

One Piece: Halfway Broken

(Chapters 91-93)

Novus Peregrine

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Chapter 91: Unexpected Opportunities

The first two days on Kansorn Island had been spent helping the locals recover. In truth, beyond the handful of unfortunate women who had been caught, most of the damage on the island had been to property instead of people. Both the locals and crew were all thankful for that, and Kaya and Chopper had the mistreated women well in hand and healing quickly. As a result, it had mostly been a case of lending the greater strength and odd mix of skills the of their crew to getting the island back in working order.

After that, they all split up a bit.

Their month on Sixis had been extremely productive, but also somewhat confining, as they'd elected not to use Vivi's Air Doors to visit anywhere else in their efforts to fall off the radar completely. With 'Little East Blue' proving to be an extremely friendly port to them, the crew had quickly decided to stay for some shore leave. A decision helped a bit by those from the East Blue being curious about the features of the island that matched up with their homes.

Which is how Kuina found herself at a remarkably accurate duplicate of her family's Dojo, discovering unknown family history.

"So you see, your uncle, Master Kousei made it here to Little East Blue. In fact, he was critical to securing it from pirates while he was still around, but it was those same pirates who eventually killed him. Unfortunately, while he attempted to train many of those in the village, none of us ever had more than basic aptitude. I'm sad to say only a few of us tried to go farther, and we could never properly understand the scrolls he left behind."

Kuina remembered her uncle, that *particular* uncle that is, only very vaguely. There was good reason that Shimotsuki Village bore their family name, as her grandfather had...gotten around. The legendary smith had never married, but certainly *did* have quite a few children, all of whom he'd cared greatly for. She'd counted, when she was younger, and had realized she'd had six aunts and four uncles, most of whom had themselves had at least one or two children. A considerable chunk of Shimotsuki village was made up of the Shimotsuki *clan* as a result, of which her father was only the eldest that had trained extensively with the sword.

Just as his half-brother Shimotsuki Kousei had.

Kuina vaguely remembered her uncle having left the village somewhat frequently, being prone to wanderlust. She hadn't been close enough to him to wonder too much when he hadn't returned, though those of the family who had been so likely assumed he'd died. Which was

apparently accurate, but only relatively recently as such things went. If Kuina had the timeline right, he must have been here on Kansorn for at least a decade and a half. Which explained the existence of the Dojo, as well as the scrolls now laid out on a low table between her and the caretaker.

“I’m not surprised. All of these scrolls are extensions of the family art. Without a full grounding in the fundamentals of the clan style, you’d have never been able to fully utilize them. Since it *is* a family style, he would only have fully trained a son or daughter in it. By blood or adoption, either one would do, but I take it he didn’t have anyone like that here?”

The caretaker of the dojo, Kenta Mendo, shook his head sadly.

“No. He lost his wife in the Calm Belt journey and never even considered taking another. He seemed content to study the sword and try to teach, even if we were poor students.”

Kuina pursed her lips at that. They actually weren’t at all bad. In fact, the average student here was considerably better than the same average at her father’s own dojo. It simply didn’t *seem* that was to them, as the threats they’d faced here on the Grand Line were far above what would bother a small village in the East Blue. Kenta wasn’t quite as good as she’d been when she left the village, but she’d already been better than everyone but her father at that time. Coming to a decision, she nodded firmly to herself.

“I cannot teach you the full family style. But I can refine what you know with tricks I’ve picked up from other styles. If you let me copy these scrolls, I will spend the rest of the week teaching a few of you.”

Kenta looked surprised.

“Really? We intended to simply offer them too you, as you *are* his family. If you would help us learn to better protect the island, though, we would be quite grateful. While running into the mountains is our go-to strategy, it relies on the idea that the pirates will *leave*. We’ve always feared a group deciding that the island made for a good base...”

A valid concern. It not for the remoteness of the island, Kuina suspected it would, in fact, have already happened. She had no issue helping the locals learn how to better prevent that...particularly as some of the techniques described on these scrolls looked like they’d be very interesting additions to her own style. Shimotsuki Kousei must have been a remarkable talent to have come up with them all on his own.

“Excellent. Then let us begin. First, we need to patch a hole that I exploited in each of your spars earlier. When you parry with your blade, you need to...”

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Kaya had, once she’d dealt with the last of the physical injuries of the villagers, been drawn to the eerie copy of her family mansion. Not just because it *was* a copy, either. No, she’d noticed a lingering and potent feeling of spiritual energy coming from the place, as well as trailing after an older woman who she’d seen moving around town. The feel of the woman’s energy wasn’t nearly as potent as she knew her own to be, or even that of Maya from Asuka Island. Yet it was *familiar* in a way that Kaya had almost instantly realized meant the woman must be from Asuka at minimum,

and more likely a member of her own family line. The mansion, after all, was a bit of a giveaway that *someone* from her family had been here.

She wasn't really surprised someone had known she would be coming. She *was* surprised that the young girl waiting for her felt faintly of that same spiritual energy. Not to mention that she looked quite a bit like Kaya herself had at twelve or so. The girl, who had been waiting on the steps of the mansion, smiled hugely at her.

"You're finally here! Grandma wants to see you, but she wasn't up to waiting on the steps! Come on, I'll take you to her!"

