

I can't draw.

Merry Christmas for all my Christian fans! Now, please, please stop the Christmas music. Driving me batty.

Anyway, obviously this story won this month's Ranma poll. It even had the carryover effect for goodness sake! This chapter is the start of the most world-changing arc yet. Luffy and company aren't center stage here, but that should have been assumed given the number of high level fighters that are about to throw down. I am also aware of the power creep that began after this arc in canon. I take that into account going forward here. You'll see a lot of Haki, and a lot of Geppo, but I hope that I show each fighter as being different enough. Well, except for the Vice admirals. Beyond a few, they aren't all that interesting despite their level of skill. LOL.

This has been edited by Hiryo, but alas not Tomon. He lives, but RL is harsh on him right now, so he wasn't able to see this chapter or my Death's Avenger chapter over on my Patty r on. This undoubtedly means I will make more mistakes both small and when it comes to One Piece. Hopefully not enough to take you out of your immersion.

One semi-important thing to point out: I used Lacroix as the name of the second admiral on Hancock's ship in the last chapter. I mixed that up, as Lacroix is an admiral, but he is one of the Giant Squad members. I have since changed this to Lance. I also describe him there and below when it comes up.

A minor note I use the word escargatoire to describe the marine's local communication net. It's a fancy word for a group of snails, and I thought it fit better.

Now without further ado, let the carnage begin!

Chapter 41: War of the best: Gathering of Stars

In the New World, the Yonko Red Hair Shanks had gathered his most powerful crewmembers into one crew once more in preparation to intervene in what he considered a truly horrible, incredibly foolish event for all concerned: the battle between Whitebeard and the Marines. *On the one hand, the Marines fighting for their foolish, all-encompassing, blind concept of justice. On the other, an old man clinging to his own ideals, more than willing to upset the entire world for those he considers family, not wanting to acknowledge how his best years are behind him. I would be hard-pressed to say who I find more stupid. But it would be a close run thing regardless. To say nothing of how I can't seem to be allied with Whitebeard, or else Kaido and Charlotte will do the same, which would be horrifying to contemplate. And then there's Whitebeard's damn pride to boot.*

To be in a position to intervene, Shanks had essentially snuck through the New World from one of his nearest bases, attempting to stay out of sight of any of the world powers. It hadn't worked perfectly, but the forces of Beast King Kaido closing on Red Force was not why Shanks was now thinking of turning his crew away rather than continuing on to Marineford. Even if the Beast King were with them, that battle would not worry him over much. In fact, it would be a fascinating way to help train his Devil Fruit.

No, that was not the problem. Right now, it was because of what he couldn't feel from Marineford that he had ordered the ship to halt and drop anchor for a moment as Shanks felt out what was going on in the distant island through Kenbunshoku.

Shanks was a master of Kenbunshoku but in a specific way. He wasn't quite as good at reading his opponents in hand-to-hand as others, but he had a range to his Kenbunshoku that was well beyond line of sight. He also could recognize the mental feel of individuals he had met in the past even further than that. In the past Shanks had shared drinks with Garp, had crossed blades with Akainu, Kizaru, Gion and several other high-ranking members of the Marines. And from here, at the outer edge of his Kenbunshoku, Shanks could tell none of them were present in Marineford. *Indeed, I can barely sense a few hundred people all told. There should be a few thousand even on a normal day. With the showdown against Whitebeard, there should be far more.*

"Captain? I realize you didn't want to get involved in any of the real fighting, but shouldn't we at least move closer? Or are you going to let Kaido scared us off?" Benn Beckman asked, inhaling from his small cigarette. The pair of them were sitting in the crow's nest, with Benn looking futilely towards where Marineford would be over the horizon. "We're still at least two hours sail away."

"... No, we're going to let the Beast Pirates chase us off." Shanks turned aside, slapping Benn on the shoulder, hiding his concern with the ease of a lifetime's worth of practice. "There's nothing going on at Marineford. Something seems to have come up elsewhere. And if that's the case, there's no chance for us to intervene any longer, whatever happens."

Ben's eyes widened at that, but he nodded and leaped down to the deck, where he began to bark out orders for the crew to raise anchor. Soon the ship began to turn, the sails unfurling to around to take advantage of a squall that was about to come up on their starboard side.

As he did that, Shanks went back to staring out over the horizon towards where Marineford was, and where Garp, Sengoku and many of the other minds he knew weren't. *No, whatever is happening, it can't be stopped any longer. The oceans of the world are going to turn red whatever happens today, and one force or the other will walk away the total victor.*

I just wish that I had any idea which winner would be worse for the world.

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Prior to Whitebeard's arrival on the scene, the marine fleet's formation had begun to look like a bull charging: lots of mass in the center, with two large horns meant to do the main skewering. There, goodly portion of the better fighters, including Mihawk, Doflamingo and Blackbeard had gathered, along with a number of vice admirals and the majority of the K9Ms and Pacifistas. Sengoku had hoped to keep moving forward in that formation to envelop the strangely designed pirate ship with the horns of his formation and the swarm of vice admirals and commodores sent forward, attacking the ship from too many flanks for the pirate vessel to successfully escape from.

Thanks to Shiki's careful planning and use of his Devil Fruit, Whitebeard's Fleet had spread out as it came out of the sky in a deliberate attempt to envelop the front of the center portion of the Marine formation, as well as match the two columns of ships that had moved out into the Calm Belt with several divisions worth of ships each. Moreover, it had succeeded. Across the bull's head, a net had appeared, ships surrounding or even smashing into their opponents from one end of the Tarai Current to another as thousands of lower ranking sailors screamed in fright.

Fighting had begun already on numerous ships, pirates boarding marine vessels, pirate ships smashing bodily into marine vessels and so forth while elsewhere, cannons blazed at range. The seventy odd marine ships on the flanks, the horns thrust out into the Calm Belt who could actually move there, were matched by an almost equal number of Whitebeard Fleet vessels. Smaller in the main, most of the pirate ships didn't have as thick sides or armor, but pirate ships always emphasized firepower and they had surprise to boot.

Worse, in a way, was the angle the first broadsides from the pirate ships came from. Many had turned their flanks in the air, their navigators able to do that by wind power alone. The first broadsides came down onto the main deck and into the rigging of several marine ships, doing egregious damage. No ships could be as well defended from on high as their sides were.

This advantage continued when the pirate ships who had been assigned to the Calm Belt segments of the battle landed, their broadsides turned towards enemy ships who had still been making headway forward. Thus across much of the marine line, captains and junior officers left in charge of their ships found themselves facing the ancient wet warfare disaster of having an enemy crossing their T. The pirates could fire broadsides down the entire length of most of the marine vessels facing them in the Calm Belt, and the marine vessels had few or no guns in a position to fire back as the battle began.

Only one in four marine galleons was the bombardment type used in Buster Calls. Worse, none of that class of ship had steam engines. The guns were just too bulky to allow for both. They might eventually turn the tide in the center if Whitebeard was taken out, but that was a big if, and didn't help at all on the flanks.

The marines in the Calm Belt desperately began to turn their ships, but a few ships were already listing, their paddlewheels destroyed or their main decks raked clear of sailors. The range there was working in favor of the attackers, as was the fact so many of the better fighters had already been sent forward and were now either past the position the Whitebeard Pirate ships were coming down into or in that same area.

Only two of the vice admirals responded fast enough to attack the ships as they came down, shattering the keels of four ships. Those ships began to sink almost as soon as they touched the water, but they still lasted long enough to get their fire broadsides off before the crews began to abandon ship.

In the center, the exchange was a little more even. Fewer navigators in the divisions centered around the Moby Dick had decided to turn their ships, knowing they would be landing directly in among the front of the marine's formation within the Tarai Current. And although the attackers were able to get in the first blows, the marines bounced back there quickest, their own broadside gunners firing back as quickly as they could.

There too, many of the high end fighters, the Giant Squad, and a few of the vice and rear admirals and commodores had gathered, waiting to push forward as those on the 'horns' did the same. Those instantly began to fight back, landing on pirate ships and attacking mercilessly.

But even as the battle began all around them, Sengoku kept on glaring at Whitebeard and Shiki.

But that stare did nothing to either legend. Indeed, Shiki simply smirked while Whitebeard continued to laugh. "Gururarara, gururarara, gururarara!!"

The ferocious, nigh-terrifying laughter of Whitebeard resounded across the ocean, heard even over the tumult of battle. The sound somehow carried with it some of his will, causing ocean, creature, ship and marines to shake. Even many of the commodores quailed for a moment at that sound combined with the sight of the dozens of pirate ships splashing down throughout the crescent portion of their formation.

Worse was when his laughter suddenly stopped, and Whitebeard glared at Sengoku. Given how close their ships were, they could easily see one another's expressions and Whitebeard was almost amused at the look of hate and shock on Sengoku's face. When he spoke it was in a normal tone of voice, yet somehow it carried for leagues around. "You knew that this was going to happen little Sengoku. Whatever happens now is on your head."

"For world peace and justice, Newgate, your shadow must be excised from the world today!" Sengoku shouted back. His own voice carried as well, but that was through training, not sheer lungpower as in the case of the much larger man.

The next moment, Sengoku and Whitebeard lashed out as one, but not with merely physical attacks. Rather, their raw will came out to play in a clash of Haoshoku. Such clashes were very rare, Haoshoku being the rarest of Haki types, and one you had to be born with and then train, it wasn't something one could simply learn. Of every marine alive, only Sengoku and Garp could use it, and Garp was a traitor now.

The impact of monstrous willpower of two men, who had bent the very world to their will, shook local reality like a baby with a rattler. It was as if two giant weather systems had suddenly formed and crashed into one another out of the ether, the clash of wills quickly becoming visible in the air throughout the conflict, two spheres of influence encompassing both sides of the conflict and smashing into one another.

The waves roiled, tossing ships around, causing cannon fire to go wild. Ropes snapped, canvas tore, decking cracked and men and women on both sides fell, many falling out of position in the rigging, or where they had been manning guns across both fleets, dying, dropping into the ocean to drown or simply slumping where they were. Both Moby Dick and Divine Wind took damage, their prows crushed as if they had rammed the Red Line at full speed.

In the ocean hundreds of Sea Kings who had been nosing up underneath the battle already going on found their wills subsumed by the attack, knocking them out to the point where they began to float up towards the surface like dead fish. So much so that it began to help the higher level fighters who couldn't use Geppo, letting them use the bodies of the Sea Kings as scaly fighting platforms just as easily as their ships or those of their opponents.

And all the while, other men and women made of sterner stuff fired at their foes, a deadly song of booms, crashes, splinters and blood.

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The reverberation in the world caused by the dueling blasts of Haoshoku was felt even so far back from the clash between the Whitebeard Pirates and the marines as the Everlasting Resolve which was at the edge of the horizon, the center of the battle barely visible. For the Straw Hat Pirates though, at least the Haoshoku explosion didn't cause any deaths, only fainting spells.

Only Zoro, Luffy and Jinbei were able to bear the sudden pressure pushing on their psyches without flinching and even Zoro grimaced. In contrast, Laki slumped in the main gun's turret, her eyes going wide before rolling back into her head. Perona was similarly overcome up in the crow's nest. As she did her defensive envelope of ghosts disappeared from all around the ship with little pops of displaced air.

In the bridge Robin trembled for a brief moment while Chopper fainted dead away, collapsing onto the deck of the bridge. Nami lost her grip on the wheel, slumping forward,

cracking her head against it hard enough to wake her up from the near unconscious state with a hiss of pain. "OW, son of a... god fucking hell... it's like two angry gods fighting it out."

"I, I second that, Nami-chwan... is that the power of the strongest man in the world?" Sanji muttered.

"That's the heights we need to reach. No, that's the power we need to surpass to achieve our dreams."

Sanji and Zoro heard that, and smirked looking over at their Captain who was grinning as he stared into the distance, his face not awed, but rather inspired, something the other two men joined in after a second. Even Robin took some comfort from Luffy's words, smiling at her lover, as he moved over to Nami, gently checking her head before rousing Chopper.

Even Jinbei smiled wryly. "I have to admit, I did not anticipate you and Whitebeard working so closely together."

"We weren't," was the blasé reply. "This is happenstance. Good for us I suppose, and very, very bad for the Marines."

"You do not think that we should just inform Whitebeard that we can escape once we have your crewmen aboard?"

"I don't think that the Marines can afford to let us escape or Whitebeard. They need a victory here. We've knocked them onto the backfoot here it's not even funny," Luffy answered bluntly, shrugging his shoulders. Still, if Whitebeard wants to break off, we'll do the same—"

"Not until I get my swords back!" Zoro interrupted, growling the words, and Luffy chuckled, shaking his head. A second later, he disappeared in a crackle of lightning to appear next to the main gun.

Pulling an unconscious and still wounded Laki out, Luffy quickly returned to the bridge, he laid her out on the sofa there. Checking on Robin took a second, and then Luffy concentrated on his Kenbunshoku, pointing toward the ships to the port of the Tarai Current from their position. "Makino-nee and Brook are over there. Thankfully Hancock's further back from them in the current on that same side of the current."

And I don't know why, but that one person over there feels really familiar. Like I should know her, but haven't ever felt her out with Kenbunshoku before. I know it's a girl, but it isn't one of Hancock's Kuja I've met before. Yet for some reason this mind feels important? Weird.

"Quick change of plans," Luffy went on aloud, "Sanji, take over for Laki or a bit, Chopper check her out and Nami too, she just took a nasty hit to the head and then rouse Perona. We'll need her ghosts running interference. I'll be back down in the engine room for now. Zoro, Jinbei,

Eve, keep an eye out for those bouncing bastards still moving towards us. Most are turning around, but not all of them. And be warned, if Ace gets into trouble I'll need to zip over there. Kizaru's out of the fighting now thanks to Gramps but I still want a piece of Aokiji."

Thanks to his Devil Fruit enhanced Kenbunshoku, Luffy could feel that Garp and Kizaru had pushed back towards the prison and beyond to the ship's current position. He doubted that Kizaru could even sense much of the battle from there, let alone actually make out specifics.

Chopper instantly moved over to Laki and after a final nod at his crew, Luffy disappeared, leaving Nami behind to giggle manically. "W, well, one thing about being in the Calm Belt, at least we don't have to deal with freaky weather or changing directions, while also fighting the marines. Laki and Brook are going to stay where they are now too."

"Small comfort, Nami-chwan," Sanji said as he exited the bridge with Zoro, the pair not even arguing over who should exit the hatch first, such was the seriousness of the battle. "We still have to close with them to get them off that marine ship."

"Actually, I have a suggestion for that," Jinbei stated, frowning faintly. He pointed at himself, then over the side of the ship, even as he wondered who Eve was and... where she was too. *This ship gives me a very odd feeling.* He had no skill in Kenbunshoku though, so couldn't sense where this Eve could be hiding. "I am, after all, a fishman and we are sailing in the ocean. I could simply go and pick your missing crewmembers up, if I know what ship they are on."

Everyone on the bridge stared at him, and a moment later, the sound of their synchronized forehead smacks could be heard down in the engine room. Where it was quickly joined by Luffy's. "Fine, again, change of plans. Nami, call Brook. He's the one that's got the Den Den Mushi." The skeleton kept it in his skull next to the recording dial for Laboon. "Jinbei, how good is your hearing while underwater?"

"Not that good, but I can talk to local whale sharks and I can use them to point me in the right direction if I have to. They will be swarming under the water soon enough," Jinbei answered somewhat grimly.

Luffy nodded then spoke into the intercom once more. "Robin, give the man one of our Den Den Mushi. Sanji, we're still going to plow the road a bit."

There was a loud hum, and then a FZZARK as the main gun fired once more, hitting something well out beyond line of sight. Sanji's shot wasn't as accurate as Laki's had been, but he was able to shoot over the Whitebeard ships at least, hitting a marine battleship there. That was good enough for now, and soon, the Everlasting Resolve was moving swiftly forward, its speed well beyond any other ship there, even as it closed with the main battle.

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As he allowed his Haoshoku to fade, Whitebeard took a moment to acknowledge what the brat in the Straw Hat had done once more, sensing their ship moving somewhere behind him. *I didn't think he'd be able to pull it off, even with the Lightning Fruit, but I gotta admit he and his crew have impressed me. They made a plan and ran with it. It wouldn't have worked to get away from the marines, not unless that ship is faster than light, but points for trying.* Even better, Whitebeard had seen Ace, already freed and battling it out with Aokiji, if the battle going on behind him and to the starboard between ice and fire was anything to go by. *And I suppose it is part of being a father to clean up after his son and his friends.*

With that thought, Whitebeard hurled himself into the air, bringing around his bisento, Murakumogiri, to stab into a ball of magma coming towards the Moby Dick's sails. He landed back where he had begun, the magma meteorite stuck on the end of his bisento before breathing out onto the bit of magma turning into a stone ball, which he shattered with a flick of his right wrist, sending the parts over the side into the ocean. "Hoh? You want to play in the big leagues, you little candle?"

Akainu didn't reply, and the next second, hurled himself forward into the air, using Geppo to close the distance, as did Sengoku. He had yet to call on his Devil Fruit, but still brought his Buddhist staff around in a blow that would have shattered a mountainside, the staff and his arm black with Busoshoku.

