if not sooner. If you had, there is no way that he could have broken into Impel Down. However, you also had no way of knowing that Luffy would go on such a rampage or become so dangerous. I also understand that his standing up to Alvida gave you the courage to do so in turn. However, you still need to be punished. For now, you will remain here in the brig. The precise nature of your punishment will be decided in the future. You're not going to be kicked out of the marines for this, Sergeant, not if I can help it. We need promising marine recruits like you now more than ever. Regardless, a decrease in rank and punishment duty will certainly be in the cards."

"Yes, Sir. And I understand, Sir," Coby said morosely, still feeling a little dirty that he'd been forced to give up Luffy's secrets, even with how Luffy had apparently turned murderous pirate on him. *Seriously! I can understand trying to free Fire Fist, but siding with Whitebeard? He should have just run off the moment Ace was freed instead of doing so much damage to our fleet instead of helping to kill Admiral Akainu along with the rest of his victims!*

Leaving Coby to be escorted back to his temporary jail cell, Rear Admiral Brannew moved next door to the observation room, where he found Saint Topman Warcury, the Warrior God of Justice, waiting for him. As the Gorosei who was most involved in the marines and the various militaries the World Government could call upon, it had made sense for him to be involved in this questioning since he was going to be in Marineford anyway. Brannew had met the man earlier the day before, and found the elderly, rotund gentleman, mildly terrifying as

Topman interviewed him, Aokiji and several others who had been involved in the battle, getting their firsthand impressions.

While Aokiji had already been given the job, coming here to get a firsthand impression of him had been just as important as making certain they had gotten the best idea of the war against Whitebeard.

Sengoku was crippled; his body had taken too much of a beating at Garp's hands to ever be a Fleet Admiral again. The man's jaw had been turned into paste, his ribs shattered, and hips too, and while that all could be repaired or replaced, the psychological trauma of it and the fact he had led the marines into the worst disaster to ever occur to the marines had marked Sengoku, broken him in a way. This meant Aokiji was literally the only one who could step into that role, given Kizaru's known laziness.

Although Brannew did not know it, Topman had come away from those interviews with a well-hidden scowl. Aokiji was smart, almost brilliant when it came to combat and strategy. He too was a bit lazy, but he could be serious and knew when to push himself, unlike Kizaru. Yet he was also too wedded to the ideal of justice, too willing to compromise and practice a very flexible idea of 'justice' IE keeping the peace, than Topman was happy with. His ideas for the next few years as the marines rebuilt were far too passive and thoughtful, with no fury and anger Topman had hoped to see, none of the fire to annihilate all pirates that he and the World Government wanted to see.

For now, however, Aokiji's plans needed to be allowed to grow. They truly were the best way to go forward. The Gorosei would just need to make certain his pervasive idea of choosing which pirates to go after would not grow into permanent marine policy. That was the last thing the World Government could afford. Luckily, they had people like Brannew, a former CPO castoff turned logistics expert, and others within the ranks to offset such thinking. That would do for now.

Topman did not look at Brannew when he entered the room instead, staring thoughtfully into the interrogation area where Coby had just been escorted out through a one-way mirror. "The boy had the last piece of the puzzle we needed in terms of how Luffy was able to get to Impel Down in the first place. But too many of Luffy's apparent abilities are still a mystery. The strange kinetic energy balls that Aokiji reported. The even stranger and far deadlier attacks that act like slashes taken out of the world. His ability to go unseen, to remove his presence entirely even from Kenbunshoku, which Aokiji again reported. We need to know about all of that, where that knowledge came from, and how to either duplicate or counter it before we move against him and his alliance with Hancock.

"What about the other two that helped convince Gion to not go looking for Ranko?" Brannew asked, looking between Topman and Tsuru. "One of them is almost certainly Makino from the Lightning King's crew. But the other, my analysts think he could be a pirate named

Brook, of the Rumbar Pirates. They are from an age before Gold Roger, but if he has some kind of Devil Fruit that keeps him alive in bone form, they would be a dead match.”

Warcury remained quiet, but Tsuru, who had also listened in to the interrogation/confession, spoke up. “Gion can’t be faulted for thinking that the bounty hunters were what they said they were. The fight Ranko had with Black Leg, the pirate crews of Captain Kidd and Trafalgar Law was far too real to be faked. She can, though, be faulted for not trying to check up on whether or not Ranko was still around after leaving Impel Down. My young protégé definitely failed there.”

“More importantly, young Gion is one of the strongest vice admirals we have. We cannot afford to do away with her entirely as I was first inclined to do with Coby once you discovered his duplicity,” Topman mused, causing Tsuru to stiffen a little before he went on. “Demote Gion to Commodore. Then raise Magellan to vice admiral and put Gion under his command along with the surviving prison guards. Aokiji told me of a plan to build two quick-moving troubleshooting forces. Magellan will seek to redeem himself, and we should give him a chance to do so by commanding one such force.”

Warcury scowled. “And if we get further reports that Hina is still alive and has fled, she is to be considered an enemy of the World Government. I will not put a bounty on her, lest she be killed by pirates, but I will demand you marines be on the lookout for her. Hina’s treason is obvious at this point, although why is still in question.”

At that, Tsuru grimaced. *Well, it looks as if you were right to run away, Hina, as you probably guessed at the time. I don’t think that I would be able to save both you and Gion from official displeasure. Damn it.* Still, Tsuru had to try. “Given all the other information Hina gave us about the nature of her temporary alliance with Garp’s grandson, I have to wonder if she knew about the Devil Fruit at all. Plus, there’s the fact he didn’t use it against Aokiji or against the Buster Call on Water-7. If he had simply hidden it away... well, Hina might be excused for not going looking for it. There might not be anything more than a lack of desire to rock the boat at that point when she was literally in the palm of the pirate’s hands.”

“It does not matter. Hina ran. Even if we had not wanted to find another scapegoat for being so blindsided by the Lightning King’s powers, that would be enough of an admission of guilt,” Topman retorted. “Regardless, she would still be held accountable for not looking and for being too trusting of the enemy. You also recall how often she spoke out against directly attacking the Straw Hat Pirates. No, she is culpable in the disaster and must pay.”

Brannew bit back a scowl, while it seemed as if Tsuru was going to argue some more. He had thought Hina was a fine officer, as well as a fine figure of a woman, but hadn’t known her very well. Yet it was clear Tsuru disapproved tremendously of this, and seemed willing to argue about it when Topman had clearly made up his mind. *And challenging one of the Gorosei when he has already decided something is not healthy. I might not have known much about them before this, but that’s been clear from the moment he showed up.*

Deciding to lighten the mood and maybe get Tsuru some time to control her temper, Brannew quipped, "Well, the Lightning King might have just seduced Hina, you know. First, he, or she, shows up with several more women in his crew than most fleets can boast, then there's the Alabastan Princess who was certainly attracted to him, and the Pirate Empress and her actions..."

Tsuru gaped at the man, while Topman surprised both the two marines and himself by laughing. "HA! That would be a most terrifying type of power, would it not? That is a thought that would not occur to me, sex is such an...unimportant topic. Yet I doubt it. Seductions like that lose their efficacy when the woman so seduced is separated from the individual doing it. Besides, from our profile of her, if Hancock has fallen in love with the man, she is undoubtedly the violently jealous sort. She might allow a... what is it, a woman with a puppy love, I think is the term, for her man to continue to exist, and might even treat her kindly if the woman is strong in other ways. But no more."

After a few minutes of discussion, it was decided to act as if the Lightning King and the redhead were separate entities. The redhead received a bounty of forty-two million, which would be large enough to show she was dangerous and yet small enough for people to actually attack her, and did not need to be accompanied by any larger story. This was a semi-subtle way in which they could perhaps keep track of where Luffy was at any one time if he tried to use that form. It also might convince Luffy that the World Government wasn't aware of the connection between the two forms, although there, Tsuru argued that they just should not put out a bounty at all. But given how tough it would have been for anyone cast adrift in the battle against Whitebeard to have not been picked up but to also have survived, it was felt that putting 'Ranko's' bounty out there was the best thing to do.

Brook also received a new bounty, fifty million, for now, seventeen more than it had been previously. They didn't have enough information about his fighting style or abilities to give him anything higher.

Makino's bounty, however, was raised even larger. After questioning Gion, Tsuru felt that it had been Makino who had been the one to be behind much of the trickery that had fooled Gion, as well as maybe the entire plan of how to get into Impel Down in the first place. Her bounty became just a million below the Ghost Princess, who apparently had switched sides from Gecko Moria to the Straw Hat Crew during the debacle on Thriller Bark.

"What about Coby?" Brannew asked, holding back another comment about how Lightning King Luffy seemed to have a way with the ladies. While Tsuru and Topman seemed to dismiss it, Brannew felt there could be some honest evidence to the idea that the pirate youth had some kind of secret seduction skills, given all the beauties that had joined his crew. "His desire to be a marine is strong, but he seems to be too wedded to the idea of justice and his own personal morals over his oath to the fleet."

"True. What about his friendship with the Lightning King?" Topman questioned.

"I would say that's been completely destroyed, Sir. Whatever ideal of an honorable pirate..." Brannew sneered a little at the very idea, shaking his head. "Well, whatever pedestal he had placed Garp's grandson is gone now."

"Good. Pirates always make their own enemies eventually. Hmm... you say he's already developed a truly remarkable degree of Kenbunshoku? He is an actual asset rather than simply a regular trainee?"

"Yes." Tsuru nodded tartly. "Coby's Kenbunshoku finished waking up during the battle against Whitebeard and nearly crippled the brat. We've tested it since, and Coby's got both more range and is more accurate than most of our vice admirals. Further, his skills with most of the Rokushiki are well advanced, and he might be able to achieve Busoshoku in another few months. Say what you will about his methods and the man himself, but Garp's training is effective."

"So Coby is a useful tool then, despite his idea of justice overriding his loyalty to the World Government. And that is not a new problem, rather it is one we already know to temper, to guide those with a personal sense of justice to serve world peace in general," Topman mused. "If the marines can be seen as a true source of justice, we can once more wed this youth to the fleet. Throw him some bones in terms of corruption and the crew he is assigned to can be the one to weed them out. Then he will believe that the system, as it still exists, can continue doing so, that only individuals are corrupt. Similar to how we handled Garp initially."

Brannew slowly nodded. "We do have a few high-ranking officers who we could move against in East Blue and North Blue, but are you saying..."

"Spandam's backers in the World Government bureaucracy have run their course as well. You can feed them to Coby and those like him in the marines first. I will leave the details of that to you." Topman looked at the two officers. "The marines need someone like Garp, as much as I don't like the necessity. A blunt object, but one who appeals to both the marines and the masses. None of our current vice admirals has that common touch and is photogenic enough. I believe Coby can gain that touch and we can use his being Garp's apprentice to build his own legend without letting his image be tainted under by Garp's betrayal."

Damn Garp, Topman thought with some asperity. Even now that he has betrayed us totally and is out there doing who knows what, we still can't move against him because he was so damned popular the world over. The hit to our public image of even placing a bounty on the man would make the current hit to our image of authority even worse. But there will come a time, Garp, where you too will feel the weight of making the whole world your enemy.

