

One Piece: Halfway Broken

(Chapters 57-61)

Novus Peregrine

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Chapter 57: Cleaning Up

Kaya was sweating as she pulled back from her latest effort at fixing someone affected by MIQ. Another success, she was pretty sure, at least as far as success could be measured with the solution she had found. She'd need to wait for the woman she'd been working on to wake up, to be truly sure. Physically, the virus she'd worked out with the Sick-Sick Fruit had done a good job turning the horrific merger of some sort of feline and a girl-next-door sort of beauty. A local woman that had apparently disappeared after signing on with the Fated Winds for work as a maid.

Despite her best efforts, she and Chopper had quickly realized that there was no way to fully revert the victims to pure baseline human. The MIQ mutagen had somehow fused them with the animal traits at a genetic level, and there just wasn't enough of the original genetic code left to have any hope of a full reversion. Having given up quickly on that idea, Chopper had instead suggested a more radical approach that Kaya had quickly agreed might be their best option.

Specifically, that they take a cue from the studies he and Kaya had been performing of the crew's various Zoan transformations. His own Human-Human fruit and how it affected him on a genetic level was the most important in this case, as it provided raw human genome data. More importantly, Chopper and his mentor had put a fair bit of time into studying it, and their efforts had only been farther refined once he showed Kaya after joining the crew. Her own specialty meant she'd been able to start filling in some blanks on the Spiritual Energy side, things the purely science driven pair had been largely blind to. Not out of disbelief, but simple lack of expertise. Doctor Kureha had known Spirit Healers *existed*, but nothing about using it herself.

After several days of intense efforts, pulling in Luffy and some local healers as well for some additional insight, Kaya had managed to create a virus with the Sick Sick Fruit that she only just barely understood. Luffy had called it a 'knock off CRISPR,' whatever the hell that meant. What it actually *did*, was go in and selectively modify DNA. On its own, that wouldn't be enough to undo the mutations. But combined with Spirit Healing and the *utter bullshit* that was the Sick-Sick Fruits ability to make 'diseases' that could alter physical forms, they'd bludgeoned together a working fix of sorts. A partial one, at least.

They couldn't *completely* remove the spliced in animal traits from each person, but they *could* dial back the prominence of those traits to remove the negative and enhance the positive. The young woman she'd just finished on was a perfect case in point. The original, painfully crude, mutations had given the woman heavily muscled and clawed 'arms' and legs along with fangs and a warped jaw that had not done her any favors. No thumbs, poorly mutated joints, reduced intelligence with heightened aggression. It was pretty typical of the crude work the conspirator's

'doctors' and mutagen together had managed. The woman would have been in constant pain, not to mention having her lifespan dramatically shortened and her intelligence reduced to barely above that of an animal. A half-rabid animal, given the heightened aggression.

Now, after Kaya's best efforts, the feline portions of her DNA had been shifted and moved. Her arms and legs now *looked* human, even if her entire musculature had been modified to give her something like a quarter of a Zoan Fruit user's physical boosts. Her eyes were slitted, but back to their original color, and provided pretty good night sight. The biggest physical indicators overall were the fact her ears were now on top of her head, and were fluffy furry cat ears instead of human. Her hair had a bit of a furry feel to it as well, and she had a matching tail. The last one Kaya had tried to get rid of but hadn't quite succeeded. She'd at least been able to make it fully functional and useful for improved balance.

Overall, the end physical result was actually quite attractive, in an exotic way. Which, along with the advantages, Kaya hoped would be enough to help the woman come to accept and adjust to them. She wouldn't be alone in making that adjustment, as this end result was pretty typical of what she'd managed so far. The features weren't all the same, but she'd managed to reduce overall animal characteristics to around 10-15% in all cases she'd processed, of which this woman was one of the last.

Now, all that remained to be seen was how much her mind had suffered. That, unfortunately, varied a lot more from person to person. Kaya could restore their brain to a functional state, even a better state than their original most of the time. But the memories of what happened remained, and some people had been...damaged by it. In ways that she couldn't fix. Hopefully, the woman would be one of the good ones! She'd been a more recent capture, so Kaya thought there was a good chance! For now, she'd just close her eyes for a few minutes while waiting for the woman to wake.

Just...for...a...few...minutes...

She was out like a light by the time Usopp snuck in, five minutes later, to put a blanket over her with a sad smile. He knew this was important to her, but he hated how hard she was pushing herself. It wasn't like the captain was going to force them to leave before they'd seen to everyone, after all.

Luffy arched his back, reaching over his head to stretch and groaning at all the cracks that resulted. Channeling a bit of Spirit Energy to help align everything just right after abusing his body by staying far too still for far too long, he reached over a moment later with a glowing hand to do the same for Pagaya. The older man blinked and straightened in surprise, seemingly only aware just how much stiffness and ache had built up once it was gone. He pulled back from the delicate work he'd been doing on the Dial installation a moment later to stretch in a similar way to what Luffy had just done.

"My joints thank you, Captain. Also, I think we're just about done here. A few more minutes and the alignment will be perfect. Then we can lock everything down and move onto the next set."

Luffy snorted, then gestured at the sky.

“After lunch on the next set, I think. I’m sure Sanji will come yell at us if we miss it again.”

The older man blinked, then turned to look at the sky himself, his expression turning sheepish as he realized how late in the morning it was. He nodded.

“After lunch for the next set sounds good, Captain. I wouldn’t want to miss one of Sanji’s meals anyway.”

No one ever did, so that was fair. All the more so now, since he was experimenting with new recipes and ingredients from the Sky Islands. Most of it they likely wouldn’t get again for a long time, but some of the spices, at least, they would be able to store in large amounts. A few of the herbs he’d discovered, Sanji had even badgered them into making growing terrariums for. Luffy had already been making some that could duplicate the conditions of the White White Sea, as there were a number of things he wanted to take with them back to the Blue Sea for study. As such, making another set that could host a few plants that Sanji had discovered gave food some interesting properties was no major hardship.

That was particularly true when one of those properties was boosted healing, which interested Luffy, Chopper, and Kaya all three. Add in the samples of the original IQ plant, found in the form of flower seeds that had been smuggled out of Merveille, and there was more than a little easy justification of the terrariums for medical study as well. The original, untainted version of the IQ flower had some serious potential for far less horrible uses than MIQ, after all. Chopper was virtually certain it would be a powerful antidote, and Kaya thought it could be used to boost some of the more beneficial uses of her Devil Fruit.

Shaking off those random thoughts, Luffy began cleaning up and racking tools while Pagaya bent back to finish up the last fine tuning touches of the Dial array that he and the local Dial engineers had been delighted to tackle. That group working for the Crystal Suns had been in R&D heaven for years, and had fully adjusted to the idea of making absurd things work. With that in mind, when it became clear it would take Chopper and Kaya a couple of weeks to process all of those who’d been mutated, Luffy had put a challenge to those engineers. How do you make a Dial array that could create Milky Roads at Blue Sea level?

They, unlike Pagaya, had known for sure that the normal methods wouldn’t work. As Luffy had half-expected, things like Island Cloud required specific conditions to exist. Conditions that didn’t exist naturally below the White Sea. This meant that the standard Milky Road Dials wouldn’t work either, which was much more annoying. Sure, being able to generate and sail ‘up’ a Milky Road might only be *discount* flight. But it was still a sort of flight, which could be seriously useful in a lot of ways.

Not just for the *Discovery*, either. Long term trade between the Sky Islands and Alabasta wouldn’t be viable if Vivi’s fruit was *always* needed to make it work. The idea of Zeppelins was *somewhat* viable as a means to reach the White Sea, but chancy at best in the turbulence of the Grand Line. Being able to generate a Milky Road at will, though? Starting within the relative stability of a weather zone, such a Dial array would allow a ship to ascend to the White Sea mostly safely and go from there.

So he'd presented the challenge, and the engineers had been gleeful to accept. Particularly since, if they could work it out, they could cut a deal with Alabasta and Skypiea to get more directly in the loop on the trade happening between them. For a trade hub, that was tempting, particularly as getting access to metals and wood from the Blue Sea would allow them to build a viable fleet for the White Sea. A fleet larger than anything they'd ever had, even before things went downhill from Enel's actions. It was a real chance at greater prosperity than ever, and the city's planners were all for it.

The engineers were pretty sure they'd cracked the problem, too. Though the *Discovery* was going to become the testbed. Just as it was *also* going to become the testbed for some new crystalline metal hybrids that Luffy had tested to destruction and found to be exactly what he needed to farther reinforce the *Discovery's* structure, with the goal of eventually supporting flight. There was no way he was going to completely convert over to the new material without time to test it, let alone try to *fly* with it, but he was taking full advantage of the time here to coax the *Discovery* into threading some of the new material through the existing superstructure. He could keep an eye on it over time and, if it worked out as well as he thought it would, they could have Nojiko create more of it for the *Discovery* to use.

