

Heya all, rather last minute this month, I know but both Tomon and I were plagued by real life issues. Not going to apologize beyond that. Regardless, I hope you enjoy this, the start of the Impel Down mini-arc.

This has been edited by me via Grammarly (to a certain point...), Tomon, and Hiryo. Hopefully this means there aren't enough small mistakes to harm your enjoyment of the chapter.

Chapter 38: Oh, Oh, Heaven Knows, We Belong...

After Gion's ship passed the Gates of Justice, it took barely two days before they were within sight of the World Government's super secure prison. Throughout that time, the ship passed through the Calm Belt, which 'Elizabeth' had made a point to remind 'Ranko' of several times since they had passed through the Gates of Justice. First, it was, "Look at how fast we are moving! If this current doesn't go deep enough for Eve and our crew to use as well, we might leave them behind."

At that, Makino had bitten her lip, looking worried as she looked at the closed door to their cabin for a moment. "To say nothing of the Sea Kings. If they attack the ship, what kind of defenses can they use through the coating bubble?"

"I trust Nami to figure the ocean out whatever they run into. And I trust Franky to have come up with a way for the ship to move underwater. I couldn't have, but that's why we have other crewmates," Luffy had replied, her words a mix of firmness and affection as she winked at Makino. "Trust them to do their parts of this plan so we can concentrate on ours."

She had then paused, and earned herself a smack upside the head when she went on to say, "And as for the Sea Kings, well, Chopper will hopefully be able to talk to them, or if not, serve as a distraction for the rest of the crew." After Makino had smacked her one, the redhead continued. "My point still stands thought, about how we need to trust them to get their part of the job done, one way or another."

The second time, Makino concentrated further on that second point, if in a somewhat roundabout way as they came within sight of Impel Down. "I realize the marines use Seastone on their battleships, coating the bottom with it, right? So that the sea monsters see it as just another bit of sea or something. I've always wondered how that works, but I've also always wondered how the heck marines have so much Seastone in the first place. Do you know anything about that?"

Luffy shook her head, not turning from where she was staring out the porthole, giving a great view of the Calm Belt beyond. She could see large monsters rising out of the ocean before submerging themselves quickly. Sea Kings, all of them, the smallest being the size of two battleships set prow to aft. "Nope. Gramps never mentioned it, but they gotta be making it by the ton, you know? It also isn't supposed to be all that easy to work with in the first place. But

they do, and no one else does,” Luffy answered with a shrug. “And if you are going to put a prison where the world’s worst criminals are supposed to be kept, putting it in the Calm Belt is a good start, I suppose.”

“Hmm, the World Government had a monopoly on Seastone already when I was a member of the Rumber Pirates,” Brook mused. “I had also wondered how they would have placed a prison in the Calm Belt in the first place. Did they simply take over an existing island or try to build something into the very ocean. After hearing about this Tarai Current, I would not put it past them. Still... something about that is bothering me.”

“Yeah, I know what ya mean, Jack,” Luffy answered, shaking her head as she used Brook’s assumed name. They had all been careful of that even here in their room, just in case. “It’s a little... over the top. I suppose we shouldn’t be surprised by it, but still, why go to the lengths to separate Impel Down from Marineford? Why not put it up in Mary Geoise, and trust its security behind the security of the Holy Land, and the Bowl Heads can just whistle up some real monsters to ‘play’ with rather than regular people?”

“Say rather, who have they imprisoned there beyond Ace that makes this idea viable at all,” Makino rejoined, saying nothing to the vitriol in Ranko’s voice as she spoke about the Tenryubito. She shared in it. “While the WeeGee as a whole are a group I would not piss on if they were on fire, the marines do at least some good in keeping peace worldwide. We can’t forget that a lot of the prisoners in Impel Down should undoubtedly stay there for the good of the world as a whole.”

“Heh, yeah, well, there is a reason we never even thought about making this a general jailbreak. We go in, find Ace, and figure out how to get him out, silently or otherwise. The rest of the prisoners there can go hang for all I care,” Luffy answered, but she had taken the greenette’s words to heart and looked at her shrewdly. “But you’re still worried about the crew, aren’t you?”

“Of course! The importance of the Seastone can’t be overstated, and they’ll be going underwater to boot!” Makino hissed.

“And what are we supposed to do about it?” Luffy’s response stunned Makino and he went on. “Nothing. That’s what. I trust in my crew to have somehow found a solution, hard or easy, they will have handled it.” She grinned then. “They are the crew of the Pirate King, and some of the smartest people I’ve ever met. If Franky, Laki, Robin and Nami can’t figure something out, then no one could and this plan was doomed from the start. But we won’t know that until later.” Luffy poked Makino lightly in the forehead. “Now, get your game face on big sis, it’s go time.”

Makino slowly nodded, her face firming, while Brook let out a small chuckle both of them buoyed by the trust Luffy was showing their fellow crewmen.

Moments later the ship slowed, and the three disguised pirates prepared for the next stage of that plan.

"A thought has occurred to me," Brook murmured, looking up from where he was stringing his violin. "How exactly will you get into the prison in the first place? Despite several bumps in the road, the rest of our plan has worked far better than I ever thought it would. But this part we never actually talked about."

With a smirk on her face, Luffy disappeared under her Umi-Sen-Ken, moving towards the skeleton man and sitting on the hammock beside him before coming out of the technique. "That way."

"... You know, with all I have seen of this crew, that doesn't surprise me nearly as much as it should," Brook said, shaking his head. "Yohohohoho, perhaps I am becoming acclimatized to strange things. An ability that will undoubtedly serve me well going forward on the Grand Line."

A knock on their cabin's door then, and a voice intoned from out in the hall, "Bounty hunters, prepare yourselves for inspection on the deck. We will transfer the prisoners to Impel Down the moment we dock, and the Admiral assumed you would want to be present."

"I don't know what he means by telling us to prepare ourselves for inspection, presumably to make sure we're clean or something? It ain't like we got uniforms," Luffy quipped before hopping to her feet. "Come on, let's get a move on."

"That is well and good, Luffy-san, but you realize you can't just disappear in front of everyone. How are you going to get out of being there?" Brook persisted.

"I'm hoping that Zoro and Sanji between them cause some kind of ruckus by the door. Once they do, I can head back to our room and then make my way back into Impel Down under the Umi-Sen-Ken."

Brook frowned a bit at the unknown words as well as how lackadaisical Luffy seemed to be, muttering to himself, "Now, where have I heard those kinds of words before. Something about their tone and tenor is tickling my brain something fierce. But of course, I don't have a brain anymore. It's dried up and blown away. Yohohohoho, skull joke!"

Makino just shook her head, reminding Brook to get back into character. "Skeleton Jack is quiet most of the time, quite unlike Brook, who lets his music do his talking for him beyond asking about seeing women's panties. Muttering to himself and making skull jokes is not in his character."

Makino then turned to Luffy as he continued walking, her voice dropping into a whisper that even her two companions had to strain to hear. "And if you had told me that your plan to

get through the prison's front door was built on luck and prayers, I would not have gone along with this plan so readily!"

"I'm not just trusting **my** luck. I'm trusting the crew's group luck, which is generally pretty damn good. Especially in comparison to mine..." Luffy added the last bit almost sotto voce before going on. "I'm also relying on Sanji and Zoro to cause a scene. That isn't luck. That's a one hundred percent certainty. It just remains to be seen what kind of trouble they cause."

And if that doesn't work, I'm more than willing to go hot right now, Luffy thought to herself, smirking coldly. If I can't get in one way, I'll force my way in.

With that, the three of them fell silent, heading up onto the main deck where they found the majority of the crew already standing at attention bar two still working the wheel. Gion was also there, leading a group of marines who were pulling the prisoners along. Both of them were once more wearing chains around their wrists and legs, although neither of them had bags or anything else over their eyes.

Luffy thought that would have been part of the normal operating procedure, so the prisoners didn't even have the faintest idea of where Impel Down was or even looked like. But evidently knowing it was in the Calm Belt – even now, Luffy could see several Sea Kings - wasn't enough to worry the Marines. *Or perhaps they think that seeing their final destination in front of them was a bigger psychological impact? Meh. I gotta say, the place isn't really all that much to look at.*

Even with the limited crew, the ship was able to nudge up against one of the docks thanks to the Tarai Current carrying it directly there. The crew dropped both fore and aft anchors, and then a plank was run out, letting them down to the docks. There, they were met by another Marine officer, a vice admiral like Gion, who saluted the woman despite their equal rank. "Gion. Welcome to Impel Down." He peered over her shoulders at the two prisoners, then the three strangely clad passengers. "Judge Baskerville sent word ahead, although I honestly wasn't certain what to make of the fact that you'd gone recruiting."

"Mozambique," Gion answered. Although subtle, her tone implied that while they were equal in rank, she had seniority over the man in front of them, despite looking as if they were the same age to the listening Luffy. Or perhaps Gion was a bit younger? It was hard to tell. Luffy was certain that she had more authority than the other admiral at least. "You know that the marines should always be looking for recruits. If Morgan hadn't been such a little bitch, the Pirate Hunter here would've joined us rather than the Straw Hats. As it is, his fate is sealed."

From behind the two officers, Zoro snorted, shaking his head. "I don't believe in God, and I don't believe in fate. I make my own future. Being sent to this place isn't going to change that."

Mozambique bristled at that, while Gion simply gave one of her habitual snorts. "False bravado will not save you here. No prisoner has ever escaped Impel Down. You will not be the first to dream big, only to realize the reality of your sins once under the tender mercies of our jailers."

Zoro simply stared back at the man, not giving in, until Ranko kicked him lightly in the back. "Enough of that. I want to get my money and then maybe a half day's worth of shopping for new weapons before I officially join up with the Marines. To say nothing of some alone time back in my cabin."

The redhead grumbled that last bit, her face twisting into a scowl as she looked down at her stomach and nether regions. It was a look that passed right over the heads of all the men around her but Gion and Makino both understood and grimaced in sympathy.

Turning back to Mozambique, Gion gestured with one hand forward. "Ranko's right. Let's get a move on."

At that, the Marines began to pull Zoro and Sanji along the docks toward the prison.

The prison itself was not a towering edifice, as most would have assumed. Instead, it was almost squat, seemingly far wider than it was tall, made of gray stone under an overcast sky. That wasn't to say that it was small. The topmost level of Impel Down towered over the numerous marine ships in docks around the prison by at least four or five stories taller than the tops of their mainmast. Yet it was even wider going out to either side, disappearing out of Ranko's line of sight in either direction. That had begun several leagues out, showing the prison was the size of a medium-sized prison. *Still, why do I feel there's more to this place underneath than we can see?*

The doors into the prison were just as forbidding as the outside, massive doors fixed to let a normal-sized giant through. But Ranko had seen Oz, and knew he would have had trouble crawling through the stores, let alone walking through them. The hall beyond was equal to the doors, except for the fact that all of the walls and ceiling were lined with what looked like guns pointing out of very tiny slits in the walls, each of them moving to track the prisoners as they moved... along with the three bounty hunters. "Damn, it's like ya don't trust us or something," Ranko quipped, snorting.

In each corner was a surveillance Mushi, their eye stalks also locked on the prisoners as they entered.

At the far end of that first hallway, they were forced to enter a small side door that threw Ranko off for a moment until they entered the area on the other side of the side doorway. This was a holding area. Several jailers waited for them, along with what had to be some kind of automated shower thing to one side. This probably meant that two large doors they bypassed a moment ago led into an equivalent area.

That wasn't nearly as interesting to Ranko as the man leading the jailers. He was a large man, towering over everyone there by a wide margin. Luffy thought he was at least sixteen feet tall, not quite up to Moria's or Kuma's size, but surely up there. He was dressed all in black with red highlights, had little demon wings, and looked almost like a mandrill monkey crossed with a devil because he had two large horns coming out of his head to go with the wings and the same markings as a mandrill on his face. His hands were massive, covered in metal gauntlets.

At the moment, one hand was on his stomach, as he grumbled to the jailers all around him, "Why did you get me out of my special room for this? The prisoners are just pirates. No matter their fame, I don't have to be roused to meet with them. It's so bright out here. I want to be in a small dark room, locked away from everyone. In fact, I want to lock away my heart as well."

To one side of the massive man was a normal-sized, if good-looking blonde woman with her hair in her curls and an eyepatch over one eye. She was dressed in a stylish-looking jailer's outfit that almost made Ranko wince, reminding him of some uniforms he'd seen in his old life from WW2. *Huh, come to think of it, I need to sit down with Robin and figure out the history of this world before the whole WeeGee BS. Definitely not a good look, though... although even me, a taken man, er woman at the moment, can say she makes it work.*

Still, the shorter than it should be skirt and short sleeves definitely took away from the suit's severity. Her chest was also kind of on the Nami size of such things, although at least there, the blonde wasn't dressed to draw the eye. Her uniform's blouse was buttoned up right to the neck, showing no hint of boob. Which was somewhat odd considering how much leg she displayed. *I'm getting some severe double messages here. She almost reminds me of what Nami and Makino said about that blonde secretary of Iceberg's. Might be a kick-type fighter, then. One willing to take advantage of guys staring at her panties,* Ranko mused internally.

"You know you must be here to meet a vice admiral in person, sir. It's standard procedure and simply good work practice to greet visiting flag officers personally," the blonde answered firmly, tapping one hand on the top of a clipboard she carried under her other arm.