Brannew frowned, but Tsuru nodded. "Like it or not, Garp was one of our most popular officers. Aokiji is a little too lazy and bland to ever be popular regardless of how much good he might do as Fleet Admiral. Kizaru's just way odd, too laid back, too slow in terms of speaking. He comes off as condescending and aloof. A few of our vice admirals and new recruits might be

able to talk to the common man, but they won't drum up recruitment as Coby could. He's even marginally handsome after all that training. We could even push it like he is Garp's apprentice, the true Garp before he chose family over duty. We'll need to be careful on that score as we don't want sympathy for Garp and his decision to override the rest of the message, but even without that, Coby could become a poster child for recruitment, which we desperately need right now."

"Exactly. In fact..." Topman thought about it for a moment, then smirked. "The marines need a new dog. When Coby has done a few such assignments, reward him, not only with a bump back to his previous rank but a Devil Fruit. In fact, I have a specific one in mind. It will annoy young Shamrock, and it might add still more money to this gamble, but it might very well pay off handsomely."

To many, it might have seemed odd that Topman had gone from being prepared to kill Coby as a traitor if need be to deciding to prop him up. Yet those would make the mistake of thinking such thoughts came from a personal desire for vengeance or hatred toward Coby due to his friendship with Ranma. They did not. Topman was an extremely levelheaded person, who knew that wasting resources was never a good idea. With his sudden mastery of Kenbunshoku, Coby was a resource. Now seeing a way to use him going forward rather than as an example of what happened to traitors, Topman would do his best to make this tool as good at its job as possible.

Brannew and Tsuru both nodded, and Tsuru led the way out to her office, where the conversation turned to other matters for the moment, mostly logistics and detailed strategy and assignment work, which Topman set to with gusto. And if some of that gusto did not have anything whatsoever to do with what they were actually doing, but rather the fact that he was here and not in Pangaea Castle right now, he certainly wasn't about to say that to anyone else.

OOOOOOO

While Tsuru and the visiting Topman were busy on the logistics side of things, elsewhere in Marineford, Aokiji handled the human side of things. This was started by a visit to the hospital, where Smoker was laid up, ironically in a room directly across from where Catarina Devon had been apprehended by Tsuru while impersonating Tsuru's youngest protégé, Hototogisu. He was going to be there for a while, as he was one of the worst wounded that hadn't lost limbs or been outright crippled.

That wasn't to say that Smoker wasn't horribly wounded. Going against Lightning King Luffy when he wasn't in a playful mood had earned him a broken back, with one of his discs having been just shattered, with the ones both below and above being simply cracked. To that was added some broken ribs. It was a wonder he hadn't died of those wounds, but none of his innards had been perforated, and given the medical surgeries available to someone who could transform their body into smoke, his back had already been operated on, and his ribs set in place.

Yes, Logia could, with extreme concentration, transform just a portion of their bodies or their skin and flesh into their element. Most of the time this was a useless skill, but in the case of Smoker, it, and the fact Smoker was somehow conscious barely a few hours after returning to Marineford, had worked in his favor.

Aokiji had shaken his head when he'd heard the younger man had woken up and been able to perform such a feat, and now, walking into his room, Aokiji had to shake his head again. "If you don't get back in that bed, Smoker, I'm going to tell Medical Admiral Alois that you've been ignoring his doctor's demands. You'll look awful silly with a scalpel up your nose."

Smoker, who had been trying to do squats, shivered a bit, but obeyed, grumbling. Alois Le Pew was a man of Garp and Tsuru's generation, who had never been a combat officer. Instead, he had gone around the world as a marine captain, learning and bringing back a ton of medical knowledge. Most of it he put down to a Dr. Kureha, who apparently was 'the love of my life' to the older man. He'd been the one to operate on Smoker as well as several others.

All of this meant, though, that he knew precisely how much pain the human body could take without breaking. He never fought, but was a terror to anyone disobeying his orders in the medical wing of Marineford.

That was enough to get Smoker back into his bed, but not to stop him from complaining. "It's damn boring in here, Sir, and I can't just sit here! I need to get stronger, to avenge this defeat on the man who caused it."

"Luffy. Yeah, you and others have said so before, and I can't argue the point." Aokiji patted Smoker's shoulder. "Still, no amount of training alone is going to get you to the point where you can challenge him. Worse, hurrying back into training will just make your convalescence longer."

He fell quiet for a moment as Smoker grumbled, before continuing. "So, we learned something interesting earlier today from Coby, you know him?" Smoker nodded, and Aokiji went on, explaining what Coby had told them.

This shocked Smoker, and he began to curse luridly. "Damn it! I should have wondered about that, but, damn it!!!" Aokiji waited until Smoker cursed himself out, and then explained how he had met Bounty Hunter Ranko on Alabasta talking to Fire Fist Ace, then explained how he had tried to apprehend Ace with Hina joining after Ranko had disappeared when the bar began to collapse. "I should have wondered where the hell she went! I should have thought it unusual how closely on..."

"Enough. You had no way of knowing. Don't beat yourself up over it. You weren't the only one 'Ranko' fooled. The whole Impel Down disaster was based off of that trick and Gion's been demoted to Commodore. To say nothing about the fact Hina had to have known about the curse, and kept it to herself." Aokiji shook his head, staring at Smoker. "If she was still around,

she'd probably be executed for that, her name added to Garp's and Hancock as a traitor. We... we don't know if she's alive or dead, no one saw her ship sink, or Hina die, but if she realized what was going on and fled, well, I wouldn't blame her. But that doesn't mean we won't be ordered to bring her in, if so."

Smoker scowled, shaking his head. "I, Sir, are you, I can't..."

"No, I'm not going to let you be sent out after her. I know how the two of you are friends, and that would be cruelty for its own sake." Aokiji shook his head, frowning a bit as he heard what sounded like an exceptionally heavy steps moving through the area. "Instead, I'm putting you under Momonga's command."

"To go after Straw Hat?" Smoker nearly demanded. He had thought to demand being sent to G-5, the marine base in the New World nearest the Red Line, but had recently learned it had been attacked and overrun by the Revolutionaries in their effort to cut off Mary Geoise from the islands they relied on

"Hah, no!" Aokiji barked out a laugh. "Smoker, you're a good officer, but you need to look at the broader picture here and also realize how far out of your league Luffy's become. I'll admit its galling to think of how far he's come in so short a time, but there you are. No, you and Momonga are going to be sent to hunt down one of the other Supernovas, Captain Kidd, once we can do so. For now, though, you need to get better. We all do. That's a part of Waiting Justice."

Smoker growled, but Aokiji was not in the mood to put up with his stubbornness. He held out a hand over Smoker's chest causing a freezing cold to wash over the injured marine's body to the point he hissed. "A, admiral, wha..."

"Understand me, Smoker. You produced results occasionally after leaving your post in East Blue, and that's the only reason why you weren't court martialled for leaving your post. Yet if you run after Luffy, he's going to probably make you a laughingstock in the eyes of anyone who sees how horribly he beats you down. That kind of hit to our publicity isn't something the marines can handle right now. So if your ego is going to get in the way of understanding the need to get stronger, I will bump you down to private and keep you right here in Marineford," Aokiji growled.

Frankly, in Aokiji's eyes, Smoker was somewhat pathetic. He had basically been made a commodore only because of his logia power. Smoker had none of the Rokushiki bar a weak Geppo and Soru and hadn't even touched on Haki yet. At his age, that was kind of sad, and spoke of either a lack of ambition or will. Either way, Smoker needed to step up, or be forced to.

When Smoker nodded, his eyes wide, Aokiji leaned back, sighing faintly as the cold receded. "We, all of us, need to grow stronger, and you are absolutely no exception. This is a time for Waiting Justice, for personal and organizational growth. The least you need to learn is

Busoshoku before I even let you sniff the idea of an independent command again, let alone go after someone like Luffy.”

Smoker clenched his teeth so hard Aokiji could nearly hear his teeth scream in complaint, but under Aokiji’s stare, Smoker could only nod. “Yes... Sir.”

Deciding that was the best he could get at present, Aokiji nodded. “Good. Now, Tashigi will still be under your command as well as --”

At that point, the rumbling of heavy feet in the distance grew so loud Aokiji cut off, staring at the door. The next moment, Sentomaru rushed in, holding a bounty poster in his hand, the bounty poster of ‘Bounty Hunter Ranko’. “Admiral Aokiji, what is this?! I, I thought that Ranko and her companions died, but now when I go to pick up some new bounties to use as target practice I find this!? What is going on?”

Somewhat confused about why the young, if powerfully built sumo was so incensed, Aokiji and Smoker exchanged a glance, before Aokiji explained. When he was done, Sentomaru looked horrified, his face turning green. “B, but, that, that redheaded beauty, is, is really a man?! And specifically, Straw Hat?!” He shuddered, backing away so quickly he smacked his head into the lintel above the doorway. “I...”

Aokiji watched, still confused about why Sentomaru seemed to be taking this personally. He had no way of knowing that Sentomaru had fallen in love with ‘Ranko’ at first sight. Of course, that was all in his own head, but that didn’t mean it was any less real to him. “How dare she, he, ugh, trick me!!” he roared, slamming a hand against the wall beside him. “I’m going to hunt Straw Hat down if it’s the last thing I do!”

“Who the FUCK is stomping around and shouting in my hospital?! a distant voice bellowed, causing Aokiji and Smoker’s eyes to widen.

Sentomaru also flinched before rushing off quickly, still growling under his breath about taking revenge for having his broken heart. This left the two marine officers alone once more, staring at the now empty doorway. “What...the heck... was that about?” Smoker asked slowly.

To that, Aokiji had no answer, and just shook his head slowly, before a horrifying thought occurred to him. “Oh damn... I, I seriously hope that isn’t a sign that the Monkey Madness that Tsuru’s mentioned a time or two is contagious...”

OOOOOOO

Most people who ever thought beyond their islands or their own simple lives believed that the World Government was ruled by the Tenryubito and the kings or rulers of the five hundred disparate countries that had joined together under the auspices of the World Government. Cynics among the people who ever considered such things thought that perhaps

the kings and the Tenryubito didn't really command much at all, leaving the real power up to a mindless, faceless bureaucracy. People who studied what they could of history felt that perhaps the original twenty kingdoms who had first created the World Government still held sway over everyone else.

Then, of course, some people knew about the Gorosei, the heads of that bureaucracy, the ones who pulled the strings so that the balance of the world continued. Those who met them in person quickly understood that rather than simply being bureaucrats, all of the Gorosei were terrifyingly powerful individuals in their own right, be it in physical terms, willpower, or simple ability and skill. The Gorosei had enough gravitas that any would think of those who truly stood at the top of the world.

Yet even those people who met them in person did not know the truth. Because above the Gorosei, there was their master. Imu, the immortal, he who ruled all of the Blue Planet and had since the creation of the World Government, the source of much of the Gorosei's personal power and much of the authority of the World Government.

Imu resided in a series of rooms in Pangaea Castle off the throne room, the one occasionally called 'the Empty Throne' by those who were allowed to study history. It was called that because the throne was supposed to be empty in order to symbolize that no one being or nation was more important than any other.

That was false. It had always been false. The nineteen weapons left embedded in the ground around the throne, supposedly as further symbols to guard the empty throne, were not there as a sign of unity from the rulers of the twenty founding kingdoms. They were left there as supplication, a sign of kings who had willingly bent the knee to a greater power.

Yes. There should have been twenty weapons. Imu knew that all too well, and the missing weapon galled him whenever he looked at the cut in the floor left there. That weapon belonged to the Queen of Alabasta, Nefertari Lili, who had joined the World Government but refused to move to Mary Geoise, instead reclaiming her weapon and returning to her kingdom.