The new material needed her Fruit to make it anyway, as he and the locals had worked together on the idea of having her perfectly align the atomic matrix of the crystal so that it supported itself in a way that was distinctly unnatural. It had stressed the hell out of her fine control, causing her to break through into being able to manipulate more than just crystals, and only the locals knowledge about crystalline structures had made it possible at all. The result though? A crystallized metal harder than diamond, *without* the brittleness that diamond brought with it. If it worked the way they were almost sure it would, it would make the future *Discovery* insanely tough. It also required quite a bit of effort on Nojiko's part to make even a small amount of it, though. Which was another reason he was only weaving bits of it through the ship as reinforcement at this point.

Luffy was happy enough to take the time to improve the ship yet more, given this might be their last friendly port in quite some time. He had to admit he was getting a bit itchy to move on, though. He was more than a little concerned that they were coming up to the point where Ace might have been captured. He hoped that Ace being stronger, and Marco bringing reinforcements into the hunt for Blackbeard, would change the results. But he wanted to be somewhere to get news and make plans if it hadn't...

Robin was finding the looks of admiration she was getting, as she wandered through the city, exploring its bookstores and asking elders about its history, very surreal. Lady Nora Isabule had announced to the whole city that her crew were heroes, having defeated a vile plot and brought back trade just for good measure. Since Robin had been part of the infiltration team, she'd even been mentioned by name and unexpectedly pointed out to the public during the speech.

The result was that Robin was getting recognized...without any looks of fear or avarice. Well, not beyond a few looks of lust from quite a few men and a smaller number of women. But even there, it was honest appreciation rather than desire to conquer and keep. She couldn't

remember the last time she'd seen almost entirely positivity leveled her way by any single group, let alone an entire island. Actually, she was virtually certain she'd *never* seen that, not on this scale, at least.

Even as a child, she'd been unwanted. She didn't know why her mother had left her when she was just 2 years old, she'd never known who her father was, and her aunt had actively hated her. Just for good measure, possibly proving past lives existed and she'd kicked God's favorite puppy during one of hers, she'd gotten her Devil Fruit young. Its abilities, in one of the Blues where Devil Fruit weren't exactly common, had disturbed the islanders of Ohara. Only the archaeologists and researchers had ever treated her as one of theirs before, and that smallish group was massively different than having an entire island leveling what could only be called hero worship her way.

That hadn't even happened at Skypiea, where they'd played forceful middlemen and peacemakers for two angry groups even after freeing both from Enel. Something that led to more than a few sour feelings from both sides. Here, there was virtually none of that hesitance, even from those that might have been aligned with the defunct Merchant Houses. Most such people had been unaware of what their bosses were up to and utterly horrified when it had all come out. Meaning even those unfortunates were generally positive about her having taken part in bringing the issue to light and dealing with the monsters involved. It was frankly a little uncomfortable, in most ways.

Yet...

Never before had she been so tempting to just...stay somewhere.

If not for her growing fondness for the extremely odd crew of technically-pirates, two of whom had helped her take the largest forward step toward her dream in *years*, she might have been overcome by the new found temptation. As it was, she found her steps taking her towards somewhere other than her usual haunts. The Captain...she had some idea of how she might want to thank him in the future. If she could convince their navigator it was a good idea. Which, given Nami's roaming eyes where Robin was involved, she thought was very possible. But as for the other? What, exactly, did one get a Princess to express both apologies and thanks? Vivi sharing the journal of her ancestor with Robin had been just as important as the information Luffy had provided and the actions he'd taken on her behalf.

Hopefully, she could find something suitable. There *did* seem to be quite a lot of beauty to be found in The Crystal City. Maybe there was something that could at least capture a small portion of her gratitude...

Chapter 58: Moving On

Vivi turned the thick bangle on her wrist in bemusement once again. It was a breathtakingly beautiful piece, with an oddly practical bent. Somehow, Robin had found a miniature *log pose*, embedded in an ornate crystal bracelet. It was apparently, shockingly enough, fully functional, as well as rendered *insanely* durable by the type of crystal it was worked into. Nami had actually given

it looks of jealousy! That it had been acquired and given to her by Robin, of all people, had thrown her for a loop. As had the rather thoughtful inscription that had been written on the inside, where it would rest forever against her wrist.

So that you can always find the way home.

The gift, along with the quiet words of thanks from the older woman, had blown Vivi away. She'd still been nurturing a little bit of wariness for Robin, even knowing her history more fully, but now she found it very hard to summon up that reservation. She hadn't, until seeing the look that came with the thanks, really quite *understood* just how important Robin's dream was to her. It was something that was...beyond her life experience, she supposed. The closest thing she'd had to a dream so powerful was the desire to see Alabasta free and safe again. Yet, somehow, she was sure that even that potent desire fell far short of how much of herself Robin had invested in her dream. It was only just beginning to set in for Vivi how little else Robin had left to believe in or hope for before the crew took her in.

The gift and understanding had made for a sobering moment, overall. But also a cathartic one.

A shout from Nami brought her back into focus. Now wasn't the time for wool-gathering, it was the time for...well, actually it was really just the time to watch as Wind's Home and The Crystal City vanished. The *Discovery* was a marvel of engineering, rigged in such a way that it could be crewed by just two or three people without trouble, even when it was under sail instead of engine power. As they weren't trying to hide that engine power at the moment, it was even less necessary for anyone but Nami and the Captain to really be doing much of anything.

It was very strange for a ship this large, particularly on the Grand Line. But the simple truth was that the *Discovery* only needed a crew the size it already had so that they could run three shifts a day without strain. Vivi wasn't assigned to this shift, so she was just a spectator. Though all of the crew were up and about, given that they were not just planning to leave the island of Wind's Home, but to leave the White Sea entirely today. There was an Octo-balloon exit point, called Cloud Fall, from the island down to the Blue Sea that they would be taking soon. Wind's Home was one of the only places on the White White Sea to see enough traffic from Blue Sea ships to justify having such a service. Apparently, Skypiea had a similar operation called Cloud's End, but it was smaller and rarely used. Only really there because there had once been significantly more people 'crazy' enough to travel via the Knock Up Stream.

Idly realizing her thoughts were drifting without focus again, this time Vivi blushed when she realized where they'd instinctively settled. Captain Luffy's loose jacket, worn over a bare chest even here in the awful cold, was a very unfair outfit as far as she was concerned. He rarely closed it, only a sash that held his weapons and a pouch he used to conceal pulling things out of his 'inventory' holding it closed at the bottom. Which meant that quite often, such as now, one could see quite a lot of very nicely sculpted chest. The sort of tightly corded muscle that could feel like banded iron when you were held close, yet somehow his hugs were still very war-

Vivi actively shook *that* thought away. Again. Tearing her eyes away from Luffy, she missed the smirk on Nami's face as she tried to focus on where they were going. The ride down to the Blue Sea should be her focus right now!

“So, Miss Navigator, any idea where we're going to end up landing? I know the idea of charts and the Grand Line rarely get along with one another. Not without laughter being involved, at least. But just generally, any guess at all?”

Surprisingly, after giggling a little at his description of the quality of existing charts of the Grand Line, Nami actually nodded an affirmative.

“I have an excellent idea. Though that's mostly due to the locals of Wind's Home. While the White Sea might move and change, the White White Sea doesn't, and *they* know where they reside relative to the Blue Sea. Mostly as they've had crews that fell down to the Blue Sea eventually make their way back up via either the Knock Up Stream or some place called the High West. According to them, the presence of Wind's Home causes an odd area of sea down below called the Florian Triangle. It's notorious for odd phenomena, many of which I suspect are caused by the White Sea being dense and near-permanently present here.”

Luffy blinked, processing that. On the one hand, that was good. He'd traveled to another Sky Island in part because he didn't want to go anywhere near Water 7 or, even more importantly at the moment, Enies Lobby. With the World Government trying to pin them down as part of attempting to fix the clusterfuck still brewing around the Alabasta situation, passing so close to the Marine's Judicial Island and the fleets stationed in the area would have been the height of abject stupidity.

On the less pleasant hand, there was the fact that Gecko Moria was most likely still set up in the Florian Triangle. That was...honestly more annoying than bad. While Luffy didn't have any particular attachment to the idea of recruiting Brook, the skeletal swordsman certainly wouldn't be a bad addition to the crew. Also, Moria was a creepy fucker that Luffy would just as soon eliminate as leave floating around to do creepy shit to *relatively* innocent people.