Yet for all that strength, Whitebeard blocked it with one hand, grimacing only slightly even as he redirected the strike with Murakumogiri. His other hand came up throwing out a punch that Sengoku blocked. The marine didn't block the next kick though, instead taking it on his Busoshoku, the blow sending Sengoku flying back into the air. "You're getting slow in your old age, Sengoku!"

"I don't want to hear that from you!" Sengoku shot back, closing again.

However, before he could, Whitebeard stole the initiative. To the backdrop of cannon fire from all around them, Whitebeard clenched his fist, the air around him cracking there, almost as if it was a solid object that he had just crushed within his grip as the Quake-Quake Fruit activated. Then he punched out to the starboard of his current position. "Kaishin!"

The attack shattered the world in a straight line out across from him, destroying, shattering, breaking everything in its path: the air, the water, wood, cannonballs, metal it didn't matter, all of it exploded or broke under the impact of the Quake-Quake Fruit.

People, it didn't shatter on contact. Nevertheless, that didn't mean they were safe. Hundreds of marines were dumped into the ocean or shredded by the shrapnel of their own ships shattering around them, while still more died under the fire coming from the pirates.

It also shattered an incoming surge of magma from Akainu. He had hurled it across the ocean waves towards him, a wall of furiously bubbling lava boiling the water away as he tried to

create a floating slab of slowly cooling stone that only slowly began to sink after the main attack passed.

Whitebeard's assault sent the cooling magma everywhere even as Akainu finally reached the fray via Geppo and Soru. "WHITEBEARD!! For Absolute Justice I will claim your head!"

Whitebeard blocked the first blow, then raised a Busoshoku clad hand to block the next, before hitting back hard. Akainu dodged and moved, and for a few minutes the two of them danced around one another, Kenbunshoku on full display, then Whitebeard's overcame Akainu. Hand glowing with Quake Power, Whitebeard shattered the air in front of where Akainu had just dodged to, creating a torrent of shockwaves that blasted into the younger man's body, bypassing his Busoshoku to a degree.

"GUHH!" Akainu gasped, hurled backwards, blood spraying from his mouth as something inside broke under the impact. *H, how!? My, my Busoshoku is the best of the admirals! Even Sengoku and Garp have said I'm nearly to their level with it, yet...*

Feeling a blow coming, Akainu dodged to the side from a slice from the bisento, and retreated, starting to rain down lava balls instead with one hand, the other going to his side as he glared at Whitebeard. *What a terrifying old man.* "But for the future of the world, for absolute justice, I swear you are not going to walk away from this!"

With that, he began to attack even harder, hundreds of lava balls flying forward to attack Whitebeard, his ship and every other pirate vessel around.

Flinging his bisento around, Whitebeard deflected every ball coming to his way and then some, the end of his weapon being enlarged by a measure of his Devil Fruit Power, snorting in contempt even as he felt his old bones start to protest. In particular, the wounds he had taken from Gol twanged in his chest. But he bore through it. "You're going to have to do better than that, little candle!"

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Elsewhere, another marine officer was all too aware of what was going on back in the main fleet. Unfortunately, while he knew he had a better than average chance to win if he could just close the battle and keep it close, Aokiji knew he was slowly losing this fight for two simple reasons. One, Ace's fire was simply too hot for Aokiji's ice to handle. It was the simplest, purest example of element disadvantage Aokiji had ever run into outside of some spars with Akainu. And two Ace knew Aokiji would tear him apart with Busoshoku if given the chance. Every time he tried to close with the pirate, Ace would simply retreat, knowing full well he didn't want to face Aokiji in a closing engagement.

The environment was no help. Aokiji was able to easily freeze the water around him, yet Ace could fly. He simply created an effect Aokiji had heard once called 'rocket' by Vegapunk,

shifting his legs alone into fire and just zooming around. Yet Aokiji was good enough with Kenbunshoku to understand that Whitebeard and his entire fleet had arrived and the battle going on nearby.

In nautical terms, anyway. Twenty nautical miles over the horizon wasn't exactly close. Yet it was close enough that Aokiji could sense at least the edge of what was going on.

Instantly, Aokiji began to try to back away, not just because he preferred lazy justice, the course of least conflict, but also because of duty. *I can do a lot more for the war effort there rather than here. And someone who isn't facing an uphill battle in terms of elements can fight Fire Fist.*

More importantly were getting the two vice admirals and the five commodores with him back to the rest of the fleet. "When I say go, you head straight back to Sengoku and the rest, they will need you. Kadar, Comil, you'll need to still deal with those damn ghosts!"

As Aokiji spoke, another wing of ghosts flew down on them like birds doing a dive bomb on a group of statues. Comil, an older man with a bald head but a lot of hair around the edges, leaped upward, while Kadar, a younger man who was a rear admiral more because he simply couldn't handle paperwork than anything else, did the same. As the ghosts faded, another series of fireballs came in.

"What about Cat Man?"

"His hearts, fucking burst, Yarisugi, he's just taking a long time to die, because he's a giant, it's what they do," Kadar grunted as he used a Busoshoku enhanced finger bomb to try and attack Ace, only to see the metal of it warp and the shot to go wild. Ace returned fire, literally, a stream of fire a finger's width wide hitting Kadar by growing through Aokiji's ice, too fast for him to dodge. Luckily, the man's Busoshoku was up to taking it, but he still grimaced at the raw heat. "And I don't think that fucker is going to let us go."

"We need to recapture---" Comil began only to be interrupted by Aokiji.

"Whitebeard has arrived, and the whole fleet is in disarray. We need to get back to Sengoku, regroup," Aokiji barked followed by a shout of, "**GO!**" that was entirely out of character for the man but in keeping with the dire straits they were facing now.

With that, the ice flow he was standing on turned into a mountain, which rose to engulf the next few fireballs. As his fellow marines jumped into the air and raced off as fast as their individual skills with Soru and Geppo would allow, Aokiji once more subsumed his consciousness into his ice, reappearing elsewhere. Tendrils of ice reached up, stabbing, the edges of them sharp enough to cut wood, moving fast enough to punch through metal.

Ace burned it all, his whole body shifting into flame, hotter than any normal fire could be, burns the frozen seawater well away from him so that the seawater didn't touch his logia form. Then Ace seemed to notice the retreating marines, and made to head in their direction, only for Aokiji to appear out of the ice, Busoshoku enhanced fist flashing out.

To his shock, Ace twisted, his own Busoshoku hand reaching not to block but redirect. The blow still hit Ace's shoulder, and the other man grimaced in pain, but Ace's other hand came up. A beam of near-white fire flashed out over the very short distance to try and impact Aokiji's chest even as he was already dodging, pulling his Busoshoku up around his body at the same time.

"AGGHH!" Aokiji howled in agony, the heat from the strike threatening to sear his flesh even as he pulled his hand free, and let his will dive back into the ice, growing more and still more, MORE. For leagues around the water froze to a depth that nearly touched the ocean floor, trapping whatever foolish Sea King had yet to retreat, as Aokiji's willpower shivered within. *Damn it, the simple heat of that strike got through my Busoshoku! I, I can't imagine... maybe Akainu's magma could do the same, but not from the mere heat around the magma! That, that was dangerous. I have to remember fire spreads heat more than magma.*

Why that was he had no idea, but that was what had just happened, so it had to be accurate.

While Aokiji recovered, Ace grimaced a bit, feeling at his shoulder. *Fuck me that hurt. Right, his Busoshoku's better than mine. Knew that, have to keep the distance open, doofus. If I hadn't moved with the blow, he would've broken my Busoshoku clean, and the shoulder underneath.* "Although it looks like I might be a little too hot for him to handle."

Ace waited a moment for a reply before smacking his forehead, then ascending into the sky on a trail of fire. "Right, got to remember Luffy's over with his crew... what are they doing now?"

In the distance, the Everlasting Resolve was shifting position, not away as it had been, but to the horizon to Ace's right. It was only then that he became aware of the greater battle going on. While his Kenbunshoku was shit, from this high up he could see a lot further, and in the distance, he could make out smoke in the distance.

"Pops. Pops and the rest are here. Are here for me..." Ace murmured, his face going slack. The one thing, beyond his brother's death anyway, that he had wanted to see the least had happened. But Ace knew he couldn't change it. *And Luffy can handle himself, especially with that Devil Fruit of his.* "So the best thing I can do is keep the Ice-aho engaged here."

Concentrating, Ace brought his fire's internal heat up to hottest he could in his condition. After so long touching Seastone and barley getting enough food to live on, he estimated that

even after recovering and getting some food he was at around seventy-percent. *But that's going to be enough to keep Aokiji from interfering with anyone else.*

With that, he twisted himself until his feet were facing upward, and then he was zooming down as fast as his Afterburn Technique could carry him. "RAAAAHHHH!!!" His fist and upper body covered in Busoshoku, Ace crashed down into the center of the ice floe, shattering it into a dozen pieces.

It didn't last, but it forced Aokiji up to the surface once more, freezing the ice between the smaller ice floes as he came, fighting hard against the heat Ace was giving off. For a moment, Aokiji appeared in his normal body facing Ace.

"Ah, there you are," Ace quipped. "I always hated hide-and-seek."

Aokiji glared back silent for a second. Gone was his laid back, lazy attitude, his normal persona cast aside, as he brought his hands up in a typical boxer's stance, crouching down. "You do know this can only end one way, do you not, Fire Fist Ace? Your brother, your father. All of them here, willing to die to save you, and they will. Your vile blood, the blood of Roger, will drag them low too."

Aokiji and the other marines with him had been close enough to the Everlasting Resolve for Aokiji, who had met him before, to sense Luffy's presence via Kenbunshoku. To say he had been furious was an understatement, knowing full well what it entailed, but unable to do anything about it, hence why he wanted to taunt Ace about it.

"Eh, I gotta say a big brother being saved like this by his little brother is a bit embarrassing. I gotta get some of my cred back, you know?" Ace quipped, before his expression turned grim, and his hands, the only part of him beyond his face not transformed into a pillar of right now, became black with Busoshoku. "You'll never touch Luffy. Not him, not Pops. I'm going to sink your iceberg right here, Aokiji."

"We'll see," Aokiji answered, before ice creatures and several clones rose, charging forward from all around Ace.

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At the same time that the battle between Whitebeard, Akainu and Sengoku began, other members of the Whitebeard Crew were making themselves known as they faced off against the vice admirals who had hurled themselves into the air and rushed forward to engage the Straw Hats only to be forced to turn around. Many on both sides had to take a few seconds to recover, and more than a few of the marine commodores had fallen out of the sky to die in the water below but these members had pushed through the clash of Haoshoku.

First, to launch himself towards the marine officers was the 3rd division commander, Diamond Jozu, his habitual scowl in place. "Since Pops ordered us to leave the admirals and Buddha to him, I will intercept the giants before they close with Pops. Get Little Oz forward to help me when he gets over his air sickness."

Diamond Jozu was a broad-chested, heavily armored and darkly tanned man who stood almost as tall as Whitebeard, but even broader across the shoulders. He had a long face and immensely thick neck, and wore his hair and beard in stripes, although he had more actual hair in his sideburns than his beard. He had armor on his upper body with bulky shoulder pads showing red bolts of metal coupled with a red cuirass, the design of which would have put Luffy in mind of Japanese foot soldiers from before the Meiji Restoration. A big elaborate golden belt held up what looked like a kilt, coupled with black studded pants and combat boots on his relatively thin legs.

Jozu didn't seem to be able to use Geppo, but instead leaped from one ship to another, using Soru instead. For him, the dead Sea Kings were a godsend for two reasons. It let him move around much easier, and he was a Devil Fruit user. While in no way scared of fighting at sea, this let him have far more mobility.

"I'll take out that ass-hat Shark Cutter, Rakkie, you take out the group of commodores with him," Another division commander ordered. This man was named Blamenco, the 6th division commander. A short, rotund man who didn't look all that frightening or piratical with a light pink skin that looked like it rarely felt the touch of the sun, large lips, and two pockets near his chin area each marked with a pig. Coupled with purple overalls, and a gray pirate tricorn with Whitebeard's symbol on it he had a yellow sash as a belt, tucked inside the loops of his overalls, the man didn't need his missing front teeth to look like a fashion disaster.

However, there was no doubting his combat skills, and within seconds, he clashed with Shark Cutter Bastille. The vice admiral with wild red hair and a mask with bull bullhorns pushed back, but couldn't get any momentum. This stopped his attack on the 6th division in its tracks, while the division itself turned to drop anchors as one, all of them having six anchors apiece.

Bigger than any ship in the fleet bar the Moby Dick and one other in the 14th division, the 6th's ships had massive bombards that quickly turned, firing over the shattered remnants of the front ranks of the marine formation in the Tarai Current, at ships well beyond them. High above the battle, a pair of pirates, Sky Islanders, shouted out coordinates.

Beside Blamenco charged his best friend among the Whitebeard Pirates, 7th division commander Rakuyo. He was a somewhat tall (by normal standards, not Grand Line standards) man with dark blonde dreadlocks who had a magnificent mustache that consisted of two perfectly straight points angled downward at a perfect forty-five degree angle from the chin. Unlike Blamenco, Rakuyo looked the part of a pirate, with a yellow coat with green linings, a green vest under an unbuttoned shirt and a green pirate sash pantaloons and boots. On his forehead, he wore a yellow and purple bandanna, proudly showing Whitebeard's mark.

The spiked flail in one end was deadly, which it proved as it slammed into a commodore of the marines, shattering skull and shoulder in one strike before he had to use the chain to block a blow from a vice admiral whose mustache was just as magnificent as his own. The blow was so strong he was forced to land on one of the floating Sea Kings, although that was with more relief than anything else. Geppo was not his best skill, much like Jozu. “Yo, Stainless, you’re mustache is drooping a little today. Want to take a time out?”

“You bastard! Today I will end our rivalry forever Rakuyo!” Stainless shouted, flashing down to attack while two other commodores did the same.

Behind them, his ships having fallen just out of position to engage the marines, the 14th division commander, Speed Jiru decided not to engage the group of officers who had already turned and infiltrated the Whitebeard Pirate’s fleet lines. Instead, he barked out orders, taking command of not only his own division but also Rakuyo’s.

His ships, equipped with anti-air guns, thanks to being posted near where Whitebeard had access to the Sky Islands that was Jiru’s home, began to fire into the air, keeping the marine officers above the Whitebeard ships jumping as still more of their own strongest fighters leaped up to engage them. Rakuyo’s ships, composed of more normal pirate ships without even the paddlewheels of several of the other divisions, simply rowed forward to join the line of the 3rd, 2nd and 1st division ships where they were opening fire with broadsides equal to those of the normal marine warships they faced.

It would take the 7th division a while. They would be rowing against the Tarai current, and were out of cannon range for now. But they would get there.

Once he had given out those orders, Jiru showed the reason for his moniker. Jet Dials on his boots activated, and he zoomed up into the air like a rocket, zipping up and over the main force of Geppo-using officers, coming down to attack the ones closest to where Ace and Aokiji were fighting it out. There he thrust out with a jousting lance much like the one the Knight of the Sky Gan Fall had used, including its inbuilt dials. In his other hand, he held a heat-dial modified shield bearing Whitebeard's insignia in its normal purple. “You’ll never capture one of our brother’s again, you assholes!”

Back in the Tarai Current, more marine ships were pushing through the flotsam ahead of them caused by Whitebeard’s assault. They still outnumbered the pirates by quite a wide margin and had an advantage in the numbers of high-end combatants. Not a single vice-admiral could match someone like Jozu, or the as-yet unaccounted for Marco, but they didn’t need to. Jozu was currently facing off against six giant admirals, one of them having turned and begun racing towards their drying fellow over where Aokiji was fighting near the edge of the horizon, his bulk barely discernable on the horizon among the steaming, strangely shaped ice that thrust up from the ice flow Aokiji was using as a battle position. This kind of matchup was happening elsewhere.

The marine Vice Admiral Cancer, a habitual smoker who liked his cigars almost as much as Smoker, led a group of four vice admirals to fight Rakuyo and Blamenco alongside Stainless and Bastille, while two vice admirals tried to fall on their ships with a few commodores, only to be intercepted by other skilled fighters, such as the Decalvan Brothers, Doma and McGuy or being forced to dodge from the fire from Jizu's division. Battles between those able to fight in the air occurred all over the place scattered across the crescent-shaped battlefield and further back into the Tarai Current, with even more fighting it out on the ships or the dead Sea Kings, division commander or skilled captain against vice admiral or commodore.

At the same time, Hawkeyes Mihawk's ship surged forward on his lonesome, his black blade gently redirecting any errant cannon coming his way. He hadn't even felt the clash of conquering technique, his own willpower so strong that he was completely immune to such things. Now he looked towards where Whitebeard's attack had just hit the other side of the marine formation, if such a term could still be used.

"It is obvious his Devil Fruit's power has not diminished. Yet I wonder if the man is still worthy of his reputation..." Humming thoughtfully Mihawk pulled the black sword off of his back, and turning in that direction himself. A cutting strike flashed out from his sword as he brought it down, stronger, wider, more condensed and for more long-range than any such attack Zoro or indeed any other swordsman in the world could create.

It did not reach its target, however. Instead, one of the other Whitebeard ships caught across its angle of attack, an individual aboard that ship hurling himself into the air, and brought his swords up to block the blow, shattering it with his own at the point of contact. "You will have to get through me to get at Pops, Hawk Eyes!"