Bemused by the liveliness of the girl compared to herself at that age, Kaya allowed her hand to be grasped and her body to be towed along after the child. They passed through the main hall, and Kaya quickly started noticing differences between this mansion and her own. While the exterior and entrance hall had been similar, the decorations were all different as they passed through the halls towards the study. The results of very different people living here, as well as different levels of access to things from the East Blue.

Even more odd to her own senses, was that this was a clearly a *home*. One that was well lived in. There were no servants like Merry present, but instead at least half a dozen people of three different generations. One, who looked on with amusement as Kaya was pulled past her, was so obviously the younger girl's mother that Kaya easily connected the dots. This mansion's space felt different due to being an active *family home* with multiple generations in residence. At least a few of which had some level of their family's gift.

When they came to the study, which true to form was in the same place it would have been in her own mansion, the girl stopped and waved her on.

"Go on! Granny said to show you to her and leave you be for now. Even if I really want to hear all about your adventures!"

Resisting the urge to give headpats to the adorable kid, who she was virtually certain would be listening at the door, Kaya thanked her and entered the study. There, sitting at the desk, she immediately spotted the older woman who she'd seen around town already. Perhaps a well-preserved sixty years of age, the woman gave off both a feeling of welcome...and a feeling of understated spiritual strength. Not in the same league for raw power as Kaya knew herself to be, but with a depth that spoke of skill Kaya was still in the process of gaining. In recognition of that, Kaya bowed lightly as she introduced herself. The woman chuckled at the introduction and waved Kaya to a seat in front of her desk. After Kaya was seated, the woman finally spoke.

"I admit, I had wondered if the main branch of the family would ever stumble upon our little contingent here. I imagine you've got quite a few questions, no?"

Kaya nodded, even if that very comment, along with the extreme similarity of appearance the girl who'd led her in had to her younger self, had already answered the biggest one. Deciding to be up front with that, she forged ahead.

“In truth, my largest question is already answered. You are clearly related to me in some fashion, though I’m afraid I myself am all that is left of the ‘branch’ that resided on the Gecko Islands.”

The older woman grimaced, shrinking a little, but not seeming overly surprised.

“I had feared as much. Given how much effort had gone into being invisible to the World Government for so many years, I could only assume that there was no one left of the main branch but you. Otherwise, you’d have put them all at risk by drawing attention.”

Kaya flinched, suddenly worried she might have put *these* people at risk, but the woman preempted her with a raised hand.

“Not to worry, dear. I was presumed dead a long time ago and the World Government abandoned even the most basic of Marine presence on this island years ago. Little Yoko’s late father was the last, staying behind when the rest of the Marines left, and that was over five years ago. No one will connect you to us anytime soon.”

Relieved at that, Kaya nodded. Searching for another topic that might be less sensitive, she decided to ask a question aimed at her other major interest here.

“Well, I can feel your ‘branch’ has regained some of the family gifts. Did you know, I managed to visit and help cleanse Asuka Island recently? Would you like to hear what I learned about our family there, and share in a few tricks I learned from the one priestess still present there?”

The older woman’s eye had gone wide at the mention of Asuka island. Her voice was bemused when she spoke again.

“Well, that’s certainly a thing. I *had* wondered a time or two what became of the island. Why don’t you tell me about it, and perhaps we can compare notes afterward about those gifts you mentioned? I’m sure I have at least a few things I can share with you in turn.”

Delighted at stumbling into someone else she might be able to learn from, Kaya happily began to tell the older woman about their adventure on Asuka Island...

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Sanji had come to the local iteration of the Baratie with *high* standards and a complete willingness to destroy it utterly if they failed to be met. The *true* Baratie was the culmination of Chef Zeff’s hard work and dreams, and someone dishonoring it by making a mockery of that effort was more than enough for him to risk being scolded by his Captain. He had, frankly, largely been expecting to burn the place down, stomp on the ashes, and possibly beat a few fools halfway to their graves for the insult.

That said, these were Chefs, and they were *feeding* people. So he’d also come with full intention of giving them the chance to explain themselves.

What he *hadn’t* expected to find was an original member of ‘Red-Leg Zeff’s’ crew. Until that surprise introduction, neither he nor Zeff had believed any other member of the Cook Pirates had

survived. Yet the man, who introduced himself as ‘Mitsuboshi,’ had not only known all about Zeff...but knew many of Zeff’s secret recipes as well. According to ‘Mitsuboshi, who was down and arm much like Zeff was down a leg, he had ended up on Karsorn Island after a series of small adventures, after the loss of the ship in the storm. Already missing an arm at that point and finding himself among other East Blue natives, he’d decided it was time to settle down rather than trying to find a crew that would take a one-armed chef on. For a while, Mitsuboshi had worked in the inn in town as a cook, just as skilled in that field as *all* of the Cook pirates had been.

Then he’d heard about the Baratie and Zeff.

Delighted that his Captain had lived, but unable to cross the Calm Belt to go to him, he’d sought after all the information he could about the Baratie and built his own mini-version on Little East Blue. One which served many of the same recipes the real Baratie did, made with skill Sanji had to admit was genuinely beyond any of the Cooks at the real deal other than himself and Zeff. Unsurprising, truly, given Mitsuboshi’s starting point as a member of the Cook Pirates.

