

One Piece: Halfway Broken

Chapters 128-131

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Chapter 128: Exploration in the South Blue

“Captain, I’m *boooooorrreeed*.”

Luffy blinked, looking up from the copy of a book Robin had indicated might be of interest to him, as it illuminated some things about how the Five Elders worked. Not in a lot of detail but, frankly, more than he knew. Which, given it was a subject of some potential importance, was worth looking into. As for who he looked up *at*, it was *Dis*, using her Dryad puppet-body, that had slumped down across from him and made the comment. Given that it meant *their ship* was expressing boredom, Luffy immediately put a small bit of paper between the pages to mark where he left off and put the book aside.

“Well, that just won’t do! You’re the most important member of the crew, Dis! Why are you bored? Because we’re stopped at another island so soon?”

Dis made a sort of wishy-washy so-so motion with her hands, nodding her head, then shaking it. Very informative, that. Thankfully, she also voiced the problem a moment later, so Luffy wasn’t completely lost.

“Not really? Being in dock isn’t a problem! It’s part of being a ship! No, it’s because we haven’t been *exploring*. I’m an Exploration Vessel, Captain! I’m supposed to explore things! Visiting Hightide was neat! Amazin Lily was even fine, the first time, if a little dull the second. Seeing the changes to Jaya was okay too. Even coming here to the South Blue was a new experience! But...well...now I’m just idling below the waves of the Torino Kingdom, which you guys aren’t even exploring! Just reading books! We have an entire ocean I’ve barely seen under my hulls!”

Oh. Huh. Luffy hadn’t truly stopped to considered what the *needs* of a *sapient* Exploration ship would be, had he? It wasn’t hard to put the pieces together, now that Dis was bringing it up at all. She was the living embodiment of the ship, given life by the crew aboard her yes...but also likely influenced by what she’d been *built for*. That was a logical enough leap to make, at least. Luffy, when he’d first planned and built the *Discovery*, hadn’t given a single damn about being a pirate or making the world a better place. His intentions had been to create a ship that could see *the world* and all of the incredible things in it!

It only stood to reason, then, that *Dis* would be influenced by that purpose. Particularly as it was one shared by several of the crew, such a Nami, Usopp, Robin, and Sanji. All of whom had an exploratory bent to their dreams. It was something that hadn’t been an issue until now, he realized, because virtually everywhere they went was ‘new’ to both the crew and the ship. In fact, even now, as he watched Dis fidget and reached out with his empathic abilities to try and sense how she was

feeling, he suspected it wasn't the lack of new places that was the true issue. The Torino Kingdom was new, and Amazon Lily was somewhere they'd only docked twice so far.

No, he got the distinct impression that Dis's proverbial itchy feet, wanting to wander, had more to do with *where they were*. The South Blue was *new*. Not just to Dis, but to literally every member of the crew. Not a single one of them came from, or had even previously visited, this particular ocean. Which was almost certainly amplifying Dis's desire to *explore* the new Ocean. Smiling, he made a decision without any need to think harder on the subject. Dis was crew, and he hadn't been lying when he called her the most important member. Not really. Without Dis, they would be *far* less able to achieve any of their individual goals or dreams.

"Alright, Dis. I know Nami has pulled and copied some decent charts of the region. So why don't we pick an island or two and go see what we can see? If nothing else, we might confuse the Marines if they spot us moving around the South Blue of all places!"

The brilliant smile and cheer he got from Dis was all the reason Luffy needed to be happy with his decision...

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It was a little bit unusual for Luffy to get a chance to properly stretch his navigation and sailings skills. He had to admit he was enjoying brushing the rust off a bit, managing the *Discovery* at full sail, engines off. Something that *Dis* herself seemed to be basking in, given the way she was humming beside him in her Dryad form. While Nami had wanted to come, itching to chart the South Blue just the same as she did anywhere else, Wheatheria had recently passed into the New World again. Between wanting to share the works she'd found in the Torino kingdom on New World weather, and the chance to see it in person, it was a poor time for her to be managing the ship on seas that weren't exactly a challenge.

Which was honestly fine. Nami's supreme skills might be needed on the Grand Line, but on one of the Cardinal Oceans, Luffy was more than up to the challenge of navigation. For that matter, between himself and Dis, they could easily take and mark down the readings Nami needed for her charts. His System did it automatically for places they actually traveled, so they really only needed to take note of weather patterns and current oddities that might not be obvious on his System Map. So it was that a smaller-than-usual crew had set out to take the *Discovery of Storms* out on a tour of the South Blue. One which, consulting with the locals, charts copies from the Marine base, and some hints from Luffy's own System, was aimed to hit a few possible places of interest in this Ocean.

The first place they were headed sounded genuinely *fascinating*, an island called Starfall, which for reasons no one was certain of, remained unbothered by the World Government. It technically *was* a member, but what records existed said that no one from the WG *ever* went there, not even the Celestial Dragons. It also refused giving haven to the Revolutionary Army, apparently, so whatever the cause, it didn't seem to be rebellion. What they would find there, Luffy wasn't sure, but the descriptions had certainly interested the crew, as they sounded more like the oddities normally found on the Grand Line, rather than a Cardinal Ocean. Though, to be fair, the Torino Kingdom was that way as well. It might *just* be the East Blue that was super boring?

Well, whatever. The point was that Starfall sounded pretty interesting.

Apparently, there was some massive pillar just off the coast, which *generated starlight* and somehow cast the entire island into perpetual night. A relatively *brightly lit* night, with a vibrant night sky, but still *night* even at high noon. Luffy and Kaya were, of course, particularly interested in that, as it screamed some sort of supernatural shenanigans at work that they might be able to learn from. Robin was interested in the unusual, as always, though would only be joining them once they reached the island itself, as she was still busy copying books.

Yet, the person most interested of all was Yamato.

After all, it turned out that the natives of the Torino Kingdom had believed she was *from* Starfall. Apparently, there were a people living there who were said to be ‘tall and horned, with pale skin.’ Given that she had never encountered another of her kind, save only her father, the idea that there might be more...whatever Yamato was...out there? Well, to say she was interested was more than a little bit of an understatement.