Mihawk raised an eyebrow. "Vista of the Flower Swords, is it?"

"I am honored you have heard of me," The man said.

If Luffy were to look at him, Luffy might well have described the guy as having a mildly Spanish look to him.

Around Jinbei in terms of height, he was muscular, his broad chest on display by the semi-open dark blue shirt he wore. Over that, he wore a cape and white gloves a dark blue top hat, and an earring in each ear. He also wears light blue pants with a belt that holds two sword sheaths, one on each side. A curly, black mustache completed the look, and coupled with the cape would be the main reason behind the Spanish comparison, making the man look like someone who should be in an arena with a bull going 'ole!' His weapons too were unusual, having the hilt of sabers, but being single-sided, the blades looking almost like katana but not quite.

"Only a fool would not have heard of someone of your skill," Mihawk answered, his tone cool even as he launched himself forward from his ship, while Vista did the same. The two

slammed into one another, their swords flicking and striking, then shifting again, as the two of them fell to land lightly on a dead Sea King, one that closely resembled a giant goldfish.

“You go on Whitey,” Vista said, as the sounds of swords clanging began to override even the sounds of two fleets worth of ships firing cannons and one another around him. “I can handle Mihawk.”

While Mihawk didn’t respond to this with more than a simple uptick of an eyebrow again.

The addressed Whitey snorted. She was a middle-aged woman of striking appearance, with blue hair a few shades lighter than Vivi’s, falling down to mid back in loose waves, full lips and a confident expression on her face. A short striped dress with loose sleeves closed to either side of her chest by flower-shaped buttons, a polka-dotted bandanna, and a light blue pirate hat, she too wore a cape, of purple and blue, purple on the outside, blue on the inside. The skirt segment of her dress was short, showing off a good portion of thigh. And while the flag on her large, steel-hulled ship was that of the Whitebeard Pirates, Her own pirate mark sat on her hat, showing off a skull with a snowflake design.

When she spoke, Whitey’s voice was both confident and highly annoyed as she launched into a small lecture. “Thanks, Vista. I’ll leave my division here to back up yours, Namur’s and Blenheim’s. I want to head over to see Ace and maybe between us, we can put Aokiji out of action. And when I see him, I’m going to give that boy a stern talking to! Honestly, did he forget he was a Pirate Captain in his haste to chase off after Blackbeard? He’s such a child, forcing me to come back and take command of his division. What does he think his crews think of being left behind, huh?”

She then snickered, a sound that caused her crew and that of Vista’s flagship to shiver, even as they bent to their guns and fired at any marine vessel they could range on, the marines doing the same to them. None of them hit yet, the tumult of the ocean sudden and changing with every impact from both the two swordsmen and the more distant Whitebeard. “I’ve also heard about him being a little friendly with one of the Supernovas, that Bonney character. If it’s serious, I’m going to tease him sooo hard!”

A loud clang erupted as a marine cannonball bounced off her ship’s outer hull, and her first mate spoke up, while Vista’s ship was hit five times, all of which had crashed into the hull high up in its side. Already they were dealing with casualties among the crew, yet Vista’s ship was in no danger of sinking anytime soon. Sinking a vessel the size of a galleon made of water would take a lot of doing, unless you got lucky or set it on fire in too many places for the crew to deal with. That was always the case with wooden vessels.

“Er, Captain I hate to say it, but we are in the middle of a giant fucking fight. Is now really the time to let your mot, that is, big sister tendencies get the better of you?”

“Of course!” Whitey turned, thrusting out with a sword strike. Unlike the giant Black Blade or Vista’s sabers, her blade was a rapier, a real one, with a long, thin but well made blade, not like the super thin epees that were always the rage among rich fops the world over. From the tip of her blade her own version of Mihawk’s earlier attack lashed out, aiming at a marine ship with a paddlewheel much like her own ship that had tried to just now move up in front of them. That strike slammed into one side of the paddlewheel configuration, shattering it in an explosion of wooden shrapnel. As it continued all the way through the paddle wheel and engine room of the ship from one side to another. “What better time would there be?”

“Oh, I don’t know, when you’re all imprisoned in Impel Down!?” another female voice intoned from on high, causing Whitey to turn. She raised her blade and blocked a downward strike from a katana as Vice Admiral Gion announced her presence.

Gion had been one of the first to be sent forward, although she had hoped to get her whole ship involved in the conflict. Yet with it stuck in the Tarai Current, she had obeyed Sengoku’s initial order to spread out and try to envelope the first pirate ship, leaving behind orders for Ranko to stay with the ship along with Elizabeth and Skeleton Jack. With the three of them and her own crew, she knew the ship would be able to comport itself as well as any sailing ship could in these circumstances.

That this let her fight another strong female fighter was incidental. As was the fact that this fighter was an old rival of hers. “How are you, Whitey? You’re still looking as icy as ever.”

“Ugh, that joke got old when Tsuru was young, GeeGee,” Whitey teased. Her rapier shivered for a second then the pair disengaged, before their swords flicked out, clashing as the pair of women, who had fought many times before, fell into an old routine, of skill against strength and reach.

The duel didn’t stop Whitey’s ship from continuing on the course she had ordered. Soon Gion was well away from any of her fellows as she and Whitey dueled across the pirate captain’s main deck.

Whitey had not been part of Whitebeard’s crew for many years, having left it a decade ago to form her own. Nevertheless, she had been brought back to replace Ace as division commander temporarily. Little Oz was another Pirate Captain, who had agreed to take over the murdered Thatch’s division... although at present he was still getting over having spent the journey here dealing with airsickness.

And then there was the individual who was both the reason for that and for the fleet’s surprising arrival. Shiki the Golden Lion was a man of Whitebeard’s generation, standing about as tall as Shanks, although his legs had long since been cut off and replaced with swords. Unlike Whitebeard, who dressed only in pantaloons and a white cloak, Shiki dressed more like Jinbei or the deceased Wano samurai that Zoro had crossed blades with on Thriller Bark. An orange trimmed, a red and black kimono tied closed with a dark green sash and a golden chain covered

his chest, his back and shoulders covered in turn by a stripped haori of mustard and golden yellow, matching his golden hair, the shagginess of which made it look like a lion's mane. For a beard, he had a bush-like tuft of hair the same color as his hair.

At one point, he had challenged Whitebeard and Gol D. Roger in a battle to see who would rule the ocean, they and their individual ships or Shiki and his fleet. He was the original pirate admiral, long before the rise of the Yonko. He had lost that battle, but had survived despite the fight having taken place in the New World, and had been rebuilding his fleet for another attempt, when news of Roger's capture and subsequent execution had reached him.

Now faced with the same damn marines who took his chance at vengeance from him, Shiki wasn't about just sit back and watch Whitebeard to have all the fun. "Shishi: Senjindani!"

As one of Whitebeards ships' lost its masts to enemy fire to one side of him, condensed air pressure attacks much like the Rankyaku Storm attack slammed down into three of the marine ships, two regular ships, and one of the larger battleships, which Akainu had been using as his flagship.

Seeing this and having had to retreat to avoid another Quake Quake assault that could well have broken his entire body, Akainu thrust out his hand, creating a shield of magma around his ship. It shattered under the attack, the bits falling into the steaming ocean beneath, allowing Akainu to launch himself into the air towards the cackling Shiki. "You too must be captured! For Absolute Justice, both of you misbegotten relics of a past age need to be purged."

"Jihahahaha, that's the way! Come on, youngster! If you want to make a name for yourself, if you want to show the world that your idea of justice matters at all, come and see if you can stand against the powers of the previous generation!" Shiki guffawed, launching himself forward, as light as a feather in the air, thanks to his float fruit despite the fact that he had no feet to speak of below the knee. His fruit didn't let him control other living things, but it did allow Shiki to control himself as well as anything not alive.

Throughout the Tarai Current and out into the Calm Belt, battle raged as pirates and marines fought it out either in the air or via ship, no quarter asked and no quarter given.

OOOOOOO

Retreating back to his ship, as Whitebeard dealt with a group of commodores and one of the giants who had charged towards his position past Jozu, Sengoku took in everything that was going on via his Kenbunshoku and reports coming in from the Den Den Mushi.

Nearby, the remaining members of the Giant Squad had been fighting Jozu, but were now faced with an even larger giant, one he recognized as being Oz Junior. Not quite as large as his ancestor, Junior easily topped the giants themselves.

On the other side of his ship, Sengoku saw Hawkeye getting involved with several of the Whitebeard vessels and one of his division commanders. The commodores and most of the vice admirals he could sense were fully engaged, but it was quite obvious to him that surprise and the destruction of his battle plans were still having an effect. A good third of his ships couldn't range on their enemy, their firepower blocked from engaging by the wooden hulls of their fellows, and no one was able to see through the smoke and steam of the battle to let the few artillery ships that still floated to fire their arcing shots over the rest of his ships.

And none of the Kenbunshoku users remained with them, blast it. That must be how that enemy pirate can aim that hell weapon. I will need to remember that trick. But for now, that was a minor concern.

"My calculations never even considered the idea that Whitebeard would attack us from the sky like this. A few ships sent forward with bubble coating and going through the ocean yes, but his full fleet brought here through the sky like this? Whitebeard and Shiki working together!? We didn't have a clue Whitebeard had even contacted Shiki. I am going to hang the head of our intelligence division if it is the last thing I do. How could they have missed a meeting like that?" *How had they even lost Shiki in the first place after his escape so many years ago is beyond me.*

For a brief moment, Sengoku castigated himself for not having forced the World Government to try to follow up on that. Shiki was from the old generation, but was one of very few people who had survived fighting Gol D. Roger. They should have spared no expense to try and find where he had hidden himself and what his plans for the future were.

I suppose I should be thankful that Whitebeard doesn't seem to have brought as many of his allied captains to the party. He's only brought his own fleet, which gives him a lot of ships, but without those captains, not as many high-end fighters. We have the advantage with the vice admirals and commodores, but... It isn't enough, not on its own. Sengoku mused mentally, before wincing as he saw Chisel, one of the vice admirals, slammed out of the air by Joze.

He hit the water and did not rise again, his Devil Fruit, a paramecia type, causing him to sink instantly. Sengoku had already felt ten commodores had lost their lives in similar manners, and two other vice admirals, something of a shock, but easy to understand given the furious nature of the battle. Which did not include Mozambica, who must have fallen in Impel Down somehow. *There are too many moving parts, too many allies and enemies, most of our people's Kenbunshoku is being overwhelmed, taking away one of our major advantages.*

A second later, that strange hell weapon the first pirate ship had fired again. Far to his own port side out of sight over the horizon, Sengoku could sense that the strike had blasted through the side of one of the marine vessels out in the Calm Belt, having fired somehow through the Whitebeard Pirate's battle line to do it. "And then there is that thing. Damn it, I wish that I knew what kind of weapon it was, or why that ship's appearance bothers me so much."

Shaking that thought off, Sengoku turned back to his coms officers, grimacing and hoping that the local escargatoire was still working enough for him to get orders out. It was a known limitation of Den Den Mushi that networks of them could be overwhelmed if enough people were just shouting into them at anyone who could hear. Which was what was going on now. Dedicated lines like the ones to Marineford or Impel Down would be fine, but the fleet escargatoire wouldn't be soon enough.

But I need to do that now! This battlefield and the fact both Aokiji and Kizaru are being sidelined has robbed us of our biggest advantages. Or would, if the warning from Impel Down hadn't reached us with enough time for me to rearrange our plans and add still more to our combat power.

Already, more reinforcements were appearing the air from among his fleet. K9Ms and Pacifistas had been spread out among the two 'horns' of the previous formation, and were now quickly closing or using their laser weapons to tremendous effect. There were supposed to be nine of each variety, although one of the ships carrying a Pacifista had been sunk early on by that insane long-range weapon.

One raced forwards through the air to engage Whitebeard, who had just finished off the last of the foolish commodores and a giant who had attacked him. Standing over the body of one of the giants, an application of the Quake Quake Fruit shattered the K9M in the first strike, causing Whitebeard to bellow with laughter. "I see the World Government is up to its old tricks! What is it with people like them, and you, Sengoku, who think that tin soldiers are the way of the future? Gurararara!"

While the pirates who saw that feat cheered, Sengoku gritted his teeth, fighting the urge to rush forward for just a moment. It was clear that, while old age was stopping Whitebeard from jumping around a lot, it hadn't harmed his combat skills nearly as much as Sengoku had hoped. Yet, while he was perhaps the only one in the fleet who could maybe match Whitebeard, with Akainu now fighting Shiki, Sengoku had more orders to give. *Now, damn it, now!*

There was no way to create some manner of organization in the fleet, but he could turn over local command to various trusted officers, rear admirals whose skills with Geppo was not up to this kind of conflict, or commodores who had yet to engage in any of the midair battles going along. Even in some places senior captains, or worse, outsiders brought in like a young, insanely strong fighter named Ryokugyu took command of a local group of ships ranging in size from a full squadron of twelve to two. It would be up to them to try and organize the ship-to-ship aspect of this battle and turn the tide there if possible by simple flags if need be now that coms were useless.

Honestly, Sengoku calculated that as only a twenty percent possibility. To truly combat the threat of the Whitebeard Pirates, Sengoku needed to give one more specific order to activate a plan he had recently made. With that in mind, he picked up one of the Mushi nearby, speaking into it crisply, saying only two simple words. "Activate Operation Goo."

He waited for a second, then as all of the Den Den Mushi began to shout, transforming so quickly the vision of one speaker melded into another, leaped to his feet, and called his Devil Fruit power, jumping back forward to fight Whitebeard once more lest the bastard shatter still more of their line with his Devil Fruit.

OOOOOOO

While the K9Ms and Pacifista began to shift the momentum of the battle, the remaining members of the Giant Squad backed away from where they had been fighting Oz Junior, bouncing backwards and away. Luckily, a group of vice admirals had taken Jozu's attention away from them for now, as even the two vice admirals among the giants had been having trouble with him.

With that distance to act, each of them, from the lone woman on down to the youngest among them, reached up to a special pouch on their upper arms, where they pulled out auto injectors. These they stabbed into their own chests, pumping the green fluid within into their bloodstreams. Across the leagues of battle, the battle covered at least eighty leagues from one side of the fleet to the other, several other commodores and one Vice Admiral also did the same, pulling back from the front to do it.

A mere second later Little Oz Junior cross the distance leaping from one Sea King to another within a moment before he landed on the ship one of the giants stood on. The ship instantly began to come apart, overcome by his weight but that didn't bother Oz. He could swim, and was as large as many of the dead Sea Kings. His sword, almost as large as a skiff, came down on top of the smaller giant with enough power to cut through stone. "Die bastard! You'll never hurt big bro Ace or Pops! RAAGGGH!!!"

The giant raised a fist to block the incoming blow even as the ship fell apart underneath him and regular sized sailors screamed, leaping away.

But it was Oz's sword, which shattered on that impact. The giant bellowed in pain, stumbling away, but his fist was still intact. Dented, but intact. "What the heck?! How did you do that little man?"

The giant, Lacroix, roared. "Feel the power of the Marines!" He battered aside the remnants of Oz's blade in front of him, leaping up and lashing out with a fist towards Oz Junior's face, both fist and man gleaming with the light of reflected metal rather than skin.

Oz stumbled back, shaking his head, but laughing. Lacroix was joined by the giant named Lonz, whose features were hidden in a bucket helmet. However, Lonz found his head caught by Oz in his grip, and both helmet and metal head underneath began to warp under his grip. "You're going to have to do better than that!"

That was the exception though. Suddenly having bodies of steel allowed the vice admirals who used the Green Goo to almost ignore their defense for offense and the now-Devil Fruit assisted marines, many of whom already had Devil Fruits, began to turn the tide in scattered segments of the battle. Similarly, the newly created ad hoc squads of ships began to take a toll, and the first Whitebeard ships started to pull away, heaving around. One had lost its rigging and its port broadside had been mauled, while the other had lost its officers to the Geppo using marines from above.

That one was able to turn and retreat, helped in part by one of the division commanders moving in their direction to fight off the marine officers. The one with the damage to the rigging never completed the move. Cannon fire reached the ship's magazine and it exploded like a firework going off, killing most of the pirates aboard.

Scene break

Despite this victory and the marines finally getting some measure of fire on the Whitebeard Fleet across the line, the weight of firepower at the point of contact was still partially in favor of the Whitebeard Pirates. This was particularly true around the edge of the formation that Sengoku had been trying to create. More of the Whitebeard Fleet's ships could move under steam or coal power, like Whitey's. In a few cases, some even ran on electricity, something unheard of in the main Marine Fleet. There were several islands in the New World that were far more advanced than the rest of the world when it came to technology, and Whitebeard protected several of them with his name and banner.

Still, Kong had to shake his head as he listened to reports coming in from across the fleet. His ship was a different one from the one that Sengoku flew his ensign from. While Sengoku was leading from the front as much as possible, Kong's ship was in the direct center of the formation that the marines had taken to travel along the Tarai Current. This put the ship well back from the main fighting, its cannons not able to bear on the enemy. It could thus serve as a fallback command point. But now, listening to the screaming and screeching from the local escargatoire, Kong knew he couldn't do anything there. The net was collapsing as he listened.