The Empty Throne was several stories tall, ornamented red and gold, with the symbol of the World Government in gold on red, and it was so wide and deep that only someone the same general size as Whitebeard or someone that tall could sit there. Around it, the weapons stood, stabbed into the ground of the original palace. That segment of the original palace had then been placed where it was now on a red and white platform several stories tall, which further removed the person on the throne from the main throne room floor.

The throne room was on the tallest tower of Pangaea Castle, with an amazing view through windows that lined the wall behind the throne room. However, the rest of the room did not match the grandiose nature of the windows and the throne. Oh, there was a red and gold carpet leading up to the throne, and the steps leading up to the throne, all three stories of

them, were golden and gilded. Nevertheless, there was dust in a lot of places, and the windows were equally dusty.

Added to this was that the walls that were not covered by windows were festooned with bounty posters and newspaper clippings. Many of them were slashed; indeed, many were sliced to pieces, stabbed, or with swords and daggers stuck through them. Shanks featured prominently in several, and Doflamingo in a few others. Monkey D. Dragon appeared in so many you would be hard to find them all. Nico Robin, Blackbeard and several others who seemingly had no real connection with one another, although many bore the initial 'D.', including the most current and most annoying holder of that title, Monkey D. Luffy.

All in all, it was quite clear that this wasn't a place someone actually lived. Unless they were a madman. No, this area, this area was where someone came to rage occasionally. And currently, yes, Imu was raging.

Haoshoku blared out from the shadow monarch, his body hidden even here in a darkness so deep that none could penetrate it. So much of it that any normal man would have been crushed instantly, his mind turned to so much Jell-O, and his entire body turned into so much paste. The walls, ceiling, indeed, a goodly portion of the entire palace, was currently quaking as Imu raged.

Saints Ethanbaron V. Nusjuro and Marcus Mars knelt on the floor far below the raised throne, pressing their heads down into the ground. They were in full kowtow, their bodies twitching due to Imu's rage as the power he had bestowed upon them roiled within them under his power.

"A Gorosei dying! Dying?! Never to return, his power gone, his power destroyed? It did not return! It did not return to me!" Imu raged, his voice barely able to get through clenched teeth, such was his fury. Even the throne, made to contain his anger, was starting to warp around him, the metal squealing as a background cacophony to his rage. "How was such a thing possible?!"

Gorosei had never died in the line of duty before. Several of them had passed away. The power bestowed upon them by Imu only slowed the aging process. It did not block it entirely. Others had died from hereditary diseases which were incurable by any medicine of the Blue Planet.

Not even Gol D. Roger had killed a Gorosei, yet Whitebeard had. His final attack had destroyed his opponent to the point where nothing but blood and pus remained. Not even the regeneration of the awakened Ancient Sandworm Devil Fruit had been able to save him, and that was the most galling of all. That someone else had raised their Devil Fruit power to the level it could overcome one bestowed on its user by a true god.

For several moments, Imu raged, the two Gorosei sweating, blood beginning to drip from nostrils, ears and eyes as their bones creaked and everything else within their body threatened to break down. Even their own tremendous levels of Haki was unable to let the two Gorosei withstand the pressure their king released on them so accidentally.

But finally, with a final tremor that shook nearly the entirety of the city around the castle, Imu began to rein in his fury. Slowly, ever so slowly, the feeling in the air shifted, becoming stifled and hot but not wrathful or deadly.

“Very well. You say you brought along a list of suitable replacements. I will look them over. But now, tell me what you have been doing to reset the balance of power. To gain revenge on those hated beings who carry with them the will of D!” For a moment, it seemed as if Imu’s anger threatened to boil over again. “Oh, how I hate that lineage!”

He roared, and a black tail or shadow stabbed out like a spear, stabbing into a newspaper clipping of Monkey D. Garp. “All of them, every last one with the Will of D should be exterminated!”

The sight of the halves of the newspaper slowly fluttering down allowed Imu to regain control of himself for a second time, and he pulled his power back again, allowing the two Gorosei to speak. “Talk, or else I may need to replace more than one Gorosei!”

Thankfully, the two of them had been prepared for this after losing...well, both a debate and a series of rock-paper-scissors fights with their fellows. Not one of them had wanted to be in this room at the moment, and given the injuries both of them had sustained through simply being near their king as he raged, it was obvious they had been all-too correct on that score.

However, their explanation for why the Saint of Science and Technology was not there, that he had been sent to orchestrate Vegapunk's coming to the Holy Land, calmed Imu down. Topman didn’t have nearly as good an excuse as Jaygarcia, but he had also already sent off a report to the pair before they were due to speak to the master.

After listening to that report, confusion reigned in Imu’s mind where before rage had, and he slumped down onto his throne, a tall shadow on gold and red filigree, a crown falling lopsidedly on his head, the only thing visible of what he was wearing or indeed much of his form. “I have never heard the like before. Never. No report, no song, no piece of history or mad tale spoke of a Devil Fruit that is able to impart the ability to change from one gender to another with a simple application of water. Further, it can also be saltwater? That is beyond unusual, as saltwater normally cancels out most Devil Fruit powers that need such activation.”

“Yet, that seems to be the case, my liege. Topman’s report was most adamant about that score. There was no way that Coby was making that up, and given everything that happened in Impel Down and the plotting to enter the prison in the first place, it makes sense.”

"Momousagi must be punished severely for her part in that. Have Topman see to it," Imu said, a little bit of bloodthirst coming out. "Send her on a suicide mission perhaps, or better, demand the price in her fingers. A swordswoman needs only one hand, after all."

"If that is your will, we will see it done," Marcus said, bowing his head almost to the point of smacking it into the floor again. "But the marines are already in a precarious position, and their morale is also horrifically maimed. I would request that we wait for some time before we enact justice on Momousagi for her role in the Whitebeard Debacle beyond what Topman told us was already being done."

"The Monkey D. Debacle, not Whitebeard. Whitebeard alone would not have been capable of such a feat. He does not own the Will of D, not like the traitor Garp, or his hated grandson... Or his even more hated son! Both of them, both of them must die, DIIIEEE!!!"

From out of the darkness behind him, another spear formed, hurled sideways into the wall where an actual framed picture of the Revolutionary leader hung, already cut and slashed in various places. It was now completely obliterated by the flung spear, which sunk into the solid stone several feet before quivering to a stop.

"As you say, my liege," the two Gorosei murmured.

It took several moments before Imu regained control of himself, but when he spoke, his voice was almost contemplative, certainly more puzzled than any Gorosei had ever heard. "There must be some kind of trick to it. Perhaps some kind of strange new Devil Fruit? Or... Something. You have already begun to retrace this Lightning King's passage. Find out about his strange ability." Again, Imu fell silent before going on. "As for the other abilities he has shown, they are dangerous too. Ki, the precursor of Haki, should not be able to be as manipulated as you described: a healing factor to put an awakened Zoan to shame and actual marshal attacks. No... that speaks of the past to me. Perhaps Ohara was not the only depository of knowledge from the ancient days that remained. There might've been one out there still somewhere that simply catered to a specific niche."

"As you say," the two Gorosei said again as one.

For a moment, Imu just sat on his throne, fingers tapping the armrest, his powerful intellect pushing past his fury. "Very well. Bringing Vegapunk to Mary Geoise is an excellent idea. Keep an eye on him. Beyond helping the marines rearm and grow stronger, he must make weapons for us. Weapons, strong enough to destroy an entire island, a weapon to erase it from history! This Luffy, his father, even his grandfather any or all of them must be erased!"

Saint Marcus bowed his head quickly to that, almost going into the full kowtow position once more. Saint Ethanbaron, however, found the courage to point out, "That sounds most useful, my liege, both directly against our enemies and as a deterrent. But I would say that the

Revolutionary Army's recent conquests are more directly dangerous to us currently than Monkey D. Luffy or Garp."

"Hmm... with so many islands that provide Mary Geoise with food having been taken by the Revolutionaries, you're correct," Imu grunted, his tone almost like that of a child that had been told no, yet understood the reason why. "At the moment, they are the more dangerous threat. When the marine strength has been rebuilt, they must feel our fury. But you seem to have missed on another idea."

"Enlighten us, my liege. Your mind is always ahead of our own," Ethanbaron said, keeping his eyes downcast.

"Dr. Vegapunk is not the only genius out there, only the most superlative one. Find Caesar Clown and bring him into the fold."

That startled the Gorosei. Caesar Clown had worked alongside Dr. Vegapunk for several years when both of them were recruited into the World Government around five or six years ago from the previously independent think tank, MADS. They'd had a falling out about the nature of Caesar Clown's experiments, and Caesar Clown had detonated a gas bomb that had completely destroyed Punk Hazard, the island that their labs had been on, filling it with deadly gas and slaying hundreds of the world's leading scientists.

It had earned him a bounty, but he had escaped and had yet to reappear. Still, the Gorosei could understand why it might think he might be useful, so they simply nodded, mentally noting that they would need to keep him well away from Dr. Vegapunk. *Perhaps keeping Caesar Clown in Marineford rather than the Holy Land*, Marcus mused.

They set that question aside for now as Imu continued. "Further. With that... Princess going over to his side, Monkey D. Luffy will use his flag to defend Alabasta. You may have an opportunity to ambush him. Do so! Excise him from history! Him, Hancock and Nico Robin, she who can discover the mystery of the Void Century! Kill all three of them! Then, then bring Nefertari to me! She must pay for this latest affront and that which her ancestor did to me so long ago!"

It felt to both Gorosei as if it was about to fall back into his rage, and Marcus instantly spoke up. "An excellent idea, Your Majesty. But one we will need to hurry to implement. Given how much time has elapsed since the end of Whitebeard's War, there's every possibility that the two of them might have been and gone from Alabasta already. We would lose the element of surprise of such a move."

"Go!" Imu growled, more weapons appearing from shadow behind him as he raised his sole, physical blade. "I... I must vent! I will look through your recommendations for a new Gorosei, as well as prepare a Devil Fruit for him. Now, go!"

The two Gorosei quickly hurried out as quickly as their bones could carry them, which, even with the amount of trauma they'd just taken, was quite a bit faster than most might've ever been able to track. The pair remained silent as they moved through the hallways connecting Imu's tower to the rest of the castle. As they went, doors closed behind them, and only when the last close did they pause, breathing in deeply, both of them looking much the worse for wear after this royal audience.

Yet that was within their calculations. And the two men had to admit, the idea of bringing Caesar Clown along was a good one, as was the idea of a weapon that could erase islands, which Ethanbaron brought up now as their healing ability began to kick in. "If we can figure out which island Dragon is on, or even the coordinates of Amazon Lily, then destroying it from afar would send a tremendous message to the entire world. We would stamp out any and all resistance! Even perhaps from the Yonko. Without logistical support from island bases, the pirate era would soon rapidly come to an end."

"Perhaps, do not get ahead of yourself there. Marcus warned, while knowing that was more wishful thinking than anything else, a pleasant dream to while away a few painful moments. "We have heard of such wonder weapons before, and there is always a catch to using them, a weakness in their abilities. It is tempting, but we cannot concentrate solely on that. Rebuilding the marines, making them stronger, making our own forces stronger, as well as those of our constituent countries, is just as important,"

Ethanbaron nodded, and the two men moved on, eager to get to their quarters and call for doctors to attend them. After a few more hallways passed by around them, Marcus asked, "And what do you think of the plan to ambush Monkey D. Luffy on Alabasta?"

He did not give Imu credit for that idea, or even hint that such a plan came from anyone besides themselves. Imu was not to be spoken of where lesser ears could hear of his existence.