For now, Luffy simply basked in the brisk wind the *Discovery* was riding. It was at least three days to Starfall under sail, and for once he was intent on taking it easy, enjoying sailing for sailing sake. No sudden storms, monster attacks, or (hopefully!) Marines...

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“Sail hoy! Multiple sails hoy! They just unfurled from that small, rocky island! It’s a Marine patrol, Captain! Three schooners!”

Luffy cursed internally at having tempted fate, then chewed over the information. They were a solid day and a half out of Torino, so it wasn’t likely they’d give away where they’d been coming from, at least. Unfortunately, even if those ships *hadn’t* seen the mark on the main sail, which they might well not have just yet, *The Discovery of Storms* was a truly unique ship. Unless someone had copied her basic hull design, she was, to the best of Luffy’s knowledge, literally the only catamaran sailing any ocean in this world. That meant the Marines had to know who they were chasing...which was honestly conflicting. The fact they were chasing *at all*, knowing who the ship belonged to, said they were either fanatics or, more likely, *good* Marines that didn’t shy away from any pirate.

Which meant this was, for pretty much the first time, a serious morality issue for him.

Some might have thought the Marines he’d cheerfully ordered blown up in their own base back at the Sabaody Archipelago would have been that. The reality of it, however, is that the base *there* had been full of Marines who willfully ignored slavery right under their nose. Luffy hadn’t had any qualms about blowing them, as well as the Marine ships anchored there, away. Even the lowest deckhand or janitor at a base like that *knew* about the slavery and the behavior of the Celestial Dragons, yet hadn’t left in protest. Leaving him with a clear conscience, as far as he was concerned.

The same was *far* less certain when it came to a trio of random Marine schooners in the South Blue.

Here, in one of the Cardinal Oceans, it was far more likely that the Marines aboard those ships were local to the ocean and unaware of the big picture. To them, pirates were pirates and that was that. If they were chasing him at all they were either suicidally brave or, more likely, utterly oblivious to the massive difference between Grand Line pirate crews and their local raiders. They might think that weight of numbers was enough to deal with someone like their crew, when that was about the farthest from the case that anything could be.

He didn't really like the idea of slaughtering a bunch of Marines who likely had no idea of the greater evils they supported. Yet, at the same time, he wasn't overly eager for them to discover and report any of the *Discovery's* secrets. Not even her guns were normal, let alone her ability to fly or submerge, which remained valuable tricks the WG had no knowledge of. At least so far as he knew. Even the sheer speed of their ship wasn't something that, again so far as he knew, that the WG was aware of. Which meant...well, time to lean into the reputation of pirate arrogance, he supposed. Better than just killing them all or letting them know how special the *ship herself* was.

"Yamato! With me. We'll intercept those ships and convince the locals they shouldn't have picked a fight. Disable the ships but try not to kill anyone, if possible. These are just locals trying to play hero without any idea how out of their league they really are."

Yamato frowned at that, having no great love for the Marines, but shrugged a moment later as they both lept into the air with Geppo. She might not like the Marines, but she didn't bare any burning hatred for them either. That emotion was mostly reserved for her father. She still probably wouldn't have held back without the Order, since the Marines of the New World didn't exactly have a stellar reputation with *anyone*, let alone anyone she would have known. Thankfully, she was willing to obey Luffy, at least.

The ships hadn't been particularly close, yet he and Yamato were easily able to cross the distance with just Geppo in less than a minute, startled Marines attempting to open fire on them with cannons and muskets. No, wait, not muskets. Luffy noted that *these* Marines had proper breech-loading rifles, likely owing to the South Blue being a relative hub for technology. Not that it mattered. The Marines clearly didn't have any familiarity with trying to track fast, bobbing and weaving targets in midair. None of the cannon fire came anywhere close to either of them, and both only had to bat away one or two rounds from the small arms, despite a decent rate of fire. Notably, they *were* proper bullets too, rather than musket balls, another point in the 'higher average tech level in this ocean' column.

Luffy, despite not using his Devil Fruit for this, was still faster in the air than Yamato, and reached the lead schooner first. He combined *Soru* with *Geppo* for just a moment, zipping through the ship, using just a tiny bit of Haki on his blade to slice right through both the fore and mainmast of the two-mast rig. A quick kick off the latter as he moved on sent it plunging ominously forward toward the foremast rigging, which began to fall itself only a few seconds latter. He cleared the ship, noting that Yamato had taken a similar approach by utterly destroying the masts of the right flanking ship, but had slowed down more than he had to do it. That giant club of hers had wrecked the masts far more completely than his cutting had, but the brute force required had slowed her down.

Grinning, he moved on to repeat his action with the third ship, this time going for style points by using just a *little bit* of his lightning to burn a crude version of their mark into the deck of the ship as he boosted away. He laughed at Yamato's pout when she rejoined him, speeding back toward the *Discovery*, still completely ignoring the sporadic fire from the ships as they raced away. Those ships wouldn't be chasing anyone, but *probably* wouldn't sink. All without them having really given anything away about their capabilities. Nothing that the higher ups of the Marines wouldn't have already known or guessed, at least.

It was annoying that the Marines might send a fast response to look for them in the South Blue now. But there were few admirals that could get here in time to matter, really. If they were foolish enough to send one of the few who could in isolation? Well, that would just be a free chance to eliminate someone high up enough to matter, now wouldn't it? Smirking as that thought occurred to him, but refusing to voice it in case fate wanted to mess with him again, Luffy touched back down on the *Discovery's* deck. Dis was loudly complaining about not being able to use her guns, so perhaps they should find something for her to at least get some more target practice in on before leaving this ocean.

Possible a certain train depot?

Luffy quickly shook his head. No, that might give away their involvement with the Torino Kingdom. Given they intended to continue visiting it for months or years into the future, that would be ill-advised. Still, in the entire South Blue, he was sure they could find *something* or *someone* worth Dis taking a few potshots at...