Then, with Sanji no longer even slightly mad, Mitsuboshi had started rhapsodizing about all the incredible recipes and unique ingredients he’d been able to acquire by being on the Grand Line. Karsorn might not be a major stop, but it *did* see a trickle of people coming through, and Mitsuboshi had spent over a decade trading with such people to collect rare Grand Line ingredients and the recipes to use them. Sanji, quite interested in what sort of things that might entail, had asked to try such a dish. Mitsuboshi had whipped up something called a ‘Simsim Whip’ and...

“So much FLAVOR! It’s the very essence of sweetness! Like being wrapped in fluffy sunshine, your mind just melting away!”

Mitsuboshi’s hearty laugh barely registered, but when the man invited Sanji to something call ‘Food Wars,’ a competition they held every week for who could make the best dish with the exotic ingredients gathered from the Grand Line and cultivated on the island, he snapped out of it. He had to participate! There was so much to learn!

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Luffy had to admit that Yamato was utterly adorable when she was simultaneously trying hard both to be a ‘proper lady’ *and* not to bounce around in glee. Her naturally exuberant personality was very at odds with what she seemed to have decided was ‘proper’ behavior for a lady on a date. Which left her trying to act reserved and dignified...when what she clearly really wanted to do was shout her joy from the mountaintop. She’d virtually exploded in happiness when he’d pulled her aside and explained that he, Nami, and Robin were willing to give things a shot with her. Though it had taken a while to get across that he wanted to do at least a little of the whole ‘getting to know you’ dating thing rather than jumping straight into bed with her.

Honestly, it wasn’t that he wasn’t tempted to do the jumping into bed version.

It was just that his own sensibilities were a little less...abrupt...than that. Nami had actually been a good fit in that regard, since her own idea of ‘romance’ was fairly similar to what his original world would have thought of as normal. Though, admittedly, Nami’s version was more prone to going X-rated quickly and had room for far more expansion to include others. Robin was an odder

case in which she didn't really *have* a baseline culture. She'd been ostracized on her original home island from a young age and then bounced around the West Blue and Grand Line both. The result was that she'd known more about using her body for *seduction* than dating, which had oddly worked out. By signaling so strongly to Luffy and Nami that she was interested, but taking her time to work up to it carefully, she'd sort of accidentally produced an equivalent to dating. One that honestly made Luffy wonder if that was how the concept of 'dating' had come about in the first place.

It would be sort of ironic if the historian had accidentally reproduced the conditions for a cultural norm to come to be, come to think of it.

One way or another, with both Nami and Robin, the 'getting to know you' phase of dating that he was used to had happened somewhat naturally. With Yamato, that concept just wasn't really part of her cultural makeup to begin with, so it had required some careful phrasing and explanations. Essentially putting it to her as 'testing their compatibility.' Thankfully, even if he was *fairly sure* she still didn't totally get it, she was more than happy to go along with any idea that led generally to the ends she was seeking.

Thankfully, Luffy had a solid plan for how to turn this date from 'awkward,' with Yamato acting a part that didn't suit her, into the sort of 'getting to know you' adventure it should be. A plan that had them ascending to the summit of the mountains that encircled most of the island. Something that would have been near impossible for the locals, but was trivially easy for the pair of them. Just as it had been trivially easy for him to come up the night before and put out the items that would hopefully make this work. Any moment now, his little setup should come into sight.

"Ah, here we are!"

Yamato looked startled as he grabbed her hand, not letting her have time to react as he towed her to the large pair of easels and canvases he'd set up the night before. Positioned on an overlook that would give them a fantastic view of the setting sun in just a few hours, both were lavishly equipped with art supplies of all kinds. He whipped off the covers he'd put on them to protect them from morning dew, and presented them to Yamato with a flourish.

"I thought it would be nice to make a bit of art together! I'm mostly technical in my drawing, but kinda want to try expanding to see if I can be a little more creative, and I know you've made a lot of progress with Usopp giving you tips. I suspect the sunset over Little East Blue is going to be quite spectacular, so why don't we try to capture it together?"

Yamato looked both confused *and* excited, as she looked over the art supplies. Which is about what he'd expected. Getting her to let go and simply chat was always going to be a slightly uphill battle, but she was genuinely passionate about her drawing these days. So, if anything would do the job, this was it.

"Come, let's see which of us can capture the sunset best, hmm? I'm betting on you, personally, but I'll give it a fair shot myself! No time to dally, the sun won't wait for us! It will start setting in a few minutes."

Captured by the idea of needing to hurry to get the best view, Yamato's attempt to be super formal shattered and she rushed in to get to grips with all of the supplies. Smirking, Luffy settled into his own canvas. This would be a nice start to the evening, he thought...and he had a picnic dinner squirreled away in his inventory for afterwards. Triple portions for both of them, of course. He was pretty sure from how excited she was that his idea was a hit, and conversation about the art they'd made should easily carry them through the dinner afterward...

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"So, princess, when are you going to ask Luffy for a date of your own, hmmm?"

Vivi, sitting across from Robin at one of the outdoor tables of the mini-Baratie, turned scarlet at the suggestive tone the question was delivered in. She didn't deny her desire, of course. Nami and Robin had pinned her down about the possibility before their little desert date in Alabasta. She still stammered a bit when she replied, though.

"U-um, I don't...will he even...I mean with Yamato too..."

Robin smirked, even if she really wanted to sigh instead. Despite what Nami and Luffy clearly thought, she was self-aware enough of her own issues when it came to the romantic attachment part of their relationship that she wasn't going to throw stones at Vivi's uncertainty. Yet, the girl was absolutely being silly.