Beyond that though, Kong was well-pleased with Sengoku's planning. "To think that I thought Sengoku might be overreacting. Vegapunk's creations might give us an edge here both in terms of those cyborgs of his and that green goo. Even if the way that it was supplied and then refined is horrifying to contemplate."

Next to him, his aide shook his head, pushing up a pair of glasses on his nose as he did. He was a mousy young man of the same age as Coby but instead of being placed under Garp for training, he had shown an amazing proclivity with organization, numbers and reading, which made him a perfect aid for the commander-in-Chief of all the World Government's forces. That and his loyalty to the World Government were absolute. This was no small consideration considering the upheaval among the low ranking marines that Garp's betrayal had caused. "We might have issues with the aftermath. The Green Gunk, and I hate that the scientists actually

use that term in their official paperwork, was taken from Dr. Vegapunk's labs over his strenuous objections. He doesn't have any idea about the side effects of using it yet. Especially if someone with an existing Devil Fruit injects himself with it."

"I realize you need to tell me that Pencilton, but now is not the time for us to care about the long-term impact." Kong turned away, looking over at the Ship's Captain gesturing to the Den Den Mushi, which were becoming increasingly frantic, almost manic with how swiftly they shifted from one speaker to another, to say nothing of the shouts they were releasing. "Captain, I'm going to leave the ship to you. I can't do anything here. Take command of the nearby ships if you are able to and push forward when you can to take part in the battle. The blasted pirates have boxed us in, but we still have weight of numbers on our side."

"Yes, sir. And you, sir?" the man inquired politely. No hint of the fact that thousands would die before this battle was through colored his tone. After all, for justice they could not retreat, and thus could not relent from going forward.

"I'm going to join Sengoku, and the two of us will try to contain Whitebeard." *Honestly, I would prefer to go after Garp, drag him out of the fight he's got going on with Kizaru. If any of the three admirals could turn the tide of this battle single-handed out here on the ocean, it's him.*

The two of them were already too far away from the main battle area. Judging from the last report they'd had from the group of officers currently with Aokiji and trying to fight Ace, Garp had pushed Kizaru straight south, placing the pair of them entirely on the other side of Impel Down, which itself wasn't even in sight yet from the front of their formation. That was well out of anyone's Kenbunshoku range, so it was doubtful Kizaru even knew the main marine fleet had arrived, let alone anything else. And living things like Den Den Mushi could not be brought along when a logia user transformed. So the light user could not be recalled even if more than a few of the marine vessels were set up with Mirrors on their crow's nests.

Well, they can be if the individuals create a dead zone within themselves like Aokiji or any other solid-state type logia could. But Kizaru can't. And as strong as Sengoku is, Whitebeard is known as the strongest man in the world for a reason.

With that, Kong leapt into the air, and began to make his way forward over several other ships who would already lost their officers to the tumult at the front of the formation.

OOOOOOO

Even now that Sengoku had grown to his giant form and was moving to attack him again, Whitebeard still took a moment to take in the overall battle as Sengoku had a moment before. After all, none of his division commanders was there to do it for him.

With a little under half of the remaining marine vessels unable to range on his own ships, the cannon exchange was still going his way, even with the marines getting organized. Beyond the casualties he'd caused, twenty-nine of the marine vessels were already burning in comparison to only six of his own, although he had lost four ships sunk during the initial landing. The casualties caused by his sons were mostly concentrated on the two prongs of the marine fleet that had been able to move out of the Tarai Current in the Calm Belt, where he had concentrated all but four of his ship divisions and their commanders.

That was excellent. It meant in terms of the ship-to-ship combat, the rest of the marine ships, stuck using only the current with no wind to speak of, would soon be flanked by his own ships. Moreover, unless the current was reversed, they would be stuck here, defeated in detail.

The nature of the ocean was also taking an impact all on its own on both sides. Whitebeard himself had knocked several of the Devil Fruit using commodores out of the sky, and whereas if they were fighting over solid ground, they might well have been saved, Whitebeard had seen at least five of them had fallen into the ocean. There, they were completely helpless, unable even to try and save themselves, and by this point were undoubtedly dead. *I know I sensed Haruta being rescued by Namur, but not Kinga, Andre or Haruta's flagship captain, blast it. Namur and Islewan can only do so much to cover such a wide area.*

At that point, Sengoku finally reached him, palms flashing out in a series of strikes, each of which would have shattered the Moby Dick if it hit. Yet standing at the prow of his unmoving flagship, Whitebeard held out a hand. The hand began to glow, a circle of Quake-Quake Energy surrounding it as he punched out in turn, slamming his fist into the giant Sengoku's. This caused a reverberation that cracked the deck of the Moby Dick underneath them, and sent some of his weaker crewmen flailing. It also rocked the giant Sengoku back, causing him to hiss in pain.

"Back off! Keep the fire going on the enemy ships, but give me the deck here. None of you are up to facing Sengoku," Whitebeard ordered, not looking away. He then raised his voice, bellowing to be heard for several leagues around. "Concentrate on surviving, each and every one of you! Ace has already been freed and I'm not losing a single son more than I have to today!"

"Hai Pops!" several of them shouted in return, almost blubbing at the sudden emotional words from their Captain, before racing down into the ship to obey his commands.

Even Tate, the lone nurse who had insisted she come along with Whitebeard to ostensibly make certain the height they traveled through didn't bother his body, obeyed. As she disappeared, Whitebeard sighed, blocking another blow from Sengoku, sending it sideways up and into the rigging where it shattered the Moby Dick's mainmast. A wave of his bisento sent a surge of Quake Quake Energies into the debris, which shattered into dust moats from the strike, protecting the last of his crew as they rushed down into the hold.

“Honestly, couldn’t you have let me have a moment to look after my nurse? A man likes to look at pretty things, you know?” Whitebeard quipped. “Honestly, you young folk, so serious all the time, you should learn to take joy in life.” His smile disappeared. “You never know when it will end.”

“You’ll be looking at the succubae in Hell when I am through with you, Whitebeard!” Sengoku shouted in return, bringing down both of his hands, only to watch as Whitebeard leapt to the side, bringing around his glaive aimed towards the joined hands. The hammer blow went wide, splashing into the water causing Sengoku to freeze, as most Devil Fruit users would when faced with being splashed by ocean water. Seeing this, Whitebeard leaped upward bringing Murakumogiri around in an arc to take out one of Sengoku’s eyes.

That blow was intercepted by Kong, who himself was slammed by a fist loaded with his Devil Fruit’s power, which caused him to cry out and be hurled down into the body of a Sea King. Even as the Sea King practically exploded on the impact, Kong shuddered, his body wracked with what amounted to a series of tremendous shocks to the system. But Kong had protected himself with Busoshoku at the last second, and so hadn’t been torn asunder by the blow, as a normal man would have. It hurt, even though his Busoshoku, and Kong once more lamented the fact that his own control of that technique never reached the insane levels that Garp had made, lamenting also the fact that Garp had been so blind as to believe family bounds mattered more than duty. If he were here, this battle would be no contest at all. *Instead, he’s off, fighting one of our most powerful members!*

Then Whitebeard was lashing out with his Quake Quake Energy, and Kong was forced to dodge again, even as Sengoku moved into a series of palm strikes. For now, the three of them were neutralizing one another. It would be down to the rest of the fleet to really win the rest of this war. *And damn you Dooflamingo, you, Hancock and Blackbeard all! What in the world are you waiting for!?*

OOOOOOO

Near enough to the clash of literal giants to be very thankful that she wasn’t a part of it, Hina barked out orders to her crew. The sailors who had been with her during the Sky Island debacle shout to obey, showing far more experience and expertise than the rest of her crew. Several of whom Hina knew still distrusted Hina herself. But now was not the time to dwell on such things.

“Guardian Cage,” she shouted, and from her arms two walls of handcuffs appeared, covering the side of the ship blocking incoming cannon fire. She then pulled the technique back in, allowing her own gunners to fire at the enemy ship, doing significant damage as the enemy ship it still been underway, moving to the side in an effort to let one of its fellows also provide sent broadside onto her own vessel.

She was about to do the same as that second ship also fired at them, but a shout distracted her from one side. "Captain Hina, look! The Commodore's in trouble."

At first Hina actually wondered which commodore. Here on her ship, though there could be only one commodore, though. *Of course, Smoker. UGH. He hasn't been the same since we heard that Luffy died. I, I can't say I have been the same either, but still. I was... well, yes.* Hina had been an angsty, angry bitch for a while as she tried to resolve her own part in that act against a pirate who, for all his carefree attitude, more closely followed her own idea of justice than more than a few of her own higher ups. *But Smoker took it as a personal affront that he could not challenge Luffy again. He's been trying to prove himself ever since anyway he can, but in this environment, that's just going to get him killed.*

The smoke and haze of the ongoing fire from her own vessel was creating made peering through somewhat difficult, yet she could see a different type of smoke rolling around where two ships had crashed together, one marine, one pirate vessel. Lighter in color, that smoke was moving under its own power in a way no natural smoke could. As she watched though the center of the smoke funnel was suddenly struck by something, a large heavy ball of metal covered with Busoshoku.

Out of the smoke Smoker's body was blasted backward. Luckily, instead of plunking straight down into the water, the strike had hit him at an angle, sending him skipping over the ocean to slam into one of the other marine ships. There, Smoker hastily turned into smoke again, billowing up to land on the ship. Still more fire came the marine's way, slamming into several ships all around, as the owner of that heavy weapon landed on the ship and instantly began to smash marines aside as if they were nothing.

Hina recognized him, one of the lesser-known captains from Whitebeard's crew. That wasn't to say though, that he was a nobody. He was a New World veteran and a member of the world's strongest crew after all.

"Stone Mace Stephenson, user of Busoshoku, no Geppo or other techniques known but known for prodigious leaps and use of Sky Island technology in his boots, much like Speed Jiru. Hina understands. That must be why he rammed his ship into Smoker's to begin with."

She smirked a little seeing young Tashigi leading a charge of marines onto the pirate vessel. Deciding that part of the battle probably wouldn't go the way Stephenson hoped it would unless he could finish off Smoker quickly and get back to the rest of his crew, she nodded resolutely "Not if Hina has anything to say about it. First mate, keep up the fire. Keep the range open, we don't want to be rammed like Smoker was, the pirates still have far too many troops and we won't be getting aid anytime soon."

The Sergeant looked behind them at the portion of the fleet he could see, which was in major disarray. More than a dozens of ships were listing badly while thousands of marines were

already in the water, the ships behind them too far away to engage, and too far to send out rescue boats. "Yes ma'am."

With that, Hina took to the sky, bouncing over towards where Smoker had just been slammed to the ground again, landing a bit behind the pirate and instantly going for a lock attack, which he dodged at the last minute, booming in delight. "More of you! Good. All take all of you damn Marines on for pops! For brother Ace!"

"Hina does not care if you fight for mama's apple pie. Hina is still going to take you down!" Hina barked back, lashing out with a lock technique against the incoming blow, but already ducking underneath and knowing that it would do nothing, lashing out towards the pirate's legs.

And nearby Smoker was getting up. "Let us see if you can back up your boasting!"

OOOOOOO

While Aokiji and Kizaru were locked in bitter combat elsewhere and almost all of the other vice admirals were equally engaged, a few of the marine's strongest fighters had yet to engage. Two of them were on Hancock's ship with orders to watch her, and her ship had yet to even leave the Tarai Current at this point. Tsuru also had yet to reach the front line. Indeed, her ship was not even moving towards the main conflict, but rather away, moving through the marine vessels waiting their turn to become involved, unable to range on the enemy through their fellows.

How they were doing this against the Tarai Current, which was currently set to take them solely toward Impel down? Why, by dint of a trio of officers who could use Geppo pulling or pushing them along by ropes. It wasn't fast, and none of these officers understood why they were doing it, as Tsuru hadn't bothered to explain yet.

One, a particular, pink-haired youth actually had the gumption to ask why, calling out from where he was pushing at the back of the ship, his legs working overtime below. "Admiral Tsuru, why are we going against the current like this?! We're, we're just all going to tire ourselves out at this rate!"

"Staff Sergeant Coby, if I wanted your opinion, I would ask for it. Now shut up and keep pushing. I've called back, thankfully, long-range coms are still working. The locks at Marineford and Enies Lobby should respond..." Tsuru broke off, grunting in approval as the Tarai Current suddenly stopped. The manmade current was still there, but at low ebb, making it much easier to work against the flow. "There, you see. Now keep working, or else you'll all spend time on my cloth's rack. And don't think you'd be exempt, Brannew."

Shivering Coby, Helmeppo and Brannew, a commodore whose specialty with organization had kept him from the field, all bent their backs, pushing or pulling the ship along.

As they did, Tsuru raised the spyglass looking once more toward where the Moby Dick still stood, seeing how Sengoku's ship had just been smashed into pieces, shaking her head.

A loud 'FZZCRK!' echoed across the waves, and shifting her attention quickly, she saw another marine vessel cored through the side, along with one directly behind it. Both were going down, the impact of whatever superfast attack that was having hammered both ships so much they looked like Kizaru and one of the Giant Division had somehow found a way to combine their powers. The first ship was just shattered, while the second had been cored straight through, the damage not as bad but still terminal. It was a truly horrifying weapon, able to strike at distances well beyond the range of even most Devil Fruits, and hitting with a strength few could match.

And it's coming from that blasted ship, the one from Water 7! "The Straw Hats," Tsuru murmured, shaking her head. *How much trouble are they going to make for us until they are satisfied? How did they do any of it? How did they get to Impel Down, get down to free Ace before the alarm was sounded, and blast it, turn Hancock? It's the only explanation.* "But... but if I think about it... how deep does this rabbit hole go?" she nearly whispered, even more worry rising within her.

"Ma'am?" an officer nearby asked, before ducking his head back below the gunwale as the still tall old woman flicked her walking cane out, nearly hitting him in the face.

"Keep pushing, Brannew! I want every bit of speed you can push into this ship. Break out the emergency oars!"

"Yes ma'am, but ma'am, why are we moving towards Shichibukai Hancock's ship?" Brannew asked as the rest of the ship's crew raced to obey. Soon Coby, Helmeppo and Brannew were getting help in the form of several emergency oars, five to a side manned by a large chunk of the crew.

Thankfully, that didn't take any men from the gun crews. On a ship, a large segment of the crew was kept busy on the main deck or in the rigging. With no wind and fighting against the current like this, that wasn't necessary, and this ship didn't have any guns on the main deck, a marine policy.

Brannew gasped in relief as he no longer had to push the ship forward as much. An older man, he had been up for rear admiral at one point, but had been kept as a commodore since his organization skills were amazing. As such, his combat skills had somewhat atrophied. Even so, he knew this move was taking at least himself and two other capable fighters away from the fight. *Well, I wouldn't call the kids capable, but they are decent for their age, and if Garp shows up, they might be able to talk him down.*

But instead of a direct answer, Tsuru gave Brannew a roundabout one.

"I thought I was putting a questionable quantity to watch one who might prove a liability. But now, I am afraid that both are of dubious loyalties," she said, shaking her head slightly before looking over at a communications officer. "Get me the captains of the ships closest to the Kuja's vessel. They are to surround and box in Hancock's vessel. We must remove the cancer within our formation. And order the crew of our ship and those vessels to issue knives to every sailor. They are to cut themselves a little bit. The pain should keep them from becoming enamored with that bitch."

Even as the officer paled but began to relay her orders, Tsuru took a moment to turn her spyglass back to the battle, such as she could see. Thanks to the nature of the horizon, most of the battle was by this point actually out of sight already, but she could already tell the battle was probably lost on the flanks. We don't have enough coal or steam powered vessels! The pirates are hammering the Calm Belt portions of our lines, and even the beasts were quieted by the Haoshoku clash earlier. *Worse, thanks to Sengoku's orders, most of our commodores and above, even a lot of our captains went forward via Geppo to engage the Whitebeard Pirates.*

But Hancock hasn't moved from her position near the port side flank of our original formation. Her ship could venture out into the Calm Belt, but she didn't. Which leaves her like a dagger thrust into the shaft portion of our formation. Rather than getting away, she might be waiting to do as much damage as she can before leaving.

Tsuru glanced down to the Den Den Mushi in her hand. Connected to the local Mushi, she once more tried to raise Strawberry, barking his name into the pickup. "Strawberry, Strawberry, damn it respond!"

Like the first time she tried there was no answer. They weren't close enough yet to punch through the rest of the signals going around, just like when she had tried to signal Gion. *FUCK. I will have to hope that the surprises Sengoku thought up after that meeting broke up will work. I need to silence Hancock, or convince her to do her duty as a Shichibukai or her people will suffer the consequences. And I need to make certain that Vivi keeps the course too, or is removed if she does not...*

OOOOOOO

On Hancock's ship, Vivi was still dealing with what she had been told barely an hour before as the fleet was still traveling along the Tarai Current.

Flashback:

Vivi sighed, staring down at her stomach in some annoyance. *Honestly, there's going to be a battle soon, and you decide now is a good time to inform me that I need to go to the bathroom, not in the near hour and a half we've had since coming aboard? Mutiny, mutiny I say.* Shaking her head, she looked over at the two admirals, then stood up from where they had been sitting on a set of prepared chairs on the main deck. None of them had been allowed

down into the ship itself, something she had thought amusing, but the marines simply took at face value.