Chapter 129: Starfall

Usopp had cried out a sighting of the island of Starfall a while ago, but it almost hadn't been needed. While the start of the demarcation between 'Day' and 'Night' was subtle at first, they were coming in under a mid-afternoon sun. Which meant that it *rapidly* grew less subtle as they approached the island. They had struck any pirate flag from flying, replacing them with Alabastian Expeditionary Flags they'd been provided with but rarely used. Though they hadn't shifted the mark on their sail, so it wouldn't exactly be hard to identify them.

Still, for whatever reason, Starfall was considered a freeport that *somehow* existed outside the Grand Line. Which meant Luffy chose to approach openly, rather than attempt to hide the *Discovery* as they had for the Torino Kingdom. From what they'd been able to learn, any ship was welcome to dock at Starlight, the main port of the island. Even outright pirate ships were accepted, so long as you brought no trouble to the town or island. Which was the trade hub of the small island. How they dealt with those who *did* bring trouble was unknown, but apparently it was widely known that they *could*.

Luffy had been a little skeptical, right up until they'd apparently hit the edge of Starfall's territory proper and both he and Kaya had both jolted upright in surprise. They looked at each other, then out into the *Night* that was now firmly around their ship at barely four in the afternoon, their eyes tracking to a beacon that they'd thought was a lighthouse at first. Now knew must be

something *else*. They had, after all, just passed through a *barrier*. A potent one, which had previously hidden the fact that the glowing pillar was radiating *immense* amounts of energy.

Holy energy, or something very like it at least.

It felt very much like Shichiseiken did when fully drawn, only *far* larger and...shaded somehow? , That wasn't the right term for it, if there were words for it at all, but Luffy couldn't think of a better one. It was like the energy of the pillar and the energy of Shichiseiken were both slightly different *tints* of the same thing. Frowning in intense concentration, Luffy's mind raced as he remembered other sensations that were similar. The energy Kaya had called on to protect the ship at Asuka was almost a 'colorless' version. But, back then...

"Kaya. Tell me you remember that Yamato's energy back on Asuka island felt..."

Kaya's eyes widened and she nodded.

"...something like this, yes. Only not quite the same. Hers felt like the *sun*, somehow. This one feels like *starlight*. Though don't ask me how I know what starlight feels like!"

Luffy nodded agreement, though he hadn't quite gotten as much out of the feeling as Kaya obviously had. A few connections were slotting into place in his head, though. For the most part it was all blind conjecture and theory, but some of it certainly made a sort of sense.

"Odds that barrier would react *violently* to something cursed trying to cross the threshold? Say, an *Elder*, given what little Rayleigh could tell us? Actually...you aren't still carrying that cursed blade aboard ship, are you?"

Luffy's tone shifted to worry for a moment, before Kaya shook her head.

"No. Well yes, but also no, as it isn't cursed any longer. After Asuka Island I decided to experiment with curse breaking, and Grumpy-Baby-Knife-Kun was the best testbed I had. I ended up purifying it mostly by accident after one too many attempts to see what affected the curse built up. I am suddenly rather glad of that, as it happens, as I suspect you are quite correct about how badly that barrier would react. Which would rather explain why the World Government prefers to simply be *quiet* about this place, so long as it pays its Heavenly Tribute like an obedient little island nation."

He couldn't help but nod at that, having had precisely the same thought. If this island were rebellious, or if it were positioned in the Grand Line where major pirates might use it for cover, he suspected the story might be different. Even if that barrier did more than protect from just cursed items or individuals, he doubted, from the feel of it, that it would stop *normal* Marines just doing their job. A resource that the WG could have flooded the place with.

Since the island *wasn't* rebellious, being a member nation in good standing? Well, 'out of sight, out of mind' likely applied. *Whatever* that pillar was, it felt *ancient*, far older than the Void Century. He couldn't be certain, but he strongly suspected that whatever it was, it just *wasn't worth the effort* of the WG to tear it down. Assuming they even could. Much like trying to kill Neethrax. They'd somehow managed to force her compliance with their rules about the Void Century, but

hadn't attempted to outright eliminate her. Presumably as she was powerful enough to make doing so too costly.

"I suspect we should probably get Vivi to bring Robin and the others here. I have a feeling this island is going to be more interesting than anticipated."

Kaya nodded, even as she stared up at the 'Night Sky.' Where, Luffy noted, the stars were not quite where they ought to be. There were more of them than there should be as well, and all of the light they spilled was radiating with that same 'holy' feeling that the pillar gave off. The rest of the crew were staring around in awe at this point as well, even those without spiritual sensitivity...and Luffy noticed that Yamato was very nearly *enraptured* by the pillar.

A very interesting island indeed...

"Captain! There's a ship heading for us! A cutter of some sort. I'm guessing a local guide? It doesn't look hostile, at last."

Luffy blinked, his attention snapping away from his examination of the stars and energy he could feel, to Usopp. The sniper sounded a bit chagrined, likely at having not noticed the incoming ship faster than he had. To be fair, the mid-afternoon *night sky* was distracting. Also to be fair, however, it *was* Usopp's job to have been watching. On balance, Luffy wasn't going to take him to task for it, given that he'd been distracted himself. If he hadn't been, he'd have noticed the cutter coming himself with Observation Haki.

"Heave to! Let's see what they want, shall we?"

The crew was quick to respond, even as he did his own part to adjust beam-on to the wind. As the sails were adjusted, the ship slowed to a crawl, coming to an effective stop at sea for the cutter to meet up with them. It wasn't something they did all that often without using the engines, which usually made such a maneuver far easier, but Nami had pounded the relevant actions into everyone hard enough that they still managed it smoothly even under pure sail.

Which was good, as Luffy legitimately had no idea how much the Marines knew about the *Discovery*. They'd rarely engaged in ship battles and gone out of their way to hide her advantages over the nearly two years since first setting sail, up to and including hiding her engines. Frankly, they hadn't been so careful with that last bit when they weren't *sure* they were being observed, and he honestly expected the Marines had at least *guessed* about the engines. Which wasn't the same as having confirmation he had no desire to provide them with. Even if this island really was a sort of free port, somehow, it still paid lip service to the WG at least, and he wouldn't risk giving information away for free.