Shrugging, Luffy decided they'd just see what fate had in store for them. It wasn't like Thriller Bark was *everywhere* in the Triangle, and Luffy wasn't going to bother looking for it. He distinctly remembered that there were apparently *other* things in the fog there that might just be actively much more dangerous, and he wasn't going to stick around to find out what had been sinking ships for ages before Moria even set up in the area.

“Well. That should be interesting then. Though I think I should probably speak to the crew on our way down. One of the more annoying Warlords makes the Triangle his stomping grounds. He's not too much of a threat, since it's really his Devil Fruit that is the issue. Since all of us with Armament should be able to no-sell his shadow stealing, he'd be one of the easier Warlords for us to deal with. Still, that's only if everyone is forewarned, and we *do* still have some relative newbies that can't use Haki yet.”

Nami blinked, then her brow furrowed. Luffy had made it a point to brief the entire crew on the major powers, and Hina had been able to update his own information quite a bit since she joined. Robin too, but to a lesser extent. Hina's previous access to the official Marine intelligence reports, as the commander of the fleet presence in an entire region of the Grand Line, was hard to beat.

"Moria. Bounty 320 million before being frozen, in possession of the Kage Kage no Mi. Which lets him both use his shadow as a weapon, and steal other's shadows. That he can then use to control corpses? Fuck, he's the super creepy one I had nightmares about after you described him. Are you sure we can't just go to another Sky Island?"

Luffy snorted.

"The only real option for that would be Merveille, unless we wanted to backtrack, and Shiki's a heck of a lot more dangerous than Moria. Worse, we *would* run into Shiki's operations, where we only *might* run into Moria's."

Nami sighed, then shrugged.

"Well, we're only about twenty-five minutes out from Cloud Fall. Better gather everyone for a quick information rehash and warning then."

Luffy nodded and moved away from the pilot house, intent on gathering everyone together...

Plunging off the edge of the White White Sea, falling straight through an artificial hole in the White Sea, only to be caught in a slow fall as not one, but *two* Octo-ballons grabbed their ship, was quite a wild ride. There had been more than one scream from their more *excitable* crew members. The highest pitch coming from Usopp, rather than any of the girls. It had, in fact, been a bit of a competition between him and Chopper for who sounded the more panicked. Kaya had merely eeped a bit, while Nami swore quietly. Kuina, Robin, and Nojiko had taken it stoically, smirked, and laughed respectively. It would, undoubtably, end up being teasing fodder for poor Usopp for quite some time.

Still, the wild part of the ride had ended fairly quickly, leaving them to simply drift. Most vessels would have been stuck simply dropping, letting the fates completely control where they landed. The *Discovery*, due to the many Dials that had been emplaced, had instead possessed the option to at least steer in the direction their log pose was pointing. Though not even Nami had much of an idea of what island it might have locked onto. The Sabaody Archipelago was likely, but hardly certain at this point, given they were coming from a Sky Island instead of along one of the traditional seven routes through Paradise.

What she *did* know was something they could all tell as they started coming into view of the Blue Sea. Wherever they landed exactly, it would be within the foggy, misty mess that was the Florian Triangle. That particular expanse of Sea was simply too large to avoid, when they had started right in the middle of it. The fact that Wind's Home *was* right in the middle of it lent a lot of credence to the idea that much of the Florian Triangle's mystery was explained by its presence directly under one of the most stable chunks of the White Sea. That fact certainly explained the

constant shadowy, gloom, and *probably* explained the fog as an effect of interaction between the White Sea and the Blue Sea environments.

Which didn't exactly explain *all* the weird shit about the Florian Triangle, which Robin was exercising her particular brand of dark humor to expand upon for a worried looking Usopp and half-shaking Chopper. Kaya was caught between amusement and disapproval as she laid a comforting hand on Chopper, lips twitching as she watched her boyfriend try to remain calm.

“Over 100 ships vanish there every year. Of course, while some vanish forever, others turn you from time to time. Missing their crews or, in at least a few cases, with ghost or *skeleton* crews being reported as steering the ships. It's said the Florian Triangle is where the undead gather to prey upon the living, and the Gecko Moria's presence is only tolerated as he *feeds the dead* his victims~! Some even say that his power isn't a Devil Fruit at all, but the foulest Necromancy, taught to him by the dead who linger in the Triangle. That Moria traded his still-beating heart to the shadows for the knowledge of how to bring back a lost love...only to be cursed into service to them lest they take her back.”

Luffy smirked, watching his two least-courageous crewmembers quail and sweat. He might not be *entirely* sanguine about some of the things that might well be hiding in the mist, particularly as he could feel a spiritual component to the heavy fog as they descended ever closer. Yet he knew that at least some, perhaps most, of the more recent ghost stories were the result of people running afoul of either Brook or Perona.

“Fire! Right below us! BRACE!”

The voice was Kuina's, his First Mate not having gotten distracted by either Robin *or* the feeling of spiritual energy in the fog. Startled, the entire crew reacted. Most were veteran enough members of the Grand Line at this point to take the First Mate's orders as the next best thing to the Word of God when she shouted like that, and they each grabbed at walls, lines, rails, or masts. Only Chopper failed to react in time, but he was still in physical contact with Kaya, who *did* react in time, gluing herself in place with a clever use of Spiritual Energy and hugging Chopper's small form to her.

It was a good thing, too. A better thing yet that Nami's own instinctive reaction to the warning had been to slam the controls for the Jet Dials wide open, slowing the ship as a *massive* set of rigging, rigging that was *on fire*, almost immediately dominated the space in front of the *Discovery*. Kuina, Zoro, and Luffy were all three fast enough to lash out with wind blades, cutting through that rigging and weakening the massive mast it was anchored to. It wasn't *quite* enough to avoid a jarring impact as the *Discovery* smashed into the weakened mast, toppling it was a shuddering *crunch*. Thankfully, the *Discovery* had slowed greatly and was *tough*, the impact ripping away wooden veneer panel, but the Lunar/Ducal steel composite armor underneath barely being scratched as their momentum sheered through the Main Mast of what Luffy belatedly realized must be the *Thriller Bark*.

As the ship listed from that mast dragging against it, the jarring forced the much-depleted Octo-balloons to release, and the *Discovery* turned nose down and plunged toward the artificial island of the Thriller Bark. Even as he braced again for what was likely going to be a *rough* landing,

pouring his Armament Haki into the ship to strengthen it farther against the coming hit, Luffy had to wonder *why the fuck everything was on fire*.

Chapter 59: You Motherfuckers Did What?

The meeting was larger than it had been the last time they met on this subject, but the mood was no less tense as Sengoku surveyed the group. Kong and Tsuru were present again, of course, but so were Admirals Kuzan and Sakazuki. Having both of those men, who thoroughly loathed each other, present in the same meeting wasn't exactly conducive to a pleasant day. For better or worse, the subject matter had shot any idea of a pleasant day in the foot anyway, so it wasn't too much of an additional loss. Or so Sengoku tried to comfort himself.

"So that's Alabasta's final word, then. They've completely closed their ports to the World Government and ejected both representatives and Marines alike until the bounty of Princess Nefertari and her companions is removed? Complete with public apology required on our part for issuing them at all?"

Tsuru nodded stiffly, not deigning to repeat herself. It was an adequate summary of her far more detailed report. It left out just how *dire* that result was, given that one of their most important supply lines in Paradise had just been firmly cut, but they were all painfully aware of that anyway. Unsurprisingly, given he was a literal as well as figurative hothead, Sakazuki was the first one to speak up, and not with a particularly welcome or useful comment.

"We can't just let those *traitors* get away with that! We should go in and remind them that--"

Kong, not Sengoku, cut him off at the knees with a raised hand and firm shake of his head.

"**No.** Not only are we already dealing with political backlash from other founding kingdoms that are now worried we'll do the same thing to *them*, but you know perfectly well what we have coming up. Alabasta is a hideously tough nut to crack, triply so now that they've somehow built up a cadre of ten Devil Fruit users. Including, of course, the Suna Suna no Mi, which would be an utter nightmare to fight in the desert. We'd need to send *both* of you, plus a sizable fleet element, just to break Alabasta's back. All for no gain at all, as we'd end up destroying the very ports we need for logistics supply in the process."

Kuzan snorted derisively at the comment, only adding fuel to his fellow Admiral's anger by adding his own two belli.

"Not to mention it would deplete our reserves even faster. We're going to have to scramble to find new supply lines as is. If we burned the resources to take Alabasta to task, all while gaining nothing but ash and sand in return, it would freeze some of our most critical projects and potentially *starve* half the Marines in Paradise. Unless, of course, we practically turned pirate ourselves and seized food from islands that can ill afford it."