"Dear lady, if it is a choice between being greeted by the big man over there and you, only a blind man would even consider it a choice in the first place. If I am graced by a mere glimpse of you every day, I will be the most model prisoner you have ever seen, I assure you," Sanji said.

This caused some growls and mutters from marines and guards alike, but Sanji didn't even acknowledge their existence. Instead, he went into Mellorine Mode™ twirling forward, ignoring that he was shackled or the intervening marines. Several tried to stop him, but he just shifted around them all without bothering to fight back, merely dodging around them. Before any of the guards at the other end of the room could react, he knelt before the woman, holding his still shackled hand to her as if he was a knight asking for a favor from a lady. "Might I know the name of this most beautiful flower?"

As the other marines all bristled at how quickly Sanji had moved through them, Gion rolled her eyes chuckling. "Ah, there it is, that flirting thing you warned us of, Ranko."

"Yep, as you can see, it's really weird. It makes the Aho move so much faster than normal and so randomly, too," Ranko answered, shaking her head. "Fighting him like that is annoying until you flash a bit of skin. Then it becomes almost demeaning at how easy it is."

The blonde woman stared at Sanji and began to flush a little bit, stepping backward and holding up her clipboard in front of her almost defensively. She was used to the hoots and hollers of prisoners, the ribald comments, the shouts and jeers of 'giving her a good time' or what have you. She was **not** used to the more polite version of romantic compliments, nor had she ever been called a beautiful flower before. "I, I'm Domino, the head jailer here, and, and get back into line, prisoner! There are procedures that must be completed."

"But of course, dear lady, as long as those procedures allow me to see you again in the future?" Sanji smiled hopefully, his one visible eye turning into a heart.

Then Vice Admiral Mozambica grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and hauled him back towards where Zoro was still waiting by the door. Unlike the others, he didn't seem to have taken Sanji's over-the-top attitude badly, amusingly enough. He was just furious at the way he'd been able to evade his marines. "Time and place, pirate, seriously. And you lot!" he barked at his marines. "I'm going to make you all go through drills for the rest of the day for being unable to touch Black Leg just now. That is an utter embarrassment."

While the local marines saluted and looked sheepish, Gion spoke up, sticking a thumb towards Sanji as Zoro and the bounty hunters laughed along with the Pirate Hunter. "I'm sorry about that. That would be Love Cook Sanji. I'm sorry, his bounty calls him Black Leg, but Love Cook fits much better. And the other one is Pirate Hunter Zoro."

"Ah, ahem, yes, we, we've heard of the one who killed two Tenryubito," Domino said, recovering her normal poise, while the large man simply just stared at the pirates. "I believe we had some special orders concerning him, sir?"

"Indeed we did." Magellan nodded ponderously, pointing a large finger towards Zoro, reminding him very strongly of Franky for a moment, given the size of that hand. "While normally prisoners who are scheduled for a quick execution would be housed on level one and only subjected to the horrors there, so that their faces at least would be fit for being seen due to the nature of your crimes, we've been told to put you through the greatest rigors we can. That means Level IV or Level V, depending on which is most obviously uncomfortable for you. You will face the full horror of your sins under our care for however long we have you here."

"I killed two slavers as they tried to attack me first. If you're expecting me to repent or whatever, you'll be waiting a long, long time." Zoro snorted, causing many of the marines and the jailers to start shouting insults at him.

Again, Ranko kicked him in the back, shoving him forward. "Come on, let's get this over with. You said something about procedures? Is that before or after you give me and my companions our money? I'm all for ensuring these two are safely behind your prison doors before we leave. It's why we're here at all. But I doubt you'd want us to actually enter the prison. We might've decided to join the marines, but we're still technically independent agents right now, and I doubt you'd want us to see anything beyond this point."

"You are correct, Red-Haired Ranko, but we still have procedures to go through," Domino answered, seemingly having recovered from Sanji's flirt assault.

"OY!" Ranko growled. "I hate that title. I ain't related to Shanks, so figure out something else to call me, damn it!"

"I would recommend you take that up with the marine's Public Relations and Bounty Assignments department," Domino answered, amused. "They are the ones who come up with such things."

Turning back to the two pirates, Domino gestured to one side, and two of the guards nearby brought out what looked like some kind of handheld scanner. They ran it over the bodies of the two prisoners, poking and prodding Sanji a bit harder than Zoro before nodding to Domino, who made a checkmark on her clipboard. "Now, to make certain you aren't bringing in any diseases. When prisoners die on us, we prefer that the causes of those deaths be our own."

First, both men were given some kind of drink, and Zoro gagged. "UGH, what the hell is that stuff!?"

"Medicine, a new medicine made by Dr. Vegapunk," Mozambique supplied, shaking his head. "It's experimental, but it's supposed to flush out any kind of flu or other diseases in your system."

"Exactly so. And now, to make certain you aren't bringing in any germs further," Domino made another pair of checkmarks, then gestured the prisoners to one side toward the shower stall there.

Sanji went readily enough, even holding out his hands when ordered to, getting his handcuffs released, as he was then ordered to strip down and enter a small cubicle there. The water came on, cold water judging by the lack of steam and Sanji's near shriek. "AHHHH, damn it, you could have at least made it warm!"

From his position by the door, Mozambique smirked and decided to take some of the wind out of the pirate's sails. "This is a prison fool. Nothing here is made for your supposed comfort. And don't worry about any shrinkage. I'm certain your eventual prison mates will understand any shortcomings there."

“OY!” Sanji shouted, while the marines, Zoro and guards laughed, whereby all the girls, even Ranko, rolled their eyes.

A moment later, two other nozzles shot down a kind of foaming soap. Two guards also came forward with long-handled brushes, and Ranko shook her head as they went to work over the voluble protests of Sanji. “I don’t get this at all. From all I’ve heard, Impel Down is more just a way to torture people in slow motion for the most part. Why do you care if prisoners come in sick, dirty or whatever?”

“A large majority of the guards here in Impel Down are lifers, people born here in the jail,” Gion answered with a shrug. “Because of that, they don’t have as good an immune system as we who sail the oceans. That’s why so many of them wear those masks and such.”

Actually, that was something of a lie. Gion knew it was actually only two groups that really needed that kind of defense: the Blue Monkey Guards and the Devilkin Guards like Magellan and several of the guards before her. But there were also those like Domino who did not.

Five minutes passed as Zoro waited his turn, and then Sanji was pushed out of the shower to the other side of the room where, behind a small wall, he got dressed in the normal prisoner’s clothing, shaking his head. “Alas that there is no privacy here. I believe there should always be some mystery to an individual’s body until well into the courtship,” he said, his eyes flicking to Domino. “Then again, as you allow these lowly peons and myself to gaze upon your gorgeous legs, perhaps we are even now.”

Domino was far more used to being complimented - if such a word could be used for many of the comments sent her way - about her legs, and she rolled with it. She had looked away after he passed through the shower, and now she turned back, shaking her head with a little chuckle. “You know, if there were more women among our prisoners, I might be a little worried about what introducing you to them might lead to. As it is, I suppose you should get all you’re flirting out now, considering how rarely you will be able to practice it from now until you die. Much like how you will not find any cigarettes within.”

“Why practice something already perfected or was that a request?” Sanji answered smoothly, seemingly having missed the comment about cigarettes or ignoring it in favor of the beauty in front of him. “Certainly, I could, as you put it, get my flirting out of the way now, or I could save it up for when next I see you. For no matter how that meeting goes, it will be a delight to me.”

This line earned another blush from Domino and a smack to the back of his head from two of the guards, who were not too pleased with him flirting with their boss/idol.

For his part, Magellan simply didn’t care, watching Zoro and Sanji closely and flicking his eyes over to the trio of bounty hunters. If Ranko had any thought about sneaking away now

unseen and leaving Elizabeth and Jack to somehow make up a story or something, the man's wariness would have wrecked that plan.

Actually, Magellan being so focused at a time like this was very unusual. Normally after spending time in his special place (his personal bathroom), he would be much more concerned with how his stomach felt than anything else. But something about these two prisoners set him on edge. He couldn't quite say it, but their generally fearless air toward the prison was part of it.

It wasn't bravado. Magellan knew bravado. He had seen it in practically every prisoner to pass through these doors. Yet these two honestly didn't seem to fear being in Impel Down. It was highly unusual, although again, Magellan had seen the like before. Former Shichibukai Jinbei, for one, and others of that level of strength. But even with that, there still was something else to these two pirates. Something about the way they stood and looked around.

Only when he locked eyes with Zoro did he realize what was sitting his teeth on edge. *Not only do they, not fear being inside Impel Down, but those are also not the eyes of someone who has any fear of death at all.*

Thankfully for the disguised Luffy's plans, her initial thoughts on Zoro and Sanji causing trouble proved all too accurate a moment later. Although it came from a source that the pirate captain had not anticipated.

Grumbling, Zoro went through the same procedure that Sanji had, and once he was changing into his prison garb, Domino nodded to Magellan. "Procedures one through three have been completed, sir. They are ready for intake."

Magellan threw off his apathy and saluted Gion, and then stated formally. "As Warden of Impel Down, I take command of these two prisoners, Black Leg Sanji and Pirate Hunter Zoro from Vice Admiral Gion."

Admiral Gion replied similarly, although her salute was a little sloppier. "I, Vice Admiral Gion, acknowledge that I have handed over the prisoners Love Cook Sanji and Pirate Hunter Zoro to Impel Down."

Magellan was about to turn to the three bounty hunters, his hand already pointing to another jailer who stood beside several large bags of beli, when Zoro suddenly piped up. Zoro's eyes had been scanning the Marines around them and then the jailers, a scowl of anger appearing on his face as he suddenly realized that his swords were not being handed over to jailers with them. "Wait, where are my swords!?"

Turning back to lock gazes with Zoro, Gion snorted once more. "Do you honestly think that we would leave swords like those three gathering dust here in Impel Down?" she sobered, shaking her head. "As a swordswoman, I understand, but we who wield the blade must always

understand they will sometimes pass us by. I will keep them with me until your execution. Those blades will continue to see honorable service with the marines when you have passed.”

At this, Zoro’s eyes blazed, and without warning, he wrenched his shoulder out of the jailer holding him on that side, twisting around and smashing his elbow into the man’s face. The blow was so strong, the guard was lifted off his feet and sent flying backward, hurling him into the shower stall. The man struck with such force that he shattered the various shower heads there with such force that they came off, while one of the man’s feet caught the shower controls.

Instantly water started to spray everywhere, blinding several other jailers and crashing over Ranko’s head where she had charged forward. Beside her, Makino instantly tripped up as the soap sprays also began to spread, making the floor insanely slippery. Skeleton Jack kept his footing but was too far behind Zoro to stop him as he charged forward.

The First Mate’s body was covered with Busoshoku as he crashed into Magellan, sending him sideways into Domino and taking both of them to the floor. The warden’s first attempt to call upon his Venom Fruit powers instantly stopped, and he began to grapple with Zoro as Domino cried out, shaken by the impact. “Kyah!”

Luffy’s initial thoughts on Domino’s combat style were completely wrong. She was no frontline combatant. Domino was honestly the kind of secretary that Kalifa had posed as on Water 7.

This caused Sanji to shout, “Damn you, Zoro!” and moved to attack Zoro, only to get dogpiled by a few jailers. “Gah, you bastards!”

Still on the floor, Magellan’s first response was stymied by Zoro’s use of Busoshoku and Domino’s close proximity. While he would not have cared about many of the lower rankers, Domino was far too integral a part of the running of Impel Down to let her die out of hand. Instead of calling on his venom fruit, he rolled out of the way of Zoro’s next attack, taking Domino with him as Zoro slammed the chains connecting his hands into the ground where they had been a second before.

Zoro was then forced to turn around, blocking a kick from Gion, although he took one from Ranko in the leg, both women having leaped up over the sudsy slippery footing below. Landing, Ranko nearly lost her footing, but she did so quite deliberately, taking with her several of the other marines who had lost their footing on the suddenly slick floor. Then Ranko was tied up in Zoro’s chains and hurled to one side as Zoro shoulder-charged into Gion. *Yes! Fuck, this is fantastic. Well done, Zoro!*

Gion ducked around a follow-on strike from Zoro’s chains, her sword out and the flat of it crashing into the side of his head. Busoshoku meant Busoshoku again, and although Zoro didn’t sustain any damage, he was sent hurtling into a wall nearby, which shattered under the

impact, sending him into a similar room but one designed for larger-than-average prisoners. “I thought I had your word as a swordsman that you wouldn’t try to escape!”

Zoro snarled as he pushed his way out of the rubble of the wall, blocking a punch from Mozambica with his forearm. “You did. You had it when I was under your control!” Mozambica’s Busoshoku wasn’t nearly as good as Gion’s, and the strike barely phased Zoro, causing him to stumble even as he grabbed a sword from the ground near a fallen marine. With that in hand, he whirled into an attack, which the other Vice Admiral barely blocked with his own blade, which cracked, the other man unable to cover it with Busoshoku. This blocked Gion from closing once more for just a second. “I’m not under your control anymore!”

“No, you are under mine,” Magellan announced coldly, thrusting his hands forward. From them, venom began to drip as noxious fumes rose all around him. “Masks!”