Ethanbaron shook his head instantly, not even glancing at his compatriot. "We don't have enough strength to pull it off. Not unless one of us goes there personally. Even sending both Kizaru, who has yet to heal well enough to be at full strength, and Aokiji might not be enough. And if even one of them died, the marines would no longer have the strength to even ward off the Yonko, should one attack the World Government's holdings directly. I made no mention of it, but Kaido and Big Mom are both making moves to expand their territory as it is. We are bound to lose control of some of our islands already."

"True. Young this latest D might be, but he's already shown several insanely dangerous tricks. Not to mention his own Devil Fruit powers. We could perhaps deal with those, but the strange nothingness-based slashing style attacks? His general speed and regeneration ability? None of us could match Peter in that area and Whitebeard showed that even Peter had limits."

All the Gorosei had been gifted by Imu with power that they could instantly awaken their Mythical Devil Fruits. This gave them all a regeneration ability to put any awakened Zoan

to shame, along with basic physical abilities well beyond the norm. Yet Peter's death showed that such had limits, and his Sandworm Devil Fruit had lent itself to regeneration even more than any of the others.

Neither man admitted it, but this was perhaps the first time in their lifetimes they would need to ignore Imu's orders. Most of the time, those orders were sacrosanct. Yet at present, if they obeyed that order, they would either have to put one of their own in direct danger, after seeing they could be killed, or risk losing one of the strongest fighters remaining to them. Marcus had a passing thought that perhaps ordering Mihawk to ambush the Lightning King in Alabasta might work, but Dracule was the least likely to take such an order. Indeed, he had been spotted recently in the New World heading to challenge Shanks for one of their habitual fights. *If Garp's grandson was a swordsman, that would be a possibility. But as it is, no. Trying to get him to ignore fighting Shanks for such a possibility would be impossible.*

He voiced this to Ethanbaron who hummed thoughtfully. "True. We will table that idea for now. Alabasta, at least, will give us a target to go along with Amazon Lily when we have strength enough to attack them. Neither island is going to go anywhere. Although... let me think about this further. Using the Shichibukai again might be worse than worthless... but perhaps... There is a phrase: if you have one problem that is an issue. If you have two problems, you might have a solution..."

OOOOOOO

It actually took a full day for the ninja albatross to be able to call his Creator about the response he had gotten from Luffy about setting up the interview with Luffy and the rest of his crew. One thing that the albatross could not do was use a Den Den Mushi while flying. A Den Den Mushi needed to be held up to the mouth to use, especially if you were moving fast enough for the wind to cause background noise, and while the albatross could hold a Den Den Mushi in its wing, they couldn't do that and fly at the same time. Worse, trying to land in the waters of the Calm Belt was just asking to be eaten like a snack by the monsters that made the Calm Belt so dangerous for anyone who went there.

Retracing its steps out of the Grand Line, once more following its lesser brethren, the ninja albatross spotted a series of jagged rocks jutting out of the ocean. For any human vessel, they would have been a deadly danger, but for him and the hundreds of seabirds around, those were prime perching spots.

Flying down, the Ninja albatross kicked out at several serrated beak seagulls, deceptive little predators that could be found throughout the New World, feeding on other seagulls. Two of them tried to attack him in turn, but one ate a thrown feather dagger in the chest, while the other found its head caught in the ninja albatross's talons. Tossing the two dead birds aside, the larger bird landed in an open area, spreading its wings out and emitting a long hiss like a swan about to attack. Several dozen other birds that had been sharing the same rock squawked, cried and lifted away, unwilling to mess with the larger, obviously far more dangerous bird.

Satisfied none of them would bother him, the ninja albatross reached into the pouch containing his Den Den Mushi. Pulling it out, He held up the microphone portion to his beak, watching with fascination as the snail tried to change its appearance to that of a bird. "Squawk?"

"Hello, this is Apis! Designation number, please," the voice that answered instantly from the other end was not that of the ninja albatross's master. Rather, it sounded like that of a young, somewhat chipper girl.

Elsewhere in the New World was the island of Prodenche Kingdom. It was an island allied with the World Government, and strength ruled here, with the King, Elizabello the Second, being the strongest on the island. He was known to have destroyed a fortress with a single punch. Behind the scenes, however, the island was welcome to a lot of various businesses, shipping, industrial and so forth. This meant that the island was something of a hotbed for the criminal element, even if no crimes occurred locally.

One business that, on its surface, was quite well-respected but did have some shady dealings on the side was Big Bird Publishing Company. Known for its world-famous and world-spanning paper, the World Economy News, it was one of the four biggest publishing companies in the world. The headquarters of both the publishing side of things and the newspaper was in the same building, which was housed in one of the biggest buildings in Prodenche Kingdom's tertiary port, called Cubillo.

It could have been in the capital city, a port city that had recently been renamed Muscletown by King Elizabello but Morgans had preferred this city.

One of the offices in that building took up nearly an entire floor. Most of the space was taken up by feed troughs and perches, where a continual cavalcade of albatrosses came and went every moment of the day. In the center of it was a large desk, which looked even larger compared to the person sitting there. For the speaker was indeed a young girl. Barely twelve years old, this young woman had short-cropped dirty blonde hair and wore a dress that might have looked vaguely Mongolian to Luffy if he ever met her. Around her middle was a red string that looked like a belt, ending in tassels. On her head, she wore a white, pointed hat with red circles around the bottom of it as decoration, matching the row of white circles on a brown background that marked the bottom of her dress. On her feet, she wore red shoes.

Even odder than the fact such a young girl was working for such an important company, however, was the fact that, as the ninja albatross that Luffy had talked to squawked into his Den Den Mushi, she seemed to understand him. "Number one-two-two-five... Oooh! The one sent into the Calm Belt after news-gull nine-eighty-two! Are you okay? Is he? I'm always worried about any of you going into either of the Calm Belts. Ugh! I know precisely how dangerous those places can be."

“Squawk, hiss, squa-squawk, awk,” were the noises coming from the Den Den Mushi on her desk, whose facial features had shifted to resemble that of the albatross on the other side of the line. Yet even still, the girl seemed to understand its words as easily as most would the common tongue.

“Oh, that’s good. And weird, too. I’ll make a note that this Luffy guy’s got even more Kenbunshoku range than that Katakuri guy. Wow. But he passed on a message, huh?” Hearing the affirmative reply, the girl turned away from the Den Den Mushi, looking around the roost for a second. “Flyby Seventeen, I’ve got a job for you. Come on over.”

At her words, a small bird that only vaguely resembled an albatross flew off its perch, lifting off straight up, a trick only possible by the strange configuration of its wings. The bird looked like someone had combined the wing formation of a hummingbird with the sheer size of an albatross. It hovered in the air, its wings a blur before zipping over. The girl patted it lightly on its beak, the bird leaning into her touch while her other hand pulled out a bottle with a long sippy straw. “Drink up while I figure out where to send you.”

As the bird did as it was told, the little girl turned her attention to the Den Den Mushi again. “Tell me more about this Luffy guy and what he told you, then, do you remember the nearest island to you? I think that Morgans-sama will want to get that message in his hand soonest.”

That was but the work of a moment, and soon, the Speedy, or Speedy Albatross, was loaded with several more bottles along its waist. Once that was done, the bird zoomed away while the girl turned her attention back to the Den Den Mushi. Eventually, when the albatross on the end of the line finished its tale, she nodded. “Got it. So he’s concerned about security. Doesn’t sound like he wants to make demands or anything either. Puts him way above certain fat commodores I’ve known.”

The girl fell to grumbling for a moment as she stared at nothing before sighing and looking back at the Den Den Mushi. “Okay, head to Grimaal and meet the Speedy there. You can then take a break for a few days before coming back to Mr. Morgans. And when you get here, I’ll prepare your favorite feed, as usual.”

The bird answered in the affirmative, and the girl hung up quickly. Looking around, she saw there were only a dozen birds beyond the Speedys in the room. “Okay guys, I’m gonna step out to speak to the big boss. If I come back here and find you all have broken the feed lines again or started a food fight, no fish for a week, got it?”

Her answer was a cacophony of squawks, yet the girl still understood them and nodded, a bright smile on her face. “Good.”

With that, she was off, racing through the hallways of the building and up the stairs to the main room. This was a circular room, where dozens of smaller desks were scattered around,

each one of them housing one or two reporters at a time as news came in from the ninja seagulls through their normal means of simply stopping by dropping off messages. Only rarely did one of the birds need to send a verbal report in, although the young girl had, over the three months she'd been working here, learned that those were normally way more important than the written versions that came straight to this room.

For his part, Morgans was sitting at a larger-than-average table near the entrance into the room to one side. Morgans liked to be hands-on with his newspaper far more than the rest of his publishing company and refused to have a separate office. Even as the girl entered, he was checking over an article, humming as he tapped his feathers against the piece of paper, his feathers acting like fingers.

"Morgans-sama, I've got a report from the NAS member who we sent on the, the big case," the girl stated as she ran up to the table.

Quickly finishing his work, Morgans smiled down at one of his best-kept secrets and most important employees. *Really, finding Apis is going to revolutionize my business, especially how I use the NAS. A girl with the Devil-Fruit-given ability to talk to any animal and understand them like another human being is simply amazing. Not to mention how my creations respond to her. I wonder if she's realized yet how I reorganized how reports come in around her ability? Before I found Apis, I would've had the main Den Den Mushi up here with me, and be ready at a moment's notice to take notes. With her around, not only is there another set of ears, but she's a wizard at organizing all my creations. I still can't get over how she can always link a voice to a name when I, their creator has trouble keeping even the ninjas straight!*

Morgan had eaten the Zoan-type Tori Tori no Mi, Model: Albatross. Now, bird-type Devil Fruits were not all that rare. In fact, they were pretty common given how many different types of birds there were out there.

Nevertheless, few Zoan types had ever taken their fruit powers in the direction that Morgans had. If they had more people would understand how extremely weird Devil Fruits like theirs were. Because bird-type Devil Fruit users could lay eggs. And they didn't need to mate to do it. All they needed to do was have time (and privacy). That was what Morgans had done to get his army of newspaper delivery albatross.

The first few times had been **extremely** weird. After all, he had been a human, and humans did not lay eggs. More importantly, he had been a guy. Indeed, Morgans still was a male albatross. Yet somehow, when he wanted to, Morgans could lay eggs. Or perhaps the better word was create? They just... sort of appeared under his ass. Devil Fruits were incredibly weird, and no amount of scientific theory or discussion could ever truly encompass how weird they could possibly be. After all, he was perhaps the only bird Zoan in the world that could not fly, or so most people thought. Whether or not that was true was one of Morgans' best kept secrets.

“Sir, we’ve got a report! One of our birds was shot down near Dressrosa.”

Brow furrowing, Morgans turned away from Apis, holding up a hand when she made to speak. “That’s the second one in that area we’ve lost in the past day. Something is going on there.” He looked down at Apis. “How many of the NAS do we have on hand?”

“UM... fourteen. Seven of the NAS on hand just returned earlier today from long-term assignments. Six of the remaining are dealing with injuries,” Apis answered promptly. “But we’ve got NAS two-two-five-zero. He can take on a job if you want him to.”

“We’ll do that then. When you head down, find the celestial map for Dressrosa. You know the routine by now.” Albatrosses found their way around the world through the use of feeling out wind currents, ocean patterns, both of which were incredibly unique in the Grand Line, and the stars, just like sailors had since time immemorial. Normally, an albatross would only have its own learned territory and instinct. But Morgans’ creations were all smart enough to actually learn from visual cues and some had even learned how to read from Apis over the past few months.