"Princess, the only reason you aren't already warming our bed is that Luffy's the sort to do things right. Well, that and it turned out he's from a culture where harems are a bit unheard of, but Nami and I got him straightened out on *that* particular bit of nonsense."

Vivi blinked at that, startled enough that her blush actually faded a bit.

"Wait, but he was already with both you and...?"

Robin's smirk was much more mischievous this time.

"Yes, our poor Captain was apparently very willing, but very *confused* about that. He was quite cute, really, when he finally asked why Nami and I were so okay with it. I admit, I feel a little foolish for not having considered the possibility before. He *did* seem a bit worried, at times. I suppose, with Nami never balking at all, I took it for granted he had a similar enough background."

Vivi pursed her lips, then seemed to wilt.

"I hadn't even thought...but then is he really..."

Robin snorted and blatantly abused her Devil Fruit to make an arm and hand specifically to flick Vivi in the forehead. The princess flinched away and whined, but that's what she got for being silly.

"I said we got it sorted out, Princess. If we hadn't, he wouldn't be taking Yamato on a date, now would he? The only reason that's not you, instead of her, is that you have yet to be upfront with him that you want to join in. Yamato made it *very* bluntly obvious, so he wasn't going to leave her hanging. But if you want in yourself you'll need to take your own steps. Perhaps a certain type of dance that I know you're quite familiar with?"

Vivi's blush returned with a vengeance, her eyes focusing off in the mid-distance as she clearly pictured herself performing certain dances from her own Kingdom's culture for Luffy. Well, at least it was getting her mind pointed in the right direction, even if Robin suspected it would take her a while to work up the courage. That was fine, Luffy would have his hands full with Yamato for a while yet. In more ways than one, Robin thought a little salaciously. *Nami was right in that Yamato's breasts were just begging you to plant your face in them...*

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As his bow rasped across the strings of his violin, Brook allowed instinct for a song played a thousand times to guide his fingers. It was an instrumental piece, which the crowd at the local inn was clearly enjoying. Not quite as boisterous as his usual fair, he had to admit, but there was a reason for that. Luffy's control of sound and Kaya's help with controlling the spiritual energy produced by his Devil Fruit had combined to give Brook more than a few ideas. Ones his own crew, bar possibly Perona, were a bit too strong willed to test on.

Music had always been hypnotizing to Brook. He'd just never considered before that it might be possible to lean into that and make it literal.

Now, as he let his instinct guide the music and focused on weaving spiritual energy into the tune, he was certain he was onto something. It was subtle, at least for now, but the entire crowd was more than just enjoying the music. No, they were *responding* to it. Their emotions were changing with each song, all of them in a perfect harmony that couldn't be attributed just to the music alone. He was weaving an illusion, of sorts, though one he thought was going to need a lot more development before it was useful as more than a party trick.

Still, it was progress on the idea he'd had, and that was enough for now. He'd have to talk to his Captain and Kaya to see if they had any ideas what he might do to enhance this little trick he was developing...

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Perona wasn't exactly sure what she thought of her current lot in life. She fully realized now that she hadn't been in the best state of mind when she'd decided to join her new crew. Which wasn't to say she actually regretted it, oddly enough. Which, in turn, was precisely why she wasn't quite sure what she thought of aforementioned current lot in life.

She could admit, at least to herself, that she'd largely drifted through life without any actual direction until the destruction of Thriller Bark. Moria had given her a home, of sorts, but she hadn't exactly been a critical member of his crew with proper duties and goals. Perhaps inevitably, once the shock of her father figure's death had worn off, she'd started to drift back to her previous ways. No one had cared about her renewed obsession with cute things. Well, no one but Chopper, who'd taken to avoiding her after she tried to kidnap him as a new minion a couple of times.

When she'd tried to slack off, though, things had been different.

Luckily, instead of the Captain or First Mate noticing and taking her to task, it had been Mistress Hina. She'd felt very *small* when the former-Marine had taken one look at her childish defiance...then threw her forcefully over one knee and *spanked* her. It had been shocking, even

humiliating! Which was why it had confused her so greatly why it had also turned her on more than anything else in her entire life! Sure, it had been a while since she got any of *that* sort of attention, but she hadn't even thought she was into women before!

Mistress Hina had proven different.

The eye she'd kept on Perona had been stern, but just as ready to reward as to punish. The more the older pinkette had taken her in hand, the more Perona had *wanted* to be taken in hand. The attention had been a type she just couldn't do without once she had it. There had been a little jealousy of Sanji, too, at first, for taking some of her Mistress's attention. But he was very *cute* when begging Mistress properly. So his presence with her and Mistress Hina been accepted eventually.

Hand raising to play with the choker that was locked with Mistress Hina's Devil Fruit, Perona's uncertainty settled, as it always did these days with that reassuring reminder in place. She was *pretty sure* her new crew were all crazy. They were *far* too accepting of the heat from being blamed for killing a bunch of Celestial Dragons, after all. But, at the same time, some of them were *crazy strong*, to an extent her adoptive father hadn't been even at his best. Luffy and Yamato, in particular, were absolutely terrifying when they decided to go all out.