The jailers, including Domino, quickly fastened on masks that had been hanging at their sides or already on their faces. The low-ranking marines clapped their hands over their mouths, moving back towards the entrance, while Skeleton Jack and Elizabeth, who had both moved forward and were about to engage Zoro, also reacted. Elizabeth fell back, gasping and nearly on her knees already, grabbing at her nose and mouth, while Jack continued forward, engaging Zoro with a series of thrusts, pulling him away from Mozambica, able to flit around him faster than Gion, who had nearly lost her footing a moment ago as she tried to not let her attack hit Mozambica.

Zoro blocked two strikes from the skeleton’s sword and then barely dodged under a strike from a recovered Gion before his sword was shattered by another strike. Then he was on his knees, a double kick from Ranko having driven into the back of his head, sending him forward. Ranko had bounced up and over the other combatants and now came at him from behind and above.

Despite that, Zoro used the momentum of this hit to batter Jack backward before he dropped the hilt of the shattered blade and tried to raise his hands, throwing around the chains on his arms like a lasso. Gion backed away quickly, while Ranko flipped herself away, then ducked low, crouching underneath Zoro’s backswing, locking in a headlock with one arm as her other hand grabbed the top of Zoro’s mouth, prying it open.

Magellan’s attack hit them, and Zoro began to feel the effects of it, despite his Busoshoku as Ranko clamped her mouth closed, willing herself not to breathe. While the Busoshoku would’ve made him immune to contact poison, the fumes from Magellan’s venom were so potent that even inhaling them for a few moments was enough to cause weakness and pain in those so afflicted. His Busoshoku wasn’t nearly good enough to protect his insides and lungs against such an attack.

He stumbled, and Ranko held Zoro in a chokehold even as she hissed, “Trust Makino and Brook to look after your swords. This was good, but don’t take it too far, Zoro!” Even speaking

those words caused Ranko to hack as the venom's fumes hit her. *God, that shit is nasty! If I ever have to fight this guy, I'd better go full Busoshoku right off the bat.*

Zoro had truthfully forgotten the plan when he learned that his swords wouldn't be here somewhere in Impel Down. He'd been concerned while aboard Gion's ship but had gotten used to their absence from his side over the past week. And so, he hadn't thought to use his limited Kenbunshoku to ensure they were coming with him into the prison. Hearing they hadn't had sent Zoro into a fury.

But now the effects of Ranko's words, the chokehold and the poison quickly began to gang up on him. Zoro was soon collapsing forward, his Busoshoku failing as his consciousness left him, and Ranko rolled off the green-haired man, hopping deeper into the second receiving area, which thankfully put her outside the effects of the fume cloud.

She took several minutes to recover as the fumes were pulled out of the room by a series of grills in the ceiling, then shook her head, moving into the other room and helping Elizabeth to her feet. "And here I thought the flirty perv would be the one to cause trouble. More fool me, I guess."

"Yes, well, thank you for your help, even if it wasn't needed. My powers would have dealt with quickly enough," Magellan grumbled, somewhat annoyed at how well Zoro had been doing in the chaotic melee. *Next time I won't warn anyone and just flood the area with venom!* "And you are certainly not going to get a bonus for this."

"Don't want one," Ranko grumbled back. "The only thing I want right now is to get out of these wet clothes."

It was only now with the danger of Zoro and Magellan's response past that many of the marines and jailers became aware that Ranko's shirt was quite see-through, and the bounty hunter definitely did not believe in bras. Elizabeth had also gotten soaked, but in her case, her clothing was thick enough that it only now hugged her figure like a second skin. It did not, as Ranko's yellow shirt was doing off her breasts to the point her nipples could be seen.

Nearly all the jailers there stared at them both, taking in the sight like drowning men at sea would the sight of a ship in the distance, with many of the marines following suit. While Domino's presence showed there were women working here, it was equally apparent they were few and far between, as they were among the marines.

Seeing that, Domino coughed a bit, gesturing down at her chest even as she pushed to her feet, waving off Sanji's attempt at helping her despite being dragged away by several of her guards. "Er, I think I would second that idea, Ms. Ranko."

This caused Ranko to look down too, whereupon she crossed her arms over her chest and looked away, inwardly gleeful at how well this had gone. “Fuck you all. I’m heading back to the ship. Liz, Jack, you two stay here and get our money.”

Elizabeth stared down at herself, and then sighed, nodding and ignoring her wet clothing as she looked around the receiving room. During the scuffle, the bags of money set aside for the bounty hunters had been kicked open by some of the jailers in their haste to, amusingly, attack Sanji before he could join the chaos. Much of it had been sent across the floor, further adding to the chaos. Now those jailers began to move around, picking up the money and putting it back into the bags as Ranko stalked off, the Marines politely getting out of their way and not so politely gawking after her.

Luffy was back ten minutes later, having changed her clothing and form. And even that had mostly been spent flouncing – ‘Ranko’ made certain she was swishing her hips enough to make a spectacle of it – back to the ship and checking Gion’s room for Zoro’s swords. Unfortunately, the swords were on display there, meaning he couldn’t risk stealing them.

Now hiding under his Umi-Sen-Ken, he snuck up behind the marines, leaping toward the ceiling. Below him, Makino and Brook left the jail heading back to the ship with most of the marines, while Domino and Magellan led the prisoners into the jail. Gion had followed them for some reason. He had to wait a few moments before the low doorway cleared enough for him to slip through, then leaped awards again, moving along the ceiling using another technique from his past life, letting ki flow through his hands to let him almost stick to the ceiling. *Let’s hear it for the Clinging Gecko Technique. Honestly, Pops, you came up with some really cool techniques. Pity you were such a yellow-bellied panda shit.*

Clinging to the ceiling, Luffy watched as Magellan ordered the prisoners to what looked like an elevator. Luffy quickly followed, moving close enough now to overhear the conversation below, a portion of which he must have missed before getting back here.

“... A travesty that could have been a mark against the prison itself!” a new, extremely tall guard said. He wasn’t dressed like the regulars, and his height and more devil like appearance contrasted with the more normal guards around him. Indeed, he looked like a devil man crossed with a pharaoh in terms of what he was wearing and fielded a wicked-looking trident in one hand. He was tall for certain but still far short of Magellan’s height. “Why, it might have been enough to make the World Government decide you were unfit for command.”

“What was that, Hannyabal?” Magellan growled, breathing into the man’s face, as everyone else around them began to shy away, including a now recovered Zoro, although he was glaring at Gion as he did. Sanji was also looking between the Admiral and Magellan, his one visible eye wide as if something else had been said that Luffy hadn’t arrived quickly enough to hear.

The effect was instant. Hannyabal grabbed at his throat and shouted for mercy, and Magellan stopped his minor attack, causing Luffy to wonder once more how he would fight someone like him. *Airstrikes for certain, keep his venom away from me, keep the smog it causes away with it. But would those do enough damage to him in turn? Or would I be better served to go full lightning?*

Magellan gestured with one hand, seemingly setting aside the other man's dig at him with the ease of long practice. Instead, he turned to Gion, shaking his head. "As for seeing Garp, I'm afraid that's impossible. Given his strength and abilities, we placed him down on the lowest level. And seeing you would undoubtedly cause issues among the prisoners. I also don't think he would be willing to say anything you want to hear."

Luffy nearly lost his grip on the ceiling at this. *WHAT THE FUCK!?! Gramps, here!?! The hell...* Eagerly, he leaned forward, hoping for more information.

But Gion simply sighed, taking Magellan's words at face value. "Yeah, I figured that. Still, maybe after Ace's execution, I can at least talk to him then."

"Er... I'm afraid even that wouldn't be a good idea, Gion," Magellan answered, scratching at the back of his head. "For those here in Impel Down, whatever the level, they are supposed to be forgotten by the outside world. Let Garp lay here and let his legend die in the coming war."

Again, Gion let out a sigh before nodding. "I suppose that's right enough. Still, it's a damn shame. He was always almost as much of an icon to me as Tsuru was a role model. Sad to see how far he fell."

Despite the hidden Luffy practically willing her with all his might to continue in that vein, Gion didn't react, saluting Magellan once more and bidding him farewell before looking over at Zoro. A slight smile appeared on her face then as she shook her head. "Keep your head held high until your execution, Zoro. Keep that pride of yours going whatever you face here. I'd be disappointed otherwise."

Without another word, Gion turned and left, walking directly under Luffy's position and back out the doors.

As she left, Magellan looked over at Domino and Hannyabal. "Get a work detail to start fixing the receiving room, Domino. Return to your post in the sensor suites, Hannyabal, send word to Saldeath and Sadi-chan." He looked at the prisoners, who were soon being prodded in the back.

Zoro went quickly, but Sanji stayed for a moment, bowing deeply toward Domino. "Alas, dear lady, it is time for us to part. I will keep your beauty in my thoughts until I see you again, a shield against the horrors to come."

“W, whaa...,” Hannyabal muttered, shaking his head, watching in visible shock as Domino smiled faintly.

“Well, I can’t say your inflow wasn’t without issue, Prisoner Sanji. At least your attitude was somewhat... pleasant.” With that, Domino left, giving her hips a tiny bit of an extra swing.

Magellan joined the other men around him as they all stared after the retreating Domino, then at Sanji. The moment she was gone, the butt of Hannyabal’s trident cracked into Sanji’s knees, and the other guards quickly joined in, kicking and belaboring him with their own far smaller tridents. “You bastard, how dare you flirt with Domino like that in front of me, huh!?”

“Is it because you’re a blonde too, is it!?”

“Why the hell was Domino responding to you, huh!? What’ve you got, I don’t!”

“That’s my future wife you were making eyes at, you pretty boy bastard!”

“Die, you, you pirate scum!”

From within the tumult, Sanji’s voice sounded out, barely showing any pain from the beating he was being given. “Don’t hate the player, boys. Hate the game!”

“Shut up!” Hannyabal and the others responded.

Magellan let this beating go on for a few moments, then reached over and began to pluck his men off of Sanji one at a time, while Luffy and Zoro looked on in amusement. “Enough of that, you lot. Just think of it as one more sin he must pay for below under Sadi-chan’s tender mercies.”

OOOOOO

Gion returned to her ship quickly and began to oversee the ship taking on water and food. With the full might of the marines being concentrated at Marineford, food would be at a premium there, and they hadn’t picked up any fresh food at Enies Lobby. This would take a few hours, and unfortunately, knowing that Gion couldn’t get out of taking an early dinner with her fellow Vice Admiral. He had sent a formal invitation the moment he was back aboard his flagship, and there were some social niceties that no officer could get out of.

She took a brief break from overseeing that work to check in with her three passengers. Elizabeth replied for the group quickly enough, coming to Gion’s cabin and reporting that all three were very happy with the money they’d finally received. “We will want to pick up new swords and pistols before we sign up with the marines, but now that she’s dry, even Ranko is

pleased with how all this ended up... Although, don't be surprised if she stays to herself for the rest of the day at the very least."

"I'd be sulking too, and you might want to force that girl to start wearing a bra from now on," Gion answered dryly. "That or thicker shirts."

"I think this last bit of embarrassment might actually let me convince her on that score," Elizabeth announced cheerily before going on with a slight wince. "And if her, ahem, monthly issue hits, which it might tomorrow, well, it's best for all that Ranko self-isolates."

That caused Gion to wince too. "How bad? I know when mine hit, I tend to be very short with my officers regardless of whatever else is going on."

"Ranko's are more emotional than physical. She will go from bubbly and nice to weepy and raging at the drop of a hat, and all her self-control goes out the window." Elizabeth grimaced, making up a story on the fly. "We took passage on an ocean liner at one point, and one of the officers tried to flirt with her at the most inopportune moment. That poor man's limbs just should never have bent that way."

Wince shifting into a grimace, Gion nodded, waving the other woman out of the room. "Understood. I'll have orders made up to send her meals to your room and for her to be excused from any work around the ship. Since it only takes a few hours to get to Marineford from Impel Down, that won't be an issue, and after that, she can stay aboard along with a skeleton crew while you two go shopping and the rest of us join the other marines. And look at it this way, maybe Ace's execution will give her an outlet for some of that anger. Now if you'll excuse me, I gotta get ready for an evening out with an utter bore."

Elizabeth let a pained look of commiseration cross her face and joked about Gion hiding a dagger under her uniform before heading back to their room.

'Jack' let her in, and Makino slumped into her hammock, staring over at the musician tiredly. "It won't last more than a few days, but I've gotten us some leeway. Now it's up to Luffy and the boys to make all this worth it and for us to keep hiding the truth as long as we can."

OOOOOO

Whitebeard's bisento slashed through the attacks of his opponent. A bit of his Crush Fruit's power went with the strike, creating a veritable network of cracks in the air that further shattered the follow-on strikes and sent shockwaves in every direction. The massive man then leaped forward, ignoring the cheers and shouts of the onlookers on both sides of this little fight to slam the butt end of his weapon into the side of the man he was fighting, sending the far shorter, yellow-haired man skidding across the ground.

When he tried to push himself to his feet, the tip of Whitebeard's bisento was poised above his eyes. "There! Gurararara! I hope you're satisfied by this little farce, ya punk. As you agreed, you will now work for me for one month. You swore it on the spirit of Davy Jones, and no pirate would ever dream of going back on his word after that, now would ya, Gurararara!"