Usopp truly had slipped up a fair bit, as it only took a few additional minutes for the cutter to come alongside. Luffy, who had handed the wheel over the Nojiko, blinked at the man he saw standing in the cutter, who shouted a hail up at them.

"Ahoy! Permission to come aboard, Captain? As you've brought The Bearer of the Sun with you, I've been tasked to guide you to a more private dock where you won't be spotted."

Luffy blinked, trying to process that into something that made sense and mostly failing. Which wasn't helped by the fact that *the man looked like Yamato*. Not in a 'family resemblance' sort of way, but it was clear from his physical features why the Torino Kingdom natives had thought Yamato was from Starfall. He was easily eight and a half feet tall and heavily muscled, from what Luffy could see. Not to mention he sported skin as pale as Yamato's...and a *very similar* set of horns. Considerably *more* so than even the few images of Kaidou that Luffy had seen. Pushing aside his surprise and confusion over the man's words, Luffy felt him out briefly with both his empathy and Haki. When he sensed no hostility, he nodded.

"Permission granted. I'm not sure what this Sun business is about, but I'll certainly hear you out."

Kaya, in an act none of the others had thought of, due to how rare a relatively normal person needing to board their ship was, appeared near to Luffy...and lowered a rope ladder for the man. Luffy twitched and mentally chastised himself for forgetting they were in one of the Blues, not somewhere like Amazon Lily, and they couldn't expect random people to be able to leap aboard. Thankfully, Kaya had considered it, and the man proved he was an experienced seaman at least by quickly clambering aboard. The cutter pushed off as soon as he was clear and started separating from them a bit, but didn't go too far.

"Greetings, Captain! I'm afraid for The Sun business, you'll need to talk to someone higher up than me. Suffice it to say, however, that the World Government would...well...lose it's shit entirely, if they realized *she* was visiting Starfall."

The man pointed at Yamato, who was staring at him in blatant curiosity. The horns alone weren't *that* odd, by the weird-as-heck standards of this reality, but their guide was just a bit *too* similar to Yamato to easily dismiss the obvious. She looked startled when he pointed her out regarding the 'Sun' business, though Luffy rather quickly connected the dots to the comment he'd only just been making to Kaya. Whoever these people were, they might know something about Yamato, or possibly her Devil Fruit, that he did not. Which only made him more interested in what these higher-ups had to say, particularly as his statement implied they intended to cover up their visit here.

"Very well, I assume you're here to guide us into this private dock then, Mr...?"

The man nodded briskly, moving toward the pilot house as he responded.

"Harbor Pilot Ossamen, Captain. Though I doubt you'll be dealing with me much. I can guide you easily enough. Though you're ship's an odd enough one that I'll leave the actual call outs to you, aye?"

Luffy nodded instantly. Most times, a ship guide or harbor pilot existed due to dangerous local conditions for non-native sailors. Complex reefs, underwater wreckage that wasn't obvious, or any number of other oddities that could complicate a specific harbor enough that the locals preferred using local experts to guide ships in or out. There was obviously a bit more of an unusual case, which Luffy was glad of. A normal sailor wouldn't really have much clue how to handle the *Discovery*, after all.

“Right. I assume we’re following the cutter, since it hung about. Kuina, get us moving, Quarter Sail only, if you please.”

The command was, in and of itself, an example of the problem. Most ships would only use Full Sail, Half Sail, or Bare Sail, then Ease, Trim or Reef as needed. The way the *Discovery* was rigged, and her sheer *speed*, meant that Nami had needed to introduce some extra terms just for their ship. At Quarter Sail, which normally referred to something else entirely, they’d make better speed than most ships at Half Sail. A stranger wouldn’t know the extra commands, and would struggle to handle the *Discovery* as a result. Thankfully, their guide was happy enough to give simple directions, and even play a bit of tour guide as they circled farther around the island.

“I’m quite sure you’re all new to Starfall! Once you’ve spoken with the High Priestess and Elders, make sure and come visit Starlight! Our town is unique in more than one way, you know! In addition to the obvious, Starlight’s status as a free port, as well as the fact the effects of the Starlight Spear extending well under water, mean we have one of the only fishman communities outside the Grand Line! No mermaids, I’m afraid, which is tragic if what I’ve heard about their beauty is true, but-”

As the Guide chattered on, Luffy had to admit that he was getting more interested in this particular island with virtually every word. Listening intently, he mentally noted he needed to do something nice for Dis for pushing them into exploring the South Blue a bit while they had the chance...

Chapter 130: Ancient Starlight

The dock they’d been guided to really was *private*. As in the cove that it was built into was actively concealed via a massive, fake rock wall that had been raised into hidden housing at a signal from the cutter ahead of them. The construction was impressive, given that the *Discovery* was *not* as small ship, yet the hidden dock was able to handle her. Not, admittedly, with a great deal of room to spare, but she *did* fit.

Had Luffy not been able to sense the emotions of their guide, he might well have been reluctant to trust taking the ship into an enclosed, potentially trapped space like this. For that matter, even *with* the guide seemingly radiating nothing but professionalism and respect, he’d never have risked in on the Grand Line. Here in the South Blue, the chances an individual island had the firepower to deal with their entire crew was...low. Not completely impossible, given the massive barrier marking the island as a clear outlier. Yet, with no sense of deceit or any feeling of aggression coming from those *within* the dock, Luffy had gone along with the request. It was obvious the locals were serious about their crew being spotted here being problematic, and Luffy didn’t know the *why* of that yet, so proceeding with caution was only good sense.