Lance looked up at her, asking, "Where are you going princess? We're barely thirty minutes away from being within sight of Impel Down."

"I find it quite odd that all of you Marines keep on calling me Princess, when you demanded that I join you for this war as a simple combatant," Vivi remarked, shaking her head. "As to where I am going to powder my nose."

The marine officer looked confused, staring down at her with his head cocked to the side. "It looks fine to me."

His fellow shook his head from side to side with a groan. "Strawberry, haven't you been around a woman before? When they say that, it means they actually need to go to the head of the ship. I'm afraid, you will probably need to formally ask one of the Amazons if they'll allow you downstairs, princess. And I'm sorry for any embarrassment."

Strawberry blinked at that, and Vivi shook her head, somewhat amused that the somewhat lugubrious looking marine hadn't understood that colloquialism. Thankfully, the Amazons had no trouble understanding it, and one of them quickly agreed to direct her down into the ship and from there to the head.

She even walked with the princess, ostensibly to show her the way, but probably more to keep Vivi from wandering the interior of the ship. *Which is a good move, I have to admit. If we were not going to face a battle soon, I might indulge in my curiosity. Then again, if I had mastered the Sand Eyes Technique, I thought up a few months back I wouldn't have to roam around, but reproducing eyes through sand and actually having them work like my own is much harder than I thought. I was able to recreate whole animals far easier.*

Stepping into the head Vivi paused, staring around her. The room was magnificent, each piece of wooden furniture crafted lovingly, with numerous etchings on them. The porcelain of the toilets gleamed, looking almost new, and there was even a full mirror there, its edges lined with wood made to look like roses. There were even a few hanging baskets with some kind of moss in them, the scent coming off of the moss sweet to her nose. "Good grief! Whoever built this place certainly spared no expense. I have to say I approve."

After doing her business, Vivi rinsed her hands and exited, only to stop and stare at Hancock. The pirate empress stood in the corridor, her arms crossed over her chest as she stared at Vivi.

"Is, is there something I can do for you Hancock-san?" Vivi stammered, off balance from the sudden meeting. Hancock had remained in her quarters for the past few hours, and this was the first time Vivi had seen her since coming aboard. Off balance as she was, Vivi would admit

internally to being somewhat in awe and intimidated by the other woman. Her height, her piercing eyes, how **incredibly** good-looking she was. There was also the feeling that she was looking at a predator, all perfectly streamlined snakelike motion, but wrapped up in a human package.

“Yes. You can answer a simple question for me.” Hancock moved forward very slightly, yet still Vivi found herself leaning back into the doorway into the bathroom, panicking as the other woman’s threatened to press into her. But with the door behind her it only took another second before both the taller woman’s chest and the rest of Hancock’s body was pressed practically flush against the shorter girl, pinning her in place.

Of course, Vivi could have used her Devil Fruit she found herself mesmerized by the look in the older woman’s eyes, like a mouse in front of a snake. With that and the feel of the other woman’s body pressing began to blush, her eyes wide as she stared up at the other woman. “What, what is that then?”

“Do you still think of it?” Hancock said, before leaning down, causing Vivi’s blush to explode even more, as the older woman’s chest pressed into her own, the four mounds pressing almost flat given how close the other woman was, close enough that Vivi knew the other woman would be able to hear her heart going a mile a minute.

Vivi thought for one crazy moment this was leading up to the other woman somehow having decided to sexually coming onto her like she had read about in some of the more sordid books the maids in the palace passed around. While most of the books Vivi had gotten her hands on had most of the pages missing, sometimes a few foreplay scenes had gotten past Igaram complete enough for her to read through. And although most of those had been between a man and a woman, on both sides of this little equation, there had been a few between two women...

But Hancock simply leaned her head against the side of Vivi’s, “Do you still think of how you shared your first kiss with Monkey D. Luffy?”

At that, Vivi’s eyes widened, and her embarrassment, confused arousal and the intimidation that this woman was causing her disappeared. From Vivi’s waist came another pair of hands made out of sand, both of them ending in sharp spikes, which instantly pressed into Hancock’s stomach. “I, I don’t know what you are talking about, but I do not like the insinuation, Hancock-san. If this is...”

“He told me about it, you know,” Hancock said calmly, stroking one finger down Vivi’s face, taking her chin and turning it this way and that despite the glare of the shorter woman was sending her way as if she was examining her. “How you came out onto the balcony Luffy was sitting on, how you wanted to thank him by giving yourself to him. I must say, looking at you now, and knowing that he was able to pull away and not let you what would have been make a mistake, even though I believe you told Luffy it wouldn’t be, it actually makes me think even

better of him than I already do. Surprising, considering the great gamble I have decided on with him, and how it will affect not only me but my people.”

“...” For moment, Vivi was speechless. No one but her and Luffy had been there that night, and there had been no way anyone else could have overheard. *And Luffy would never have just up and told someone about it for no reason. Not even a member of his crew. So why...*

And then Hancock pushed away from her, moving as if to just leave Vivi to stew in her confusion. Vivi remained silent, then Hancock looked back over her shoulder, cocking an eyebrow at Vivi before walking away.

Obviously, Vivi could not leave it like that, and moved to follow the woman. They both remained silent until they came to what had to be the captain’s quarters, where a snake coiled in the middle, its head popping up as Hancock entered. Hancock moved toward it, gently stroking the snake’s head then sitting down in its coils like it was a thrown, head and tail becoming like arm rests.

Close behind her, Vivi took a moment to lock the door then instantly began, pointing a finger at the older woman, her stance almost like Hancock’s when she questions Tsuru, but without arching her back and neck, so much so, she was staring up at the deck above. “We don’t have time for games, Pirate Empress! What are you talking about? How did you meet my ca-- that is how did you meet Luffy?”

Once more a faint blush appeared on Vivi’s cheeks as she corrected herself, having been about to call Luffy her captain, an old habit she had gotten into in order to tease him while she was aboard the Resolve, particularly after he had saved her life by getting her medical attention on Drum Island. “You are a Shichibukai, and I know with that Luffy hates that entire institution! Why the heck would he turn around and make whatever kind of deal you were talking about with you?”

And why would he tell you about the kiss we shared? Vivi thought, somewhat hurt by that.

“Not going to claim that he’s dead? You have that much trust in his ability to survive,” Hancock taunted.

“As I told my father at the time, I won’t believe Luffy is dead until I see his body. That man has a will that has to be seen to be believed. Now answer my question, drat it!” Vivi said, her normal mental poise gone to the point that she actually stamped her foot in a fit of pique, ignoring both her normal manners and whom she was demanding things from.

Luckily for Vivi, Hancock found this cute rather than irritating. “Good instincts. I was one of the three Shichibukai assigned to ambush the Straw Hats in the Florian Triangle. Unfortunately when we were assigned to the mission, that old bat Tsuru didn’t realize to what

extent Gecko Moria would resent my inclusion. Nor did we, despite the marine's best efforts, know precisely how strong Luffy was. Not his own skills either, but also the fact that he had acquired a Devil Fruit."

At that, Vivi's eyes widened in surprise, but Hancock went on, knowing that Vivi was right, they were running out of time. She'd had to wait for Vivi to get away from the two marines before speaking to her. If Hancock had tried to reach out to Vivi in any way, it would have been grossly out of character. At any rate, Luffy and I got to know one another during the battle. At our skill level, fighters like him and I can discover many things while trading blows. Eventually, after everything had settled down, we made a deal. One that would allow us to ally with one another."

Vivi stared, watching as Hancock, easily one of the most self-controlled, poised women Vivi had ever seen began to fiddle with her hands, a faint smile on her face and her eyes going far away for a moment. "Oh my God! The two of you started to like one another while fighting?! That is straight out of some of the books I've, er, that is... that's impossible, how could..."

The emphasis Vivi put her on the word 'like' added additional meaning to it, which Hancock easily picked up. Her faint smile widened a little, and she even began to blush as Vivi had a moment ago. "Yes, I suppose you could say that. And after talking to Robin for permission to pursue Luffy, we made a personal alliance as well as one between our crews."

"Wait, wait! Okay, why would... wait... alright... Looking back on my time aboard the Resolve, I can see Luffy and Robin getting together, I suppose." The thought caused Vivi some pain, but she hadn't been ignorant of the fact that Robin and Luffy had occasionally flirted with one another after the run in with the Hawkins Pirates and Vivi had recovered from the poison.

It hurt her a little to think, but she set that aside for now, as well as the surge of strange hope that went through her at the fact Robin had been willing to share Luffy's affections. Despite the months that had passed since Luffy had saved her country, her crush on the pirate captain who had gone to such lengths for Vivi for simple friendship's sake still existed. "But Robin's choosing to share him is a bit strange. She never even let anyone touch her coffee mug, for goodness sake."

"While it is true Robin can be a bit possessive about her coffee, Robin has no wish to be the Pirate Queen. And as such knew there would always be room for another to step into that spot, the publicly known lover. Hiding such never works out in the long-run. That is a position I am uniquely suited for, not just because of my beauty, which is unmatched in all five seas but because I am also one of the strongest women in the world and already rule over a kingdom."

"..." For a moment, the still rattled Vivi was struck dumb by how simply Hancock had stated that, as if she had just stated the desert was cold at night, and yet how arrogant it sounded despite that. Then she shook her head, getting back on track. "All right, but... Why are you bringing this up n--" Vivi's widened in sudden surmise and she broke off, changing what she

was going to say. "Wait. If Luffy is alive, then this whole thing with Ace's escape, it was all planned out, wasn't it?"

Vivi and the other so-called volunteers hadn't been told much of what was going on. Someone was breaking Ace out of Impel Down rather than attacking Marineford as the plan had been, and to the marine's chagrin had apparently succeeded in doing so. They hadn't been told anything about the perpetrators. But with what Hancock had already informed her of, and knowing Luffy's personality, Vivi had made the leap of logic to fully understand what was going on here, although how Luffy and his crew had gotten to Impel Down was still a mystery.

"That would be correct. Oh, Luffy had already decided to act against the World Government considering it had targeted his crew specifically twice in a row, once with a Buster Call on Water 7 and then again by sending three Shichibukai after him. However, Ace's capture and the knowledge that he was going to be executed changed those plans. Now, he seems to have succeeded in freeing Ace, and whatever the kind of firepower coming at him, I believe Luffy will be more than capable of standing against it long enough for them to flee."

Hancock leaned forward, looking hard at Vivi. "The problem is, once they start to do so the fact that Luffy is still alive will almost undoubtedly come to light. And thus, my own position as Shichibukai will come to an end. None of the marine flag officers are particularly stupid and they will have to realize that I had to let him escape. That at least I had planned for. But having two Marine rals and you placed aboard my ship to watch me, something I had not foreseen. Nor had I foreseen meeting you like this either. I feel like I know you from the amount of stories I heard about you from Luffy, Robin and the other Straw Hats in our time together. I have many questions, and yet, at present, there is only one important point that we must discuss. Where do you stand?"

For one wild moment, Vivi thought that Hancock was wondering where she would stand in relation to Luffy and his relationship with Robin and Hancock. Like Hancock had asked to shock her before, Vivi did still remember the kiss they shared, and her memories of Luffy and the rest of the Straw Hats were among her most treasured. She also couldn't stop herself from thinking about what it would be like to kiss Hancock or even Robin, although not to the extent that Hancock had invaded her mind given the manner that she had confronted Vivi before.

Then the reality of what Hancock was really asking dawned on her, and Vivi snorted. That was a far easier calculation in her mind. "I was once part of the Straw Hat Crew. How is that even a question?"

Hancock cocked a wintry eyebrow. "Because you are a princess. Moreover, your actions will have tremendous repercussions for your people. I know that even after being confronted with my personal reasons for wanting to create an alliance between our crews I struggled with that. But my folk interact with the rest of the world mostly via piracy. Only the World Government can really be a threat to us given our island's location. Alabasta is not so protected nor isolated."

“And what is the long-term plan?” Vivi nearly demanded.

When told, Vivi paused a moment, then nodded. “Remaining as we are safe and secure, but ignorant of the true evils of the world, serving at the beck and call of the World Government. After all, once they use me like this once, what is to stop them from changing their agreement with me further? Or asking a friend to fly his flag over my island. That is an easy choice.”

Vivi shook her head. “Honestly, after being told about how I was forcefully conscripted into the marines for this whole anti-Whitebeard war, my people will not care about our continuing to be part of the World Government. It isn’t like just because we aren’t part of them that our trade will dry up. We’re on the Grand Line, and two of the five ways through it cross at Alabasta for goodness sake. And our military is actually quite strong right now. We had to do something for all the revolutionaries, after all.”

Hancock stared at her thoughtfully, then slowly nodded. “So long as you are not making this decision lightly.”

“No. I’m not. I will admit, a part of me is ecstatic to make that decision. But I would not come to it if I lacked even an iota of the faith I feel for Luffy or if I anticipated that my people would suffer overmuch for this. If he now has a Devil Fruit, with the strength he has already shown, I have no issue with making this decision. Even my father might not have much of a problem with it, considering how much he loathes the Tenryubito. The marines might keep the peace, but it also bows and scrapes to every whim the Tenryubito demand, and their idea of justice is based far too much on who has the biggest guns for either of us.”

“Do not speak of those, those bowled bastards to me,” Hancock growled, shaking her head. Then she faintly smiled. “Still, I find it amusing to know that someone else has decided to join our little alliance simply for hatred towards them. It was a telling point with me as well. But you must return to the bridge now. Be ready to act when we need to.”

End flashback

Now, as they heard reports about the Whitebeard Pirates and the battle going on over the horizon from their current position, Vivi glanced at the two admirals. The two of them were pacing the deck from prow to aft, growling every time they reached the prow where two large sea snakes swam. They had accompanied the ship to this point, but hadn’t been hooked to it, as the Kuja ship, like all the other ships in the marine fleet, had been using the Tarai Current.

Now though, that very current was acting like a trap, funneling the marine vessels which couldn’t move under their own power into the Calm Belt forward into the carnage at the front of the battle. More than eight ships had already been lost simply because they had struck already sinking boats. Thus, the choice for most of the marines was to just drop anchor. Which

left them as sitting ducks. Which didn't even mention that most of the officers at commodore level or above had already moved forward.

The sea snakes gave the Kuja ship the maneuverability to get out of the Tarai Current, yet the two marines quickly became annoyed at how long it was taking to hook the snakes up. One of them in particular seemed skittish, unwilling to move into the harness after the blast of Haoshoku in the distance. This wasn't helped by the fact many of the Kuja had succumbed to the backwash of Sengoku and Whitebeard's Haoshoku Clash. There were only three Kuja working on coaxing the recalcitrant snake into position, and that didn't seem enough, not with Hancock staring towards the battle, scowling in anger.

"Dammit, what is taking so long! Get those snakes hitched!" Lance bellowed. The middle-aged man paced around, his high forehead showing bulging veins easily even if his eyes were hidden behind a pair of sunglasses. His scowl twisted the fu Manchu mustache he had, making it seem somehow more ferocious.

All of the nearby Amazons gave Lance glares, and Hancock turned away from where she had been talking quietly to her sisters, all three of them looking towards the battle. Now she marched over, the scowl on her face deepening as she pointed at the man, her eyes cold and no arrogant theatrics showing at present. "You do not give orders on my ship marine! The last snake will be hitched in a moment. And you forget the sheer size of this battle. It will not be over quickly, nor will one force overcome the other. The Whitebeard Pirates lack the numbers for that, especially with your fellows already in among their ships."

Both marine admirals grimaced at that, but understood the points Hancock was making. While a lot of the fighting near Whitebeard was up close and personal, the rest of the battle was occurring either in the sky or at cannon range. And at cannon range, if one side or the other couldn't introduce Devil Fruit powers or something similar, battles could last for hours. Normally that would be while fleets worked to use the weather gage to maneuver around one another. Even single ships would work to move around each other in a dance of death and carnage at times, especially if one ship greatly out massed his opponent.

That would still be true even with all of the superpowered individuals on both sides. In a battle like this since to a large extent the Whitebeard's division commanders and other strong fighters were basically nullifying the commodores, cyborgs and vice admirals. That didn't even take into consideration how vulnerable a lot of the Devil Fruit users on both sides would be in this battlefield. And unlike the Whitebeard pirates, the marines didn't have any friendly Fishmen to save them if they fell in.

By this point, Hancock could tell via Kenbunshoku that the fight had basically broken down into seven segments.

There was also the conflict between Ace and Aokiji, but that was outside her range. Hancock only knew about it from the last report that had been shared throughout the fleet.

before the Den Den Mushi escargatoire had become inundated with shouts for help, reports from various ships, and simply shouting from the at-times junior officers left in control of the marine vessels.

"I, I apologize for my tone," Lance said, trying hard not to lose himself to Hancock's eyes or her general beauty, but that was extremely tough. "B, but our people are dying out there." He gesture to his Den Den Mushi, which even now was shrieking and shouting as it picked up random people's coms from the front.