It was, even Sakazuki knew, painfully true. The *vast* majority of islands in the Grand Line, even in Paradise, were hardscrabble and marginal. They didn't produce much in the way of surplus food beyond their own needs and sold what little extra that did grow to the merchants they relied on

to bring in things they couldn't make locally. As a result of that, the immense needs of the Marine fleets were supplied not from the Grand Line itself, but from the four Blues. Brought in via logistics vessels...over half of which had previously passed through Alabasta.

With that connection now firmly cut, since the World Government would never actually give into Alabasta's demands, they were going to be cutting into their reserves all across the board. Those reserves were deep when it came to basics. Food, nails, sails, that sort of thing. But they most certainly wouldn't be able to maintain their ongoing construction projects longer than a few months without a major effort in fixing their logistics. Actually fighting a serious war, one that would virtually certainly invite both the Yonko and the Revolutionary Army to strike elsewhere while it went on, would cripple even their basics in less than six months. Possible even if the *won*.

There was silence for a long few moments, before Kuzan spoke again.

"Are we sure we want to go through with the execution plan now? If we hold off, maybe trade our captive for some concessions, we could easily get our own house in order in three or four months. After which we could lean on Alabasta or resume our original plan, whichever proved more viable as a show of strength."

Sengoku was the one to give a sharp head shake to the negative this time, speaking up firmly a moment later.

"No. Eventually dealing with Alabasta will be a political clusterfuck no matter how we do it. A net loss of influence, even if we pull off a win without much actual military cost. As for resuming our current plan later? How? We've been waiting for a chance like this for the better part of two years. Whitebeard doesn't operate in Paradise often, outside of Fishman Island at least. Worse, our sources within his fleet say he's declining in a way that can't be reversed. In a year or two, at the absolute most, he'll be too weak to hold his position. He'll pass it off to either Marco or Fire-Fist, and neither of them will grant us the strong blow against the Yonko that we need to be seen making."

Tsuru's voice when she spoke made it clear she knew she was going to be shot down, but she spoke anyway.

"We could always aim for one of the others. Big Mom does a fair bit of business in Paradise."

Sakazuki snorted derisively, but it was Kong who spoke.

"She's also the weakest of the Yonko in anything but pure numbers. We could take her out, but doing so would be costly and have little affect on the overall situation. Shanks is *irritatingly* difficult to pin down, the least actively troublesome, *and* we don't want to piss off the Dark King by going after him. Rayleigh is the one person alive we are damn near certain knows what Roger found on Laugh Tale, and him shouting about it to all and sundry would be a complete disaster. Kaidou, meanwhile, is both directly allied with Linlin *and* virtually unassailable in Wano. That alliance also makes taking Linlin out doubly unadvisable, as he'd be virtually certain to retaliate."

Silence descended for a minute, before Kuzan tentatively offered one more idea.

“There *is* a way to lure Kaidou into Paradise personally, to take him out directly instead of fighting through his forces. His dau-“

Kuzan was cut off as a horrendous crash sounded from them somewhere forward of them in the Headquarters building. All five of those present were on their feet in an instant...and they each paled a moment later as a bellow reached them.

“SENGOKU, YOU ROTTEN BASTARD, WHY THE FUCK DOES MY GRANDSON HAVE A BOUNTY ON HIM. I’M GOING TO BEAT YOU WITH YOUR OWN SPLEEN UNTIL YOU COUGH UP AN ANSWER I LIKE!”

The senior officers just *barely* had enough time to process that Monkey D. Garp was back before they had to raise their respective defenses to protect themselves from the shattering wall as he burst through. Even if they wouldn’t admit it to a soul, all five of them flinched as they spotted him looking more pissed off than *any* of them had ever seen him...

King Cobra was pleased, as he watched the results of the testing. The first round of trade with Skypiea had proven fruitful. Enough so for him to bite the proverbial bullet and severe contact with the World Government until his terms were met. He’d been stringing them along, hinting that maybe he’d give in and accept something less than a full retraction, as much as a means to buy time as anything else. Admittedly, he’d expected that said ‘buying time’ would ultimately favor the World Government and require he find a less offensive, to them, concession to demand. A pardon for Vivi and her crew, rather than a full retraction and apology, for example. Not having to admit they were wrong, being able to play at being magnanimous by ‘pardoning’ the crew for ‘great services rendered,’ would have been far easier for the powers that be to choke down.

Frankly, he was pleased as punch that he wouldn’t have to accept that. He’d grown increasingly disgusted with the fools for years even before this recent series of epic fuckups proved them *incompetent* along with malicious. Now, as he watched the results of the weapons testing, the produce of giving Skypiea Dial Engineers access to more metal than they’d ever been able to *imagine* having before? He was quite certain by the time they finished reequipping his new navy, as well as training the new Devil Fruit users, that the Marines were going to have a hell of a time if they tried to come down heavy handed on Alabasta.

Triply so as he’d broken into the old archives from prior to the Void Century and dusted off some knowledge of combat systems and techniques he was pretty sure the WG had no idea Alabasta retrained. If those idiots thought that one of the founding twenty, the only one who *hadn’t* given up rule of their people to go live with fucking fishbowls over their heads, didn’t remember a few dangerous things? Well, they’d find out the hard way that Alabasta’s archives were *excellent*. He’d even found a manual for what he was fairly certain was a primitive version of the Marines ‘secret’ Rokushiki. A manual that detailed *nine* powers, not six. Even if he was pretty sure none of them were quite up to what he’d seen the Strawhat crew demonstrate.

Of course, if he wasn’t so certain he had *time*, then it might not have mattered. But Nefertari Cobra was no fool. He’d reached out to all of his contacts the moment he’d realized he was potentially getting into a pissing match with the World Government. Some of those contacts

he'd used to stir the political pot nicely. Others, though...those would have worried the WG if they'd known he had them. It was those contacts that had come through with the most critical information. The information that the World Government was *busy* planning something big, very big, involving Whitebeard. Fleet assets the entire world over were being condensed and concentrated for what was likely going to be a serious attempt at taking on the strongest man in the world.

All of which meant that, for once, the World Government just flat out didn't have enough attention to pay to a country that could prove itself a tough nut to crack. Not even one that made up a critical cog in their logistics supply chain. In six months, that might not be the case, depending on how their little war with Whitebeard went. But in six months, Cobra intended any fool attacking *his* country to discover that doing so would be the last mistake they ever made.

Cobra wasn't a violent man by nature. No more than his daughter was. But he was still a D. and, unlike most, had at least a vague understanding that there was something *off* about those that bore the initial. Enough so to carefully conceal that fact from official records. Now, the World Government had thought they could use *his daughter* in their little games. Those motherless bastards were going to have to realize, sooner or later, that there were some things you just didn't do. Somehow, he found he didn't mind the thought of being part of that reality check at all.

Smiling grimly, Cobra left the testing grounds. If he didn't get moving, he was going to be late for training. At 48, he wasn't delusional enough to think he was ever going to be a combat monster. But to hell if he wouldn't put in the effort to make him hard to assassinate. It was one of the World Government's favorite tools when force failed, after all. Besides, he needed the exercise. His new chocolatier was entirely too good at making sinfully tasty treats, and he wasn't going to give them up! Which meant burning off the calories if he didn't want to end up needing to be rolled between rooms by his servants...

Marco blinked, looking around himself at the 'ladies' that surrounded him. Then he tipped his head back to look at the massive, luridly pink giant foliage that looked, frankly, a big obscene in shape. Like it wasn't sure if it wasn't to be boobs or a giant set of testicles. Ah. Well, at least he knew where he was. Even if he wasn't sure why Kuma had sent him *here* of all places. Was the Warlord making some sort of commentary about him? Well, if he was, he was afraid the man had rather missed the mark.

"Ladies, lovely to meet you. I don't suppose I could trouble the Kamabakka Kingdom for a ship, could I? I'm a little worn out to be trying to fly across the Grand Line at the moment. Ah, and access to a Den Den Mushi would also be rather nice-yoi."

The 'ladies' around him tittered, with more than a few blushing in his general direction. The fact that he was entirely sincere and polite seemed to win him more than a few appreciative looks. A few of them were close enough to his rather broad 'type' that he might have been otherwise tempted to follow up on those blushes. As it was, he was a bit more worried about what had happened to his companions that he was interested in a tumble. Thankfully, one of the Okama proved quite willing to lead him to a Den Den Mushi, even if they informed him there weren't any

ships available at the moment. Annoying, but he could make do with flight, once he recovered a bit. Paradise wasn't *that* hard to get around in, if you were used to worse.