"Shihahaha, well, that, that went about as well as I expected. You might have lost a step, but then again, so have I," the other pirate wheezed out, hopping to his feet with alacrity despite his words, a light clank echoing for just a second as he looked up at Whitebeard. "But you still haven't told me why you wanted me to join you. Surely your fleet is enough to free your son Ace?"

Snorting at that attempt to get a dig in, Whitebeard leaned forward and whispered in the far shorter man's ear. A wild, almost rabid grin crossed the shorter man's face as he did. "Shihahaha. Well, why didn't you say so in the first place!? Let's get to work. Just don't expect me to call you Oyaji like your sons do. Shihahaha!"

"Gurararara! As if I'd let anyone as ugly as you become one of my sons!" Whitebeard laughed in turn and turned to his crew, shouting out orders. *I'm coming, Ace! If your brother doesn't rescue you, I most definitely will, my son!*

OOOOOO

After Sanji's beating, he had been dragged into the elevator alongside Magellan and Zoro, with most of the guards leaving to return to their duties, trusting in Magellan's skills. With only Magellan and five guards to deal with, Luffy was tempted to attack now, maybe beat the answers he wanted out of the warden, especially after hearing that Garp had somehow wound up here along with Ace. But the four Security Mushi in the corners of the elevator stopped him. As fast as he was, there was no way Luffy could take out Magellan and the rest and then question Magellan without the cameras catching it.

I could kill them all, which has a certain appeal, admittedly. But not without leaving the Umi-Sen-Ken and being seen, even if I try to use my lightning powers to do it. And for now, secrecy and sneakery serve us better than brute force. Time enough for that if I have to after I find Ace.

The elevator continued going down for several minutes, then opened onto the first floor. Like the area above where they had entered the elevator, this segment of the floor looked almost normal, the room showing a wide doorway at the far end.

Waiting there was another blonde woman, taller than Domino but actually up to Robin's level of voluptuousness, which was shown off quite easily thanks to her bondage outfit. And not the sub-type of bondage gear, this was full-on Dominatrix-style gear, the kind Luffy had seen in his past life in a few anime, usually with the joke 'Call me Queen' following up on it.

She stood quite tall for a woman at around six feet, much like Gion. Her pants were tight hotpants linked to her top by a series of ribbons that looked like the sexy version of suspenders, complete with a circle of metal just above her navel where they all met. From there, only one ribbon passed between the woman's large breasts. Her top looked almost like a cowgirl's tassels falling from the top that barely covered half her breasts. A wild mane of light brown hair fell down her hips and over her eyes, hiding them from view. On top of her head was a pair of horns, but they were part of a headpiece rather than natural, two pink spikes matching the color of the rest of her outfit bar a cloak she wore. In one hand, she held a trident and at her side hung a whip.

Beside her was, well, at first, Luffy thought he was a particularly ugly minotaur. It had semi-large, almost teddy bear-like eyes, large lips, and a runny nose. Its upper body was hugely muscled, making for two of Zoro shoulder-to-shoulder, but at the belt, it was nearly normal-sized, except the legs were hooves. It wore red and white striped shorts and a wide belt with a hoof-shaped buckle. At its side, the Minotaur had a massive club.

Staring at the creature, it took Luffy a moment to remember about Zoan Fruits. *So this guy's a Cow-type Zoan or would it be called Model: Bull?*

Beside the Cow Zoan stood a rhino man on his hind legs. It was quite fat looking, with rolls of fat around its neck, thick, wide lips, and, again, a dripping nose and strangely cutesy eyes. It wore the ruff of a court jester almost and dark pink pants with suspenders.

Those forms aren't the normal demi-form. And those eyes are just a little too blank to be normal. They almost remind me of Chopper's full monster form, the massive one where he losses all sense of self but gets massive power and regeneration in return.

If that were the case, both of them would be very dangerous. *Chopper's full monster form hits like a brick house falling on you and can just tank a lot of damage. Zoro would need to use Busoshoku, and Sanji would need to go Diable Jambe to hurt them, and even then, putting them down for good is gonna be hard. Well... hard for Sanji or Zoro, anyway. I find enough lightning can solve any such trouble,* Luffy thought, somewhat interested in how long the two would last under a full-lightning assault.

Of course, while the bondage outfit and dominatrix vibe the tall woman was giving off bothered the hidden Luffy a lot, it barely registered on Sanji. Instantly he was back on his feet, twirling through the remaining guards, shouting, "Mellorine, Mellorine! And who are you, lovely lady? To find such as you in this prison, which is undoubtedly dominated by men, I am blessed, blessed, I say!"

This did not work as it had on Domino. Instead, she lashed out with a kick, catching Sanji in the chest and doubling him, causing Luffy to nod in appreciation. *Huh, she's stronger than she looks.*

As Sanji hit the floor, the blonde placed her foot on his head, cracking her whip to one side as she ground his face into the stone underneath them. "I am Sadi-chan, worm, and you will only speak when spoken to, unless you want to join my toys for a bit of fun on the rack!"

"This is Sadi-chan, and these are two of our Jailer Beasts. Normally they would be spread throughout the prison, but the two of you made such a splash before being captured that I feel I'm justified in keeping one assigned to the level we put each of you at. Sadi-chan, take Minotaurus and Black Leg on tour, find out where he is most uncomfortable and leave him there. I will be taking Zoro down to Frozen Hell with Minorhinoceros. I want these two separated, but I honestly can't decide where Black Leg would be most uncomfortable given the reports on him."

Luffy watched the beasts from where he was, frowning as the Cow Zoan sniffed the air. Quickly, Luffy flipped himself up and out of the elevator to the side of the wall directly above it, watching as the cow monster looked around in confusion. None of the jailers seemed to notice, and the beast didn't look directly at him, which meant that he wasn't smart enough to figure out that there was someone unseen around. That was good enough for Luffy, but he wouldn't tempt fate by remaining in a small space with the rhino Zoan for long. *Although ain't they supposed to have a bad sense of smell? Well, whatever, still too dangerous.*

Landing behind Zoro, Luffy leaned in, whispering quickly, "I'll meet you down at Frozen Hell, whatever that is. I'm going with Sanji for now. Don't do anything until I get there to free you!"

This was the first time that Luffy had communicated with either young man since returning, and Zoro barely stopped himself from nodding in answer, relief flooding through him. He still wasn't afraid or fearful of what was to come, knowing that his captain was around meant the plan was still going forward.

Just without my swords, dammit! Zoro snarled internally. How the hell am I going to get them back? How the hell are Makino and Brook going to get away from the Marines? Now that it comes to it, there are still quite a lot of holes in this plan of ours!

That was one aspect that Luffy, Makino and Brook had been working on since coming aboard Gion's ship. It was why 'Ranko' had gone out of her way to mention going shopping before joining up with the Marines officially and why 'Makino' had followed up on it. The principal thing they were doing would be for Makino and Brook to leave the ship as soon as it docked to go shopping, and before that, Makino would cover for Luffy's absence with whatever excuse she could come up with.

Just as Luffy had trusted Zoro and Sanji to like themselves, he trusted Makino to think on her feet.

For now, Luffy followed Sanji, who was now being poked and prodded by Minotaurus as Sadi-chan led the way onto the floor. "Behold, Crimson Hell!"

As they exited the room around the elevator, the floor became visible, and it turned out to be a forest, but one unlike any forest Luffy had ever seen before. Everything was made of what looked like glass or metal, maybe. The trees looked like pine trees but were made of sharp, jagged metal or glass. The grass on the ground was also metal. And looking around, Sanji and the hidden Luffy could see prisoners were free to move around as best they could, which wasn't much.

Because as they moved, the metal trees and grass cut at them like razor wire. Their screams of pain could be heard from here, delighting Sadi-chan as Luffy watched blood drip down to be absorbed by the grass beneath them.

"ARGGGH!! It, it's so painful, ugggghhhh...."

"Please, please make it stop. I can't, I can't take this anymore..." These and more mingled into a dull background of pain and agony, but Luffy could see that most prisoners within sight had seemingly no energy to spare for shouting. They moved around the area as Sadi-chan led the way forward, looking more like blood-soaked zombies or wraiths than real humans.

The entire place serves as torture, Luffy reflected, shaking his head.

Scattered around the place were large, brutish-looking men moving around in teams of two. They all dressed the same, nearly skintight blue suits with wide black hoods. Their appearance was also startlingly uniform, almost squat with muscle, long arms paired with short legs.

Almost like gorillas, Luffy thought.

"Considering you are supposed to be a foot fighter, this hell would probably be best for you," Sadi-chan began, gesturing around her, nearly wiggling in delight as she licked her lips.

Sanji looked around thoughtfully, tapping his foot against the nearest bit of grass, listening to the metallic clang of it, seeing how sharp it was and taking in the appearances of the prisoners in sight. "All of this, is it supposed to be red?" he asked, his voice deadly serious despite Sadi-chan's looks.

"No," Sadi-chan turned back to him with a smirk, her voice a moan of delight as she gestured around them. "That's a byproduct of what goes on here. The blood of the people, who have been put here and cut again and again mingle with the ground and the plants here, bringing out that delightful color. Mmmm, their pain, the beginning, it is music to my ears!"

Sanji stared at the woman and, to the astonishment of the watching Luffy, made no move to flirt with her again. Instead, he moved away very slightly, staring around him and then very deliberately armored up one of his feet before stepping forward onto the razor grass, shattering it under his foot. "Well, my lady, if this is where I am going to be, I will wish you...."

"Not so fast! We knew about your Busoshoku. Impel Down likes to be aware of its guests' abilities," Sadi-chan answered, now scowling slightly as she gestured with her trident to the cow Zoan. The large Awakened Zoan pushed at Sanji's back with his weapon, and the group made their way forward. Sadi's feet were encased in long leather boots, which seemed immune to the flensing of nature of the grass, and Sanji had his own Busoshoku, while the Minotaur simply tromped forward, uncaring and not even noticing the grass underneath.

Above them, Luffy clung to the ceiling, moving after them, frowning as he looked around and wondering if this was level one, what the other levels were like. *Hopefully, they don't have metal grass everywhere. I won't be able to hide my presence if I leave broken bits of metal behind me, and even I can't land on something so fragile as that without making an impression.*

A series of stairs led down to the far end of the floor. They weren't guarded, causing Sanji to ask why that was.

Sadi-chan chuckled at that, shaking her head and pointing down with her trident. "We don't guard the entrances to the levels going down. If a prisoner decides to do so, who are we to stop them from facing a greater hell than the one assigned to them for their sins?"

Sanji frowned at that, then asked politely, "Hmm... well, on a separate subject, I don't suppose there is a level that would allow me to have a cigarette?"

That caused Sadi to scowl, and her trident came up, the flat of it smacking the side of Sanji's head and sending him flying. Luffy couldn't tell how strong the strike, but since Sanji had still been using Busoshoku on his feet and Tekkai on his upper body to protect himself from the various needles of the trees, it must have been quite strong.

Nonetheless, Luffy watched as Sanji pushed himself to his feet, dusting his clothing off and ignoring the numerous cuts his prisoner garb had taken as his Tekkai failed him for a moment. *Although they are probably just as painful as getting paper cuts.*

"Do not ask such questions of me! You are not here to be comfortable. You are in Impel Down to pay with pain for your sins!" With that, Sadi-chan gestured for Minotaur to pick Sanji up and hurl him down the steps. "If that means you have seen your last cigarette, that is but a small part of the hell you will face here!"

Yet by the time Sadi-chan and the beast followed, Sanji was once more on his feet, dusting himself off again, staring at her and then around them as he heard the growling of nearby monsters. "More of your jailed beasts?"

"No. This is Wild Beast Hell!" Sadi-chan growled, leading them forward into what at first looked like a regular jail stuck in a cavern. There were dozens of cells all around, differing in size and shape. They didn't rise to the ceiling here, which was at least two stories taller than the tallest jail cells, and there were wide avenues between them all, but the cells continued up on the walls to either side. Looking around from a nearby rooftop, Luffy was somewhat amused to note that it almost looked like someone had made a maze of the place and then filled it with jail cells and beasts.

Lots of beasts. Lots of different beasts, some of them looking normal like lions or tigers, others looking like a giant centipede that had broken into various smaller bits. At one point, Luffy spotted something almost like a storybook basilisk staring down at a few prisoners.

There were a lot of prisoners out and about, but they all seemed terrified of the beasts, quickly entering the cages and locking the doors behind them to save them from the beasts as they roamed the area. *Interesting, but if they expect someplace like this to mess with Sanji, they've got another thing coming.*

As these Sadi-chan had already thought of as she unerringly led the way through the maze. The prisoners who spotted her or the Minotaur scurried further back into their cages, trying desperately to not catch their attention.

Only once did Sadi-chan stop to thrust her trident through the bars to poke at a man. He yelped in pain, pulling back quickly deeper into his jail cell, and she laughed before marching on.

More than an hour later, while still trailing after Sanji, Luffy saw another type of monster. In what might be the center of the floor was a large open area, within which sat... well, Luffy would have called it a sphinx if it had a woman's face. As it was, it had the face of the Frankenstein monster, complete with dark gray skin to go with blue fur and a white mane. One of its massive paws was over its eyes, and the wings on his back folded up in sleep.

As he came close, Luffy paused, staring as the beast spoke. "Ramen."

Sanji stopped and stared while Sadi-chan began to laugh. Then the sphinx spoke again. "Itamen. Pasta. Meatball."