Hancock simply nodded in answer to the apology then turned away to join the efforts by the snake. As she did, Hancock's eyes flicked over to Vivi. The princess was already maneuvering herself behind both of the marines as they watched Hancock anxiously. Given vice admirals were extremely capable fighters, it was best to take them out as fast as possible, before they could start to use the Busoshoku that, as vice admirals, they had to know. Kenbunshoku was also supposedly a requirement, but Hancock knew that in fact many vice admirals only had a rudimentary understanding of that type of Haki.

But before Vivi could do anything, a shout came from on high.

"Hebihime-sama! A marine ship is moving through their formation towards us towed by several officers. It is flying the paper flag of Tsuru's personal ensign," Marguerite shouted from the crow's nest.

In response, Hancock froze for a second, then turned back to the two marine officers, smiling winsomely. "Lance, Strawberry, could you to do me a favor?" The pout she added was positively illegal, Vivi reflected, ducking around the mainmast for a moment as Lance completely lost control of himself, shouting out, "Yes, anything for you!"

Even Strawberry actually stumbled a bit such was the impact of Hancock's looks at that moment. He grimaced his teeth then as he felt his eyes starting to turn into hearts, as his fellow marine cut himself on his hand with a small ring he wore on one finger, the setting of it sharp to the touch. This let him control himself enough to look away, and he lashed out with a slap to Lance's head. "Damn it, snap out of it!"

But Hancock was willing to settle for just one. "Mero Mero Beam!" She brought her hands together quickly, lashing out with her Devil Fruit attack towards the marines. The one who had looked away was able to survive, but the first one, didn't. Even with the slap from the other admiral having sent his head forward with the power of it, he was still caught by Hancock's beauty and thus the Mero Mero turned him into stone.

"Traitor! I should have known never to trust pirates!" Strawberry hissed; his verbal hiss accompanied by the noise of his sword as it slid out of the scabbard.

A second later, the marine animal crossed the intervening distance, but his sword was smacked to the side by Hancock's hand glowing with Busoshoku, her other hand coming up in a punch to his chest that smashed the wind out of him, the man too slow with his own armor technique to respond. His only return blow however did have armor technique, and would possibly have taken Hancock's head off if she hadn't instead dodged underneath it, as both of her sisters turned into their Zoan forms and charged forwards.

"Yes, perhaps you should have," Sandersonia taunted, as she and Marigold pushed the marine admiral back in the way from Hancock for a second before he took to the air, bouncing around them.

As they did, Hancock moved over to the wheel, picking up a hidden communication snail there, barking a command into it. "Gunners, open fire on any marine vessel you can. Franky, time to roll out your little toy."

A chorus of yes ma'am's responded, before Franky's voice overrode them even as the cannons along the ship's sides, two banks of twenty, opened up on the nearest marine vessels. All of the Amazon shooters had time to range in on their targets before this, and nearly every shot hit above or directly on the water line.

Caught completely flat-footed, one somewhat ahead and to the port of the Kuja ship had its entire aft raked by the fire, which was highly accurate. Another ship took significant hits through its own gun deck. Two shots even smashed cannons there, and the splinters and shrapnel of the hits reaped a horrific toll among marines who had been standing at combat stations but hadn't been ready to take fire just then. A third ship took hits to their prows, but weren't significantly damaged. They couldn't range on the Kuja and vice versa very well until one or the other turned on its anchor wheel.

The marine vessel hit from behind began to sink on the port side, while on the starboard side of the ship, two more marine vessels had their sides raked by the cannon fire of the Amazons. Neither was in danger of sinking anytime soon, rather they had probably lost at least half or more of their own broadside on the side of the ship facing the Shichibukai's vessel. As an opening shot, it was devastating, as both ships would not be able to bring their own heavier weight of fire to bear even when the Inglorious Perfume moved through them out into the Calm Belt.

That was the name given to the ship after Franky had rebuilt portions of it once he, Hancock and her crew reached Amazon Lily. And while he hadn't been happy to keep himself hidden in a single small room in the main cargo area of the ship, Franky hadn't been about to let even someone as super as Hancock leave him behind.

Which was why a voice shouted out through the communication snail a bare instant after Hancock had finished speaking into it, overriding the acknowledging shouts from the Kuja

in charge of the gun decks. “Oy, Oy! There’s nothing little about my suuuuper toy! You’ll see in a second, snake sister.”

While this was going on, Strawberry was pressing both of the Zoan users back. While they were strong and powerful, and both had a bit of knowledge about Kenbunshoku, they were no match for him. Even as he did this though, the marine admiral shouted at Vivi. “Princess, don’t just stand there, help!”

“You’re quite right, I should help.” The calmness of the young woman’s voice took Strawberry back, and he was able to briefly turn his head away from fighting the two snake sisters to stare in her direction. Instead of cowering as he had thought, or possibly instead of being turned into stone (he wasn’t the type to care, but Strawberry had seen the glances Vivi had been sending Hancock’s way before the Shichibukai had gone down to her quarters), she was standing there calmly from next to his frozen companion.

Now as he watched, she leapt into the air, lashing out with a kick towards one of the marine vessels, which had begun to fire on them. Tsuru’s had gathered to confront Hancock’s betrayal. “Sables!” A series of long thin blade-like formations of sand appeared, lashing out at crazy speeds towards the incoming ship.

Once struck, the sand-based assault shattered the side of the ship it hit as if a giant blade had just slammed into it. It couldn’t cut through at this range, instead the damage more closely resembled a blunt object. It still did a lot of damage, and marines died as the side of their ship was ship shattered in places, sending bits of wood and shrapnel throughout the gun decks on two floors and across the main deck.

The other attack was entirely blocked. A wet rag of some kind was flung forward, enlarging instantly as it left Tsuru’s hand and turning into Busoshoku. The wet cloth intercepted and negated the second of Vivi’s attacks, and then Tsuru’s ship twisted around, pulled by the Tarai Current in one direction having dropped the aft anchor. This brought their own broadsides to bear as the battered marine vessels tried to do the same.

“Coby and Helmeppo, you two are in charge here. Only close to board, if it looks like the Kuja will get away out into the Calm Belt. Otherwise keep your distance,” Tsuru ordered, before grumbling under her breath, “Whippersnappers like you probably are more susceptible than most men to Hancock’s so-called charms anyway.”

Before Coby (Helmeppo had already proven to have no defense against Hancock and knew it) could protest, Tsuru leapt into the air, bouncing forward, her hands outstretched to either side.

Even as they and the marine vessels began to exchange rolling broadsides, Tsuru alighted on the aft end of the Amazon ship, reaching up to grab the sword of an Amazon there who had responded but to her arrival by attacking her. Sword and Amazon alike changed into a towel-like

substance, flopping to the ground and shrieking, showing that despite being transformed into so much flannel, she was still alive. "What the heck! What happened!?"

"So, you have betrayed us after all. You cannot believe that you will get away with this, Hancock. You're not going to escape here, and the horror that you will bring down on your people for this..." Tsuru shook her head sadly. While hating Hancock for this betrayal, she knew the Kuja would suffer horrifically. "Even if the marines were willing to try, without your Shichibukai status there will be no stopping the Tenryubito from praying on your people as they did in the past. I will give you one chance to recant..."

She dodged to the side as a Love-Love Beam passed through where she had been standing, then sighed and took the other one heading her way, smirking slightly. If you didn't feel any attraction towards Hancock, the beams didn't do much in their base form. "I suppose that's my answer."

The old woman charged forwards, remarkably spry for someone her age. One arm also was covered in Busoshoku. The rest of her body didn't, allowing Tsuru to use her Devil Fruit powers through it. While paramercia type fruits that altered the body could be used in conjunction with Busoshoku, beam-type users couldn't direct their beams outward through body parts covered in the technique.

Before Tsuru could attack Hancock, Vivi landed between them, lashing out with a sand fist. Tsuru sensed her coming, and the sand was battered aside, changed into several dozen tiny sheets as it touched Tsuru's hand. These Tsuru grabbed and which she whipped around, creating a strange, fabric-like sword, which quickly hardened via Busoshoku.

Knowing how badly she was outclassed in terms of Haki, Vivi had already turned to sand herself. The blow passed through her sand sculpture, her persona having retreated elsewhere.

But there was a limit to how large a portion of Vivi's sand creations Tsuru could take over with her Wash-Wash power. Sand was not a real solid except at the extremely small level unless Vivi willed it to be, and the moment the, well Vivi felt it could only be called the Wash Effect, began, she cut her control of the sand it was impacting, causing the sand between her control and that of Tsuru to turn back into regular sand, landing in a clump at the old woman's feet. A second later as Tsuru was dodging around more attacks from Hancock and Vivi, Vivi reconnected with that portion of sand via a long thin line of sand particles, changing it into a fist. This hammered up into Tsuru faster than she could dodge.

Tsuru grunted on the impact, but showed that even if she didn't use Busoshoku, she was quite durable. The hit simply took her up into the air where she flipped, bounced around with Geppo, then zoomed forward with Soru closing with Vivi.

Once more Vivi had already turned into sand, this time a vast amount of it covering more than half of the main deck. While Tsuru didn't land on it, dozens of hands formed from

the sand, lashing up towards Tsuru. Tsuru dodged, shattered or transformed each hand as they came near her. At one point the power of the two Devil Fruits battled it out for control of a large fist and it's attached sandy tentacle, but Tsuru's will easily pushed Vivi back to the point she once more had to pull her will away, letting Tsuru transform the whole length into a portion of wet cloth around seven feet in length, which flopped half-on, half hanging off the side of the ship.

"And you too, Nefertari Vivi. What possible reason could you have for turning on us? You know what will happen to your island. Alabasta will lose its nation status, your father will become a 'guest' of the Tenryubito, and-- "

"Yes, you and every other marine officer have been very careful about stressing how necessary my fighting for you was, how important it was to show willingness to work with you, how any action I took would affect those I love badly. Your problem is," Vivi interrupted the old woman, appearing out of a swirl of sand behind the taller woman, thrusting her hand out into her back.

Tsuru was already turning, and Vivi quickly transformed into her sand form, disappearing into a cloud of sand and retreating back to the deck. There, sand continued to spread, incidentally helping to put out a fire that Strawberry had started to gain some distance from Sandersonia and Marigold.

A mouth formed out of the sand to continue speaking, as Vivi created multiple clones around Tsuru. Tsuru began to shatter even as Vivi spoke, showing that getting close to the old woman, slowed with age or not, was a bad idea. "That you never established what the carrot could be along with the stick. You assumed that the stick was enough. The problem there is that if you don't offer a carrot, any beast will know that just avoiding the stick becomes a reward in itself, rather than you simply withholding it."

"And so you side with Hancock? Why? Do you think Whitebeard will let you fly his flag over your country?" Tsuru probed, still wondering how deep Hancock's betrayal went, and what the bitch's overall plan was. "You expect to impress that old fool with this show of betrayal?"

At that, Vivi actually formed into her full physical flesh and blood body again, although separated from Tsuru by several dozen conjured up creations, lions tigers and scorpions made out of sand all prepared to attack Tsuru.

Around the six combatants, the Amazon crew had quickly made themselves scarce, leaving the battle on the main deck to the Boa sisters. Sandersonia and Marigold were fighting Strawberry, while Hancock had turned her attention to two Pacifistas coming their way. They had apparently diverted their attention towards this small battle in the flank of the portion of the marine formation that had yet to engage, and Hancock had already taken to the air, rushing towards them, wishing to keep them away from the ship.

Beyond them, several other marine ships were trying to clear their guns away to range on the Inglorious Perfume, while Tsuru's own ship fired into the pirate vessel.

The ship shook as both port and starboard fired as one, sending one of the marine ships firing on it reeling. Tsuru's own vessel took some hits, but Coby and Helmeppo defended the other marines on the main deck by destroying the cannons that would have hit there. The gun deck on the other hand took several strikes, causing Tsuru to shout out, "You idiots, protect the whole ship! You can use Geppo can't you!?"

Hearing their superior officer despite the background noise of the battle between the Kuja and the marines, Coby and Helmeppo both stared at one another, then over at Commodore Brannew, who groaned, and pushed himself to his feet, his green hair still matted to his head with sweat. "Do it. I don't think my legs could let me hop even once, let alone multiple times. I can protect the rigging and the deck."

The two younger men nodded, and grabbing ropes, hopped over the side, waiting for the next salvo from the enemy ship.

Vivi's laugh brought Tsuru's attention back to her, and she stared at the young woman threw her head back and laughed gaily, like a woman who'd just been told the funniest joke she'd ever heard. Or, perhaps a girl with a crush that had heretofore gone unrequited being shown a chance to move forward. "Whitebeard? You think I am doing this to gain his protection? You think I would trust him? No. There is only one man whose flag I would allow to fly over my country. The man who will be Pirate King, my Captain, Monkey D. Luffy!"

"... Foolish girl!" Tsuru grumbled, even as she charged forward, smashing or turning the sand creations into limp rags as she went. *So it is the worst option after all. Curse you, Hancock! We lost Garp's allegiance and strength for **nothing**!* "You know nothing of the real powers of the world if you think any rookie could ever be powerful enough to protect an island just with his flag!"

"And maybe you don't know all of those powers!" Vivi shot back, retreating quickly. "Maybe such powers rise as others fall."

The implication of that sentence at this time was not lost on Tsuru, and she scowled as she charged forward, trying to figure out where Vivi was keeping her consciousness within the sand that continued to spread across the ship's deck. "You are a fool if you think the marines will be the ones falling here, girl! There are powers at play, plans in place you cannot even begin to imagine."

At that point, they were interrupted.

"OW, don't listen to the old biddy. That was a suuuuper declaration, little sister!"

Franky appeared then, on top of the raising elevator, posing with his hands outstretched to one side, while behind him some kind of... glorious dakka device rested. It looked to Vivi as if multiple cannons or bombards had been fused together, some kind of loading device leading up into each while a group of four Kuja sat in the direct center of it, looking through what looked like sniper scopes coupled with sextants. Each of the barrels could move slightly in a given circle, and did so as Vivi and Tsuru stared at the thing.

"Is that what that madman's been building since he came aboard? No wonder Old Nyon was wondering where our spare cannons went," Marigold grunted, blocking a blow from Strawberry even as her sister was nearly kicked out into the ocean.

"As a Straw Hat Pirate, there's no way I can let one of our allies fight alone!" Franky shouted. "Fire!" At that, all four of the Kuja squeezed triggers like they were firing pistols, and three of the mortars aboard the strange contraption flared, sending out large superheated shot up into the air, while the fourth fired across the water at a closer target.

Superheated shot was a simple but devastating concept. A cannonball was heated to the point where it was red hot, and then fired. The shot was so hot it could cause fires in the hulls of wooden ships, and fire was easily a sailor's worst nightmare on any ship given the amount of rope, tar, and wood any ship contained. To say nothing of the fact these shots were coming down onto ships from above, just like the first salvo from Whitebeard's ships had, which had done so much damage to the marine's.

When they unerringly fell down into the rigging or on slammed into the decks of the marine ships around them, rigging and deck alike began to smoke, then burn, as the heated shot did its job.

At the same time, one of the larger barreled guns fired as well against one of the ships that was raking the Kuja ship in turn already. The hit slammed into the ship's side over the gun deck, punching through, then the cannonballs proved that gun at least was firing shells as it erupted, exploding at least fifteen feet of the ship into so much fire and kindling, taking it out of the fight instantly. "Oh, yeah! Let's hear it for condensed gunpowder baby!"

"Damn you! And of course another ghost from the past, the surviving Tom's Worker's apprentice! I should have made certain you were dead the moment that fool Spandam reminded the World government of Pluton," Tsuru growled as she used Soru to charge forward, slamming into and through several of Vivi's sand creations, making for the strange contraption, knowing that it would be more dangerous to the rest of the marine ships around her than Vivi was.

Vivi knew it too, and had a split second to attempt a new attack, her more tested ones having not seemingly slowed Tsuru down yet. One of her old weapons, a kujakki slasher that she still carried, formed out of a sand hole that she thought had missed, slicing at the back of Tsuru's knee, causing her to dodge to one side cursing. At the same moment, a sand fist

hammered into her side and rocketed her back towards the front of the ship away from the guns that even now were going off once more.

"Damn it, it looks as if I will have to deal with this upstart first," she grumbled, before looking over at the statue. "And get that fool up too." *If those two Pacifistas can keep Hancock busy, then I mean to make certain she comes back to a destroyed ship! And explaining a dead daughter to Cobra will be much better than letting her live to tell this tale.*

OOOOOOO

By the time Tsuru finally engaged Hancock and Vivi, Perona had recovered, and her ghosts had intercepted a few of the high-ranking marines coming their way. Once more, it was proven that Busoshoku, could deal with them, but that didn't stop her from cackling as several of the officers proved too slow to realize the danger. Soon several were plummeting down towards the waves below. One of them splashed down, while the others were caught by their fellows.

Meanwhile, the Everlasting Resolve made full speed ahead towards the battle. Instead of moving to breach the battle line of the Whitebeard Pirates, they backed it up, destroying several marine vessels in this part of the battle, which had continued to spread out and into the main marine force. But with no need to close, the Straw Hat's ship could play long-range killer until their missing crewmates were aboard.

Ranma could tell from here though that at that point, he might need to go back up Hancock. *Well, I might have to. She's strong enough to look after herself, and I can tell Franky's having a fun time, but I can also sense they're being pressed... but...* He smiled, breaking his thoughts off and speaking into the intercom. "Good news troops, Hancock's ship just moved into the Calm belt. They're making their way around the marine formation. Hancock's still fighting several people, I don't know who, but the Kuja are heading towards calm waters."