Well, at least he'd gotten the pleasure of ripping Bleackbeard's heart out of his chest and setting it on fire *personally*, before Kuma, Moria, and Doflamingo had intervened. Unfortunately, Marco was only certain of Moria's death before Kuma had managed to tag him. Worse, Ace had been tagged by Kuma in the opening exchange, hit before he could even register the Warlord was present and bring up his already depleted Haki. That meant that only Jozu was left, with their handful of other 1st and 2nd division crew having been ordered to retreat once it became clear Blackbeard had somehow convinced Moria to give him refuge.

That *somehow* was now quite a bit clearer, post ambush. The other two Warlords couldn't have been present for anything less than a trap. One explicitly ordered, and most likely paid handsomely for, by the World Government. That Warlords weren't exactly known for working with each other willingly, after all. No, the World Government had clearly taken advantage of the fact they were tracking Teach to use the traitor as bait, and Marco hadn't spotted it in time. He could hope that Jozu could take the remaining Warlords...but he suspected that was too much to hope. He had most likely been captured by now. Which had to be the point of this entire ambush from the Marine's perspective.

Marco needed to talk to Pops ASAP. Then, he needed to figure out if it was possible to intercept the bastards before they brought Jozu to Impel Down. Assuming that's even where they intended to stash him. Not to mention needing to figure out where Ace had ended up. Fuck, this was very not good. The Marines had obviously decided it was time to push, and that boded ill for everyone involved...

Chapter 60: Rough Landing and Impolite Greetings

There were long moments of stunned silence as everyone aboard the *Discovery* tried to process the crash and recover. Luffy, linked to the ship as he'd been, was at least aware that the damage had been pretty minimal. Nami's braking maneuver, the impact with the mast farther slowing them down, and Luffy's last-second burst of armament Haki to reinforce the hull, all meant that the ship itself barely had a scratch. That didn't mean that the sheer impact force hadn't jarred all of them, and even Luffy needed a short minute to recover from the abrupt drain on his Haki.

Thankfully, most of the fires were *elsewhere*, rather than right on top of the ship, and the only living presences Luffy had felt were radiating as much surprised confusion as his own crew was. One of those presences, a concerningly strong one, recovered even faster than Luffy did and began moving toward their ship, causing Luffy to rally his crew.

"Look alive people! Potential hostile incoming!"

Not all of his crew managed to gather themselves quickly at his barked order, but most of them did. Robin was already spreading her sensory network and he felt waves of Observation Haki spreading out from Kuina, Zoro, Kaya, and Nami. Nojiko had simply chosen to go airborne and start summoning crystals as ammunition, keeping her own Haki in close. She wasn't the best at using it when so many others around her were disrupting the natural spiritual fabric with their own Haki. It

was Robin, of course, that first got eyes on the opposition, paling and calling out a face she recognized from bounty posters.

“It’s Doflamingo!”

Luffy cursed and immediately stopped sandbagging, embracing one of his Hybrid forms for the first time outside *very carefully* hidden training. He hadn’t properly replaced his sword yet, still experimenting with new options, and this *wasn’t* the time to be dicking around with an inferior spare, which he quickly tossed in his inventory. Massive wings of lightning burst from his shoulders, even as his body sprouted fur and shifted to take on characteristics of a tiger. His Stormtiger form, revealed openly for the first time, shot upward, and the approaching flyer gave off a feeling of utter surprise before screeching to a stop. Luffy didn’t do anything of the sort in return. Instead, he summoned up the biggest burst of lightning he could form quickly and launched it at the Warlord, shouting an order as he did.

“No quarter! Nami, power the Storm Canon!”

He could *feel* his crew’s shock at the order, feel their moment of hesitation before they started moving. But he didn’t let it stop him from raining more lightning down on where his first bolt had already been outright blocked. Donquixote Doflamingo was *not* someone he was willing to fuck around with. He had only *very* limited knowledge of the man from his first life. Things he’d learned not from watching One Piece, but from hearing brief snippets from others after he’d already dropped the show. Just enough to know that he would, at some point, not only be a major threat...but also might be in possession of an Awakened Devil Fruit.

That was scary enough, but Luffy might not have simply gone for the kill if that’s all he’d known. Instead, much of what Luffy was acting on now had *nothing* to do with his past life and *everything* to do with being the Grandson of Garp. A grandfather he’d been much closer to than the original Luffy, since he hadn’t been screaming his fool head off about wanting to be King of the Pirates every five minutes. That meant Garp had told him more than a little, over the years, about various threats out there. Doflamingo was one of the very few among those threats Garp had ever lost his blasé manner when speaking of. His grandfather had been *grim* when he’d described the man as a dangerous sociopath that he’d needed to be *specifically ordered* to leave alone.

Something about the psycho sadist made the *World Government* leery of targeting him. Leery enough to use what little influence they had over Garp to firmly stand on his grandfather’s throat when it came to the Warlord. Luffy had *theories* about what that was. But it was little more than rumors and secondhand information from his first life. He wasn’t sure the series had even *gotten* to a proper explanation before he’d died. All he knew was that Garp wanted badly to kill the motherfucker, but couldn’t. That was *more* than enough for Luffy to take the gloves off. Particularly when his girlfriend had...not been pleased when she’d pointed out that he hadn’t used his Hybrid form against Enel. He’d risked defeat when there *literally hadn’t been anyone around that could report it*.

He’d reordered his priorities after what had been the closest thing he and Nami had so far had to an argument. Even so, if he’d had a reliable blade or more information on his enemy, he wouldn’t have reached for the transformation so fast. Letting things play out to see if doing so was

justifiable. As it was, lacking both his primary fighting style and almost completely uncertain what he was facing for the first time since he'd ended up in this new life, he didn't hesitate. Something which saved his life over the next several seconds as a burst of Conqueror's Haki lashed out at him. It only froze him for an instant before his own rose up and lashed back. But that instant, the first time he'd experienced this side of the King's Disposition, was long enough for a razor-sharp string to attempt to cut him in half.

His momentary freeze had kept him from forming up Armament to block, but there hadn't been any Armament in the string either, and it met the reinforced flesh of his hybrid form and lost. Not without leaving a mark, a shallow cut on Luffy's left side that made him mentally curse that his lightning form wasn't automatic, like a Logia's would be. Then, there was no more time for thought as his own Conqueror's Haki clashed with Doflamingo and the entire world seemed to freeze and the very air cracked. He could feel half his crew barely clinging to consciousness, with Chopper only pulling through because Kaya did *something* with her own Haki that wrapped a shield around him.

An instant later, he could feel his own shock echoed from the Warlord as a *third* burst of Conqueror's Haki slammed into the mix from a completely different section of Thriller Bark. The world *screamed* and Doflamingo *barely* dodged out of the way of a massive black covered arm that Luffy *recognized*. Impossibly recognized. His own shock, as much as that of Doflamingo's and the fact the newcomer didn't follow up on the attack, caused the battle to screech to a temporary pause.

All three clashing domes of Haki continued to press against each other, nearly visibly to the naked eye. No longer actively clashing, but still fully out and exposed to the world. The very mist and fog of the Florian triangle burst apart from the clash of three wills, fleeing from Thriller Bark, revealing the wrecked ruin of a ship that had clearly seen heavy combat between powerful forces. Parts were on fire, others were piles of rubble, and in still more places it was clearly taking on water. Thriller Bark was sinking, but its sheer size was making that process slow.

Luffy didn't have any attention to spare for that fact, and little to spare even for Doflamingo. Numbly, he took in the unexpected newcomer to the fight. The newcomer who had just *used an equivalent to Gear 3, complete with Armament Haki*. A technique that *would* have been developed by the original Monkey D. Luffy, if he hadn't been replaced by...well...himself. The disorientation was *real* as Luffy processed that it was a fiercely grinning *woman* that had landed on a pile of rubble and pulled back that fist. A woman he recognized. Not from having watched the show, but from the sheer amount of Fan Art that had spread regarding her in his old world.

Yamato.

Daughter, or perhaps son, of Kaidou.

She didn't *quite* match what he'd known of her. She was at least a foot shorter than he'd expected. But, if anything, even more 'stacked' up top than the art had made her out to be. Something shown off to a nearly obscene degree by the same sleeveless white top and red hakama bottom that she'd been so often drawn with. When, of course, she'd been drawn with anything at all. The purple and white nio-dasuki rope was missing, replaced with a more practical sash, and the

giant club she was supposed to wield was absent. Despite knowing his brain was whirling at lightning speed, accelerated in his Hybrid Form by his element, it felt like he was swimming through molasses as the dots connected painfully slowly.

This Butterfly knew Kung-Fu and had beat the ever-loving shit out of the timeline.