"What in the world?"

"Hah, the Sphinx has heard its victims wailing about food more than anything else. It's picked up the names of some of the food and likes to taunt its victims by using the names as

impromptu battle cries. Although..." Sadi-chan paused, staring as the Sphinx roused itself, sniffing the air.

Shit! Luffy grimaced. Once more, the limitations of his Umi-Sen-Ken were coming to the fore. Quickly, he leaped away, watching from a nearby rooftop as the sphinx sniffed the air, looking around for a moment.

"Steak..." the Sphinx growled out, staring around in confusion. The confusion faded after a moment, causing Luffy to breathe a sigh of relief and send up thanks to whoever had devised this floor's air circulation system, as it was taking his smell away from him.

Grumbling, the Sphinx lay back down, staring at Sadi-chan, the Cow Zoan and the new prisoner, growling once more as he stared at Sanji. "Fish..."

"If that's a request, I am afraid I would need my hands free and ingredients to hand," Sanji deadpanned.

Scowling a bit, Sadi-chan hit him in the back of the head with her trident, then gestured them forward.

Near where the Sphinx lay, was a small grate that the Minotaurus quickly moved, allowing another set of stairs leading down to be seen.

"I thought that you didn't stop people from moving down?" Sanji inquired.

"We don't, but that doesn't make it simple for them," Sadi-chan retorted, tempted to hit him again. By this point, she was quite annoyed by this man and his seeming unwillingness to feel fear. Minotaurus didn't seem to scare him at all, and he had used Tekkai several times to take the Zoan's random strikes without injury. This meant Sadi would not be able to hurt him either.

Yet even so, the sadist part of Sadi was laughing, eager to break him down all the more because of it. *But the way he reacted to me, he's a bit of a pervert, so perhaps I can use that against him?*

With that, she stretched her arms overhead, grabbing her trident's shaft with both hands and moving her upper body to either side. Sadi's eyes locked on her, and she smirked, reaching over and touching his chin with one hand, before pointing at the correction and walking. "Forward, boy. And perhaps if you are good, I will give you a treat."

A moment later Sadi-chan moved down the stairs, gesturing for Sanji to follow behind her.

Before this, Sanji had been doing extremely well, and Luffy reflected on that momentarily. Indeed, it almost looked as if he was going to break out of his Mellorine paralysis again, but the sway of Sadi-chan's hips and the previous touch to his face had seemingly broken through his initial distaste of her obvious sadism. *Hopefully, it won't last for long.*

Luffy waited for a second, then dove down, leaping over Minotaurus' head as he closed the secret door behind him. As this brought him near it, the sphinx once more caught wind of his scent. Instantly it roused, lashing out towards where the air movement of Luffy's quick passage and smell told it something had passed with a strike that shattered the ground right beside Minotaurus, who turned, letting the door swing for a moment as he raised his club toward the Sphinx menacingly.

Rolling down the stairs, Luffy was thankful for the noise of the growling from the Zoan-type and large cat-like monster for a second as he made quite a bit of noise rolling down the gravel-strewn staircase. But Sadi-chan had already turned around, racing back up to shout at the Sphinx, pointing her trident at it. "Honestly, I don't know what's gotten into you, but don't make me lose Minotaurus on you!"

While all this was happening a few steps behind him, Sanji had stopped, lamenting under his breath that, "Besides her hips from the back, Sadi-chwan isn't nearly as interesting on the eyes."

"True that," Luffy hissed in his ears while Sadi-chan got between the Cow Zoan and the Sphinx, shouting them down. Her whip was off its holder now, snapping in either direction, causing both to back away despite the fact either could have crushed her. "Just remember why we're here, yeah?"

Sanji stiffened, then looked around, and noticing a few Surveillance Mushi had moved in to watch events from above, and that one of them at least could see him, continued to stare towards Sadi-chan's hair and cloak covered rear. When he replied, his mouth barely moved. "Don't worry, I won't forget."

Sadi-chan was soon back, grumbling and eager to take her anger out on someone, in this case, Sanji, while Luffy clung once more to the roof above. *Blast it. I don't know what got into the Sphinx. It almost looked like he smelled something but couldn't figure out where it was or what. Strange. I might need to report on it when I go off duty. But for now...* "Move, dog!" she shouted, her whip flashing to lick at Sanji's chest just hard enough to cause a normal man to stumble.

The Straw Hat's cook had left normal in the rearview mirror when he joined Luffy and the rest if he ever had been normal in the first place. Luffy watched in bemusement as Sanji stood at attention, his one visible eye – his hair had somehow formed into its normal coif after his shower and the beatings he'd taken – turning into a heart once more. "ARF!" he shouted, then went down on his heels, panting like a dog.

Sadi-chan snorted, but the act put her in a mildly better mood. "Good doggie. Come. Minotaurus, follow after you've closed that door."

With that, the man followed after Sadi-chan as she descended the stairs. The stairs were short and quickly deposited into another small area, where another door opened.

The heat and blazing light hit them first, causing both Straw Hats to blink momentarily, while Sadi-chan whipped out a pair of sunglasses from...somewhere, placing them over her eyes.

When their eyes acclimatized to the intense light, Luffy and Sanji saw the same kind of construction as above. Lots of differently sized cells. The sand was everywhere, and the sun from an artificial sun of some kind beat down unmercifully. But frankly, after a few moments, the sun and its light were only a minor part of the new irritation hitting the hidden and captive Straw Hat.

Because the main thing was the heat here on this floor. It was so hot that even Luffy felt himself sweat a bit within a few minutes of standing at the open door. And that heat certainly wasn't coming from the sun. No, the heat was coming up from the floor.

It was so hot that when she stepped on the sand, Luffy grimaced and shook her head. *Damn, where is that coming from? It is like being back in Alabasta's desert, only without Vivi making jokes or Robin to flirt with... or, well, for her to flirt with me, really.* Luffy shook his head at that thought, banishing thoughts of a petite blue-haired girl and a leggy brunette to concentrate on the area around him. *Whoever designed this place was a genius. Almost certainly a total shit heel, but a genius.*

"Behold, Starvation hell!" Sadi-chan said, watching Sanji carefully. "Here, you will deal with the heat and desert, then two hours every day of intense cold as the 'sun' goes down. All while only being given one square meal every other day! Prisoners here will succumb quickly to these conditions!"

"Bark!" For once, Sanji's Mellorine Mode™ (dog version) saved him, his sudden wariness hidden under his reaction to Sadi-chan. Of all the Straw Hats, he understood the terror of starvation the most.

But then again, Luffy reflected, he could also probably make any meal last longer.

Sanji's lack of response annoyed Sadi-chan, and she flicked her whip at him again, sending the manacled man forward. "Hmmpf! Let's see if the little doggie can handle the heat here. If not... I might need to send him someplace even hotter, mmmmm~!"

For a time, Luffy followed after them, assuming that the pink-wearing sadist would lead them to the entrance to the next level. Meanwhile, Luffy used Kenbunshoku, trying to feel out

the area around him, or at least the minds of the people within. This worked to a certain extent, showing that there were around a thousand minds in this place, scattered liberally around the area. But as they traveled, Sanji and Sadi-chan, and the Cow Zoan who had joined them by this point, saw none of them.

The size of Impel Down was also throwing Luffy for a loop. He didn't know how many levels there were to this place. Hancock had no idea, and Shakky had mentioned there were at least three, almost certainly more levels, each of them built as if they were their own separate worlds. Even knowing that, Luffy was stunned at the levels' size. The first floor had taken them a good hour to traverse. The second floor had taken them two. At first, Luffy thought that was because Sadi was going so slowly, but now he wasn't so certain.

We've been going for forty minutes, and I still can't see the far wall. Now, that could be some kind of, what're they called, optical illusions? But this place still has to be huge, or else I should've been able to feel the minds of any Sea Kings outside the prison. Considering how much the lightning fruit helps me with Kenbunshoku, which means this place is larger than Shandia. Eesh.

Luffy paused then under a faux bamboo tree. It was fake since he could feel plastic underneath his fingers, and while it seemed to have left, they surely didn't protect him from the glare of the artificial sun above them. *That's a thought, the Umi-Sen-Ken using pirate thought. This place has to have an outer wall... what would happen if I caused a few holes... and how hard would doing so be? Would I have to break out the vorpal blades?*

Luffy's thoughts cut off as he heard something in the distance, a group of men shouting in the distance, the cadence carrying even though the words themselves sounded like grunts from here. But that cadence was familiar. He glanced in the direction Sadi was going to see if she or the Cow Zoan had heard, but neither looked to have done so. Intrigued, Luffy leaped off, heading out into the distance. *I can use Kenbunshoku to find them again after this. I know Sanji's mind more than well enough to pick him out of a crowd, let alone in a place like this.*

Within moments, he could make out the words being used and became convinced entirely of what he had found. *This could be both interesting and complicated at the same time.*

Indeed, anyone on the crew when the Resolve had left Alabasta would have recognized the voice Luffy could now make out in the distance over the intervening dunes. "Un, Deux, Ora. Un, Deux, Ora. Keep it up, my lovelies, come now, come now! Heat is nothing but weakness, be firm in your mind and will and with the Okama Style, the heat will be nothing to you~~! Un deux, Ora!"

Coming over the horizon, and wasn't that something strange to think of while inside, Luffy paused, grinning as he took in the sight before him.

In front of Luffy was a group of eighteen prisoners, their garb in various states of disrepair. All of them were men, their beards and hair as ragged as their clothing, their eyes listless and unseeing. Yet for all of that, they were still moving in a row, still performing moves that Luffy recognized from ballet, crouching down, standing upright and twirling along in a line as the man in the lead called the time and encouraged them on.

While Luffy didn't recognize any of the men in that line, the man leading them was none other than Bon Clay.

Bon Clay was the captain of the Okama pirates who had escaped Alabasta with them after having fought Makino and Chopper as Mr. 2 of Baroque Works. Bon had fought alongside the Straw Hats during the breakout, and the addition of his crew allowed Luffy to leave the Resolve along with Sanji and Zoro to go on the attack during the breakout.

After that, Bon and Luffy swore an oath of friendship between their crews.

That ceremony hadn't been the full ceremony the Kuja, and Straw Hats had conducted before reaching Shabody Archipelago. Rather instead of the full alliance/merger of their crews, it had been a much more haphazard thing since Bon hadn't wanted to put himself or his crew under Luffy's flag, which was a main pillar of the alliance between Luffy and Hancock. But that didn't make Clay any less of a friend, and Luffy was astonished and confused to find him here.

Luffy watched until the group came close to one of the cells, then leaped onto it, quickly moving inside. There weren't nearly as many recording Mushi's here, but Luffy wasn't willing to take any chances and made certain no one was alive in the cell before he called out, "Hey Okama, ya remember the guy with the curse you thought was so enviable? Don't speak loudly. Just stop your dancing and move close to this cage."

Bon Clay did indeed remember Luffy, his curse in particular, and his eyes widened as he looked around. But Luffy was still under the Umi-Sen-Ken, and Clay couldn't see him. "WH...where are you~~? I can't see you, ah!!! Don't tell me you're a ghost or something!"

"I'm no ghost, Clay, just using a technique like my tornado and I am not dropping it. There's too many video Mushi around," Luffy warned. "We can talk like this."

While he would normally have been very annoyed, perhaps even untrusting of an invisible voice, the mention of the hurricane on top of the curse convinced Clay that whoever he was talking to at least knew about his crew's escape from Alabasta. Still, it was better to be safe than sorry, and he whispered, "Who among your crew did I try to imitate to get your cook to give me food?"

"You took Nami's form and asked for... suzette something, I can't remember," Luffy replied. "She thought it was hilarious, so long as your clothes stayed on."

“Luff-chan~~!” Clay shouted, flipping himself through the air to land at the entrance to the cage, forgetting his followers. Without him calling the time, they fell to the ground senseless, overcome by the heat. But Bon, used as he had been to Alabasta, barely seemed bothered by it. “What are you doing here? Did the marines capture you too?”

“No. Listen, have you heard about Fire Fist Ace being captured?”

“No... but I remember a report saying that you and he were seen in one another’s company back in Alabasta when I was working with Baroque Works... are, are you here looking for him!? To willingly enter Impel Down for friendship’s sake!? That, that touches me so much I want to dance~~!” Bon shouted, twirling in place.

“Keep your voice down, dude! I don’t know if they have any Mush around to pick up sound. But yeah, that’s why I’m here. **We’re** here, really. My crew had a plan to get in here and free Ace.” Luffy considered mentioning that his grandfather was also here but decided against it. *After all, a lot of pirates had literal nightmares about Gramps, best not to bring him up.* “But I gotta wonder why you’re here too. Did the marines catch you?”

“Sort of. You know I was looking for the King of Queens, Ivankov, right? I discovered that he/she was imprisoned somewhere here in Impel Down. So I created a gre~at ruse~ you know? I hunted down a few of the members of Baroque Works who’d escaped, then let the marines realize who I was. After that, they sent our old playmate, Smoker, after me, and I wound up here pretty quickly,” Clay explained. “Still, Ace, huh?” the Okama Kenpo user shook his head, his face unwontedly serious. “That’s some big, bad news, Luff-Chan~ I can’t even joke about that. Whitebeard-sama has got to be furious.”