Robin smiled, and Nami cheered. "Woohoo, let's hear it for some actual common sense. Getting the fuck away from the fight, who would have thought?"

"I find your sarcasm disturbing," Luffy intoned, making his voice sepulchral enough that, coupled with the intercom, made him sound almost like a certain black-wearing antagonist from a place far, far away. Then he changed his tone back to normal as he continued. "Makino and Brook's ship is about to move forward to plug a line in the marine's line. One of their ships just finished sinking. Jinbei, go!"

"Excellent. I am off. However, after all this is over we will need to speak of the debt I owe you for freeing me from Impel Down. This retrieval operation I see as simply bringing your crew back together, not working towards paying that debt off." Before Ranma or any of the others could say anything, Jinbei leaped off the side of the ship, disappearing into the water below as smoothly as any dolphin.

"I still can't say I'm all that sanguine about us trusting a Fishman," Nami muttered, shaking her head from where she was at the tiller. Right now, the ship was moving from side to side, firing at any marine vessel they could with their main gun. Since the rail gun was basically a straight line type of weapon at this close (for them anyway) range, they had to wait until there was no Whitebeard ship in the way.

"I realize that, and I would be the last person to tell you to trust someone blindly, Nami-chan," Robin said, getting up from the captain's chair, reaching up idly to run a finger along the brim of the Straw Hat she wore on her head. Luffy had made no protest when he saw Robin wearing it, and so there it remained. "But Jinbei is known as the knight of the Sea for a reason. He holds honor as sacrosanct as Luffy."

She moved over to the still grumbling navigator, peering closely at her forehead, where a bruise now splattered across her skin. "You did not ask Chopper for a compress?" Currently, Chopper was outside, bringing Perona a tonic to calm her down. Although recovered from the Haoshoku clash earlier, the strain of using so many of her Negative Hollows was taking it out of her.

"Bah, I've been through your lover's toughness training bullshit. Yeah, that hurt, but it didn't do any permanent damage," Nami scoffed, waving her off.

A moment later, Laki, who had also recovered from the Haoshoku assault, fired the main gun. The familiar noise rang out, and a moment later Luffy reported, "And another bites the dust. Damn, that thing is deadly. It hits with such force the Ship just kind of folds in on itself around the strike."

"Especially with your Kenbunshoku to help me get the shot on-target, Luffy," Laki muttered. "Flipping hell, I am glad that Enel didn't have any idea he could do something like this."

Elsewhere on the main deck, Sanji and Zoro paced. They had been fending off any of the marine officers that came their way but at present, it was very clear that the Everlasting Resolve, despite coming closer to the main battle, was very much a secondary consideration. What they were doing now really was pacing. Sanji for something to do and Zoro in worry. "Come on, Makino, come through on this. Come on Brook, don't leave a fellow swordsman hanging."

Luffy appeared out of a flash of lightning, standing next to Zoro, staring in a specific location. Zoro looked at his captain, but Luffy shook his head, frowning. Someone's Kenbunshoku just started blocking mine over there so well I can barely get a feel for Makino, let alone Hancock."

And whoever that is with her. Damn it, that mind feels like I should know her. But I can't quite bring whoever it is to mind, pun intended. "Still I can feel Jinbei, and he's almost to their

position,” Luffy went on aloud, even as he frowned and continued to stare where Whitebeard was fighting. *But I wonder who the hell has so much control of defensive Kenbunshoku they can overcome my Devil’s Fruit’s natural advantage in that area?*

OOOOOOO

There was a third individual in a position of power within the fleet that had yet to do anything. This man was also in a ship well away from the center of the conflict, and unlike Kong was actually hidden inside the ship’s cargo area. There, the immensely tall, though not as tall as Whitebeard, thinly legged man waited calmly, listening to reports from several World Government officials scattered throughout the marine fleet as they informed him what was going on. He had his own communication escargatoire to those agents which actually gave him a better idea of what was going on than Kong or Sengoku had prior to their moving to engage Whitebeard but he did not want to reveal himself just yet.

After all, if he did, the consequences for the marines who saw him would be horrifying. No, best to wait until he could understand the big picture, even if he was only here because Sengoku had begged for aid. Now, nearly an hour after Whitebeard’s arrival, this man felt it was almost time to act.

Nearby, two tall men, yet still small in comparison to the man sitting down, waited alongside one of the walls. One had very strange arms, looking longer than normal with a second set of elbows. His mask looked like someone had merged a regular mask with dark streaks running down the right side, darkened lips and nose, and sunflower. The man also wore a striped red and white top hat and a cap with frills around the neckline.

His companion was even taller, but looked thinner, his own cloak more of a robe, covering his body but seeming more voluminous than filled. A bluish-gray beard was visible under his mask, which was dark red and with an angry expression painted on it. His hair was black, sticking out in every direction in strange octopus tentacles. A black tie and a white beaded necklace with a light blue bead in the middle was the only other color in his outfit.

The man in the chair with his legs splayed out in front of him had a full head of blonde hair cut short into a quite nice haircut, with a mustache and beard that were equally well-trimmed. He wore a suit that, although rumpled, was of excellent quality, and gave off an air of respectability and strength. In a way, he looked like a well-to-do financier, someone who had made his own fortune, but he was actually far, far more important and powerful than any financier or even marine officer could ever be.

His name was Shepherd Ju Peter. And he was one of the Gorosei, one of the Elders who ran the World Government. The youngest of that group, admittedly, who still routinely did the legwork such as they needed to do. But still, one of the six most powerful men in the world.

“Well, it seems as if Sengoku’s instincts were right, even if none of us even considered Shiki’s reappearance or that Whitebeard would somehow convince him to work with his fleet. That will cost lives somewhere. Perhaps the Marine Intelligence Service needs to be purged entirely, wrapped into our own, but then again, we missed it too. Where has Shiki been hiding all this time?” Shepherd murmured, before going on in a louder tone as he concentrated on the here and now, his voice calm and unhurried despite the fact hundreds were dying. “Still, while Sengoku has given out all the correct orders, I am afraid he is missing the forest for the trees.”

“Sir?” one of the World Government operatives working the Den Den Mushi asked, looking confused, while the two men in masks stood at even greater attention, if such a thing was possible. “I’m sorry, but, what do you mean? This battle is, well it’s possibly the most important thing to happen since Gold Roger’s execution.”

Shepherd smiled, somewhat pleased. While it would never do to have the public ask too many questions, having his own subordinates ask questions even at a time like this was important. *The more educated they are, the better they can serve.*

“It is very obvious that more members of the Straw Hat Pirates survived than were actually killed. That is the vessel that our operatives on Water 7 described, and it seems to be operating at almost full capacity. Indeed, even their captain might be alive...” He frowned then, looking over at the operative sitting next to the one who had asked the question. “You were given a report that said that Tsuru’s ship was moving through the fleet. Not to engage the Whitebeard Pirates, but to seemingly close with Shichibukai Boa Hancock’s vessel? And that the Shichibukai in question had not moved out into the Calm Belt yet?”

The man scrambled among a pile of notes for a few moments, then nodded quickly, saying aloud “That is odd. There doesn’t seem to be a reason for the movements. That portion of the fleet’s lost most of its officers sent forward via Geppo, but there isn’t anything going on in that sector. Er, Fleet Admiral Sengoku didn’t say anything while he could. I have to conclude that Logistics Officer Tsuru has the freedom to follow her instincts. We don’t have an officer on her ship, but we could...”

“Don’t bother. Her intuition allies with mine. Boa Hancock is a traitor,” Shepherd announced simply, causing everyone there to stiffen in shock, even the two silent sentinels in white. “I wonder how that came to be, how this Monkey D. Luffy was able to suborn her knowing how much of her people’s prosperity relies on her Shichibukai status. Regardless of how it came about, that must be what is going on here, even if we have no reports of Monkey D. Luffy’s involvement in the fighting yet. But the sight of that ship and its combat capacity is enough for now.”

For a second, Shepherd Ju Peter fell silent then he straightened his shoulders and stood with the fluid grace of a trained fighter, towering over the Mushi operators. “We can trust Tsuru to deal with that. Hancock’s Kuja are good, it’s true, but they are completely isolated, and can be surrounded from all sides, while also dealing with two vice admirals and...” Shepherd

scowled, shaking his head in annoyance, some of his certainty fading for a moment, overcome by anger. "The Nefertari heiress."

For a moment he wondered what that young woman would do if the reports of her having gotten close to and used the Straw Hats to combat Crocodile were accurate. Yet the woman was a Nefertari. *That particular royal house has always been far too devoted to their people above everything else, even the good of the rest of the world. The girl might only go through the motions but she will not turn on us. Not even for so-called friends.*

"And the rest of the overall battle is for Sengoku to orchestrate," Shepherd went on aloud as if the moment of calculation had not occurred, his voice once more calm and authoritative. "I will move to help dispatch Whitebeard." The tall blonde smiled thinly. "He and I have a score to settle."

The member of the Gorosei looked over at the two men in white even as he leaned down to pick up his weapons, a simple pistol and a claymore with a longer than average cross guard, its pommel a smooth circular metal sphere that could also be used to brain people.

"Nico Robin is a threat to world peace above and beyond anything Whitebeard or his crew might do here. CPO, here are your official orders. Kill every pirate of opportunity you can, but your primary mission is to bring me the head of the Ghost of Ohara, whatever it takes."

The two men in masks, members of the secretive espionage organization Cipher Poll 0, bowed from the waist, and headed up to the deck.

OOOOOOO

Perhaps it could be called irony, but it was the sight of Shepherd Ju Peter, a World Government official, that finally got Doflamingo Donquixote, ex-Tenryubito, moving.

Doflamingo had been stationed on the starboard side of the formation directly across from Hancock's position. But unlike her ship, which had to shift to the serpents, and had not forged through the Tarai Current as fast as many of the marine ships, his ship, *Destined Glory*, worked under coal power, letting him operate out into the Calm Belt. At first, he had simply been grinning, amused and hoping to watch a good show of whatever force the Whitebeard Pirates had sent to free Ace were corralled and then bombarded by the marine ships. After all, who didn't like a good execution, especially one with a lot of cannon fire and screaming. Even knowing Garp and Jinbei had also been freed, and would fight for Ace's life, wouldn't matter much against the weight of fire Sengoku had brought along.

Then, to his shock, he had looked up, sensing movement from the air above. Only to see a second later the rest of the Whitebeard Fleet arriving in style. Doflamingo had to give the Yonko that. *Whitebeard certainly has not lost anything when it came to how to showmanship or raw will. But seeing Whitebeard bend his back, ignore his pride to the point that he is willing to*

ask another of his own generation for aid? Doflamingo hadn't anticipated that and it was obvious Sengoku hadn't either.

Now, Doflamingo was kind of torn. On the one hand, the marines still had a major number's advantage, and they had those weird cyborg creatures who were now racing forward. Already on this flank, four of them had destroyed eight pirate ships and even killed one of Whitebeard's division commanders. Doflamingo could also see the marines had some other tricks he hadn't known about. Which said a lot for how well hidden they were, considering that Doflamingo still had a lot of connections to the World Government and the Tenryubito it served, and his own spy among the marines.

But on the other hand, the Whitebeard Pirates were fighting equally with the marine fleet, and in the distance, that enemy ship with its insane long-range fire was still taking pot shots at the marines. Two of their logia-using admirals were sidelined entirely in separate battles, and the marines had already begun to lose people dead or wounded.

When Doflamingo used that term mentally, he meant that the marines had already lost officers, specifically rear admirals and above. He didn't care about the flotsam, the lower rankers who were doing the majority of the dying on both sides thanks to the continued cannon fire. They literally didn't matter in a fight like this. *Pile enough sand on a fire you can put it out. Pile enough sand in front of a wave, and like a fool standing in the way of destiny, all you will get is nothing at all.*

Doflamingo thought about it for a few moments. Thought about just ordering his ship to turnabout, head to open ocean off to the starboard flank, just live this battle behind. *If Whitebeard and the marines tear one another apart to the point where both sides are like wounded beasts refusing to die, I might be able to move in and put them out of their misery. And then I will be in a position to claim Whitebeard's territory. Decimate the few surviving marine bases, have Vergo come out in the open, and then---*

His thoughts were interrupted by an elderly voice growling, "I've woken everyone else who was affected by that burst of conquerinG technique. Wimps and weaklinGs, the lot of them! When I was younGer, such attacks would never have put me down, G!"

Doflamingo turned away from where he was contemplating the center of the ongoing battle around Whitebeard to look at another old relic from the past, but one who had joined his crew. The man was a rather old, short and bald man, with veins practically popping out from his bald head grotesquely, made worse by his wrinkled skin and extremely squinted eye, the short beard doing nothing to improve the look. His clothing was even worse, a fashion don't that Doflamingo tried hard not to dwell on being a blue jumpsuit with a white arrow pointing upward on the chest and two lightning shapes on his shoulders. The belt with the letter "G" on the buckle was just wrong too, even if the whole 'G' thing was the man's calling card.

Still his disdain for the man's sense of fashion wasn't going to stop Doflamingo from being polite to one of the men who had been on his crew for the longest. "You have my thanks, as always, Lao G. But don't be so too hard on them, it's astonishing that Whitebeard was able to make us feel his Haoshoku from so far away. Even with my New World spyglass I can barely make him out with my Kenbunshoku, yet he and Sengoku's clash was still strong enough to bring the weaker members of our crew low."

"Work on saying either of their name without so much hatred next time if you're trying to give them a compliment, Doffy" another voice intoned, shaking his head. The speaker was a large man standing three feet taller than the already tall Doflamingo, although most of his height was his long legs. He wore a hat, which looked almost festive, showing almost golden fox tails set in a circular pattern over his brown hair. On his face, two tattoos of orange and red rectangular streaks ran down from his forehead, through his eyes and to his chin. A red cape, open shirt and red pants with gold highlights finished the image.

"Fufufu, I never bothered concealing my disdain or hate for that relic of the past age, Diamante. Between them, Garp and Whitebeard have been acting like a cork in a bottle on a lot of this world's darker elements due to the fear and awe all men feel towards them. But can you imagine how much glorious carnage will burst to cover the world once this war is over?" Doflamingo laughed throwing his arms out. "Indeed, at that point it will become a age of true pirates!"

The Shichibukai then sobered a bit a glint flicking off his sunglasses. "But I am not so foolish as to join the mass of fools challenging that precipice. Not unless the two giants that are Whitebeard and Sengoku wear one another down to the size of mere nubs. For now, I..."

Doflamingo was interrupted by a voice from on high shouting down. "Young Master! There's someone else moving to engage Whitebeard! Some extremely.... I guess he's incredibly tall, I think he's all most as tall as Whitebeard, blonde hair, heavily tanned face. I'm never seen him before among the Marines."

The voice was female and came from Baby 5, the member of his crew who most closely fill in the sniper or lookout position. She was currently up in the crow's nest, the height giving her an even better view than the one Doflamingo had used on the main deck.

But at the description she gave, Doflamingo's eyes widened behind his sunglasses, and he bounced into the air, using his strings to seem as if he was using Geppo, ascending through the sky by bouncing along on not nearly invisible wires until he settled down next to the crow's nest.

He looked askance at the weapon that Baby 5 held in one hand, shaking his head. "And where did that creaky, dirty weapon come from?"

“One of the lower rankers gave it to me before we set out from Dressrosa. He looked so disconsolate when I tried to refuse, I just couldn’t do it. He needed me to take it!” the blue-haired, rather chirpy young woman stated with smile.

Rolling his eyes at that behind his glasses, Doflamingo decided not to take umbrage at the fact that someone else was abusing Baby 5’s inability to turn away from someone who needed her help. Instead, he turned his attention to the direction she was pointing with his spyglass. At the sight that greeted his eyes, a shiver went through Doflamingo, both of fear and manic delight. “Now, now that is a vision I never thought fate would bring before my eyes! One of the Gorosei is going to war! Truly, the number of enemies Whitebeard has made over the years must be as many as stars in the sky for that to happen.”

That also rather neatly made Doflamingo’s decision for him. All thought of leaving the battle faded, and he ordered the ship forward on a heading that would take them around the main battle area, but between it and the starboard-most flank of the two formations duking it out on this side of the Tarai Current. “We will slip in among the enemy, then pounce on the lesser crews of Whitebeard’s fleet,” Doflamingo ordered his helmsman, Dellinger. “Whitebeard himself is beyond all of you even now, but any of his officers we meet is fair game.”

He was a hybrid human fighting fishman, and was about as short as Lao G, but whereas Lao G was the oldest member of Doflamingo’s crew, Dellinger was the youngest, being a teenager with shaggy shoulder-length blond hair and a face that looked almost feminine, but not quite given the sharpness of his teeth and a certain battle hungry look in his eyes currently. Like the rest of the crew, Dellinger had his own sense of fashion. Gold hoop earrings made him look more feminine, offset by a white baseball cap with horns coming out of it on his head, a mark on the center of his hat shaped like a dark fighting fish. A long sleeved shirt with a giraffe-like design on it, blue shorts, and dark purple stilettos however tipped things back to the more feminine side of things.