“Aye aye, boss!” Apis said with a lazy salute.

“Good. For now... tell me what SH told our man,” Morgans ordered.

This didn’t take long, although Morgans, like Apis had, felt a flash of amusement at the idea of someone sneaking up on one of his spies. When Apis was done, Morgans leaned back in his chair, turning in his swivel chair to stare out of a nearby window, letting her shift from one foot to another, ignoring her and the shouting, squawking, and bellows of his workers all around him as they tried to keep up with the reports coming in from NAS and regular reporters alike.

Okay. I, I don’t have any problems with meeting with Luffy and his crew on neutral territory. From what my Water 7 and Alabasta beat writers have told me, they are straight arrows, essentially, and if Luffy gives his word, he’ll keep to it. That wouldn’t be enough to let me go into his territory, but meeting him clandestinely somewhere else, yeah, that’s fine.

So, with that out of the way, I have to think of whether or not I should run with this interview at all. It’s obvious why the Lightning King made the deal he did with me in the first place, and that’s something to remember Morgans. He could have just killed the NAS he found. Instead, he wanted to make a deal. But, but is this story too big? Knowing from the Straw Hats’ perspective everything that they’ve gone through, from the Alabasta on, would be amazing. Where did Straw Hat come up with that Lightning Devil Fruit? It’s one of the most sought-after Devil Fruits in the world, and suddenly a rookie, who had only begun to make a name for himself, has it? And then doesn’t use it against a Buster Call but waits to unveil the Goro Goro no Mi until he’s on the biggest stage in the world?! How did he ally himself with Hancock?

That was the original question that had caused Morgans to agree to the deal when the first ninja albatross, that Luffy had inconvenienced, had reported to him.

On the other hand, printing anything positive about the Straw Hats will infuriate the World Government if my story differs from theirs. The World Government already shared their version of the truth about everything that happened with Whitebeard, scarce though it was in detail. And anything differing from that is going to bring down the wrath of the Tenryubito on anyone who disagrees.

Like most people in the world over, Morgans believed that the King's Council and the Tenryubito ruled the World Government. Further, while he had a lot of dealings with the criminal element of the world, Morgans himself had left his violent days well behind him. The idea of getting the World Government, five hundred countries and everything that entailed furious with him was a daunting concept.

But, but if my story is the truth, that is going to drive up sales to a tremendous degree! And... what will they do? Rather, what can they do? As much as Mary Geoise is, the rest of the World Government isn't monolithic. The allied countries can't simply be ordered to no longer let my albatross deliver the news. Hell, I deliver way more than my own newspaper! What countries would agree to be entirely cut off from world news outside of whatever Den Den Mushi they own with contacts outside?

That thought gave Morgans some courage, and he stopped pacing around the open area at the back of the room, tapping one clawed foot down on the floor below him. His wandering brought him to a window, and he peered out and down to the dockyard area, where a very odd ship rested. It was wide, far too circular to be useful out in the open ocean, even in one of the Blues, let alone the New World. That was to say nothing of the fact it looked to be made out of stone in places, particularly the large building set in the direct center of it. The large metal constructs situated all along its edges did nothing to dispel the lack of seaworthiness of the odd craft.

That was fine by Morgans. After all, it wasn't made to be used on the wind and wave.

That sight caused his large albatross-like beak to split into a grin. "What can they do?" he mused aloud, uncaring of how his voice carried. "We've already gotten reports of how weakened the marines have become thanks to their war with Whitebeard. And I'm allied with Big Mom. Any move against me might incur her wrath. Then there's the fact that they won't be able to pin me in place soon."

The ship that he had been looking at earlier was based on an idea he had given the New World equivalent of Water 7, a ship designed not for the ocean but for the sky. Those metal polls would be festooned with huge helium balloons, while thousands of Morgans' albatrosses would be tied into place, helping to keep them in the air and provide propulsion. It would not be the quickest method of travel, but it would be untraceable. *Hmmm, which reminds me, I'll*

need to start popping out eggs soon with a new imprint for that job, albatross built to lift and carry heavy loads for long periods. Ugh, even in my own head more than a decade later, that wording still bothers me.

Morgans had learned over time to not only create eggs but to imbue the albatross born from them with what he called an imprint of the roles he wanted them to take. Regular albatross carried the news, and ninjas were created to be his spies, his eyes and ears throughout the world. He had even created albatross guards. They were larger, taller and broader in the shoulder than even Morgans himself, and he had only ever created eight of them. Presently, all of them were making the rounds around his headquarters.

“So I might be safe from the World Government’s response so long as I keep on the move. Which will probably mean Apis will be getting more work. But with that set to one side, I suppose I need to think about the overall impact of what I might learn and share with the world from talking to Mr. Lightning King,” Morgans mused, not noticing one of his reporters stiffening nearby.

The world’s foundations are already quivering for those who are in a position to notice. Shanks is clashing more often with Big Mom and recently sank a full flotilla of Kaido’s crew. The Revolutionaries took several independent islands, and there’s news coming from my reporters in the Holy Land that certain foodstuffs have already begun to get scarce there. But this? If the story the World Government told about Whitebeard’s War isn’t the truth? The foundations of the world will look like Jell-O if the World Government is caught out in such a tremendous lie, especially if they’re as weakened as they might be if some other reports coming in are accurate. The pirates all over the world are going to go crazy!

Still, despite knowing the chaos that might erupt around the world from this, and despite the fact that it might make him an enemy of the World Government personally, Morgans could not let it slide. He just couldn’t. *No one’s ever called me a good Samaritan, and I will be damned if I keep what might be the biggest scoop of my life a secret!*

“We’ll run with it!” he shouted, turning back to Apis, who rolled her eyes at the birdman’s theatrics. “Yes! Yes, we’ll run with it. I presume you already sent a Speedy to retrieve the message from SH?” He barely waited for Apis to nod before going on, delight and anticipation building within him. “Good. When it arrives, I’ll send another Speedy straight to Amazon Lily with our acceptance of their deal. If we speed up our moving into the Big Scoop, then we can use it to go wherever SH and his crew wants to meet.”

Morgans rubbed his feathers together excitedly. “Yes, we’ll run with this. It will make big news for sure!”

As Apis and a few of his writers all laughed at hearing Morgans’ catchphrase, a new voice interjected, its tone cold and almost analytical. “That is not allowed.”

One of the writers, the same man who had twitched a moment ago, stood up from his desk, peeling back his face as if it was paper, revealing a blank mask underneath, as a pistol appeared in his hand, pointing towards Morgans. "The World Government decides what is truth."

"The World Government has declared the truth in this case. Your reporting will not get in the way of world peace," a second new voice said as another man stood up from a desk near the doorway.

He and another man who had just entered the room also reached up to their faces, peeling them off as easily as a snake would shed its skin, revealing two more blank masks. Another pistol was quickly pointed in Morgans' direction from far closer this time, while the third man pointed his gun at Apis. "By order of the World Government, your independence is revoked. We, CP0 will take you into custody as well as Apis, special military target designate."

Morgans stared at the three men as his people froze or quickly dove under their tables. When he spoke, it sounded like a loud croaking noise, as if he was cursing. What he was really saying in Albatross was: "Apis. Duck."

Apis did so, and Morgans launched himself forward, leaping over a musket ball as it passed underneath him, launching himself towards the nearest man even as he flung out a wing towards the other man, sending out several pinion feathers. "You think I got to be 'Big News Morgans' without getting my talons dirty?!"

Now would be a really good time to actually have a psychic connection with my creations, he thought, even as the man who had been aiming at Apis reacted quickly, nailing Morgans in the side, as the other assassin tried to line up a shot, hitting Morgans in the back, causing him to grunt in pain, but he was a Zoan. Simple pistol shot was not going to put him down that easily unless they hit his brain or heart.

Morgans barreled into the first man, who tried to take his charge with Tekkai, only for Morgans' momentum to overcome his footing. He wasn't injured and rolled with it quickly, bringing around a kick that caught Morgans in the wing, but Morgans reacted by moving with the blow, lashing out up into the air with his other arm, catching the second man in the air when he leaped to kick Morgans, sending him careening into the wall before he could activate Tekkai.

He grunted on the impact, and Morgans ducked under another blow from the third man, lashing out with a kick. This man also responded with Tekkai, and this time his footing wasn't overcome by the kick. He grabbed onto Morgan's outstretched talon, only to be pulled up off the ground and hurled away like a piece of jetsam caught in the talon.

As this was going on, Apis crawled to the doorway. Ducking under a hand that tried to grab her she rolled forward, then raced off, shouting, "Guards, Guard Birds, we're under attack!"

Back in the main office, Morgans reeled from a kick, then ducked under a Rankyaku before taking another similar attack in the side that flung him sideways. The technique wasn't sharp enough to cut his feathers, and he actually smirked for a second. *These aren't fully trained Cipher Pol agents*, he thought, ducking under another blow only to eat a knee to the side of his face that instantly began to cause like to swell closed from the pain of it. *Thank goodness for that, but they're still tough!*

Another blow to his back sent Morgans to his knees, but he rolled forward, lashing out with the bird version of a mule kick, catching his attacker in the chest, his talons digging into the man's chest before he could activate Tekkai. The man gurgled and then found himself in the air as Morgans completed his roll, hurling the man over Morgans and off his talons to slam into the forwardmost wall from his desk. Another Rankyaku caught Morgans in the shoulder and collarbone, and for the first time, Morgans grimaced in real pain as blood spurted out from the cut.

The other two attackers made to move forward, but one of them instantly had to turn away as the door burst open, and two soldier albatrosses charged in, Apis hiding behind them. Like with Morgans and all of his other creations, it was a question about how they could use their wings to grip anything. Yet they could, and they were carrying large boar spears, which they leveled at the man, charging forward at near stabbing range the moment they entered the room.

This left only the badly wounded man and the other attacker, the one who had been so quick on the use of Tekkai, and Morgans leaped forward, charging towards that man again. Tekkai met Morgans' beak as it plunged down into the man's chest, and this time, the Tekkai failed. The man gasped as Morgans' beak, like a giant dagger, stabbed deep into his chest, then found himself being lifted up into the air and flung sideways into the slowly recovering other badly wounded man.

They went down in a heap, and Morgans was on them, his wings forming into fists as he flailed at them, beating them into a pulp, while his guards dealt with the other one. One of his guards went down, its throat slit by a point-blank Rankyaku attack powered by desperation. But soon, the two Morgans had been fighting were dead, and he breathed heavily, pushing himself away from the bodies, looking down at the blood slowly dripping from his feathers, and then reaching up to his face where he felt cut from the air slice that it barely missed his own neck, the bruises on his face. "Well, if the World Government thought that was going to dissuade me, they have another thing coming! I'm independent, and I'm going to stay that way!"

He looked over at Apis, and sighed faintly, seeing her looking as if she was about to throw up. Despite having had a rather rough life before Morgans chanced upon her, she had

never seen someone killed before and was not dealing with it well. "Lisa, take Apis here to the restroom until we clean all this up. Stay with her for the rest of the day."