Now, after mooring to the dock and actually lowering their seldom-used ramp, he was stepping off the *Discovery* with Yamato. Strictly speaking, it should have been Kuina with him, as the ship’s First Mate. Yet it was blatantly obvious that the locals wanted something to do with, or at least had an interest in, Yamato. Something that was only made more readily apparent when virtually *all* of those that greeted them when they stepped off the ramp shared the same sort of

physical looks as the guide. A few were clearly guards of some sort, with the main three present who *weren't* such being two women and a man. The two women, in particular, were radiating a feeling much like Kaya or the Priestess of Asuka Island did.

The man was near enough nine feet tall, with salt-and-pepper hair and a walking stick. While both women in turn favored the same general height, pale skin, similar horns, and even...certain generous proportions (if not *quite* as dramatic)...as Yamato did. Something which very clearly had his companion interested. One of them, the older of the two women, who had grey in her hair but still showed off a body many women would cheerfully murder for, stepped forward and spoke.

“Greetings Bearer of the Sun, Captain Monkey D. Luffy. I suspect you have questions for us, as I sense only confusion and interest from you. Perhaps it is fate that led you here? If you did not come to Starfall already knowing why the World Government would cheerfully have sent every assassin they had and entire battle fleets to stop you from coming here?”

You could practically *hear* the blink of confusion from both Luffy and Yamato, complete with an adorable head-tittle from the later that made the older woman laugh. It was a pleasant, tinkling sound despite the woman being roughly of a height with Yamato. One that said she was amused and delighted, but hardly put out or insulted.

“Fate, indeed. Well, perhaps if you did not know yourselves, the World Government will not guess. Certainly, none here will tell them, though you might choose to be cautious about visiting Starlight. Still, you are free to do so, if the risk does not bother you. For now, I believe you have a large and building number of questions, the longer we talk. Would you like your crew to be present? We will have a meal prepared, either way. But we can talk in private to The Bearer of the Sun alone, or her and you Captain, if you would prefer?”

Luffy was increasingly concerned that he had *no fucking clue* what these people were talking about. There were...religious or near religious tones to the way they said that title, just for starters. The mystery of just *why* Yamato seemed to have a ludicrous amount of spiritual energy that felt like the sun was another point. Thankfully, he knew that Yamato wouldn't shut him out. He was, in fact, unsurprised when she looked to him to answer. He pursed his lips and considered carefully.

He easily dismissed bringing the entire crew, who were all now present due to him quietly sending Vivi below as they were guided in, to retrieve those back on Torino or elsewhere. The crew contained a few too many people these days to hold potentially complicated talks with, and several of them would only likely be interested in the most abstract of ways anyway. He *could* leave it at just himself and Yamato, in case something said was private to his largest lover. On the other hand, there were those on the crew that might have valuable input. Biting his lip for a moment, he eventually made a 'suggestion' to Yamato, which he knew she would likely take as closer to a de facto order.

“Perhaps just you, myself, and Robin? This may be a bit private, but she is the best of us at asking the right questions.”

He was *sorely* tempted to include Kaya, since he had suspicions this would brush on her areas of expertise. Likewise, he was extremely tempted to include Vivi as well, as she was by far the most diplomatic member of the crew. He was getting the sense from all three of these people that *they* would prefer a degree of discretion though. Thankfully, he was right about Yamato, who instantly accepted with a nod and a bright smile. Luffy didn't miss that some tension bled out of their hosts at the confirmation of a smaller group, though at least the younger woman had grimaced at the inclusion of Robin. The older was apparently firmly in charge, however, and clapped her hands with a genuine smile.

"Excellent! I admit, we had hoped to keep the number of those that heard the details small, as we very rarely share certain things with outsiders at all. To the point that we suspect the World Government believes we don't remember anything. My grandson, Ossamen, who guided your ship in, will take the rest of your crew to a larger feast we've had prepared for them. If you would call Nico Robin down, I and the others will take you somewhere we can better, or at least more safely, answer your questions."

Luffy nodded and turned to call orders to those still on the ship. He was dying a bit of curiosity at this point, but it wouldn't do to forget the rest of the crew...

... ..

Luffy, Yamato, and Robin sat across from the trio that had guided them in. Said trio had finally introduced themselves as High Priestess Brightstar, Elder Northstar, and Senior Priestess Dusklight. Luffy was, in fact, sensing a bit of a theme with the names, and wondered if it carried through the entire island or if it was just...whoever this group was. The High Priestess seemed to be the one in charge, though her was pretty sure Dusklight was the next person down the totem pole, which made a bit of sense given she'd been introduced as Brightstar's successor.

Elder Northstar was treated with respect, but had said little as they moved from the dock to a modest but obviously secure room, one deep within what he suspected was a hidden section of a noble estate. Overall, he'd given Luffy the impression that he was perhaps a political leader for the island, deferring to a religious one? Or something of the sort was currently his best guess, at least. Tea had been waiting for them, along with platters of various types of snacks, which they'd all politely taken a few of. The tea, in particular, was quite good...and spiritually infused. Though Luffy didn't get a sense it was anything dangerous. More that the herbs used in it had been grown somewhere soaked in spiritual energy. Of course, with that giant Spear thing out there radiating so much of it, it might be a case of the whole island being soaked in enough of it for such a thing to be more or less natural.

"Right. I must admit, I never imagined that The Bearer of the Sun would come to Starfall, let alone that she would do so *unintentionally*, so I'm a bit at a loss as to where to start."

Ever reliable Robin didn't hesitate to offer a suggestion. Which, of course, was one of the reasons Luffy had wanted her present.

"Perhaps with that title? You call Yamato 'The Bearer of the Sun,' but what does that *mean*?"

The High Priestess hummed, then surprisingly nodded toward Luffy.

“I suspect your Captain has at least some idea, but I won’t make you guess. To be blunt, your companion has eaten the Hito Hito no Mi, Model: Nika. More importantly, she’s *compatible* with the Devil Fruit in question. Such is not always the case, which is how the World Government was able to get away with giving it the false label of the ‘Gomu Gomu no Mi.’ For most users, it never does anything more than let their body act like rubber.”