“Kyahahaha, that sounds like fun,” Dellinger laughed, trying to sound upbeat, but failing. Like Baby 5 and the majority of the actual people needed to make the galleon go, he had been overcome by the burst of competing Haoshoku.

Doflamingo sighed internally, once more questioning his choices to bring along a crew rather than just coming himself and damn the consequences. However, when a CPO member made that demand on behalf of the World Government, Doflamingo knew he couldn’t refuse. So he had picked out who he thought would be able to handle a battle on this scale or who were useful in ship-to-ship combat.

Gladius, the ship’s chief gunner who was down in the gun deck, Dellinger and Baby 5 fell into that category. But against someone at division commander level or higher, they might prove a liability. *But I suppose if they prove too weak to survive, that is just the way it is. I will just get new crewmen to replace them. The same obviously goes for the rest of the lower ranked weaklings.*

Their advance did not go unnoticed, of course. Many of the Whitebeard ships firing against the remnants of the marine fleet on this side of the battle saw the Shichibukai's ship coming, and turned their attention its way.

None of the fire from the enemy ships hit the ship. Doflamingo simply held out his hand, creating a nearly invisible web of sharp wire around the ship that sliced the cannonballs coming towards them into pieces and sent them in different directions, including behind and around them towards other marine vessels who were still exchanging fire with the Whitebeard Pirates.

He looked to the side of his ship towards where Blackbeard's ship was also moving.

It wasn't Blackbeard's original ship, which had been destroyed by Ace early on in the battle between Ace and Blackbeard's crew. Blackbeard only had one crewman to his name any longer after that, his helmsman Lafitte who had been away on a mission to speak to Sengoku and the other marine higher ups. This meant that he just didn't have enough crew to man a ship. Instead, the pair had ordered a small steam driven sloop built, one currently almost lost among the bigger galleys of the marine vessels around them.

But Doflamingo knew where it was, and was keeping a portion of his mind on watching what Blackbeard would do via Kenbunshoku. The other pirate was in his debt to be certain. Without Doflamingo's help, Blackbeard would have been crippled even if he had lived through the battle with Ace, which he certainly wouldn't have without Doflamingo's timely intervention.

But Blackbeard was a tricky customer. There was something incredibly duplicitous and conniving about the man, something Doflamingo acknowledged having seen such in himself. Now he watched as Blackbeard moved forward, but on a sharper angle. It looked almost as if he was trying to slip around the intervening Whitebeard ships entirely and head around the main battle zone in the center of the Tarai Current.

"I wonder what you are up to Blackbeard, fufufu? I certainly don't think you're going to fight for the World Government as a Shichibukai, like we should be, fufufu. No, you're always planning. What are you planning now? A stab in the back certainly, that's the kind of man you are. But whose back?"

Just then, the ships that had been making to block his own ship's path forward twisted around, and from them came several of Whitebeards officers, some seemed to kind of zoom through the air almost as if they had just been touched by The Golden Lion's Devil Fruit. Doflamingo and his officers watched them come, and was about to attack them when he they enter his range, when an explosion from behind his ship back in the scattered remnant of the marine battle line on this flank turned his attention that way.

Marco the Phoenix had just arrived from on high. He was only one of three division commanders who had yet to engage, and he had just set at least a dozen marine vessels on fire behind the two Shichibukai. Ships that had been previously engaged with them were now

moving forward to engage the marine vessels, which were still stuck in the current, blasting at them in turn as the starboard side of the battle turned entirely against the marines.

With that done, Marco made his way towards Doflamingo, who snarled in irritation. Of all the Devil Fruits out there, Marco's power was one of the ones that was a hard counter to his own. Doflamingo was certain that he could eventually beat the other man, but it would take a while. And worse, a fight out on the ocean like this, the advantage turned even more in Marco's direction thanks to his ability to fly. "Fuck. Full steam ahead, get us away from Marco for a bit and in among the Whitebeard ships! Then everyone can go wild, while me and Diamante handle the bird man."

OOOOOOO

Back across to the other side of the Tarai Current from the upcoming battle between string and fire, the *Everlasting Resolve* stopped moving towards the battle, and began to move towards their original port, swinging wide of any of the fighting. While waiting and still tense with having his Kenbunshoku blocked towards the center of the marine formation, Luffy tried for several minutes to break through before giving it up. But this had taken him enough time that Jinbei was nearly at the ravaged marine battle line. "Perona, now!"

"Ugh, stop it with the shouting, it's seriously not cute," Perona grumbled from the crow's nest. Even so, she did obey, and her ghosts formed a solid line, zooming up over the main battle area, then down towards a specific target.

OOOOOOO

Feeling a pressure coming his way through his Kenbunshoku to the point he could barely see anything, Whitebeard broke off from where he had been dueling with Sengoku. Hastily turning around, his bisento came up instinctively blocking a blow from a sword that practically matched his own weapon for reach. On the other end of it was someone that Whitebeard had not anticipated ever meeting again. *Now, this is interesting*, he thought, his eyes alighting with delight at this newest challenge, his earlier moment of concern subsumed by battle lust. "Gurararara! Hello, and look who it is! Shepherd! How's that scar?"

"All the better for you asking, Newgate!" Peter ground out; his eye twitching as he remembered all too well how Whitebeard himself had given Shepherd that scar when he was younger. At the time, he had been a member of the CP0 first generation, their captain, in point of fact. Over his objections at the time, they had been sent out on a mission to assassinate Whitebeard as he grew in fame and infamy, becoming the first Yonko. But as Shepherd had feared, Whitebeard had been too strong back then, at the height of his power physically speaking. They had been nearly wiped out, with only Peter and the current leader of Cipher Pol operations having survived. *That's right, I did survive and I have a lot more strength and even more tricks now.*

The two of them exchanged blows, their blows so fast and powerful they created shockwaves, their limbs only visible when their weapons at the point of contact even to Kong and Sengoku.

Quickly Shepherd realized that although he was faster in the air than Whitebeard, he could not break through the Yonko's defenses. *It is not like he can anticipate my every move, my own Kenbunshoku is more than enough to block his own, so how? Is it simply experience that lets him somehow anticipate me blind like this? Well, let us see if he can handle this!* When Sengoku pressed in again, Shepherd pulled out his pistol and fired at near point blank range.

Grimacing with the effort, Whitebeard flicked Murakumogiri up so fast it more resembled a teleportation, deflecting the bullet just in time to avoid it striking him right on the scar across his face. Instead it grazed his side, causing a surprising amount of pain, which reverted into his chest, aggravating his old wounds. *FUCK a Seastone bullet. Those things always feel like hellfire to Devil Fruit users like myself even if they just nick rather than hit. Time to get serious.*

"Gururarara! Well, isn't this amazing! So much fun when old friends get together, now, if only Garp was here, we would have the full set." Whitebeard laughed, letting none of his sudden flicker of concern show. "But then again, you idiots seem to have angered him, haven't you? I saw him fighting with that young Kizaru from on high. Pity."

With that, Whitebeard suddenly twisted, his movement so fast that even Kong and Sengoku could barely follow the blur he became, as his blade crashed into the elder's hastily raised blade. Worse was how the energy of the Quake-Quake Fruit covered his Bisento, adding still more striking power to his Busoshoku. "Rasetsu!"

The hit overwhelming Shepherd's defenses for a second, sending him flying into Sengoku, whose Kenbunshoku didn't warn him in time. Both of them were hurled backwards and down into Sengoku's ship, slamming into it and shattering the already damaged prow of the ship like so much kindling, the entire front disappearing in the strike.

As the marines aboard screamed and tried to get to the lifeboats or just clung to the wood of the ship, Whitebeard grit his teeth at a pain in his chest as he settled back down toward the deck of his flagship, his home. *Fuck getting old, and Roger for giving me this wound when he's not even around to enjoy fighting anymore. Honestly. Still, if this is going to be my last battle then I will make it one to remember. Slaying a Gorosei should just about do it.*

Ahead of him, the ship lasted just long enough for Sengoku to once more bounce up into the air thanks to Geppo, where he and Shepherd, neither of them wounded overmuch but annoyed, began to move apart. Both of them glared towards where Whitebeard had once more settled down onto the main deck of Moby Dick, his bisento back over his head to block a blow from Kong. A strike from a Quake infused Fist shattered Kong's own Busoshoku on his blade, breaking it while Kong concentrated on keeping his Busoshoku from breaking on his side where

Murakumogiri had just struck. The blow still sent him skittering over the ocean to crash into another marine vessel for a second and Whitebeard let his bloodthirsty smile dim noticeably, becoming grimmer as he stared at his two most dangerous opponents.

Despite the growing pain in his body Whitebeard continued to speak as if the previous moment of raw violence hadn't occurred, his own almost conversational tone a kind of horrid dichotomy to the screams, shouts, cannon blasts and other sounds of violence all around them. "It won't be nearly as much fun without him."

OOOOOOO

At first, when the ghosts appeared above them, the Marines on Gion's ship or the ships surrounding it didn't notice. Most of them were either locked in hand-to-hand combat with boarding pirates, boarding pirate ships themselves, or at longer-range firing their cannons and pirate vessels.

So was the case with Gion's ship. There, without their Admiral, the ship had retained its distance, firing long-range shots, with Elizabeth surprisingly taking command of the time, being the best shooter there, and Skeleton Jack playing his music to bolster morale. Both of them garnered a lot of respect, especially Elizabeth, since the makeshift anti-air guns she had come up with had let the ship fend off several pirates who were using dial technology or knew some manner of flying technique. They'd even shot down a few.

But now, as the ship began to take more fire, more than one of the marines aboard the ship wondered where Ranko was.

The ship was rocked by several hard hits abeam, and Skeleton Jack was hurled against the gunwale. He hung there for a moment before pulling himself back aboard. "Gah, that was far too close!" He moved over to Elizabeth, nearly asking to see her panties for a moment but paused to whisper in her ear. The orders that had come whispered over the Den Den Mushi in his skull had been true. Jinbei the Knight of the Sea was here to pick them up.

Although inwardly surprised, the disguised former bartender did not let that show. Instead, when another series of strikes rocked the ship, 'Elizabeth' growled out, "That is it! I am getting that little bitch up and moving. The least she can do is take her bad temper out on someone worthy of it!"

The ship rocked again, and Skeleton Jack moved to join her. "I will help. If we work together, maybe we can stave off her anger for the few seconds we need to get her up on the main deck. After that, she should be able to at least tell friend from foe."

The two of them raced inside, then the ship shuddered from several more cannonballs hitting it. One was heated shot, and the crew became fighting the battle and the fire at once.

And then, the ship rocked as something exploded. A shout from one of the other hatches reached the men on deck, including the first mate. "One of the shots from the Whitebeard Pirates hit the ready locker! Fire teams to gun deck three forward! We need to put that fire out boys, or she's going to blow."

Near the prow of the ship in their quarters, Makino sighed. "I really hope that I didn't end up killing anyone in that blast. This is all leaving a bad taste in my mouth no amount of strawberry daiquiris is going to wash out."

"Yohohohoho, as you have said before, Makino-san, it is for a good cause. But I agree, once only for this sort of thing." Brook solemnly handed Zoro's swords over to the woman. Then he turned and his sword blurred, cutting through the outer hull of the ship, creating a neat hole. "With that said, our gallant steed awaits."

"Who are you calling a gallant steed," Jinbei grumbled, having heard that last line. He caught Brook, shaking his head at the sight of the skeleton man. He had been told about him, but seeing truly was believing. Nonetheless he tossed Brook over one shoulder, feeling him sag as the seawater did its work to the Devil Fruit user.

Next, Makino jumped out, as the main deck above them was hit by several more cannonballs. A loud cry of "We're taking on water, boys! Abandon ship!" came from above them.

Even though that shout threw off Makino's jump, Jinbei caught her easily. "I am afraid this isn't going to be pleasant for either of you. Makino, when you feel you have reached your limit smack my chest a few times and I will surface. Are you ready?"

Gulping in air, Makino wrapped her arms firmly about Zoro's swords, which Brook had retrieved from Gion's room the moment the woman had left the ship. Then she nodded, while Brook mumbled, "Ah, while I have many questions about why a Shichibukai is helping us and everything else, I, my body is feeling quite dead... Yohohohoho, skull joke..."

Deciding that was as good as a nod, Jinbei submerged, zooming off through the water.

OOOOOOO

Still concentrating on the familiar feel of Makino's mind, it was easy for Luffy to 'see' when she and Brook met up with Jinbei and then began to move through the ocean now being lugged around by Jinbei. Their return would be much slower, of course, since while Brook could survive being dunked underwater, he wasn't technically alive, Makino would need to breathe. That would mean frequent stops on the way back.

He reported this all to the others, and smirked as Zoro seemed to sag in relief. He'd been able to fight at his usual level, and had even gotten better at coating his swords with Busoshoku

without breaking them throughout the battle up to this point, but he had still been worried about losing Wado Ichimonji, let alone his other two blades. Wado was a symbol to Zoro, a symbol of his promise to become the strongest swordsman in the world made to his dead friend, Kuina. If anything happened to it, it would be as if he'd broken that promise, or broken faith with Kuina in some way.

For his part, Sanji also had been deeply concerned about their companions. Or at least one of them. With Sanji there were always priorities. "Bah! That overgrown ingredient better treat Makino like the precious flower she is and not push her so hard she drowns or else I'm going to fillet him."

"Okay, Sanji's descent into cannibalism aside, Jinbei and the others look good. They aren't being targeted or anything and the Whitebeard Pirates seem to be holding their own even now. Hancock's still going strong. And so is Ace." Turning around, Luffy gazed over the horizon behind, sort of, more behind and to the left by this point, the ship toward Impel Down.

As he did, he pushed his range and the information he was gathering with his Kenbunshoku to the limit. Even so, he could barely feel his grandfather's mind, let alone Kizaru. Such was the huge size of any battle on the open ocean like this. But even so, he could sense another mind joining them, and then a second later, Kizaru did something. A moment later he was gone, and Luffy knew there was only one place he could be going. To link up with the rest of the marine forces.

"Well fuck. I think we just ran out of luck guys. Kizaru must've been told about the battle, and he's on his way over." For a moment, Luffy debated trying to head him off, but realized in light form, even his Kenbunshoku couldn't pick up Kizaru at range. Still there was only one place the Yellow Monkey would be going, and that was straight to the top, to Whitebeard. *And while I've got no loyalty to the man, Ace does. And I know that Ace'd be sad if anything happened to him. Plus, introducing myself to another living legend would be kind of cool.*

"Alright guys. The ship seems, note, I said seems, I am not tempting fate here, to be out of the action for now. I'm going to go and introduce myself to Whitebeard and the other powers that be." *And solve the mystery of who has powerful enough Kenbunshoku to blanket a few leagues from my own.* "Perona, set up an overwatch. I know that you can make a solid state ghost that can hold things, send it up with a spyglass. That should hopefully let you move around what remains of the marine force on this side of the current."

"That ain't much is it at this point?" Laki asked. "And I'll be the overwatch. I wager I can go just as high with my dial skates as Perona's ghosts can move away from her. And without you here, I'm not needed in the main gun." Laki was also highly embarrassed that she had been one of the four crewmen to have been knocked out by the earlier Haoshoku clash, and even though she had helped sink several marines ships by this point, Laki still wanted to prove herself.

“Fine. And no, it isn’t much. Most of their ships on this flank have been smashed by this point, but there are still a lot of vice admirals and others in the area, including a few who feels like that Kuma bastard to my senses.” It had taken a while for that connection to occur to Ranma, but he knew it now: that the World Government had created cyborg super soldiers just like Kuma. *Freaking awesome when you read about it in a book, not so good when they might be turned your way in real life.* “So you’re going to want to be careful regardless. Still, skirting around them will let you all meet with Hancock and her ship. When you do, I’ll come and meet up with you. Hancock will be in command of the pair of ships until I return.”

“You think the World Government will just let us go?” Zoro scoffed.

“Nope. But then again, I don’t think between us Gramps, me and Whitebeard will leave them much choice,” Luffy said with a toothy snicker, feeling his grandfather moving towards the main fight, albeit way more slowly than Kizaru, who had already reached it. “I’ll see you guys later.”

With that, Ranma was gone, zipping up into the sky higher than any of them could follow in a blaze of lightning. Just as two unassuming minds, he hadn’t even noticed, broke out from the main battle zone and began to make their way towards the Everlasting Resolve...

End Chapter

Initially, I had written up a whole scene where Makino and Brook are confronted by Gion, made suspicious by ‘Ranko’s’ continued absence from the scene. But then I remembered that she was one of the vice admirals most likely to be sent forward. Her interaction with Whitey was a bit of a surprise, but I ran with it. As for the rest, Jinbei made any exit a hell of a lot easier, and with CP0 heading their way, I didn’t need to introduce Gion into that equation to make things very tough for Zoro and the rest.

Beyond that, I believe that this way of showing a massive battle is better than trying to break it up by ‘front’ so to speak, as I had to in ATP recently. So this one set the scene, the next will expand on the various battle zones, shutting some down and bringing others to the fore. The next will be the next series of fights. I don’t know if two chapters will be enough, but we will see. I would like this arc to be a max of four chapters.

Anyway, I hope you enjoyed this, and have a merry Christmas!