An elderly woman nodded her head, stood up and gently led Apis away. Morgans looked at her, wondering if Apis would remember soon that the World Government had wanted her as well, before shaking his head. *If she did, we'll talk about it then. If not, then not. I've kept the extent of her abilities a secret, but if the World Government had agents here... who else might know about her abilities?*

Shaking that thought off, Morgans looked around at the reporters as they slowly crawled their way out from behind or under desks. Scowling barked out, "What are you waiting for! Get back to work! We've got news to tell the world! And you, Stephenson, go tell the incubation room to be ready for me, then go over to the supply group. We're going to move up our timetable to move into Big Scoop."

OOOOOOO

Stella and Pythagoras remained working on the project to safely move Punk Records for the next two days, all while Jaygarcia was watching them like hawks. That was fine by Lilith though, who had already done what she had set out to do: hiding a certain ancient robot away where no one could find him. Lilith had then erased her memory of the event before her next upload to Punk Records so that even the rest of the satellites wouldn't know what happened.

This actually led to a big argument with Jaygarcia. It had been a younger Saint Jaygarcia who had delivered the ancient war machine to Egghead for Vegapunk to study. To learn that it was gone and no one on the island knew where it went was infuriating. In the end, other than executing every lesser scientist and worker who knew about the robot, he couldn't do anything about where the giant robot had gone. The best he could do was discover several large footprints through the snow and down to the shoreline, making it look as if the robot had walked off under its own power.

Lilith had put that trail down with a certain amount of glee before erasing her memory of doing so. The fact she and nearly a hundred marine divers were forced to go and look for further evidence in the cold sea might have dampened that joy, if she had those memories. But even so, the 'evil' satellite still took some delight in how furious Jaygarcia was and how cold and annoyed the marines quickly became. The pinkette delighted in such small victories, yet soon, she joined Shaka, Atlas and Edison in Mary Geoise, where she was forced to work once more. For her, fun time was definitely over.

Finally, it was done. Punk Records, a giant, cracked open-egglike construction, was set into a floating disk of metal, which flew down to the ocean under its own power and then floated in the water between four of the steam-driven transport ships, able to just be tugged along between them. It would still be dangerous to transport it, as well as slow, but it was now possible.

Within another hour, Stella and the last scientists deemed necessary by the Warrior God of Science and Technology left with Jaygarcia. The moment they did, the marines initiated a Buster Call on Egghead. That there were still several thousand people, cooks, basic handymen, nurses and other support personnel, on the island did not matter at all. Rather, their deaths were the point.

Jaygarcia stayed on the aft of his transport ship, watching as the Buster Call was carried out. Next to him, watching the same thing with a true look of horror on his face, was Stella. "Remember this moment, Dr. You are a servant, nothing more. We allow you some freedom, but we cannot allow your knowledge to fall into the wrong hands. Whatever we must do, however we must do it, we will keep the world peace."

"I, I understand. I will not forget. I can never forget," Stella answered bitterly, before stomping off as much as someone of his diminutive stature could.

Jaygarcia let him go. He had broken Vegapunk's will enough over the past few days. The genius could be allowed a moment of harmless rebellion.

But as good with Haki as Jaygarcia was, he could not actually read someone's mind, or at least, not someone with a mind touched by the Nomi Nomi no Mi. If he could, he might have known that Stella had planned his eventual freedom and had hidden one ace in the hole away, then very carefully removed any knowledge of said ace from himself and the two satellites who also knew about it, Shaka and Pythagoras, just like Lilith had information about Emet's fate.

This ace in the hole would not move for more than a week. Indeed, he remained completely isolated, buried in the ground underneath one of the laboratories. However, after Jaygarcia and York, the last satellite on the island, left? After the entire island had been wiped clean of life by a Buster Call called on it by Jaygarcia, and the marines retreated. If anyone had still been on the island, they would have heard a booming noise from near the wrecked, burnt-out wreckage in the center of the island.

The Buster Call was thorough, as had the marines who had combed through the island. So thorough that a lot of the features of the island had been flattened, and not a single building remained save in the form of mounds of rubble.

Nevertheless, they missed a few things. Mainly, because they lacked any ability to see through several feet of concrete and a few inches of Seastone. Even someone with Kenbunshoku would have been defeated by that, save perhaps someone with Devil Fruit that could have added to the ability.

BOOOM. *BOOOM*. *BOOOOM*. For the rest of the day, the adventurous seagulls and other birds who had thought to try to find food on the now deserted winter island were disturbed in their search. For the rest of the day, the snow in this ear quivered and shook. Then, it began to rise as if something from beneath was slowly pushing the ground upward until,

finally, there was a final crack, and a portion of the ground in the shape of a paw two stories across blasted upwards, dumping snow and such in every direction.

From out of the hole in the ground, a Pacifista pulled itself. At first, as it stood there, staring all around it, there was nothing unusual about its appearance, but then it slowly removed its sunglasses, revealing remarkably human-like eyes behind it. It was only for a moment before they were put back, and the Pacifista shook his head in an equally humanlike manner, staring in particular at several bodies that had been crushed under some wrecked, molten scaffolding, and to another group out in the open, which had been burnt to a crisp.

“Well... I suppose that the World Government has never been anything but thorough. I honestly did not believe Vegapunk’s little message, but looking at all this, there is certainly very little of the Egghead I once knew that has been left standing. Pity, I would have liked to see what Vegapunk had made of the island since the last time I was here,” the robot, if indeed it could still be called that stated staring around at the destruction that the Marines had wrought on the Gorosei command.

Bartholomew Kuma, his soul intact, retained outside of his body thanks to the work of the Nikyu Nikyu no Mi and Dr. Vegapunk, looked around him speculatively in his new body, shifting slightly this way and that on his feet, still after several days needing to get used to how this entirely robotic form felt. It was far lighter than his cyborg body, but at the same time, it felt... stronger? More streamlined? It was hard to tell, but he knew that even though he was now fully a robot, he would have a lot of the same abilities he had as a cyborg and then some.

As he did, he spoke to himself, a habit he had grown into over the past few days of complete and total isolation underground. “So, priorities. Priority one, get used to my abilities and limitations in this form. I can feel that the Devil Fruit has somehow weakened. It should have taken me only an hour at best to get through that little bit of Seastone and concrete. However else it has weakened, I will need to experiment to discover. A pity that Dr. Vegapunk is in here for that. Next... What should I do after that? Meet up with the Revolutionaries or try to plan out a way of freeing Dr. Vegapunk before he is forced to give too much of his research to the World Government? If they have complete and total access to his abilities, his experiments, that will become a true bedlam of horror in time...”

Yet even as he said that, a part of Bartholomew Kuma, the part of him that had been a father willing to lay down not just his life but also his very existence for his daughter, shook his head. “No. Vegapunk and Dragon can both keep for a few months. I need to find my Little Jewel.”

With that, Bartholomew Kuma hopped into the air, only to fall flat on his face. Frowning, he pushed himself to his feet, and then tried it again, only to stumble as his Geppo failed within two steps, then he was forced to use his palms to bounce into the air when his Geppo finally failed. “Drat. Right, no more air walk for me, rather thrusters...”

A second later, he found himself slamming into a hill at speed, his thrusters, which had popped out from his feet and the back of his legs, failing instantly. “Well... that was humiliating. Although, I thankfully don’t seem to have pain receptors in this body. That’s a nice feature... I think.”

With that, Bart pushed himself to his feet before staring at the hill he’d crashed into, which overlooked a cliff face leading down to the ocean. A hill on which the snow had been displaced by his crash to see that much of the grass on it had also been burned away, leaving a gleam of metal underneath. Moments later, after using his Devil Fruit to get rid of the rather ridiculous amount of soil and rock that had been used to hide what was underneath, Bart stared at the metal giant thus revealed, its size dwarfing him. “Emet... Vegapunk was able to leave you here, too. Amazing!”

He reached over, touching the dirt and moss-covered robot with one hand. “Unfortunately, I can’t do anything for you. I lack any knowledge needed to get you moving. Still, perhaps eventually someone else will come along and have the touch?”

With that, Bart turned away and began to practice with his thrusters once more. Between them and his Nikyu Nikyu no Mi, he would hopefully be able to escape the island.

It took Bart several hours to get the hang of finally moving through the air again, but soon, he was moving over the waves before pausing as another thought occurred to him. “Now... how exactly am I going to find my daughter?”

His only answer, of course, was the sound of the wind and the waves around him, and Bartholomew Kuma, former Shichibukai, former Revolutionary and full-time father, sighed. This new life of his was not getting off to a smooth start.

OOOOOOO

Hearing the sound of giggling over the even more pleasant sound of an extremely advanced contraption creating the most amazing drink the known world had yet to discover, Robin looked up from her book, gazing at Vivi from the side as she worked on the extremely advanced coffee maker that the young girl had been given by Franky, staring out into the distance. “And what has you giggling so much this early in the morning, Princess?”

“I saw a blast of water from out beyond the edge of the city. I just thought it had to be Jinbe, and that made me remember the look on his face when he asked Luffy to let him use Luffy’s flag to protect Mermaid Island. It was very clear that he was all prepared to pay whatever price Luffy and Hancock demanded for the use of **our**...” Vivi paused, savoring that word, causing Robin to smile. “Flag to defend his island, only for Luffy to point out that wanting peace between mermaids and humans was more than big enough of a dream to mean he’d fit right in with our crew. Followed by saying he would, of course, protect Mermaid Island. With

nothing asked. It felt almost like a part of Jinbe was expecting it, but the majority just sort of... Stared for a few moments, like a fish out of water."

At that bit of wordplay, Robin chuckled, shaking her head, putting the book down as Vivi finished whatever she was doing to the coffee machine, coming over with a coffee cup for Robin and one for herself to go with the pastries that resided on a table set between the two lounge chairs both women were currently using. "Yes, well, part of what drew both of us to Luffy was the fact that he has such a warm heart, and after Jinbe explained the troubles that Mermaid Island faced before Whitebeard put it under his protection, how could Luffy not agree to allow his own name to be used to protect it in turn? It might not work as well as Whitebeard's name did, but it will work well enough, especially if Jinbe leaves the majority of his crew where they are."

Vivi nodded, handing over the cup to Robin before Zoro's shout of, "You're going to have to do better than that!" reached her. Turning her attention over the patio's railing down towards the area below, Vivi saw Zoro, Sandersonia and Brook locked in a three-way battle, where Brook was losing badly. While Sandersonia lacked the speed and the durability of Zoro, she could use Busoshoku quite well in her body and to a degree in her weapon. She also had Kenbunshoku, whereas Zoro's was quite weak in comparison. All of which meant Brook was swinging well above his weight class at the moment.

Brook desperately fended him off, shouting, "Yohohohoho, I have a feeling this is somehow personal Zoro-san, this can't be how you learned how to concentrate your Haki into your weapon. You haven't given me a single moment of actual instruction. You and Sandersonia-san just attacked me. And I didn't even ask to see her panties today"

"Actually, this is pretty much precisely how I learned it from Luffy," Zoro drawled, blocking her ripostes with ease. "And you're the one that asked to be trained."

"Trained, yes, but training usually doesn't mean breaking bones! As those are all I have left, I am most against such, Yohohohoho, Skull AAKK!" Brook groaned, before he was flung aside.

The next moment, Sandersonia yelped as she found herself the sole target of Zoro's attention. *Blessed Nika, I know that I asked for this, but oh dear this is going to hurt!*

Meanwhile nearby, two other groups were also training. Chopper was wrestling with Marigold, the two Zoans tossing one another back and forth, as Marigold taught Chopper some takedowns and other wrestling moves, something that Luffy hadn't really bothered much with. Nearby, a dozen Kuja children watched, cheering for Chopper, who the young girls had taken to treating as a plushy occasionally. Beyond them, Perona could be seen learning the basics of using daggers from Marguerite.