High Priestess Brightstar’s eyes narrowed as none of them reacted to the reveal. Luffy had long ago told them what little his System had to say about Yamato’s Devil Fruit. Though he’d restricted that information to only those who knew about the System at all. Something that now made him somewhat grateful he’d decided not to bring Vivi and Kaya after all. Vivi knew at least *more* than the rest of the crew at this point, but he hadn’t sat down to walk her through everything yet. Kaya knew nothing more than the crew at large, which was basically only that Luffy could use the Inventory. Not that they even knew it was called that.

“You already knew then, the true name of the Nika fruit. Yet seemingly know nothing of it otherwise. What an utterly curious combination.”

The woman shook her head, an odd smile having formed on her face as she said that. Sipping her tea, she hummed for a moment, then nodded.

“Very well. As you undoubtedly know, Mythical Zoan fruit are something beyond even the already extraordinary of typical Devil Fruit, or as they are more accurately called, Spirit Fruit. While every Spirit Fruit contains...call it a technique, if you will...Mythical Zoan fruit are *more*. They contain not just a single ability, but a *concept*, specifically the conceptual weight of their Myth. No one, to my knowledge, knows for sure and certain if any of the myths were true, though the physical evidence of the Starlight Spear suggests they may well have been. At least in the ancient past.”

Seeing questioning looks spread across their faces, she shook her head.

“Everything in it’s time. Now that I have a starting point at all, let us stick to it. It all ties together, somewhat, anyway. Now, where was I...ah, yes. Nika. You’ll find very few references to him, as the World Government did their best to wipe them away, but Nika was either a legendary warrior or a *sun god*, depending on which legend you give the most weight too. Either way, he was known as a Warrior of Liberation and symbol of freedom, and the Hito Hito no Mi: Model: Nika contains the *concept* of his existence. Last known Awakened wielder...Joy Boy.”

Robin sat bolt upright at that, with Luffy stiffening as well. He didn’t know *much* about Joy Boy, but knew the figure was *important*. Clearly, Robin was aware of something as well, and the three locals were eyeing her carefully.

“Joy Boy. The first Pirate. Someone who fought in the Great War against those who would later become the World Government. Even we, despite attempts to retain knowledge, know little more of him than that. We know two additional things of great importance, however. One, that the World Government greatly fears the return of Joy Boy via another Awakened Wielder of the Nika Fruit. Two...that whatever Nika was, he wasn’t the only one of his kind. Another, an *ally* of his, drove

the Starlight Spear into an ancient enemy right off the coast of Starfall...but died to the death throes of that same foe.”

Luffy swallowed, abruptly beginning to form a picture of why the World Government would *very badly* not want them here. As well as beginning to form uncomfortable suspicions about the larger picture of the world that he’d only slowly been seeing pieces of until now.

“The barrier let off by the Starlight Spear, it is the remnants of this other Nika-like entity’s power, isn’t it?”

The High Priestess smirked, and Luffy abruptly felt like a child about to be praised by a doting grandmother, something made all the more real by her action of holding up a particular plate to him.

“Very good, Captain! Have a cookie!”

Snorting, but taking the cookie nevertheless, appreciating the break in tension, he still waited for an answer. Which he got a moment later.

“You are right, of course. While few still know the legend, the Starlight Spear was said to be the weapon of Asteria, and the very island of Starfall to be her body turned to stone in her death. Whatever the truth is, both the island and the Spear radiate a protective barrier against curses, as well as keep sealed the final curse of the monster she slew. The ‘unnatural’ Night Sky is merely a manifestation of her primary domain, which was said to be that of the ‘Starry Sky.’”

Luffy got the *distinct* impression that the High Priestess knew far more than she was saying about Asteria specifically. Yet, he wasn’t stupid enough to press the point, given he *also* got the impression that even this much was virtually never shared with Outsiders. Most likely, only Yamato and the presence of the Nika fruit, whose originator was linked to this Asteria as an ally of some sort, was making the locals willing to say as much as they did. Though that, at least, got a partial correction a moment later as High Priestess Brightstar locked eyes with him.

“While it is unknown if they were allied or not, your own Spirit Fruit belonged to great beast whose name was known to us as well. Had you come alone, with your fruit Awakened as it is now, we might well have spoken with you regardless, but the Nika fruit takes precedence.”

Oh. Well, Luffy *was* vaguely aware that his own fruit was named after something somewhere between a divine beast and a force of nature, so he supposed that made a degree of sense. Though, more important than that in some ways, was the fact the High Priestess had just admitted she could tell his fruit had fully Awakened. Silence fell for a moment, before Robin once again proved he was right to bring her along, as she asked another critical question.

“Takes precedence in what, exactly? Why would the World Government fear the Nika Fruit wielder coming here?”

The High Priestess smiled, and there was something cold, yet fiery in her eyes. Like looking into the night sky and knowing what stars really were.

“Why, my dear, the answer to that is quite simple. After all, Starfall is one of the very few places in the world where it is possible to speed up the *Awakening* of certain Spirit Fruits, using the

very energy the island and Starlight Spear give off. Including, as it happens, igniting the power of an old ally of Asteria herself. Something which I very much suspect the World Government would be horrified to see happen.”

Even Robin was left speechless as the enormity of that statement caught up to them all, Yamato most of all. Luffy had *tried* to describe to her how Awakening worked, and mostly failed. Yamato’s control of her fruit had shot up a fair bit from what little he *had* been able to pass on, but had still landed far short of the sort of revelation required to bridge the gap. Abruptly, Yamato moved, prostrating herself before the High Priestess without a second thought.

“Please, teach me. There are things I must do that I have not the strength for.”

The High Priestess looked startled for a moment, then smiled and reached down to tug Yamato up.

“No need for that, dear. I said Asteria and Nika were allies, did I not? You needed only to step onto our island and *ask* and the knowledge and help was there for you to have. Though I warn you, the process will be neither quick, nor safe. Are you prepared for the risk?”

Yamato’s stare as she looked into the eyes of the High Priestess was unflinching as she replied.

“Yes. While I do not pretend to understand the larger picture, there are those in my home that require *liberation*, and I will ***not be found wanting***.”