Somehow, Yamato had escaped Wano. Even more improbably, she'd then somehow encountered and *eaten* the Gomu Gomu no Mi, which Luffy himself had chosen to pass up. Just as it would have altered original Luffy's physical form to a degree, it had done the same to Yamato. Yet, unlike Luffy, she'd likely have been a minimum of sixteen when she'd eaten the Fruit. Possibly older by several years. Meaning it had shifted her *adult* body. Compressing her total height and size somewhat, while enhancing the 'bouncy' parts of her body. That last thought was *ridiculous*, but this was also a *Devil Fruit* at work here. Ridiculous was par for the course.

He only just managed to string that train of logic together before she spoke.

"Oh, this looks fun. A new player joins the attempt to kill you, Joker!"

Luffy blinked, not sure just who she was speaking too, though thankfully Doflamingo responded, his creepy-ass smile looking a little more strained than it had so far.

"Yamato, isn't it a little much to follow me all the way to Paradise?"

Yamato's grin, sharp until now, turned surprisingly joyful as her gaze snapped from the Warlord to Luffy.

"You're just a bonus! I'm here for Luffy-dono!"

Luffy was fully confused now, and wouldn't have minded admitting to it if he'd been able to get a word in edgewise. But Yamato quickly addressed him, seemingly half-ready to ignore Doflamingo, despite still having her Haki up and clashing with his. Wait, how had she even recognized...oh, a quick touch of his hand to his chest confirmed he'd lost his Hybrid transformation somewhere in the confusion. It still wasn't instinctive for him to maintain in when surprised, since he trained with it so infrequently. He was going to have to work on that. *After* figuring out what the fuck was going on.

"Ace sent me a message that you finally reached the Grand Line, and I just couldn't wait! Then he even said he met you twice, which means you had to be nearby, so I used his Virve Card to find you! I missed him, but I found you, so it was a success!"

Blinking and pointing to himself, Luffy couldn't keep the confusion out of his voice as he asked.

"You were looking for...*me*?"

Nodding sharply and making a frankly adorable 'uhm!' noise, Yamato's smile only grew wider as she enlightened him.

"Yes! Ace said you were going to be the strongest! The one that would reach all the way to Laugh Tale! Then Shanks said the same thing when I met him, so it must be true! You even have the hat still!"

Luffy was almost thankful to be saved from his gaping confusion at this *complete* derail of expectations by Doflamingo getting annoyed at being ignored.

“If he’s important to *you*, you irritating little brat, then I’ll just kill him!”

There was a flash of movement as Doflamingo twisted his fingers, glowing-red string whipping toward Luffy. Even if he was still off-balance from the situation, though, Luffy’s momentary freeze from the earlier clash of Haki was long over. His hand shifted back to that of his Hybrid form, Armament coating the claws as he easily sliced through the string. Doflamingo clearly knew Haki, likely all three forms, but Luffy’s Armament was better. So was his Observation as he easily ducked around the next two attacks, shifting fully back to his Stormtiger form even as Yamato launched herself forward toward Doflamingo.

She was *fast*, using something that looked suspiciously like Gear 2, complete with red skin, and the Warlord was forced to parry rather than dodge. He lost that exchange, sent flying straight *through* a remaining wall of what looked like some sort of Castle. He was back in an instant, strings reaching out for Yamato, only for Luffy to nearly rip him apart as he closed the distance instantly with a lightning dash and raked the man across the chest. Only a last instant pull on his strings kept the resulting slash shallow, blood bursting from it even as the man finally lost his smile entirely. His speed increased, enough so that Luffy only stayed ahead by shifting into lightning and darting around a flurry of Haki-infused attacks in the same way he’d fought Enel.

Then Yamato was there again, her own skin a full-body black sheen as she simply ignored a trio of attack that hit her, attacks that drew a bit of blood but failed to penetrate enough to matter. Doflamingo grunted, managing to get a string on her and throw her through a wall, though she popped back up with no visible damage. The opening he left to pull it off was one Luffy wasn’t going to pass up, darting in as lightning, only to shift to his hybrid form point blank. Doflamingo blocked, but Luffy’s Haki mastery was superior in this case, and another deep trio of slash marks were opened on the Warlord’s arm before Luffy pulled back to avoid the man’s retaliatory sweep of more Haki-laden strings.

A calculating glance between Luffy and Yamato seemed to come up with numbers the man didn’t like. Between one heartbeat and the next, he visibly decided this *wasn’t* a place he wanted to be and began trying to retreat. Opening space with a hail of slicing strings that was near enough to a *wall* that Yamato had to go *up* and Luffy had to drop out of lightning form to slash *through*. In the bought seconds of time and space the Warlord grabbed a distant portion of Thriller Bark with his strings and pulled himself away at high speed.

Despite Luffy’s speed advantage, the man might have succeeded in disengaging fully, gaining distance from both Luffy and Yamato with that set of moves. Except that he passed too close to the *Discovery* as he did so. Kaya, looking unusually grim, appeared from *nowhere*, right in front of him. Even Luffy faltered, having felt her just *appear* already inside his Observation in a way that shouldn’t be possible. She’d done *something* with her energy to cloak herself, and Doflamingo paid for her cleverness now as a pinpoint strike took him just below the heart. He faltered, his heart stopping for an instant, before he instinctively wrapped it in String to force it to pump again.

Yet that instant had been too long.

Yamato slammed him into the sinking deck of the Thriller Bark with a gigantic fist from up high.

Then Nami fired the Storm Cannon.

A spiraling, flashing arc of multi-color lighting reached out to touch the sky, and the clear day turned to the dark of a rolling thunderstorm in seconds. Luffy embraced his Ball Lighting form, becoming *part* of the storm as lightning began to rain down on Thriller Bark. Doflamingo had latched onto the clouds, trying to use them for flight, but all that earned him was a direct connection through his strings to the lighting Luffy had rapidly gathered to him. The man lit up from the inside out with a massive lightning strike, but even that wasn't enough to actually kill him. He lashed out in rage, parts of Thriller Bark turning to String in proof he'd at least partially awoken his Devil Fruit already.

But it wasn't enough.

Not already weakened by the disruptive burst of Haki Kaya and channeled into his spiritual pathways. Not pinned between Luffy and Yamato, unable to flee. Yamato hit him like a hammer, giant hands coated in Armament clapping him between them, crushing him, then releasing him to follow up with a giant foot that stamped him down into the sinking remains of the ship. The sea water that was now rapidly sweeping onto the ship's holed deck flowed over Doflamingo, weakening the Devil Fruit user for a farther critical moment.

Unable to use Armament. The Warlord was unable to move from a combination of pain, lighting overloaded muscles, and seawater, for just that single instant too long. Donquixote Doflamingo screamed in agony as a brutal pillar of black and red lightning, gathered in massive amounts from the storm and infused with Luffy's Haki, carved straight through his heart, leaving nothing but ash behind. The Warlord died, Luffy confirming the feel of a portion of his Devil Fruit's power being siphoned by his System. Somewhere, a Kung-Fu Butterfly cheered...and in the present a storm raged as Luffy and Yamato both made for the *Discovery*, the ship rising in the water as the Thriller Bark sank.

Now, they just needed to not get sucked into the whirlpool that was bound to follow...or drowned by the storm they'd summoned up with the Storm Cannon.

Chapter 61: Guests and Stowaways

The Storm had been a wild one, even for the Grand Line. Not at all helped by the building whirlpool, caused by the sinking of the island-sized Thriller Bark, that they'd needed to escape. If not for Nami, and if not for the incredible power of the *Discovery's* newly enhanced engines, they wouldn't have made it. Between the two, they'd pulled through, bedraggled and battered but with no serious injuries as they escaped the Florian Triangle entirely.

It was only then that they discovered that they had more than just Yamato aboard.

Well, no. Luffy and Kaya at least had been fully aware of the additional presences. But they'd both been a bit busy helping keep the ship afloat, *and* disinclined to throw non-hostile people overboard into a raging storm. Besides, the reaction of Chopper as he finally processed the *living skeleton* that had handed him a Sanji-crafted hot cocoa was priceless.

“Aaaahhhh, skeleton! Zombie! Ghost! Kaya, the Grim Reaper has come for my soul and I’m not ready to go yet!”

Sanji passed a blinking Hina a cigarette, the pinkette taking it and the light that followed absent-mindedly as she too stared in confusion at the latest weirdness that the Grand Line had dumped on this oddest of crews. Said weirdness being a Skeleton with an Afro who was currently grandly bowing to Luffy.

“Ah! Captain! My apologies for coming aboard unannounced. It was really quite rude of me! But the young lady had showed me her panties, even if not on purpose, and I couldn’t just let her drown after that kindness!”