The rest of the crew were elsewhere at the moment. Hancock was out with Franky and a few of the shipwrights and engineers to survey the area of the two mountainous shoulders and the observatory above them. She had to be there because, despite his stay on the island previously, there were still a few women who disapproved of men being on the island in general, and of one being put in charge of so many projects. Franky, Zoro, and Sanji were the target of such anger more often than not. Zoro ignored it, while Sanji's general attitude drew a lot of laughter and threats of violence alike. Franky, though, was more important to the ongoing efforts to make Amazon Lily defensible and Hancock would allow such complaints to slow things down. Rather she browbeat all the women into submission, and made it clear the Franky's time was precious given everything they had laid on his shoulders.

"You **must** start making those plans now, Franky. Let others start the work on these projects, specifically gathering the material needed. Then you can turn your attention to finishing the sloop for Vivi and Luffy's trip and my permanent ship. A project, I will remind you, is at the heart of our alliance as much as my affection for your captain," Hancock had said that morning after Franky said after he had finished most of the work what he called the Super Franky Lightning Zoomer.

Similarly, Luffy was in the observatory with the blacksmiths and glassmakers, working on finishing building the spyglass, where he would undoubtedly deal with some issues. However, his position as Hancock's paramour and his logia powers protected him from being outright attacked or shouted at. It wasn't as effective as Chopper's sheer cuteness, Jinbe's past association with the Boa sisters, or Brook's being a skeleton, but it was enough.

Laki and Makino were out with a few of the Kuja in the jungle that dominated the island beyond their valley. Vivi wasn't certain if they were actually training or going through some local rite that the two of them wanted to take part in. She hadn't followed that discussion much that morning, but knew that both were enjoying their time on the island.

As for Sanji, who should have been enjoying their time on Amazon Lily the most, he was also out training with Jinbe. Jinbe was due to leave later that day to head to Mermaid Island, and both Zoro and Sanji wanted to get in a few hours sparring with him. Sanji would spar with him in the morning, and Zoro would in the afternoon over the strenuous objections from Chopper.

Zoro had been the worst injured among the Straw Hats, thanks to the injuries he had sustained in his fight with the CPO assassins. However, to Chopper's shock, he also seemed to be gaining some measure of what Ranma called ki healing. Thus, despite the fact he should have been, at best, on light duty for more than a month, Zoro was up and able to spar fairly well now a little over two weeks after his injury.

Looking down at Zoro and Sandersonia become more and more serious, with both of them gleaming with the black of Busoshoku from the waist up at this point, Vivi shook her head, murmuring aloud, "I wonder why Luffy didn't want to spar with Jinbe?"

"Oh, he does. But he doesn't want to do so under a time limit, and Jinbe was adamant that he needed to leave today to get to Mermaid Island as fast as possible. It **has** been almost 2 weeks since Whitebeard died, and the shock of that is probably already wearing off around the world," Robin pointed out, looking back down at her book.

Vivi nodded, turning back to gaze at the other woman thoughtfully for a moment. Taking a sip of her coffee, she grimaced a bit as Robin barely even noticed the taste of her coffee, simply gulping down several sips of the pure black coffee she had requested without comment. "Barbarian."

"Effete weakling," Robin retorted, not turning her attention back away from her book. It was a recent history novel of the Kuja and had a translation from common into their ancient language, which she was currently trying to memorize. "Not all of us need to dull down the impact of coffee with honey and milk like you do, darling."

Vivi snorted but did blush a little at the use of that term. Moving over to sit across from Robin in the other lounge chair, she set her coffee down on the tiny table between them. The two of them had buried the hatchet even further than they already had over the past few days, building on an admiration that had been there since well before Crocodile had been defeated.

There hadn't been any attraction there at the time. For one thing, Vivi had thought she was straight as an arrow and had not yet met anyone with the... overwhelming sensual beauty that Hancock could exhibit. That was not to say that Robin wasn't attractive, and even back then, Vivi had known it yet she hadn't awakened any interest in Vivi like Hancock had. Robin, likewise, hadn't really been into women but had become so by necessity with Luffy.

"You're staring again," Robin said, not looking up from her book even as she spoke, a hand appearing on her thigh for a moment, waving an admonishing finger at Vivi. "Time and place, Princess."

"Oh, hush! I was just thinking that the cowboy hat is an excellent look for you," Vivi retorted defensively, trying hard not to blush at the appearance of that hand. She could all too easily remember what those hands had done to her two nights ago when she was drunk and at least in this, Robin was right. There was a time and place for such thoughts.

"As is the choker you have on you, Vivi," Robin replied magnanimously, a sly smile on her face telling Vivi a bit more than her words.

The two of them had, along with the other girls, somewhat gone native here on Amazon Lily. Both of them now sported the upper body wrap and lower toga that most of the Amazons wore, while Robin had procured a cowgirl hat much like the one that she had worn for most of their time in Alabasta. Vivi had gone out of her way to buy a choker for herself, the blackness of it highlighting her porcelain skin and the regal curvature of her neck, which Luffy and the others had discovered was one of her weak points, that and Vivi's somewhat submissive nature. She

wasn't submissive in terms of her normal life, of course, but when it came to the physical side of their relationship, she very much was. She enjoyed being led and controlled to a certain degree.

Which is probably why having her sleep between me, Luffy, or me Hancock and Luffy, works so well. She's so gentle that nothing she does will activate Luffy's Sleep Fu or my own self-defense instincts. Even Hancock had slept more soundly with Vivi beside her, which, considering the time that she and Robin had tried to share a bed with Luffy without Vivi there, was even more surprising.

Wincing a little in remembered pain, Robin looked up from her book at a particularly loud shout from below. "Ha, it's not even noon yet, and you come limping in here, Love Cook! More time for me then!"

"Oh shut up, baka Marimo!" Sanji grumbled as Robin quickly created several eyeballs on the outer edge of the balcony looking down, a chuckle escaping her at the bedraggled, bruised appearance of Sanji. "I made the mistake of trying to fight him along the shoreline. I took one for the team, so you can benefit from my mistakes."

Zoro paused, thinking, then shook his head. Whatever response he could make would be a little too wordy for his preference. So he simply stayed silent, batting aside another lunge from Sandersonia with Wado Ichimonji and moving toward Jinbe as Brook got in her way a second later. "Well, whatever. We've still got, what, three hours before you leave with the tide? More than enough time."

"Very well, just remember to keep your blades blunt, if you please. I would rather not return home with still more scars on my person," Jinbe answered with a laugh.

A weight had been removed from the fish man since his conversation with Luffy, and another had been removed when he finally spoke to Nami. The navigator had been kind of avoiding him a little bit, not really at home around fishmen given her history with them, but eventually the two of them had sat down and talked about Jinbe's past actions and how they had impacted Nami.

That had been a very interesting moment: learning that Sawtooth Arlong had once been a part of the same crew as Jinbe and that it had been Jinbe's name that had partially shielded Arlong from marine retribution, not just the local garrison commander being on the take. Jinbe had been extremely apologetic about it, to the point of literally bowing his head towards Nami, something that had startled Hancock and several of the other members of their little group.

Nami had soon forgiven Jinbe, though, saying that it was no one's fault but Arlong's and that she had pretty much moved on from it anyway. Still, given the friendly nod Nami, who had just come out of the palace, gave Jinbe, it was obvious that whatever hesitation had been between them before was gone now.

“Jinbe isn’t the only one anxious to leave,” Vivi murmured, sipping from her coffee again, drawing Robin’s attention to her again. “I am too. I’ve always hated being out of the loop, and with me being unable to call home, it’s been hard, knowing that the first reports of what happened that my father sees will be from the World Government.”

“I understand, but you are going to leave tomorrow. Never fear. Luffy will get you there as fast as he possibly can. Literally lightning speed,” Robin quipped, shaking her head. She then smiled a little, knowing how to get Vivi’s mind off of her concerns about her father and Alabasta. “And it will just be you and Luffy all alone on that trip. I wonder what the two of you will get up to when he decides to take a break, just drifting all alone on the waves, hmm~?”

This worked to a T, as Vivi blushed most satisfactorily, letting loose a little cough as a bit of her disgustingly mud-colored coffee went down the wrong tube. “*Cough* yes, well, I hope that you and Luffy have a nice time together tonight.”

“And you and Hancock, my dear,” Robin teased, causing Vivi to squeak a little, shaking her head and turning aside to pick up her notebook for a moment. She lost herself in it, jotting down some notes for herself and for the rest of the crew as to what to and to not tell Big News Morgans’ reporter if or when that conversation occurred.

Smiling faintly, Robin also turned back to her book. Just as a tornado blasted out of the nearby forest, pointing out precisely where Jinbe and Zoro were fighting.

True to the plans they had made, Jinbe left that afternoon with good wishes from all of the Straw Hats and many of the Kuja who had gotten to know the Knight of the Sea. Hancock had already respected Jinbe, as he was a follower of Fisher Tiger’s the man whose rampage through the Holy Land had freed Hancock and her two sisters. But now, many of the other Kuja had also come to respect Jinbe in his own right rather than just because he was a friend of their Empress.

That night, Luffy and Robin spent some time alone together, as most nights before this, Hancock had monopolized Luffy’s time. Luffy showed Robin the sites of the island and then the two of them making love on the shore, much to Robin’s chagrin the next day. While Luffy just needed to transform into lightning to remove all of the sand that got in uncomfortable places, Robin had an awkward morning until she could take a bath to do the same.

Nonetheless, she and the rest of the Straw Hats joined Franky, Luffy and Vivi on the docks when it was time for Vivi and Luffy to take her back to Alabasta the next day. This area had been closed off for the past few days as Franky spent nearly every waking hour down here working on the mini-ship that would carry Luffy and Vivi to Alabasta as fast as possible.

At first, he had debated on making some kind of flying ship. Yet Franky ran into a major problem in that he hadn’t ever built such before, and he lacked the materials for the amount of trial-and-error type rebuilds that he would need for that kind of thing. Thus, he had to fall back

on building a normal sea-faring ship, although that didn't mean that the ship he created was any less of a masterpiece.

The ship was an extremely sleek vessel, one that looked almost like a teardrop, its prow coming to a blunt nose like that of a dolphin, with streamlined metal shifting only slowly to wood in the center, then metal again near the back, where large turbines could be seen underneath the water. The whole thing was small, almost the size of a fighter jet, a comparison that came easily to Luffy as it had a canopy to it that started only a few feet back from the prow and which covered half of its body. Behind that, there was a small, covered kitchen and a supply room, loaded with premade meals from Sanji.

"OW! There's room enough for four people on this bad boy, but I took the two back seats out of this baby for now so there's more room to stand... although given the speed this baby can run at, you probably won't be doing much of that..." Franky sweatdropped for a moment, the blank gaze of Vivi reminding him that she too was a Logia, so if she wanted to move around, well, she could easily just create a half-body of sand and just shift along on that.

Shaking his head, he pointed down into the large cockpit/living quarters at the leftmost seat. There, a lot of small metal prods, could be seen, starting from mid-thigh down. "That, and the passenger and pilot seats can both fold back, making for even more comfort. This suuuuper baby also has a built-in electrical battery along with the turbines, so you can take short breaks if you want Luffy, although it won't be able to last long at full speed. I still haven't figured out a way to make a battery last very much, sorry, Luffy."