A frisson of power to the words shot down through Luffy’s spine, something underlying them *screaming* to the Awakened part of his own fruit. The High Priestess’s smile widened.

“Oh ho, perhaps it is already closer to the surface than I thought. Well then, that will only make things easier, and side effects much less likely to be dangerous. Come, there are things you must learn. Captain, you may come as well, as you may learn something yourself. I am afraid, Miss Nico Robin, that it would be unsafe for you to follow. Elder Northstar will see you back to the rest of your companions, and answer the many questions you no doubt have regarding our island. What he can of them, anyway. The poor man is the unfortunate fellow that is forced to deal with the eclectic residents of our home, rather than dabbling in things beyond mortal comprehension. The latter of which is truly much easier. If perhaps, a touch less safe.”

Smiling, the Elder spoke for the first time since they’d entered the room.

“Only a little safer. We *do* have a rather eclectic set of residents, as you said. Such as our own people, who you didn’t even let me talk about. Ah, well, I supposed I will merely have to tell the history of the Oni to miss Robin, so that she may share it with the Sun Bearer later. I get the feeling that, despite the obvious interest of young Yamato, Nico Robin may be a more rapt listener to more than the basics, anyway.”

Yamato actually looked torn for a moment, but only a moment, before firmly nodding. The Elder only chuckled at that and stood. He held out a hand in a gentlemanly gesture to Robin, who took it with a smile. Thankfully, it seemed only a polite gesture, from the ring on the man’s finger and the feel of his emotions, so Luffy didn’t feel the need to introduce his insides to his outsides for

the presumption. Besides, Robin was quite capable of doing that herself, if required. Standing himself, Luffy quickly joined Yamato and the two Priestesses as they left the room and headed in the opposite direction from the Elder and Robin.

This, he thought, should prove interesting...

Chapter 131: Night Oni

Robin sat apart from the majority of the crew, as she and Elder Northstar joined them in their early-evening feast. By the time they'd docked, it had been late enough to be full dark even in the world outside Starfall, and her additional time with Luffy and Yamato had been long enough for it to be properly meantime. A bit early for it, perhaps, but reasonable enough...particularly since the locals had brought out the alcohol and her crew was hardly shy about indulging.

Nami and Zoro were having a drinking contest, which for once Kuina wasn't riding herd on to make sure they didn't go too far. Instead, the First Mate was looking after a visibly tipsy Vivi, who had apparently decided to try what *Nami and Zoro* were drinking, though at least she hadn't tried to get in on the drinking contest. Usopp was rather distracted with Kaya on his lap, and Sanji had yet again been triggered into waiting on Hina and Perona in an over-the-top fashion, despite their being proper local staff around.

Brook was, predictably, playing music for everyone and Nojiko was, thankfully, looking after Chopper. While their doctor could look after himself for the most part, he was still easily peer pressured, and normally Robin kept an eye on him. She rather enjoyed their frequent conversations over books and the little reindeer's innocence, so it was the least she could do. Pagaya was the only one not present, aside from Luffy and Yamato, but that was entirely expected. While the *Discovery* could look after herself fairly well, it was best not to advertise that fact, so Pagaya had volunteered to stay with the ship. A common behavior of the older man, who wasn't much for large gatherings or parties, much preferring to tinker with his creations and their various discoveries in peace.

"Well, it seems your crew are enjoying our hospitality! Would you prefer to join them? I can always spin the tale of our history another time."

Clearly, this man did not know her, but that was easily corrected.

"No thank you, Elder. I spend plenty of time with my crew, but interesting history is far more difficult to find. An entire group of people like Yamato? An apparent colony of Fishman outside the Grand Line? These are entirely too interesting to leave alone, if you're willing to tell me about how such came to be."

The Elder chuckled and gestured for a nearby servant to bring them drinks and a selection of food, before turning his attention fully to her.

"I see your reputation is an honestly gained one. Not that one can be blamed for curiosity, even if it can be a dangerous trait at times. I'm more than willing to tell you about the Night Oni, even if what we know is riddled with as much myth and legend as it is historical fact. We've been

here since long before the Void Century, even if our traditions are mostly oral histories, rather than written texts.”

He gave her a sharp look that seemed to pin her in place, despite having not sensed much threat from the man.

“Please do not ask what those histories contain about that particular period. We retain more knowledge than most, but the knowledge is *dangerous*, and the World Government would have no qualms at all about obliterating our people if they thought you learned something of the matter from us. We are not your Alabastian Alliance, the barrier is not proof against an invasions of perfectly ordinary Marines. Our security comes from our compliance and the World Government’s ignorance of what knowledge we retain.”

Internally grimacing at meeting *yet another* person that might be able to shed some light on her ultimate dream, yet who wouldn’t or couldn’t speak of it, she still refrained from poking and nodded. As much as she *wanted* to know more, she would not cause another island to suffer Ohara’s fate just to slake her desire. Particularly as the hints she *had* gotten from those like Neethrax and Rayleigh were enough to make her aware the truth truly *was* dangerous.

“Good. Now, aside from that point, I will be happy to explain our own story! You mentioned us looking very much like the Bearer of the Sun. In truth, I cannot tell you if she has any direct relation to those here on Starfall. It is certainly plausible, as it is hardly unusual for some of ours to choose to travel the world, and much like Fishmen we are naturally quite a bit stronger than regular humans. So if some of the Night Oni have settled on the Grand Line in the past, I wouldn’t be surprised at all. That said, it is possible she shares no direct ties, instead merely being of the same ancient blood.”

Curiosity in full swing now, Robin took a sip of a glass of a dark, sweet wine the servants had brought and gestured for him to go on, ignoring the food entirely for now. Chuckling, the Elder indulged her.

“Have you, per chance, heard of the Ancient Giants? I’m sure you’ve encountered regular ones, on the Grand Line of all places, but the Ancients were something a bit *more*.”

Humming for a moment as she began to get a hint of where he was going with this, Robin nodded.