The ‘young lady’ in question was, unmistakably to Luffy, a bedraggled, battered and bruised Perona. Her clothing was in tatters, her panties peaking out through the shredded remains of her skirt. There were numerous cuts littering her body, though none that looked particularly lethal. It looked more like shrapnel had gotten her, as collateral to a larger fight, that someone taking her out directly. Part of the reason Chopper was running around screaming like an idiot was because Kaya, normally the one to snap him out of it, was already at work with glowing hands, working on the young woman’s injuries. Luffy, shifting his attention away from that bit of byplay, focused on who he knew to be Brook.

“I will entirely excuse you, if you both introduce yourself and explain just what happened back there. I believe that was Thriller Bark, Gecko Moria’s infamous ship. But given the lack of shadows defending it, I suspect something major happened before we...dropped in.”

Brook stood, expression shifting to an open-skull smile.

“Yo ho ho ho! Of course, Captain! I’d be delighted to tell the tale! Yo ho ho ho! I’m the Skeleton-man Brook! Formerly of the Rumber Pirates!”

Luffy nodded, as if that made perfect sense, even as his crew all looked on in various levels of disbelief at the walking, talking, skeleton. Honestly wanting to get onto the part of all this that he *didn’t* understand, aka Yamato, Luffy decided to shorten Brook’s no doubt long-winded tale.

“Well, Brook. I’m Captain Monkey D. Luffy of the Strawhat Pirates and you’re aboard the *Discovery*, an exploration ship intending to map the entire world. While I’d be delighted to hear your story in full later, we seem to have several events to look into. Cutting to the heart of the matter, I assume your unusual body is either the result of a Devil Fruit or Moria’s experimentation?”

Brook somehow looked a bit surprised. By the declaration of one of their goals or by Luffy guessing part of his story, Luffy wasn’t sure. He laughed that frankly sort of annoying, over-the-top-laugh again and bowed grandly once more.

“Quite right, Captain Luffy! I became a Skeleton-man after I died the first time! I had previously eaten the Revive Revive Fruit, and it brought me back! Though, to my misfortune, the mists of the Florian Triangle caused my soul to take too long to find my body, and I ended up a skeleton!”

Several of his crew made 'ah-ha' noises, though even those noises seemed a bit confused. Kaya, done healing Perona's relatively superficial wounds, looked at Brook with a curious and extremely interested expression.

"You're incredibly *bright* to spiritual senses, Mr. Brook. I rather suspect that the fruit you took somehow converted you into pure Spiritual Energy that is then merely possessing its former body. How odd. Not to mention interesting. I suspect you could learn to do quite a few of the same things I can with that energy, though we would need to be careful to make sure you properly regenerate Spiritual Energy the same everyone else does..."

Luffy blinked. He'd noticed Brook's brightness in the flow of spiritual energy of the world, but hadn't taken the thought that far. Now, reluctantly interested, he took a closer 'look' and realized Kaya was right. Brook appeared to be *made* of Spirit Energy, bound to the bone of his body and doing...quite a lot of odd things he'd never seen before. Probably duplicating and replacing all his physical needs, giving him the ability to do things like move and eat. Even a quick glimpse was enough to realize that just studying Brook would likely push both his and Kaya's understanding of Spirit Energy forward quite a lot. Pleased, but also annoyed, since he *really* wanted to get to why Yamato was here, Luffy forced himself to do this thing properly.

"Well, Brook. You seem to be without a crew. Well, mostly. I do remember that name as being associated with Laboon, who is still alive and waiting for your return. Aside from him I..."

Luffy paused as Brook shot ramrod straight, body full of tension.

"Laboon...is still waiting for me?"

Internally, Luffy sighed, but he couldn't deny the wildly surging emotions coming from Brook. Fine, he wasn't a monster, he'd deal with this first, even if his curiosity was attempting to murder him.

"Yes. Actually, Vivi?"

Vivi jerked at her name, her attention snapping to him from where she'd been staring at Brook along with everyone else. She snapped out an admirably sharp 'Yes, Captain' that made his lips quirk just a bit. She was arguably the most deferential to him of the entire crew, which was a little amusing given she was royalty.

"You've been to the Twin Cape Lighthouse before, haven't you? Do you remember it well enough to open an Air Door?"

Vivi blinked, then considered the question for a moment, before slowly shaking her head.

"No. I don't think so. Crocus always did a good job of keeping us away from the lighthouse itself, since he knew the local islanders all wanted Laboon as a resource. I could easily open one to Whiskey Peak, though. It's pretty easy to lock onto the Red Line there and it's not hard to make the trip in a sloop, despite the rough weather in that zone. When we have a free day or two, it would be easy enough to take Brook to see Laboon."

Luffy nodded, smiling as he saw Brook stagger a bit in shock.

“Well, there you have it, Brook. Want to sign on as a Strawhat Pirate? We’ll help you see Laboon, either way, but you seem like you have an interesting story!”

Not to mention that he and Kaya would most certainly like to study the Skeleton-man. Luffy had been indifferent to having Brook aboard before, but it was looking like there might be advantages. Ones that went both ways if he and Kaya could help Brook figure out how to use his Spirit Energy. His skill as a swordsman likely wasn’t up to snuff by Luffy, Kuina, and Zoro’s standards. But if he could learn to manipulate the energy that made him up as well as Luffy suspected he might be able to, he could become quite a monster of a different sort...

“I...Captain...I...yes. Yes, I would like that, I think? Can I wait to give you a final answer until I see Laboon, though?”

Luffy nodded firmly.

“Of course. You’re welcome as a guest for now, so long as you help out when asked. Now...not to press you too much when you’ve clearly got a lot to think about, but could you tell us the basics of what happened on Thriller Bark, at least?”

The skeleton man shook himself, causing an oddly disturbing rattling of his bones, but nodded firmly.

“Yes. Yes, of course, Captain. My own story for how I got there...I’ll leave the telling of that for another time, to do the epic tale proper justice! But what happened *today* went like this...”

Even distracted, Brook was a fantastic storyteller, bringing to life the sequence of events in a way that his audience could almost see it happening. How a one-armed man calling himself Blackbeard had arrived with a weird looking raft-galleon and only two other crewmen. A sniper and an incredibly pale man carrying a cane. There had been a brief altercation where Blackbeard utterly decimated many of Moria’s zombies and other subordinates, drawing the Warlord himself out to confront him. Brook could only guess at what had been said, not having been close enough to hear and mostly having been hiding in amongst the other ‘undead’ for his own reasons.

Whatever it was Blackbeard had said seemed to have interested Moria, as the Warlord has shifted from confrontational to almost welcoming. After which, they’d gone back to Moria’s castle on Thriller Bark for a time. What happened there, Brook didn’t know, as he admitted he’d had his own business with one of the zombies. Given he seemed to be in possession of Shusui, a Meito blade that none of the swordsman had missed noticing the presence of, Luffy had to assume he’d either defeated the zombie Ryoma during that time...or simply taken advantage of Moria’s death to liberate the blade. Of his original cane sword, Luffy saw no evidence.

Whatever he’d been doing, Brook *hadn’t* missed the arrival of two additional Warlords. Donquixote Doflamingo and *Kuma*. That little revelation in the story began piecing the bits together for Luffy, though he remained quiet as Brook continued to spin out the tale. A tale of two additional ships, a small one trailing flame that Luffy recognized from description as the Striker II, accompanied by a schooner rig bearing the Whitebeard Flag. Brook had done his dead level best (pun entirely intended and groaned at by all) to keep out of sight during the ensuing battle. Blackbeard had died to a blow from Marco, leaving Luffy filled with a sense of satisfaction...along

with a bit of concern about just where his Fruit had ended up. He was going to have to check his System later. He had some points built up, and might want to acquire that monstrous thing just as a precaution against someone *else* getting it.

Almost equally welcome was the news of Gecko Moria's death, but far less welcome was the revelation that both Ace and Marco had been struck by Kuma at various points and sent flying to locations unknown. Not quite as bad for Luffy personally, though likely worse for the world as a whole, Brook had witnessed the final senior member of the Whitebeard Pirates, 3rd division commander 'Diamond' Jozu, battered down and captured.

On the one hand, the fact that Ace hadn't been directly captured in what was blatantly an ambush aimed at the Whitebeard pirates was *probably* a good sign. It meant Kuma might not have simply launched him straight to Marineford. On the other hand, Luffy didn't *know* that, and the World Government had gained at least one senior member of the Whitebeard pirates to use as bait regardless. The ambush was blatant enough to have confirmed for Luffy something he'd suspected all along.