Luffy waved that off, stepping into the ship then into the chair indicated. There, he saw that the controls included Vivi's Eternal Pose to Alabasta, as well as a wheel that looked more like a car wheel than a ship's. "It's fine, Franky. I gotta think those books we got ya from the Rainbow Mist didn't go into how stuff like that was made, so taking a while to get it right is fine."

With that, he allowed his lower body to shift into lightning form, feeling the power run down from his 'legs' into the various prods. The whole ship began to thrum, as the turbines began to spool up. *Are those turbines like on a ship, or jet turbines? Is there a difference? I wish I knew more about engineering sometimes.* Shaking his head, Luffy stopped the power for a second, feeling the ship slowly lose a bit of power, although he could tell that some of his electricity had been captured by the batteries Franky had been talking about. "It feels like it should work. Good job, man."

"of course it will work, you baka!" Franky shook his head. "I made it, after all. Oh, and here is the Den Den Mushi."

The Mushi was set into the center of the column, with its own little feeding tray. The Mushi itself though was strapped down by what looked like thick rubber bands. "Franky, how fast do you think this thing can go?"

"I clocked it, Cap'n." Franky smirked. "You can put as much power into this engine as you can the Everlasting Resolve, and it's less than a tenth of the weight. It will be going so fast, and with the nose the way it is... well, you should be going at least five times as fast as the larger ship."

Nearby, the Everlasting Resolve seemed to creak in protest at that, and if they were alone, Luffy just knew Eve would have just appeared out of the hull of the larger ship. *Probably to admonish either Franky or me. Eve's really not happy about the idea of me and Vivi using this smaller ship given how she shrieked her little head off last night.*

Chopper hopped in behind Luffy, ooh at the small space inside the small vessel, staring at the controls avidly. "So cool, they look like a mechas controls!"

Franky laughed at that, and put on a show for a few seconds as Luffy went back to checking out the controls. Back on the pier, Zoro and Sanji stood waiting their turn, all of them intensely interested in Franky's current creation. For some reason just the amount of tech he'd needed to pile into the ship had grabbed their attention a lot.

The girls, not so much. They were still there, but instead of being interested in the Super Speedster, as named by Franky, they were talking to Vivi. Nami in particular made Vivi promise that she would come back and not let Cobra or Igaram try to guilt trip into staying. "I've just got my best friend back, and I'm not letting you leave me again after less than two weeks!"

Vivi laughingly promised that she would, reflecting internally that her staying in Alabasta would probably be a bad move anyway. Even with Luffy's flag protecting the nation, the World Government or some enterprising up-and-coming pirate might attempt to try to fight her. *Now, admittedly, fighting a sand user in Alabasta was just asking for trouble, but so was putting myself out there where the marines like Aokiji or a few of the vice admirals could overwhelm me.*

Laki and Hancock also bid Vivi farewell, as did Robin, before Luffy called Vivi over to him, and the two of them boarded the ship.

The others watched as a low hum began to build from the vessel as soon as the large canopy closed. It began to rise up in the water thanks to a few Dials on the under hull, while lights started to flash near the engines.

Seeing that, Franky whooped, posing with his arms outstretched above his head. "Suuuuper, I really like that look!" before the engines began to turn at the back, roaring to life.

As they did, Hancock, standing behind them on the wharf, frowned. While her Kenbunshoku wasn't up to the point she could always predict the future, right now, she had a very specific vision fill her mind.

"I think we all should stand back," the Empress announced suiting action to word even as she did, grabbing Laki and Nami up under each arm and bouncing up into the air via Geppo. "I get the distinct impression that the backslash from that things take off is going to be quite dramatic."

The next second, there was a whooshing noise as the engines fully ignited, electrical arcs appearing around their fuselage for a second before disappearing. Inside the large cockpit, Luffy followed Franky's instructions and pulled back onto the wheel when all the lights along one side of the panel turned green. An instant later, the turbines roared, a huge wave of blasted out from the aft of the vessel, and the ship zoomed out into the open water beyond.

Sanji and Zoro hadn't taken Hancock's advice, and both of them found themselves bowled over by the wave, nearly to the point where they wound up in the ocean. Chopper had automatically shifted into his Guard Point, only to find himself flying backward in midair like a beach volleyball that had just been struck by a Jinbe.

From above, Hancock, Nami and Laki, who had bounced out of Hancock's grip with her skate dials, stared. "It, it's moving faster than a cannonball..." Laki breathed, watching the dopplering waves left behind the ship as it zoomed forward. "Heck, is it even touching the water, or just zooming over it?"

"I don't know..." Hancock said, as within seconds the ship was out of sight. "I still object to its current appellation, yet I cannot deny it definitely lives up to the name quite well."

"Franky, what in the god's name did you build?!" Nami shrieked, not dealing with the speed or being drenched nearly as well as the other two ladies.

"Something Suuuuper!" the ecstatic cyborg shouted, posing again as he stared into the distance. "The lightning equivalent of Ace's little surfboard, I told you! Done large and in charge because that's the Suuuuper way, baby!"

Rolling her eyes at the cyborg's antics, and noting that parts of the ship seem to have been left behind as it raced away, Hancock looked around at the others, shaking her head. "Regardless of the abruptness of the departure, Luffy and Vivi are gone. Now, that leaves me in charge. Zoro, Sanji, you know what you two should do. The rest of you, let us adjourn to my sitting room for a moment to discuss my plans for you all going forward."

Not two hours later, this process was interrupted by two arrivals.

Rayleigh was ushered quickly into the sitting room where Hancock, Robin, and Nami were all sitting down, discussing a training schedule for the orange-haired girl. It was kind of difficult for her, as it was for Franky. Nevertheless, Franky had more than enough around the island to keep him busy. Nami, on the other hand, outside of conversations with Sandersonia and the other navigators among the Kuja, did not.

All three of them smiled as Rayleigh and Shakky entered, with the woman looking like she had just stepped ashore from a small boat and the man looking as if he had spent several days in the water. Which he had. Apparently, he had been pushing the ship along through the Calm Belt from the Archipelago, A feat that, when she heard of it, caused Nami to gape in astonishment at the messenger from the dockyard area. She'd gotten control of herself now but still couldn't help but feel just a little more awe in the Dark King's presence than she had been when they'd first met. For some reason, the feat of swimming through the Calm Belt simply made the legends surrounding Silvers Rayleigh seems more real.

"AHAAHAHHA, and there's one of the ladies of the hour! Hancock, from all that we've learned from Shakky's sources and the World Government's official press release, if even half of that is real, you and Straw Hat messed up their plans so hard it's a wonder they didn't scream for mercy! I'm no longer in the business of enjoying violence for violence's sake, but that made my day. I already loved the idea of your little alliance and hearing about Luffy's dream to be the Pirate King, all the dreams of you and the rest of his crew, well... it made me want to interact with the world again."

"To say nothing of what **really** happened, the story of which being the reason why I'm here with this old reprobate. My nose is telling me that there was a lot more going on and that the marines are full of it, when they say that they won with how many casualties they seem to have taken. Is it true that you killed the Red Dog?" Shakky asked.

"Yes, but it was more of a team effort. Luffy had already disarmed him quite literally." Hancock laughed quietly. She would've put on a front for anyone but these two, but with the former Empress, and Rayleigh, there was no point. "While also sending Kizaru into a retreat after he nearly died from his wounds. Which isn't even talking about what Whitebeard did."

Telling the tale of first the infiltration from Makino's perspective, then the battle through Impel Down from what they had been told took so long it was evening by the time they got to the actual battle against the marines. At that point, Sanji and Zoro arrived to fill Rayleigh in more about what had gone on inside the prison, taking even more time.

It was deep night by the time they all finished, and Rayleigh leaned back in his chair, taking a long swig from his bottle of wine, while Shakky smoked her seventh cigarette of the day, tapping it against the ashtray she and Sanji were sharing between them. "My word," he said, his eyes alight with fiendish delight. "I knew that it was worse than the World Government was letting on. But for a Gorosei to **die**? Whitebeard certainly went out like no one has before him."

He fell silent then, staring down at his bottle before raising it in silence salute, then downing the entire thing while the others remained quiet in respect. He then slammed the empty bottle down on the table, causing Hancock to hiss at the damage done to her furniture. "Now, what are your plans going forward?"

“Training,” Zoro answered bluntly. “Our navigator, musician, shipwright, doctor and both our sharp shooters need training before they’re ready for the New World. Hell, even me, the two Boas that my captain isn’t Boi...”

“Finish that word, and spend the next year as a statue, worm!” Hancock snarled, while Robin looked surreptitiously over at Perona and then at the drink in Zoro’s hands, wondering how strong it was to make him so crass. Zoro fell silent, showing he wasn’t entirely out of it, and Nami continued where he left off before going down no-no road.

“As much as it pains me to admit it, Zoro’s right. Me and the rest he named, we aren’t ready for the New World. Especially not given how every other pirate is going to come gunning for us given, what Luffy’s already accomplished. Nami sighed. “I don’t like it, but at the moment, Laki, me, Chopper, even Franky, we’re a liability.”

“Excellent. I was afraid I’d have to talk you into it!” Rayleigh guffawed. “Far too few pirates understand the need to continually get stronger through training, not just overcoming opponents, and even fewer small-sized crews realize they can’t get by with just a few powerhouses. I had hoped that Luffy would be here when we arrived, but I can understand why he and the Princess are gone.”

To one side, Shakky smiled faintly, looking at Hancock and Robin thoughtfully. They hadn’t touched on anything personal, but how quickly Vivi came to join the pirate side during the war against the marines was telling in and of itself to her.

“However, that doesn’t mean I can’t help the rest of you train. In fact, I’ve thought long and hard about this. There’s a reason why Shakky and I weren’t here a few days ago. I wanted to gather some information. I think that an overall training regimen is fine, but most of you would benefit more from detailed plans for each of you. To that end, I have a few suggestions on training and specific islands out there where you might get even more training in your various disciplines...”

End Chapter

All that, and I didn’t even get to the Garp and Dragon meeting. I decided that Garp wouldn’t run straight to his son, but do something else to infuriate the WeeGee first. So I moved that segment into the chapter after this one. It will be a good break from the Vivi/Luffy scenes that will dominate the next chapter. As for the Nami/Jinbe talk and the Jinbe/Luffy protect my island talk, the first wouldn’t have gone all that different than in canon, and I dislike just regurgitating stuff from canon like that. And Jinbe, well, he was just really overthinking it. A LOT.

Now, about Imu, and specifically his gender: I have seen Ivankov’s conjecture on this point. I am ambivalent about it in canon, as in I don’t care either way, but at present, I do not think he’s (or she’s depending on his mood) is right, and I will be going forward with that idea in

mind. I don't think the hatred Imu has for those who bear the Will of D. would be so harsh if he (or she) could claim to be such too. I

The next chapter will also bring back a large chunk of the humor. The chapter after that will show how I have decided to handle the two-year training arc. Where only a few salient points need to remain the same and everything else is interchangeable. Where I can let my imagination run wild, and concentrate on only a few characters at a time, while hinting at things going on elsewhere. Yes. YES. **YESSSS**. Gonna have so much fun with this... so much so, that going forward, this fic will no longer be dropped from the Ranma poll in April. The other fics will still get the carry over effect, and I won't vote for Stallion, but I am in a big One Piece mood, so if your votes go that way, I would love to keep on writing in this universe.

That poll will be up on the sixth. Until then, if you see any mistakes, tell me, and I will correct it before posting this chapter over on fanfic next evening.