“Yes. There is at least one with a bit purer blood from the Ancient Giants running around the New World as a Pirate Captain. Little Oars Jr., who is very much not little. Far larger than a typical giant, with oddly colored skin and horns. There have been theories that Kaidou might be another such, but he isn’t quite so large and the horns aren’t unusual enough to be a definitive marker.”

Robin refrained from mentioning that Kaidou was Yamato’s father. While it wasn’t precisely a secret, it also wasn’t information Yamato really wanted spreading around to strangers. Still, Elder Northstar nodded along, seemingly pleased she was aware of that much.

“Quite right. Little Oars Jr. is known to us from bounty posters and is *certainly* of Ancient Giant blood, though somewhat diluted. Kaidou is technically more uncertain, but is almost certainly also from the same. It isn’t *certain*, mostly as there *are* other ways to have inherited horns.

Some Fishmen hybrids are known to have them, for example. As are, supposedly, some descendants of a group called the Mink. Though the truth of that latter's existence is something we know little about. There are persistent rumors, but no Mink has been seen in the South Blue for centuries, to my knowledge, if they truly exist at all."

That, at least, was something Robin apparently knew more about than Northstar. Mink *were* rare, but they popped up on rare occasions within the Grand Line. Typically in the New World. The Nox Pirates in particular came to mind, a crew that had been active up until around four years ago and which consisted entirely of Mink. Of the rest of the crew only Yamato might remember them, as none of the others had been active on the Grand Line at the time. Robin had been, however, and had made a point of keeping up with notable bounties.

There were one or two others still active, including one of Big Mom's officers and a crewmember of another Supernova, though one that had gone oddly silent since entering the New World. Still, they were few and far between, and Robin only knew their species name from records. It was entirely understandable that they were less aware of them here on Starfall. Robin had personally never considered the possibility of Kaidou being related to them, as he didn't match up that well to them, despite the name and theme of his pirates.

"Regardless, this story is ultimately about us here on Starfall, and we've digressed a bit from that point. You are aware of the Ancient Giants, and that is enough. As it happens, a group of those same giants, often referred to as *Oni*, were supposedly in service to lady Asteria, who they called a Titaness or a Kami. Both names have appeared in oral tradition and what few texts we retained, but which is correct is unknown. Whichever the case may be, they followed Asteria into battle here at Starfall. Unlike their leader, some of them survived, and chose to stay here as guardians of both her grave and the Starlight Spear. Presumably, at least in part because of whatever it might have sealed away. What the 'final curse' is, I have no knowledge. Though the High Priestess might."

Robin nodded, the shape of the narrative coming completely together for her now. She voiced the obvious guess.

"They eventually intermingled with others, humans in particular, and came to be called the Night Oni?"

Elder Northstar chuckled and nodded agreement.

"Exactly. Not a complicated guess, now is it? Yes, that is, at least supposedly, exactly what happened. The odd phenomenon of the Everlasting Night that surrounds Starfall attracted attention from all sorts, and eventually blood intermingled. As the numbers of the Oni were small, eventually their blood diluted greatly into the greater numbers of humans who came to settle here. Thus, the Night Oni came to be. Effectively, we are just a distant remnant of the original Oni...who come from an island of Everlasting Night. Even the name isn't particularly original, hmm?"

Robin let a chuckle of her own fall, even as she started paying actual attention to the food. The greater mystery was at least partially solved, after all, and it wouldn't do to let it get entirely cold. There was still one other major question, and a host of minor ones, though.

“What about the Fishmen? Aside from a tragic case in the East Blue, I’ve never heard before of a group of them so far from the Grand Line. There are truly a significant number of them here?”

Elder Northstar nodded, smiling as he filled his own plate with a few choice bits of food.

“Yes. As I understand their own tale, the Fishmen migrated here several centuries ago when one of them visited and realized, to their surprise, that the starlight from the Starlight Spear propagates under water. The primary reason that they gather around Fishman Island, or so I’ve been told at least, is that it is the only place in the depths of the ocean that is properly lit. Something about tree roots that carry light to the ocean floor?”

The Elder seemed confused by that, but Robin knew exactly that he was talking about, having seen the roots of the Sunlight Tree Eve when they first visited Fishman Island. Exactly how it worked was beyond her understanding, but the colossal tree’s roots carried light from the surface all the way down to Fishman Island. For that matter, it was those same roots that provided the oxygen for the interior of the Fishman Island bubble. Before she could attempt to explain, the Elder shrugged and continued.

“Whatever the case, the story goes that the first Fishman to see it told others about it, and this caused Fishmen who had disagreements with the Neptune family’s rule at various times to migrate here. Initially it was just a family or two, here or there. Over centuries, and as those families had children, there came to be a small-but-thriving underwater community of them here. They are considered full citizens of Starfall, though we mostly fail to mention their presence to the World Government. Without the Mangrove trees that provide the special resin for surface dwellers to dive, it is quite difficult for anyone to visit the undersea portion of Starlight anyway. So there is no reason to risk attracting certain parties’ interests...”

Robin grimaced and nodded firmly. While their true favored prize were mermaids, if the Celestial Dragons realized there were a population of Fishmen outside the Grand Line they could raid for exotic slaves, they likely *would*. The fact the World Government apparently tried to *ignore* Starfall, so long as it showed no signs of rebellion, had likely protected them from official discovery. Though Robin suspected at least the Marines knew of their presence ‘unofficially.’ She wondered if the Neptune family were aware? Well, it wasn’t her duty to report on the fact, even if they were allies. Best leave it alone, since it sounded like the locals and Fishmen were getting along with each other just fine.

“So what more can you tell me about the Night Oni and your history, as well as the Starlight Spear? Or even the city of Starlight? Even if it’s just legends or myths, I would like to hear more.”

The Elder smiled at that, seemingly pleased by her remaining interested, even after the big reveals were done. Which was well deserved, she’d say. Honestly, this place seemed just as fascinating as any of the islands she’d ever visited on the Grand Line. Which was quite a remarkable thing for any island in any of the Cardinal Oceans to be able to boast...

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