“Yeah, he’s got plans to rescue Ace, but I had this invisibility technique and a few other things that could let us sneak in like this. So, we decided to act on our own without Whitebeard. He knows we’re doing something, but that’s it. But I think we can work together, yeah?”

“Don’t even joke, of course we ca~~n!” Bon Clay whirled in place, showing his back toward the cage’s interior where Luffy was. “You help me find Ivankov, and I will help you get Ace out of here.”

Luffy grinned. “Sounds like a plan. Now, why don’t you tell me what you know about this place? While ya lead me to the entrance to the next level, that is. Sanji’s being sent down there at the very least, and Zoro’s on level V.”

Gasping Bon leaped away, singing, “Then we don’t have time to waste! Follow me, Luff-chan!”

OOOOOOO

At the same time that Luffy had found Bon Clay, Sanji left Starvation hell in the most direct manner possible. Scattered throughout the deserts were large holes where, if you lifted up a thin metal cage, you could simply jump down to the next level. Sanji had been led to one such hole like a lamb to slaughter, and now, after pushing him in, Sadi stood at the edge, watching with Minotaurus beside her as he fell through the air. "Land or burn alive, you fool!!"

Sanji snapped out of his Mellorine Mode™ as he fell. "Damn it! Why do our enemies have to include women, huh!?" he grumbled, using Geppo to bounce through the air. Doing so with his hands and feet chained together was tough, but he could land on one of the many metal walkways crisscrossing the area.

As he did, Sanji took stock of his surroundings. Around him, there were perhaps a few hundred prisoners, all of them chained together to a series of ropes that led to a single large winch. Below, there was a bubbling, roiling soup... or magma, it was so hot and red it was hard to tell which.

Whatever it was, it was insanely hot, and as Sanji watched, two men who had dropped to their knees were pushed in by a few guards, screaming as they thrashed in the water. It had to be water, as they didn't start to burn away instantly like they would have if it was magma, although, now that he knew that, Sanji was extremely concerned about where the red color came from. "AHHH, hot, hot, hotttttt! Ahhhh, I can't ... help me, someone!!!!"

No one did, not even Sanji and the two prisoners quickly succumbed, disappearing into the boiling goop. "Damn," Sanji whispered, wishing he had a cigarette and knowing he wouldn't get one anytime soon. "That was cold."

Above, Sadi-chan had nearly gone into a paroxysm of pleasure as she watched the two prisoners fall to their doom, forgetting Sanji momentarily. But now, as the high of watching their agonized deaths passed, she concentrated on their newest prisoner again and had to scowl. Much like as they moved through Starvation Hell, it seemed as if heat barely bothered Black Leg. "Tsk. And Magellan-sama did say it was best to keep him away from Pirate Hunter. Minotaurus, go down there and tie him to one of the work gangs. Don't be afraid to give him a few smacks upside the head, darling. Keep an eye on him until you receive orders otherwise."

Minotaurus, the Minotaur Zoan, grunted in answer, the only answer he could make. In return for their regeneration and strength, the Four Zoans of the Jailers Beasts left most of their humanity behind. Not only could they not transform back to their human bodies but also their intelligence had lessened to that of particularly intelligent guard dogs.

That was more than acceptable to Sadi-chan, who was in charge of the training, which had pushed them to that limit and greatly enjoyed every part of it. Now she watched with a faint smile as Minotaurus leaped down below, wading out of the boiling blood without apparent discomfort until he was right behind Sanji.

Sanji saw him coming and debated whether or not to fight back but decided against it. There was no point, and he was still in manacles, after all. Even he would have trouble breaking out them.

He did try to dodge the minotaur's club when it swung for him, succeeding in dodging the strike to his head. The blow still landed, causing Sanji to grunt under the impact as it hammered into his shoulder. *"Fuck, these bastards hit almost as hard as Luffy does in training. They won't put me down easily, but enough hits could start to really hurt."*

Sanji soon found himself tied to the nearest winch, moving along with the other drudges as it turned on them, pulling them along and hoping his captain would find him soon.

OOOOOOO

Nico Robin was hot, smelly, annoyed and quietly going crazy. She was not alone in this. In fact, Chopper had made it clear he would not even enter the conning tower until the heat within died down and everyone, including himself, had the chance to bathe. None of the girls could argue with that since, despite eating the Human Fruit, Chopper was still a reindeer. Heat was his bane, and they could do nothing about it.

There were two major issues the crew had not considered when Franky had created his makeshift workaround to let the ship's backup coal-powered engine work underwater. The combination of which was making them all mildly miserable by this point.

First, coal was **ridiculously** dirty shit, and Robin used the word with feeling, to work with. Luckily, thanks to Robin's powers and Eve, none of them needed to actually be in the engine room to work with it, but the sheer amount of coal they had aboard below decks – Franky had not allowed for the storage to use his coal engine for more than a few days – meaning that the smell and dust were getting everyone down there. Whenever Robin had to transfer a new locker full of the stuff from the main hold into the engine room, the coal fumes and dust was most unpleasant. And somehow, the smell of the smoke, despite none of the actual smoke appearing inside the ship or the primary bubble, had quickly spread. So much so the crew had moved almost entirely out of the ship's interior and began living out on the main deck.

The second aspect was the heat. Adam wood and the internal metal lining of the smokestack had worked to contain the heat very well at first, but over time it had built up to the point where being in the conning tower was quite sweltering. This forced the crewwomen to go about as if they were back in Alabasta or preparing for a day at the beach.

While being underwater should have helped, it didn't help nearly as much as Franky had thought simply because no portion of the ship ever actually touched the water. The bubble coating kept the water at bay. But without that direct contact, the water didn't help to disperse the heat.

If not for Eve keeping us on course with only the occasional help from Nami, our side of this mission would have long since ended in failure, Robin reflected. Well, them and our new companion's Hollow ghosts.

Robin, Nami and Perona were all laid out on the main deck, drinking small sips of lemonade as they tried to stay hydrated, which had become a daily chore almost matching the normal three-hour training sessions Luffy had run daily. The heat started spreading out from the conning tower before they reached the Gate of Justice. By this point, even here near the prow of the Everlasting Resolve, it was hot enough to want to go with bikinis more than anything else.

Looking around, Robin had to shake her head very slightly at the bikini designs on display, chuckling internally at how they would have affected the male side of their crew. Perona's fit her personality to a T: frilly, somewhat girly two-piece made mostly of black but with pink highlights in the form of tiny bats scattered like polka dots over it. Laki's was somewhat conservative, pairing a normal yellow bikini top with a pair of boy pants cut short. Nami's was almost indecent, two small triangles barely covering a third of Nami's breasts in blue and orange. The bottom was a little better, simply being a larger triangle, all in orange. Whereas Robin's was a black bikini that covered her chest entirely, although it left a lot of side boob visible, and the bottom was just short of a t-back, although she paired it with a sarong. *I'd bought this for my next beach date with Luffy, but I doubt he will care. I have worn it before, not given how hot it is here.*

Shaking her head, Robin turned her attention away from the other girls to watch a few of Perona's hollows intercept several giant Sea Kings outside the bubble before they could come close and investigate the strange thing that had invaded their domain. "Hmm, I wonder what would have killed us first. The decompression of having the bubble suddenly bursting, the pressure of the water down here on our bodies bursting our eyes, brains and organs, or the Sea Kings? Hmm... Munched to death, drowning, having our innards bursting within us, the possibilities are endless."

"ARGH, Robin! Stop it with that stuff, please. I'm begging you!" Nami whined, covering her face with her hands. The orange-haired girl was practically slumped in her lounge chair, her whole body covered in sweat, matting her orange suit to her body like a second skin. She had just joined them on the main deck after being inside the conning tower on the bridge for a bit to help Eve navigate through the Calm Belt. This deep, there were still a few currents fighting against the one made by the WeeGee and their power but the ship's engines could still deal with them under Nami and Eve's direction.

"Yeah!" Perona shouted, pointing at Robin with a dramatic finger and almost as if she was imitating Hancock as she arrogantly looked down at the older woman. "Seriously, you and your love of coming up with ways for us to die! You should instead be getting on your knees, thanking me for helping to keep us safe."

"I'm afraid I have a boyfriend, dear. You will have to look elsewhere to fulfill your power fantasies," Robin answered drolly, causing Perona to splutter.

"Ugh, you're horrible," the younger girl muttered, a blush on her face as she looked away. For all her abilities and the company she had kept until being semi-absorbed into the Straw Hats/Kuja Alliance, she was quite inexperienced with such things.

At least when it comes to other people saying such things. Judging by the books she bought back in the Archipelago, Perona certainly is no innocent, Robin mused as Nami spoke up.

"Hah! And don't look to me either. I'm not into girls. And even if I was, I'd be able to find someone with much better taste in partners than you seem to have in men," Nami snarked.

"Eh, I gotta agree with Nami on this one," Laki interjected, pushing herself up from where she had been napping a moment ago and looking at Perona quizzically. "Do you and Zoro go into swordplay or something? That's the only way I could see him being interested in anyone actually human. Does he call you his sheathe? Tell me he doesn't call 'little Zoro' Wado Ichimonji."

That caused Perona to flare up in turn. "Oy, at least I have someone. What about you? Will you get with Sanji or Franky, Nami, Laki? Or just wait along until you're both old maids?"

"Hah! If I wanted a man, I could walk into any port and have my choice of them within minutes," Nami blustered while Laki twitched a bit and fell silent.

"But those would be rolls in the hammock, not relationships," Perona smirked. "Do you want to become the female equivalent of Sanji?"

Nami rallied quickly. "You're one to talk, being seduced more by your messed up fantasies than the man in question. How hard did you have to hit Zoro over the head that night on the flying fish rider's docks to get him to look at you rather than his swords?"

"All I'm hearing is the voice of jealousy," Perona laughed haughtily. "How sad for..."

"Incoming Sea Kings," Robin remarked mildly, cutting across the budding argument. It was not the first one the trio of girls had over the past few weeks, but there was no reason to let it keep going. *This reminds me of a book I once read about a future based on the premise that women could create a utopia without men. If I didn't think that the Kuja showed that concept was pure fantasy, this voyage would have.*

Perona glared up at the incoming underwater monsters waving her arms. One of her Hollows appeared to either side of her, with one moving up towards the top of the main bubble and out into the water beyond quickly. The other stayed by her side momentarily, as Perona's

glare shifted to Nami before she sent it on its way, slumping back in her lounge chair. “Ugh, you’re not worth it.”

Robin ignored the three other women for a moment, watching as the hollows flew through several Sea Kings who had shown interest in their ship for a moment. Perona’s hollows only lasted a few minutes in the water, but their impact on the beasts was profound.

“Who knew that animals like Sea Kings could be so impacted by negativity?” she mused aloud, watching as five Sea Kings stopped swimming for a moment, floating away, auras of gloom practically visible all around them despite the poor lighting this deep underwater. Two of them were instantly attacked by their fellows but didn’t even fight back, becoming overcome swiftly, the massacre filling the water with blood. “And if not for Perona’s hollows, that could have been us several times over, so please at least try to play nice, Nami, Laki. I know at this point that actual civility is beyond us all, but I am more than willing to send you both to your respective corners on the threat of a Clutch to keep the peace.”

“Ouch,” the other girls chorused as one before looking at each other and then turning away in varying degrees of high dudgeon. Laki got over it quickly, apologizing to the others and then volunteering to go into the ship to get them some more lemonade. “At least the heat isn’t bothering any of the dial-based devices.”

The other two girls took her apology with thanks but did not look at one another. Of all of them, Nami and Perona had clashed the most over the past several days, and Robin sighed. While she had served as a peacemaker once or twice while working with Baroque Works, it wasn’t something she had much experience with.

After all, I would normally seek to exacerbate such weaknesses within any crew I was with, the better to keep them from looking at me too closely and to leave them behind when I had to. This is not the case now.

It sometimes still frightened her occasionally how attached she had become to Luffy and her fellow Straw Hats, but those moments were few and far between these days and getting fewer. *And if I had my Luffy to cuddle with, I doubt any of this would have been as much of a hardship as to bring such thoughts to mind.*

Still, Luffy had his role to play in this plan, and we must do ours. With that in mind, she spoke up now. “Nami, you were humming a moment ago when you joined us. Is there something wrong?”

“Not wrong, no. I was watching that one group of Sea Kings, the ones who looked like flattened swordfish the size of the ship? They seemed to be letting the currents carry them more than the rest of the monsters out there, and it looked as if there was a change in the Tarai Current. A change I’d expect if we were coming close to a large underwater mountain or something similar, marking the end of this point of the current. And the marine ship the boys

are on has slowed, too," Nami answered, returning her attention to the world outside their little bubble rather than her annoyance with Perona. *Stuck up little needy wannabe princess.*

"Do you think we are close to Impel Down, then? I can't imagine the WeeGee's so-called invulnerable prison would be small," Laki asked, already back with the lemonade and looking annoyed at how much sweat there was on her. "And I equally doubt there's anything similar still existing within the confines of the Triangle."

Perona stayed silent, stewing a bit at the latest back and forth. *Jealous ginger-haired bint, just because there's no man around for her! ...And let's not get into the fact that my and Zoro's thing might not even be serious in the first place.* Nami's comments about Zoro hurt more because of how close to home they hit.

I just don't get the impression from him I'll ever be the center of his world like all the stories should happen. Now, I don't want the settling down type, I'm a freaking pirate, but I would like to know at least that he'd choose spending time with me over challenging an unknown swordsman or something like that. And I have to admit to myself at least that being under all this water is really making me nervous. Double Ugh.