Specifically, that the execution plan for Ace hadn't been a spur of the moment decision, an opportunistic plot. Instead, it had been a preplanned event, with the only missing component being a Whitebeard pirate of sufficient rank to act as bait. Ace had, originally, simply been the one unlucky enough to caught for that purpose. But any sufficiently high-ranking member of Whitebeard's crew would do from the World Government's point of view.

That...complicated matters, as it brought into question if it was any business of Luffy's at all to get involved. If Ace turned out to have been sent somewhere that he was captured in turn, the question would have an obvious answer of 'fuck yes.' If it was merely a conflict between Whitebeard and the WG, then the only horse in that race Luffy had was that his brother would certainly participate. Which wasn't enough to draw him into the fight directly.

Ace was his own man, with his own crew, and it wasn't Luffy's business to hold his hand and protect him. He had a Yonko's crew to do that, just as Sabo had the revolutionary army. Which didn't mean Luffy would do *nothing*. But it did mean that some of his other long-term plans might well serve better than butting in on a fight that he didn't have a horse in. Unless, of course, Ace asked for help. Which wasn't very likely, since they weren't an allied crew, but it wasn't completely impossible.

"...and that's when, after Kuma left and with Doflamingo looking through the wrecking of Thriller Bark for something, I came across her."

Brook pointed at Perona, who Luffy was very much aware was now only faking sleep from where she'd been covered by Kaya with a blanket. None of those who had realized she was awake were saying anything, though, given the quiet tears running down her cheeks and feelings of despair radiating from her. Apparently, she genuinely had cared for Moria in some fashion. Luffy had to admit he didn't know much about her, so couldn't say just how or why, but there was no faking the sort of anguish she was radiating. She'd lost someone important to her and it was only decent to give her a bit of time to come to terms with that fact.

“She was a member of Moria’s crew. One of the few living ones, and the only one he seemed legitimately somewhat fond of. In truth, the few times I witnessed them interact were the only time I saw Moria act remotely human. Whatever her story is, she was actually managing to contribute to the fight a fair bit with some sort of ghosts. Which I suspect were Devil Fruit generated. But she collapsed when Moria was killed, then got clipped by shrapnel and knocked out while she was unresponsive. After the fighting stopped, I checked on her and realized she was still alive. While she might have been nominally an enemy, she wasn’t one I’d ever fought myself. So I wasn’t going to just leave her to drown...”

Virtually the entire crew nodded at that. The vast majority of them, all of them most likely, would have done the same. Minus any information of her being some sort of monster, simply leaving her to drown wasn’t something even Robin or Zoro, their two most practically-minded members, would have been comfortable with.

“Understandable. We’ll find out more from her when she is up for talking. For now, she can be considered a guest as well, so long as she doesn’t cause problems.”

Luffy directed that comment mostly her way, knowing she was awake, and noted her untensing just slightly. Good enough for now. He really *didn’t* have any idea what to do with her. Brook he had at least a moderate knowledge of, Perona he did not. He could see her Devil Fruit having several uses for the crew, but had no idea if she’d be a good fit for them or not. More to the point, at the moment, he *finally* had an excuse to move onto the point his curiosity had been killing him over.

“Thank you for the useful information, Brook. It sounds like you were witness to a pre-planned ambush of the Whitebeard pirates, which is concerning but not immediately important. Now...”

Luffy turned his gaze to where Yamato had been taking in Brook and his story with stars in her eyes.

“...what is your story? Yamato, I think Doflamingo called you? You said you were looking for me, and you seemed to have some personal business with Doflamingo. But, beyond that, I’m a bit confused what your story is?”

Yamato straightened, then grinned happily at him.

“Yes! I’m Yamato! Your brother freed me two years ago! I was imprisoned on an island called Onigashima, where he was rampaging, trying to draw out and fight my father. We fought and ended up becoming friends! He freed me from the handcuff bombs which my father had used to keep me trapped there, using an advanced form of Haki I hadn’t heard of at the time. A trick called Internal Destruction that he taught me later. I went to sea with him...but wasn’t willing to join the Whitebeard Pirates when he decided to. I wanted to keep traveling! To see everything and everywhere in the world! He’d told me all about you, and how you wanted to explore the whole world, even Laugh Tale, much like by idol Kozuki Oden did!”

Yamato was almost literally glowing with excitement, even as Luffy was scrambling to put the pieces of the Kung Fu Butterfly together. Ace might have met her *before*, but wasn’t good

enough with Haki to pull off the trick of ripping explosive collars or cuffs off someone. It was something *Luffy* had known was possible and specifically taught himself, given how deeply he hated slavery and how likely it was he'd need to do something like it at some point.

Ace hadn't quite been at the level needed to pull that trick off when he'd left on his journey, but he must have picked it up at some point. Possibly even from Silvers Rayleigh if the old man had recognized his old Captain's son and given him some pointers. The ability to remove Yamato's cuffs meant she'd been able to leave with him, escaping Kaidou and...Wano, he though the name of that island was? Onigashima was a name he didn't know. Possibly a nearby or connected island that Kaidou used as a personal base for the Beasts Pirates? Whatever the case, Ace's freeing her had clearly changed the sequence of events...but how, exactly?

"Huh. Well, I'm glad to meet you Yamato! Any friend of my brother is a friend of mine. Possibly even a crewmate if you're still looking to explore? I admit I'm curious about something, though, if you don't mind me asking. That Devil Fruit, I last saw it in the possession of the Red Hair pirates over a decade ago. How did you...?"

Yamato had, if anything, gotten even happier looking as he mentioned her traveling with him.

"Yes! Yes, I want to be on your crew! More than ever now, since you told Brook you're going to see *all* the seas! I want to see it all! Oh, and I ate the Devil Fruit on accident! I visited the Red Hair pirates with Ace, he wanted to visit them to thank them for looking out for you when you were younger! I was hungry and found it in a storeroom, everything but the Fruit was all dusty, so I thought no one would mind! They were nice, just laughed it off and said it must be fate, since no one had wanted to eat it in so long."

Luffy...boggled a bit at that. Admittedly, he knew that Shanks had *very* few Devil Fruit users on his crew, and none of his officers had one. His whole crew had possessed a bit of a weird disregard for them, by pirate standards. Shanks had never actually stated such, nor had any of the crew, but they seemed to just...not care about them, for the most part. Even the few, like Shank's daughter, that had them at all had each gotten them entirely by accident, rather than eating them on purpose or in a pursuit of power. It was still a bit difficult to process that Shanks had just let a Devil Fruit sit in storage for the better part of a *decade*. Hell, it sounded like they might have even *forgotten they had it...*

...

...

Actually, that *did* sound like something Shanks would do, come to think of it.

...

...

Well, whatever. One mystery solved. A few more at large. Not to mention he was pretty sure his future knowledge was now completely toast. Aside from information he shouldn't have about things or people from the *past*, anything left he might have known about the future was pretty much

totally fucked sideways at this point. Too much had changed. Though a lot of that change was positive, as far as he could tell, so he didn't exactly regret it. Particularly as he'd been getting closer and closer to the end of what knowledge he *did* have anyway. He'd only known bits and pieces about the New World, stuff he'd picked up by osmosis from other fans rather than having watched the show that far himself. The only thing he could do now was the same thing everyone else did...make himself and his crew strong enough to take on all comers. Which he felt he was well on his way to accomplishing.

“Last question for now, then, given that it's about time for dinner and we could all use it after the day we've had. You clearly had some sort of previous conflict with Doflamingo...what was that all about?”

Yamato's grin turned a bit menacing at the reminder of the now-dead Warlord.

“Oh, that? The bastard was providing a type of artificial Devil Fruit to my father called a SMILE. I wanted him dead so that he'd stop making my father's forces stronger. I still need to kill him and save Wano after all, and weakening his forces is a must! The SMILE factory still exists, though. It will need to be destroyed. Without Doflamingo around, it will be much easier, and his organization might well fracture without him anyway!”

Luffy blinked. Artificial Devil Fruits? Well, that sounded like a fucking nightmare. One he was going to have to ask Yamato for more details about later for certain. For now, though, he shook it off.

“Well, he's dead at least, and few will miss him I think. Better yet, the World Government has no idea who did it, most likely. At least not yet. For now...Sanji, food!”

Sanji straightened, snapping a very sloppy salute.

“At once, Captain! Oy. Usopp, you set the table, since you were completely useless today!”

Usopp protested that, even as he followed Sanji to obey. Nami nodded and snapped a few orders at Zoro and Nojiko, even as Kaya quietly got moving on getting the 'sleeping' Perona to a cabin. Luffy himself moved off to inspect the ship as a whole, including communing with its still-developing spirit. As much as he wanted to question their guests some more, and feel out Yamato farther as a new apparent crewmember, the *Discovery* had taken some heavy hits today. Making sure the ship was okay took priority...

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