With them as protection, and the rest of the crew not exactly being weaklings, maybe it would be okay? Well, one way or another, she was going to get stronger herself, for Mistress Hina's sake. If the rest of them all got themselves killed, she'd at least make sure her Mistress got out safely. If that happened, she was sure they could find somewhere to hide out for a while, until the World Government forgot they existed. She was sure Mistress would be okay with that, if Perona was an Extra Good Girl while they laid low.

Hmmm, come to think of it, this island was remote enough maybe it was somewhere they could come hide if it came to that? Though, since neither of them were from the East Blue, it might be a problem. The locals all seemed to be connected to that sea somehow...

Chapter 92: Drakestone

Little East Blue had been a pleasant distraction, one that at least a few members of the crew had gained something from. It also, thankfully, *wasn't* an 'orphan island.' Seldom visited as it was, it was still a side-connection to one of the main seven routes through Paradise. An island similar to Asuka or Skypiea in that it wasn't always locked onto, an 'extra' on a route that you had to hit at just the right time for your log pose to divert you to. The locals were thankful for that, as it kept the trouble down, while still seeing some level of trade flow through from time to time. The Straw Hats were just as thankful, as it meant that their log poses had reset after a week there, putting them on target for another island of Paradise. Even better, the locals of Kansorn Island had actually been aware of what the next island in the chain was and were able to tell them a bit about it.

As luck or fate would have it, the island in question was one Robin knew about and had one of her small emergency caches on.

Drakemine was a Winter Island which, like Alabasta, intersected two different routes through Paradise. That detail had been *half* of the reason that Robin had made the effort to set up a

cache there. The *other* half, entirely predictably to anyone who had ever met her for more than five minutes, was because the island had one of the few publicly accessible libraries anywhere in Paradise. For a modest fee, anyone could peruse the library there, even if it was far smaller than the library that had been contained in Ohara's Tree of Knowledge. The Frozen Library also wasn't nearly as...organized...as the Tree of Knowledge had been. Which had been part of the draw for Robin.

Robin had spent quite a bit of time trying to find snippets regarding the Void Century in the disorganized works of the Frozen Library specifically *because* it was disorganized. A specific section of the library, carved into a mountainside, had been burned out at some point in the past. That section had, perhaps unsurprisingly, contained the bulk of such knowledge as far as Robin had been able to determine. Yet, despite the blatant sabotage by what had almost certainly been the World Government, the chaotic nature of the library had protected some works that mentioned the time period. It was, in fact, where she had first learned that Alabasta had a poneyglyph, as well as a few other bits and pieces of her limited knowledge surrounding the lost century.

Of course, the library wasn't the primary draw for most of those who visited the island.

No, that would be the markets and the *mine* that the island was named after. The markets were the result of the island lying at the intersection of two Paradise Routes. Smaller in scale by far than Alabasta, it was nevertheless a place where ships could buy and trade most needs. More importantly, it sold the results of the mining that took place on the island. Drakestone mine didn't mine anything so plebian as metal or stone, but instead a type of *bone*.

Supposedly the bones of an ancient dragon, the bone mined and sold on the island is far harder than steel and incredibly temperature resistant. The World Government took the bulk of the mined material as the locals' Heavenly Tithe, using it for unknown purposes. Though Luffy personally has a small suspicion that the material might be used in Pacifista creation and similar projects, the bone possibly being used by Vegapunk to create the far-stronger-than-steel metal supposedly used in those cyborgs. It was no more than a guess, at best, but he certainly wanted to get his hands on a sample to see what he can do with it.

Hopefully, it would be another stop with minimal complications. Though Luffy wasn't particularly expecting things to work out that way. Their luck had been entirely too good since Shiki, after all...

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"Well. There's the other shoe that's finally dropped. The question is what we want to do about it."

Nami's dry comment as they all watched the screen, one showing the feed from the Projector Den Den Mushi they'd hooked up to the periscope, got nods from several members of the crew. Dis, bouncing eagerly, was the first to respond.

"Let me at 'em, Captain! I can blow them all away with my guns! I've barely gotten to use my guns! It would be a great test!"

Lips quirking in amusement, Luffy nevertheless shook his head in the negative, before patting a disappointed Dis on the head. Dis was someone they were all still adjusting too, but she was settling in as something of a little sister figure to most of the crew. Aside from Luffy and Nami in their roles as Captain and Navigator, Sanji actually dealt with her the most, guiding her use of her Mori Mori no Mi to grow edible fruits and vegetables for the crew. Thankfully, even the usually perverted cook seemed to instinctively treat Dis more like a sibling, something Luffy suspected had to do with the fact Dis had formed from little slivers of every crewmembers' spiritual energy soaking into the ship. In a way, she was a little sister of sorts to all of them, and that fact seemed to echo in their interactions with her.

Which was good, as he'd have hated to need to brutally murder Sanji for perving on Dis. The good quality aboard ship would have dropped unacceptably with Sanji's death. Luffy had gotten used to high-quality food and wasn't at all sure where they'd have found a suitable replacement.

"Not unless something goes badly wrong, Dis. We're still more or less laying low. I doubt we'll get away without being spotted at all, but there's no real reason to piss off the Marines by destroying a major fleet detachment. For better or worse, they are undoubtedly protecting the town from the increased pirate presence we've been hearing about."