"Yeah, I think we are. Now...what are the odds of them having some underwater observation Mushis or something?" Nami mused. "I'd really like us to start using our lights to see what we're dealing with." The ship wasn't so deep that there was no light during the day, but it was still quite dark. And at night, it was nearly impossible to see unless they put torches out.

"I rather think that doing so would act like the lure on an angler fish to all the Sea Kings around here," Robin negated that suggestion quickly, shaking her head. "For someone annoyed at my commentary a moment ago, you seem to want to make some of my thoughts into prophecy."

"Ugh," Nami groaned, unconsciously echoing Perona's thoughts from a second before. "Robin, please don't say things like that. But seriously, do you think we should use our lights, or even maybe surface, get the lay of the land?"

Robin thought about it for a moment, then turned to Chopper. "Chopper, are you up for trying to talk to the locals again? Nami says the ship we've been following has stopped, but I want to make certain and see if they are willing to tell us anything about the lay of the land."

Chopper lay nearby, practically insensate, curled around a chunk of ice with a cold, wet towel over his back. But being directly addressed roused him, and he groaned, looking upwards before nodding. "Ugh, I know it's helped us a few times already, but talking to fish and Sea Kings is weird. It's hard to understand their voices, not like talking to other land beasts, and I always get the impression the Sea Kings want to eat me."

“Hey now, you know no one’s going to eat our resident monster doctor,” Nami soothed.

“Unless you fleshy types get hungry,” Eve caroled from around them, eager to work on her troll game. “Didn’t Sanji say you were the crew’s emergency food rations? It might just be it’s your destiny to be eaten, Chopper. Just like it is the girls’ destinies to grow old and wrinkled.”

“Gah, Eve, why~!” Nami, Chopper and Perona said as one. Perona had gotten used to the fact that the ship had a Klabautermann throughout this journey, although Eve was still reluctant to show herself to Perona, as Perona had yet to officially join the Straw Hat Crew.

As Nami continued to remonstrate with the ship’s spirit, Chopper stood up, wobbling a little and wrapping the rapidly melting ice in his towel, holding the whole thing like a security blanket as he worked his way over to the side of the ship. There, he pressed his mouth against the bubble around the ship and began to gesture and speak loudly.

One of the nearer Sea Kings swam closer and opened its mouth, letting loose a series of booming noises causing all four of the Straw Hats to cover their ears. The Sea King soon fell silent, and Chopper turned to the others to relay his words. As usual, the eye-patch-wearing reindeer boy’s face shifted, taking on the mien of... well, to Robin’s eyes, he looked like some kind of street punk, complete with haughty, arrogant tone to his words as he spoke.

When it was finished, Chopper reported that there was indeed a huge manmade structure ahead of them. The marine vessel they’d been following was also there.

“Alright, we will remain here, drop the anchor. We don’t want to get any closer,” Robin ordered Eve. “Tonight, we will surface until we are right below the waterline and use that periscope Franky added to the crow’s nest. We can’t let ourselves be seen now, of all times.”

The other girls nodded eagerly, but Nami had another idea. “Actually, I might be able to do something about that. Laki,” she gestured over to the Shandian. “Made me a new weapon that lets me use my weather knowledge. It can create a fog bank and even illusions if I can access enough water vapor and sunlight.”

“The fog bank technique should only take Nami’s Clima-Control staff a few seconds if there’s some existing fog or rain,” Laki added, eager to see her latest creation in action now that Nami had reminded her of it. She’d finished that weapon several days ago and had been working on the enlarged version for the *Everlasting Resolve* since.

“Hmmm... All right, let’s do that, then. But we’ll still wait for nighttime,” Robin decided.

With that, Robin stood up, moving to the side as Eve dropped the anchors, watching as they slid out from the bubble coating and down towards the distant bottom of the ocean. Then

she looked up to the light streaming down from above, calculating. “And I think, Eve, I’ll be loading the guns up too. We can never be too careful, after all.”

OOOOOOO

Garp grumbled to himself as he performed thumb-ups in his cell, wondering if he should try to break out of his chains again. *I swear I felt them shift the last time. Feh, Seastone chains even for people who don’t have Devil Fruits like me? I’m getting the impression the WG want to keep me here for some reason. Could it be because I want to tear each of the Gorosei’s heads off one after another? The order had to have come from one of them, given how Tsuru was talking about it.*

At one point that would have been Tsuru-chan, but Garp was past that point now. His time over the past few days – he wasn’t certain how long he’d been down here, but it didn’t feel like it had been all that long – had given Garp a lot of time for self-reflection, something that he had never really done before. And for good reason.

It had made Garp question a lot of the things he’d done, let alone seen as a marine, and Garp had never been into the completely black and white ideal that the World Government pushed to begin with. *Now? Now if I can get out of here, I’m going to go looking for some answers. The Tenryubito, why do they have so many rights, really? No way is it just because of their ancestor’s loyalty to the WG way back when. And that CPO group I’ve heard of a time or two, let alone some of the weird rumors about Vegapunk. Fucking mad as a hatter bastard. Did he really somehow split up his personality into separate people? And what about that rumor about his research into Devil Fruits yielding artificial ones? Yeah, I think I’ll start with him when I get out of here... well, anyway, so long as I can get Ace out before he’s carted off to be executed. If I’m lucky both CPO will be sent after us, and...*

His violently positive musings broke off as he and the other prisoners became aware of the noise of the elevator activating. Many of the prisoners grumbled and growled, but then one, a woman’s voice although very deep and rumbling, grunted, “Fucking calm down, you losers. It’s just food.”

True to the unseen woman’s prediction, soon several dozen guards appeared. Nearly half of them stayed put by the elevator, their guns up and pointing in every direction. But the others started to push forward small carts holding tiny trays of food. Made of some weird plastics, they and the accompanying sporks would actually melt over time.

They needn’t have bothered with the guns, though.

Yesterday several of the pirates Garp had put in here had tried a joint attempt to escape their cells, actually succeeding in getting one of their number, the giant, Doha Ittanka II out somehow. Of course, while it was so dark down here none of the prisoners could see more than

a few feet in any direction, the prison did have some surveillance Mushi who could see through the dark and saw what was happening.

By the time Doha had gotten out of his cell, Magellan had been called in to deal with him, although Garp had already knocked the idiot out with a Busoshoku-assisted leap. His chains had just added more weight to his leap, as his fingers and feet were still free. Indeed, Garp had been about to make a break for Ace's cell when Magellan arrived. And while Garp could have beaten him in turn, even Garp couldn't do that as chained up as he was. His one try had resulted in Magellan knocking Garp out via his poison after dodging his 'Torpedo Headbutt of Revenge.' Even Garp had to breathe, and the fumes from the poison had worked eventually to knock him out again, before he was tossed back into a new cell, this one with Seastone bars to match Garp's chains.

Afterward, Magellan had finished Doha off along with a few others as a warning to the other prisoners. All their corpses had since been tossed out to feed the Sea Kings.

Although still sore about his escape attempt being ruined, Garp still wondered how the giant had gotten out of his cell. He had wondered on and off if Shiryu had somehow had something to do with it but couldn't figure it out how.

Regardless, level six was actually kind of quiet and subdued today, something he was very thankful for.

As the guards came close to his and Ace's cells, Garp glanced across at his adopted grandson. Well, that was how Garp thought of him anyway after hearing about how Ace and Luffy had become blood brothers, on top of how he'd taken care of the brat at Gol's request.

Damn, I'm really worried about him. He hasn't been the same since I got here and told him about Luffy... not that I can blame him. Fuck, the only reason I'm not wallowing in grief and pity is because even if I can't eventually escape on my own, I can hope to somehow eventually be let out of here thanks to who I am and my former position as the 'hero' of the marines. Fuck me, some hero!

For just a moment, Garp thought of the marines he was leaving behind, including his two newest trainees. *I hope Coby and what's-his-face, begin to see reality now and maybe choose to leave the marines if so. I know Coby had his dream, and it certainly drove him hard, but the marines aren't what he thinks they are. Let Coby and his sidekick pursue their own concepts of justice, without the baggage of the marines dragging them down.*

Of course, Ace didn't have any hopes of being officially freed. Ace knew that the moment his cell door opened, he would be marched out still in his Seastone handcuffs, and dragged out to a waiting marine ship. That marine ship that would carry him to Marineford, where, barring intervention and a war launched by Whitebeard to rescue him, he would be executed.

Ace had known and been crushed by this knowledge before Garp came. Now on top of that, Ace had learned that his little brother had been slain, literally dog piled by Shichibukai until he fell for the simple crime of being associated with Ace, and being too strong for the marines to want to allow him to stay free to potentially interfere with Ace's execution on top of their planned war with Whitebeard.

Garp had tried to get Ace's spirits up a few times, but to no avail. Even Garp's attempt to get to him and escape hadn't worked, Ace simply hung there limply, staring at the floor.

So it was no surprise to Garp that Ace didn't bother looking up as the people delivering their meals passed by. But Garp did, and he was in a position to listen to their muffled conversation as they did so.

"Thank God it's so quiet down here today. Maybe we can convince the boss to come down here once every few days just to shut them all up."

"If you want to try and convince the boss to do that, go right ahead. I'm sure he'd love to hear how you want to give him even more stomach problems." A second guard snorted at the first, shaking his head. Their features were obscured by heavy masks and goggles, their hats containing little lights on them as they moved around, surrounding each of them in a small cone of light that allowed them to see what they were doing, but not to see any of the prisoners or vice versa very well.

They were also shivering in fear despite it being quiet today, such was the terror the monsters on this level evoked. Yet somehow, despite that, the power of gossip compelled them to keep speaking to one another. Although as they were moving away from Garp now, he couldn't hear as much, only grasping a few words per sentence.

"Did you hear... two pirates.... One... flirt with Domino-sama, and she was... responding! I... him some special attention! And maybe... few... Blue Gorillas..."

"I heard... something wrong with Domino.... even if she only works in the above-water sectors."

At that point, the group of scared guards came back and once more passed in front of Garp's cell. Which, thankfully for him, sat at an intersection of several short walkways moving around his cell towards other specially designed cells.

"And there's **definitely** something wrong with Sadi-chan," the third guard said as they passed. He seemed to pause, staring into Garp's cell, but Garp just grinned at him cheerily, grabbing up the food and eating noisily, using his thumb and the side of the chains to use the spork.

The second guard who had spoken earlier snorted at that, then gestured upwards before pushing the others on their way. "I heard the rumor about that pirate flirting with Domino-sama, but I also heard the rumor that two of the bounty hunters who apparently came with him were women. Moreover, both of them were good looking too. Although I have no idea why the bounty hunters were allowed to come here in the first place."

Once more, the group of guards was moving out of Garp's hearing, and he scowled. *That was getting interesting, at least.* And this time, they had begun to hurry, so Garp heard even less, although he was amused that despite becoming more scared of being down here with every step, the guards kept on gossiping.

"The bounty hunters...Admiral Gion...signing up with.... I was... Baskerville's okay... Apparently... East Blue and the marines there promptly lost them," a fourth guard said.

Unseen in the dark, Garp frowned for a moment at the mention of East Blue and began listening even more intently, before his eyes flicked to the side. He hadn't been looking directly at the guards, so his eyes were still acclimatized to the darkness down here, and he had just seen some strange movement in Ace's cell.

Ace too could hear the guards now as they spoke to one another. And as they did, under his lank black hair, Ace's eyes widened in shock.

"...both of the girls... cute. One... picture-perfect tomboy. Her attitude... but her looks were kind of okay, and I... the red hair...for me. And that... her shirt...shower stall's water when..."

"Lucky..." grumbled one of the other guards.

Passing by Ace's cell, the guards became silent, only picking up their conversation when they were back by Garp and going down another hallway. And once more, Garp could make out their words easily, although unlike Ace, he didn't quite understand what he was hearing.

"As for the other one, I think she gave off a little too much big sister vibes for me. But if you're into that kind of thing, it was definitely a breath of fresh air in comparison to dealing with Sadi-chan or even Domino-sama. Domino might have the looks but she is all business."

"Yeah, but didn't they come with a skeleton or something? Some weird Devil Fruit user. That's kind of a turn off for me," the first guard said. "That they are comfortable around skeletons, I mean."

"That's fine by me. I'm into a little bit of crazy stuff, so long as the payoff is worth it," the second guard announced, and the four of them at least moved entirely out of Garp's hearing range and did not return. But even as they did, Garp's eyes were drawn toward Ace's cell, where renewed crying could be heard.

But there was a difference to the sound now. Instead of sounding broken, or simply despairing, these tears were accompanied by... snorts of laughter? *What the hell? Has he finally cracked?*

Garp stayed silent as the food was distributed throughout the level and until all the guards were back on the elevator heading up. Then he looked over toward Ace's jail cell, and called out quietly, "Oy, brat, what the hell is wrong with you?"

His eyes widened as the sound of Ace's crying stopped and he chuckled for a few seconds before responding. When he spoke, his voice was raspy from disuse. He hadn't spoken a word since the day Garp had arrived and told him of Luffy's death, only crying silently. "I think old man that you should never count the man, with the Will of D down, unless you see his body..."

That confused Garp further, and then he stared at Ace's cell in shock. "Wh, wait... you don't, you don't mean..."