The major Fleet detachment was, of course, the 'other shoe' that Nami had mentioned. The Marine Fleet wasn't even attempting to hide, but was fairly obviously positioned as protection for Drakestone, rather than besieging it. Its presence even made sense, Luffy reflected. With Alabasta closed to World Government shipping and Drakestone sitting on another critical trade junction, *this* was likely one of the most critical islands left in maintaining the remaining Marine supply lines in Paradise. Something Robin and Hina more or less confirmed as they spoke up next.

"There has been a lot of new construction since I was here last. Those cannon towers at the mouth of the bay are completely new. The docks have increased in size, and so has the town I think. Clearly, the Marines have invested a fair bit in the island's security recently."

Hina nodded along to Robin's comment, pointing to the personal flag flying on one ship. The Battleship was docked and appeared to be undergoing some significant repairs.

"That's Vice Admiral Strawberry's personal flagship. Hina would guess it was damaged at Marineford and is being repaired. Hina suspects he is here to protect the remaining major supply route for the Marines here in Paradise. Even with how many they lost, it makes sense to cover such a critical point with a Vice Admiral while they are recovering. Disruption of their remaining major supply route would be disastrous for them right now."

Luffy winced. That was...troublesome. Something Kuina realized just as quickly as Luffy did, pointing out the issue before he could.

"If there's a Vice Admiral here, we might not be able to avoid a fight. All Marines of that rank have a measure of Haki, and not all of the crew are capable of hiding ours."

Nodding acknowledgement, Luffy pursed his lips.

"I think we've all had enough shore leave recently that we can skip bringing the full crew unless there's major trouble. I still want to get ashore long enough to get a sample of 'drakestone,'

and Robin needs to hit her cache here, as she's said it contains a couple of Eternal Poses we can put to use."

It didn't contain any such thing, of course. But she *did* have a cache here, and the smaller subset of the crew who knew about Luffy's System Store ability had agreed to use any such caches as an excuse to 'acquire' one or two useful poses at a time. Given that a single Vice Admiral wasn't really a serious threat to them at this point, Strawberry's presence here wasn't enough to dissuade them from that plan. Particularly as Luffy really *did* want to get his hands on some drakestone to experiment with, as well.

"Let's see, Kaya is a given, she's got better control than even I do. Kuina and myself for heavy hitters that can hide ourselves at anything but point-blank range. Robin is required of course, and Hina can hopefully help us maneuver *around* the Marines since we aren't here to fight them. Vivi for transport and Pagaya as an unknown that can make the drakestone purchases. The Marines might be watching for anyone that looks too interested in the stuff. I think that's all we should take along for this little side-trip."

Some of the crew were looking unhappy at that, but most were either accepting or ambivalent. Yamato wasn't interested if they weren't going to fight, and was at least *aware* she wasn't good at stealth or subtly. She was clearly unbothered, while Nami was just as clearly annoyed. Understandably, given that she was *normally* their most stealthy individual. Even more so that Kaya in most ways.

Unfortunately, Nami had also made a breakthrough with her Haki while training on Sixis, and hadn't had time to learn to control the more obvious imprint she left on the world since doing so. Usopp was clearly just as bothered, letting Kaya go without him, but he lacked a skill set that was really useful for a mission they intended to stay below notice on. Others like Chopper and Brook were used to the idea they stood out too much, and Zoro has zero interest if there wasn't a fight to be had. Despite the few that looked slightly unhappy, no one outright protested Luffy's choices.

"Right. That's our group then. Anyone else, if you have anything specific you want us to look over the markets for, you've got a half an hour before we leave to think of it and let us know..."

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Getting ashore was never going to be particularly difficult, with Vivi's Air Doors to call on. In truth, the half hour they had needed for prep had been merely a requirement to get into some disguises. They had, in fact, considered the possible need to move around on islands under WG control. Thankfully, between Nami, Robin, and surprisingly Hina, they had a decent level of skill in the crew regarding the creation of disguises. Skill at not being immediately recognizable had been a survival trait for Robin, part of her past as a scam artist for Nami, and actual training for Hina.

Apparently, it was a fairly standard additional training given to female Marine officers, as they tended to have an easier time slipping into local populations to scout for pirates. Perhaps a bit sexist of the Marines, but purely a practical degree of it, since the relative rarity of female Marines meant it legitimately *was* less likely they'd be suspected. It was something they, themselves, would

be taking full advantage of too, since female pirates were even rarer than female Marines. Their own crew was a very strange exception in that they had more women aboard than men.

Thus, a quick bit of temporary hair dye for the girls, clothing that would hide Pagaya's wings, and a complete outfit swap for Luffy, and none of them looked immediately recognizable. Luffy would, normally, be the riskiest of the group, but Kaya had managed to teach him a basic version of her Haki inversion trick. He couldn't disappear almost completely from the senses the way Kaya could, but he *could* apply something like a 'boring' field to himself. One which would make most eyes simply pass him over as part of a crowd. If they ran into Strawberry himself, the imperfect technique would likely be seen through instantly, but Luffy's own Haki was sufficiently better than virtually any Vice Admiral that he *should* sense Strawberry coming.

Disguises ready, the two men and five women were set to head to the island.

"Alright, Vivi. Two Air Doors, I think. One outside the town for myself and Robin. We're still the most likely two to be recognized, so we'll focus on hitting up Robin's cache near the mountain library rather than risking being seen in town. The rest of you will Air Door inside town somewhere out of sight, then split into two groups to get what we want from the markets. Kuina, you're in charge of Vivi and Kaya getting basic sundries and crew requests. Hina, you and Pagaya will focus on the drakestone. If the Marines are watching too closely, give it a pass until we regroup. If that happens, we can go loud for a bit to grab some, then vanish into an Air Door. It's not like they can really find the *Discovery* once we run."

There were nods all around as those going along divided up into the groups that Luffy had just outlined. As soon as they were properly divided, Vivi opened the first Air Door, and Luffy and Robin stepped through into a snowy landscape a fair bit outside the town. Doubly checking the baby Den Den Mushi they'd grabbed was secured against the cold, the two set out toward the library at a sedate, civilian pace.

"So, what do you think the odds something doesn't go wrong are?"

Robin hummed, then smirked.

"Nearly zero, of course. Even if you picked our more subtle crewmembers, things have been much too calm lately."

Luffy shook his head, but he was grinning as he did. It wasn't as if he hadn't thought more or less the same thing, after all.

"True. Too true. I'm more curious which group is going to run into trouble first, to be honest."

Robin nodded at that and they both picked up the pace *just a little*. Even if actually visiting Robin's cache wasn't truly important, it was still better to go through the motions. Besides, said cache was right next to the Frozen Library, and both Luffy and Robin wanted to give it at least a quick visit...

Chapter 93: It's Always Something

-Town Markets - Kuina-

Kuina didn't like how the locals were reacting to their group. More accurately, how they were reacting to outsiders in general. Of the three of them, only she herself was visibly armed. Vivi's slashers were easily concealed as a jeweled belt and Kaya didn't use weapons at all. They should have been one of the least threatening looking groups moving around the market. There were plenty of Marines in sight, and quite a few other outsiders more heavily-armed looking than they, after all.

Yet, while the mix of traders and merchants from the various civilian vessels were acting at least somewhat normally, the locals were very much not. *Something* had them on edge, eyeing any and all strangers carefully. Worse, it was only the *non-Marine* strangers they were eyeing so. Which meant that the usual possibility of the locals being afraid of pissing off the garrison wasn't the issue. Marines, even well-behaved ones, were often enough to put the backs of locals up if they were garrisoning an island in force. Yet that clearly wasn't what was going on here.

No, if anything the locals were actively trying to stay *near* the Marines, even if it didn't seem to be a conscious decision for most of them. They were also keeping children close, despite the children not looking at all happy about that fact.

She could see that many of the other non-locals were instinctively sticking together in their own crews, too. Being a trader on the Grand Line wasn't an occupation you got into if you didn't have *damn good* instincts, and clearly the locals' behavior was putting the visiting crews a bit on edge. Not enough to stop them doing regular business, courage was *also* a required feature for traders on the Grand Line and there was nothing *obviously* wrong. Yet it was enough that the various crews weren't spreading out the way you'd expect of those who were on shore leave from their ships. It wasn't obvious or drastic, certainly not enough to disrupt regular business, but it *was* noticeable. At least to her.

"Girls, I think we should skip most of the basics and focus only on the special requests and a quick skim for anything of major note. Keep your ears open, too. Something is wrong, even if I don't think it's anything drastic yet. Certainly nothing related to us directly, I think."

Kaya nodded seriously, though Vivi looked surprised before doing the same. Well, that probably wasn't too much of a shocker. As capable as Vivi was, she was still one of the less experienced members of the crew. Technically, Kaya was even more so in some ways, but the spiritualist also had a triple dose of extra special bullshit going on with her senses. She'd probably picked up something was wrong even before Kuina. As if to prove her right, the younger woman spoke up quietly.

"The energy of the island is...odd. At first, I thought it was just the island itself, and I still think that's mostly it. But there's something, some sort of eddy or tide, building in the background of the rest of the oddity that is the island itself. It's not like Asuka, not a curse, but *something* weird is going on. I have no idea what it could be, though. Not yet."

Kuina nodded and tried not to let her palm itch too much as the urge to rest a hand on the handle of Wado Ichimonji grew ever-so-slowly stronger. Maybe they'd get away before whatever it was came to pass, but their luck rarely ever worked that way. Not that she was complaining, since

it gave her plenty of chances to grow. If something major happened in the middle of a city with a major Marine garrison, though, things could get a little bit ugly...

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-The Frozen Library-

Luffy had to admit that, even on the Grand Line, the Frozen Library was an impressive sight. Carved into the side of the same massive mountain as the Drakestone mine, he could honestly admit that it seemed like it *could* have been carved by a dragon. Which was apparently the local legend. For one thing, it was stupidly tall inside, to the point that if it *wasn't* a dragon that had gone it, then he'd lay high odds that a Giant had performed the working instead, though not for their own use. After all, the 'books' were only slightly larger than human sized.

The 'Frozen' part of the name also certainly fit the place. Every bookshelf had layers of ice and icicles, the desks were covered in frost, and the décor of the entire library was all carved into the permafrost of the ceiling, pillars, and walls. One would think it was hardly a good environment for books. Until, that is, one managed to pry a book loose from the ice and realize that none of them were made of something as plebian as *paper*. Instead, incredibly thin sheets of drakestone, which showed some serious tensile strength that made him itch to experiment with it, were bound up in the books as if they were paper. The ink too, according to Robin, was something unique and local, a way to stain drakestone 'paper' that was far more durable and permanent than normal inks.

Now, if only the place wasn't completely empty of people, including the locals that should have charged them the modest fee of a few thousand belli each to access the library for a day. Robin had frowned, commented on their absence immediately, and spread out her network of eyes and ears the moment they'd gotten inside. Luffy was merely taking in the sights of the library while waiting, as she tried to figure out what was going on.

"Found someone in the lower levels. Let's see where he's...ah. Quite a few more people and...oh dear. That doesn't seem good at all."

Robin's tone had changed with the 'ah,' becoming even grimmer with the 'oh dear' a few moments later, and Luffy shifted to give her his full attention. For a long minute, she didn't speak, clearly focused more on whatever it was she'd discovered. When her eyes finally focused properly on his again, there was a scowl on her face.

"I followed a man in blood red robes through a hidden door. He came out in a chamber that looks like it's been used for a decades, if not centuries, for some sort of ritual sacrifice. Piles of skeletons and frozen corpses at the edges of the room, and more men in similar robes, chanting. Not to mention what looks unfortunately like the thawing body of a dragon trapped in ice. One large enough to brush the ceilings of the library."

Luffy groaned. Yes, because *of course* dragons had to be real. Why not? Also, apparently they'd stumbled on a group trying to...what, wake one from hibernation? Resurrect it? Part of him just wanted to leave this be, maybe after dropping a warning for the Marines. Yet he'd both recognized the fascination in Robin's voice and had *zero* clue if a single Vice Admiral would be

enough to deal with a *dragon* if these cultists, or what he was assuming were cultists, managed to wake the thing up.

“I think I’d better call this into the rest of the crew and have them look into rumors in town, then you and I can go get a better look at what these cultists are doing.”

Robin nodded, turning her attention back to her network of extended senses, even as Luffy pulled out the Baby Den Den Mushi. There was some risk to using it, since Mushi this small couldn’t be paired with a White Den Den Mushi to prevent people from listening in, but needs must when the dragon cultists drive...

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-Town Markets - Hina-

Hina frowned as she listened to the quick-and-dirty description her Captain was providing. He wasn’t going into much detail, knowing they might be listened in on, which Hina understood. Even what he was saying was alarming though. Particularly given that she’d managed to pick up a few rumors after she and Pagaya realized that the town was no longer selling drakestone to outsiders. The locals had been apologetic, but apparently the Marines had clamped down on sales of the stuff after arriving in force. It wasn’t upsetting most of the locals much, since the Marines themselves were paying a premium for the material instead. But it had meant that she and the older man hadn’t had much to do. She’d decided, on her own initiative, to try and get a feel for the local conditions as a result. Which is why she risked broadcasting more than a quick response back to Luffy now.

“Captain. Hin—we, we have picked up rumors about people going missing recently. Apparently, there have always been some strange disappearances. People supposedly lost to the mines or out in the wilderness, despite a lack of major predators. But the numbers have gone up significantly of late, enough to put the Marines on edge and have the locals bunkering down. You didn’t find anyone normal at the library as it’s officially closed right now, with the usual caretakers and guards sticking in town for the time being.”

There was only a moment of hesitation before her Captain replied.

“Understood. That makes it more likely that they are nearly done with whatever they are up to here. Gather the others and head out to the library as quietly as you can. We’ll see what we can find out before you get here. Tell Princess to be ready to bring the rest of the crew in, if they are needed.”

Hina nodded.

“Understood. Hina is on it.”

She cringed as she hung up the Mushi. Damn it! That verbal tick was a much bigger problem than she’d thought. She hadn’t had it back when she’d trained for this sort of covert operation. Hopefully, no one at the Marine base had been listening in...

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-Local Marine HQ-

“Admiral! Admiral Strawberry! Signals intelligence picked up something you need to hear! We think the Straw Hat Pirates might be in town!”

Vice Admiral Strawberry, still nursing a slightly stiff arm and leg that had been broken at Marineford, but mostly recovered, turned to look at the Commander who had just burst into his office. Pursing his lips, he took in what the man had said and spoke firmly.

“Explain. Quickly. If a crew like that is present, there is no time to waste. No, wait.”

Quickly standing and moving passed the Commander, ignoring the throb from only mostly-healed injuries, Strawberry stuck his head out into his primary aide’s workspace.

“Lieutenant, put all Marines aboard ships on alert, *quietly*. Then start spreading the word to the officers ashore to gather up their people. Try not to alert the locals that anything is wrong.”

As soon as he got confirmation from his aide, he turned back to the officer that had burst into his office.

“Now, explain quickly. What makes you think the Straw Hats have resurfaced *here* of all places?”

As the commander reported what the local intelligence office, on high alert due to several squads of Marines and even more locals going missing in the last two weeks, had overheard, Strawberry’s face grew grim. The name ‘Hina,’ used the way it had been, virtually confirmed the Straw Hats were here. Doubly so with the title ‘Princess’ used, even if they’d showed some basic sense in not using that Princess’s name. Yet, the pirates also seemed to have stumbled into what might be the very trouble his people had been investigating without success for months. Given the particular habits of *this* particular band of pirates...damn it.

“Gather every officer that can use Haki or the Rokushiki. Anyone else will be completely useless against them. We’ll move on the library, *carefully*. With a little luck, maybe these cultists and the pirates will fight each other and let us only need deal with the winner.”

Somehow, Strawberry doubted everything would work out that well, but he had to hope. Surely the Marines were due at least *some* good fortune after the run of disasters they’d had recently...

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