Ace's fierce grin shown in the darkness unseen. "Makes me feel kind of pathetic being the older brother needing my little brother to save me, but I sure as hell am not going to look that horse in the mouth when it comes."

Now it was Garp's turn to chuckle, before it became a full-blown laugh his heart soaring. *That damn brat, that damn brat! I'm going to fucking pound him into the ground like a nail when he gets here!* Even as that laugh started several of the other inmates to shouting, and yelling at him again, Garp tuned them out and then went back to exercising, determined to be in the best shape when his grandson arrived to save his brother.

OOOOOOO

Zoro stared out at the frozen tundra, crossing his arms despite the manacles still on them, as he looked all around him, seemingly uncaring of the cold, which caused Magellan to growl a bit under his breath. "Where the heck did the forest come from? I mean I'm not going to even ask about how you've created snow and ice and everything else, but how the heck did you grow in entire forest here, indoors, without sunlight or anything that any plant would recognize as regular ground? It's going to confuse the hell out of me."

"That is none of your concern!" Magellan growled. "I..."

"So you don't know," Zoro interrupted him before he could continue on, nodding his head sagely. "Makes sense, I guess. This place was probably here long before you were born. Still freaky though."

"Whatever your thoughts on the matter, this will be where you will reside until we come to take you to be executed. I wonder how long you will be able to keep that attitude of yours

when you realize we don't tend to feed prisoners that are going to be executed so quickly, and that there is no respite from the cold?" Magellan snorted, his nostrils actually flaring up as he let loose the loud noise, far louder than any of Gion's typical snorts, which Zoro had almost gotten used to since crossing blade with her.

Zoro shivered a little bit, the cold indeed getting to him despite his bravado. *It's almost like being back on Drum Island. Just without the candle guy, or a strange duck chasing a little girl through the forest. Funny to think that no matter how weird that line is to think, that little adventure barely registered on my weirdness meter even then.*

His hands fell to the side, and his thoughts on the cold disappeared, his hand clenching and unclenching pair his three swords should reside. Zoro had gotten used to that over the week on Gion's ship, but he had still been able to sense his swords nearby then. Now, whatever minuscule ability with Kenbunshoku he had when it came to his swords wasn't giving him anything. They were far too far away.

And still under Gion's control. That rankled very, **very** badly, on several levels. First, that they weren't his. Second, at least Wado and Shusui both had promises wrapped up in their steel, promises that made their being away from him even more painful. And second, the fact that Gion had them, was a sign of how badly she had beaten him, something that no swordsman would be able to put up with easily.

He turned to glare up at Magellan, pushing down any reaction to how big the guy was, something that was somewhat difficult despite the slow hours they had traveled down in the elevator. They'd met some really tall people in the past, but this guy took the cake among normal humans. *Although, can he really be called human with that face and those horns? Better put him under the category 'other' I suppose.* "If you think that the cold will break me, you have no idea of how a true swordsman's mind works."

"I've heard it all before. But no matter your strength, no matter your bravado, eventually, the cold here will break you. Lack of food will help. And when you are dragged in front of the world to be executed for the heinous crime of slaying a celestial Dragon, a holy noble of the World Government, you will be a broken wreck. So broken that you will apologize on bended knee for mercy," Magellan intoned.

He gestured towards two shadows almost invisible in the room of the snowfall around them as they moved towards them. These were prisoners who had been near the elevator enough to hear its arrival, and now, their voices could be heard on the wind.

"Magellan, let me out of here, I'm sorry, I'm sorry! Let me back up to Burning Hell at least!"

"Magellan, I'm sorry! I will tell the World Government whatever they want to know, I will show them where I kept my treasures. Just let me out of here!"

“Proud pirate captains from the New World, corrupt government officials, former revolutionaries. The cold here breaks them all. Or the wolves get them. Wolves that are so strong they could no longer be kept on Beast Hell thanks to trying to hunt down the other animals on the level. Although I hope the wolves don’t get you. If they do, I will probably be in trouble with the World Government for a bit. But I’m certain they will understand in the end.”

With that, Magellan gestured to the rhino man beside him. The Awakened Zoan grabbed Zoro by the scruff of his neck, and twirled in place before hurling him out and away from the elevator. “Stay here, Rhino. Keep an eye out and make certain he can’t find his way back to the elevator. The reports on the Pirate Hunter stated he had some strange teleportation powers and I don’t want him to be able to somehow find his way up to the other levels.”

The Rhino man ponderously nodded, and Magellan turned, reentering the elevator, heading up to his room on the level above. As he did, the rhino man

More than a mile away, Zoro landed, plowing into a tree so hard it shattered. He grunted under the impact, but not really feeling it, despite not calling on either his Tekkai or Busoshoku. Indeed, he barely felt them thanks to how much training he’d done with Luffy since he’d come aboard.

Pushing out of the snow was harder. The snow was so soft and fluffy where Zoro landed, he couldn’t get purchase for a moment, but when he finally pulled up, he could only gasp, growling out, “The moment I get my swords back, I’m going to...” he began, before slumping, nearly falling back into the snow as the realization hit him yet again that his swords were nowhere near him, or even within Impel Down at all.

Unless Luffy was able to find them on Gion’s ship? Zoro thought hopefully, before shrugging his shoulders and looking around him, shivering now. The prisoner garb he had been given was totally inadequate for the cold down here, and it was now starting to get to him even more than it had on Drum Island. *It might be actually colder here than it was there. Heh, what I wouldn’t give for one of those giant rabbit things to skin.*

How long he traveled around the frozen tundra, Zoro didn’t know. Nothing seemed to change as he did, the vista around him the same as when he landed: pine trees covered in snow, with the ground equally covered, and no one living in sight. The only breaks to this monotony were the scattered handful of frozen bodies Zoro stumbled upon.

It was soon after he found one such that looked like it had been gnawed on that Zoro stopped, hearing growling from nearby. Turning in a circle, Zoro watched as a band of thin wild looking wolves came out of the forest around him. In the pale light of the artificial sun or whatever it was above them that shown through the falling snow, their red eyes stood out starkly, and they all looked altogether menacing. Zoro looked down at his still chained arms, then back at the wolves, slowly nodding. “You’ll do, I suppose.”

A series of loud thumps was then heard throughout the forest, as well as the sound of chains rattling continuously for several minutes. Then, several of the wolves streaked away from Zoro's position, yipping in fear, and he stood over the body of two of them, their necks snapped by strikes from the chains. "Would've thought that Magellan bastard would've remembered how I used these as weapons before. Not that it seemed to matter to him." Zoro had long since shattered the chains connecting his hands together and down to his feet, leaving him only with the chains draping from his wrists.

Zoro shivered now, not at the cold, but at the memory of that guy's venom form. The fumes from it had completely bypassed his Busoshoku, and so quickly, there hadn't been anything he could do. *With my swords, I bet I could be that guy hollow, without them, my Busoshoku is limited and my attacks aren't much better. Damn, probably means that if it comes to it, I will have to leave Magellan for Luffy.*

Shaking his head at that, Zoro turned his attention to the here and now, staring down at the bodies then at his hands and the chains still binding them together. "... How exactly do you go about skinning an animal with your bare hands, anyway?"

OOOOOOO

Franky frowned a bit as he looked at the entrance to the hidden cove where apparently the one port on Amazon Lily resided. The sides of it were jagged, the entrance way marked by several stones jutting up out of the rock like fangs. On the hills above stood two large towers, where he could see movement, as well as hear the sound of a gong or Bell going off and announcing their arrival. "This point has got to be crazy difficult to enter or leave when there's bad storms. But why aren't there any defenses?"

"This is the Calm Belt, there are no storms here. And as for defenses, we warriors of Amazon Lily are too strong to need them," scoffed Marigold.

Her sister Sandersonia however shook her head, looking over at her sister for a second. "You know that's not true. Generally speaking, we rely on the fact that we're in the Calm Belt in the first place to be our first line of defense, with the Sea King's then forming a second. And we don't have enough warriors to properly defend the whole island. We have lookout towers stationed around the island, but we have been surprised by slavers in the past. That is why Hancock-neesama decided to become a Shichibukai in the first place: to stop that kind of thing from happening."

Sandersonia had not shown any reluctance before this to the alliance that Hancock and Luffy had made. She had seen the growing connection and affection between them pair and had seen Luffy use his lightning powers a few times in training and before and knew how strong he was. And moreover, Sandersonia had made friends with Nami, learning more from her in weeks they'd spent together than she had in years before acting as the Kuja Pirate's narrator.

But now away from Nami, and with Luffy off on a mad scheme to free Fire Fist Ace from Impel Down, she had to wonder. *Still, if he doesn't succeed, she can still act as a Shichibukai, and maybe even bring in the other Straw Hats into our crew instead. There is no way that Robin or Nami let alone Laki or Perona would attack on their own and get caught by the marines, if Luffy hasn't already succeeded in his part of the plan.*

Unaware of Sandersonia's inner thoughts, Franky just nodded, slapping her lightly on the back with one of his big hands. "Yeah, but with my Captain's flag and the ships this super Franky will help ya build, that's not going to be necessary at all, trust me."

A few of the nearby crewwomen scowled at the familiarity, but most didn't. They'd gotten used to Franky's character over the past few days. There was also the fact that the ship, despite being what he called a rush job, it had sailed just as well as their previous ship had, if not a little better. The rigging was still an issue, and the interior wasn't anything worth mentioning, but the overall shape of the ship had allowed it to cut through the waves like a dream.

Near the prow of the ship, Hancock lounged on her snake seat as per usual, her legs crossed languidly, and an umbrella above her head as she stared ahead of them towards the town. There Hancock could see hundreds of Amazons gathering to welcome them home and she wondered idly what her people would think about the alliance she had forged. *I will know soon enough, I suppose. As well as when the World Government want me to show up on Marineford. And soon after that, I will learn how Luffy has succeeded...*

Like her sister, some doubts about this alliance had crept into Hancock's mind after the Straw Hats had left, but not to the extent that they had Sandersonia's. She had fought Luffy, and then sparred with him numerous times on the trip to the Archipelago. And if there was one thing that had truly impressed her, above and beyond his sheer skill in combat, it was Luffy's adaptability. *No matter what happens, I think Luffy will figure out some way to free his brother. What happens after that... heh, only a goddess could predict. Regardless, this alliance was an excellent way forward, and my people will see the truth of that soon.*

Not two hours later found Hancock once more sitting on Salome in the throne room of her palace, kneading the bridge of her nose with two fingers as Elder Nyon shouted at her. "...and you know how important it is for you to be a Shichibukai! We are too darn close to the Holy Land, the Calm Belt can't protect us from the World Government itself, or its depredations on our people. I cannot believe you would so willingly decide to throw over that promise of good relations for this, this Luffy character!"

A few of the other, more senior Amazons of Grannies generation had joined her in this 'conference.' This was the Elder Council of Amazon Lily. Although leaders in smithing, shipbuilding, farming and so forth across the island, they didn't have much formal power, since Amazon Lily was a meritocratic monarchy, and as the strongest warrior, Hancock ruled with all the powers a tyrant could. Indeed, she had often acted like a tyrant overriding the old women's

worries on many an occasion. But given the nature of the alliance she had forged with Luffy, Hancock felt she needed to inform them as well as a few other chosen representatives of her people how things would be changing after the coming battles. Hancock could not have called herself a leader if she did otherwise.

While the younger set had simply decided to go along with things because Hancock was the one saying it, the oldsters had not. Luckily, most of them were overawed by Hancock. Unluckily, Elder Nyon, who was a former Empress herself, made up for that in volume and how strident she was in her opinions. "Trusting Rayleigh is one thing thanks to his relationship with young Shakky, but just because this Monkey boy impressed you in combat is no reason to think he has any chance of winning through Impel Down, let alone get Fire Fist out of there. And to think his name alone will..."

"Enough!" Hancock rose to her feet, grabbing at Gloriosa's head and pulling her up off the ground shaking her from side to side while smacking away her staff with her free hand. "I have heard your objections, your worries, and I have rejected them! You were not there, you did not fight the Lightning King, and have no idea how strong he is. When I called him an Emperor in the making, I was not using hyperbole. He truly is that strong. And did you even notice the ship I came in?"

One of the oldsters would remain silent up to this point spoke up now. "I did Hebe-hime-sama. It's definitely not the ship you left us in. It looks as if it was built quickly, but to a far higher standard and ability than we can replicate here."

Many of the younger women who had examined the ship since they'd arrived might have argued about that. Nevertheless, the oldsters had long since learned more than enough about the world beyond Amazon Lily to know men could build ships and occasionally even fight better than they could.

"Exactly. Franky, the male with us who I left down at the docks, is a shipwright. The *Everlasting Resolve*, the ship he made for the Straw Hats, is a warship beyond any that I have ever seen before. He, with the resources we have here, can perhaps build us several ships close to that level. With them and with Luffy's power we can protect our island."

"And you know as well as I do, old woman," she growled, turning her attention back to Elder Nyon, still holding in the air with one hand. "A Shichibukai is merely a different kind of slave to the World Government. All of their so-called protection is based about following their orders whenever they whistle me up and that I do not prey on WeeGee ships. No matter how I tried to escape that reality it still existed. And if a group of the accursed Tenryubito suddenly took it into their minds to gather up some Amazons slaves, the World Government would not have defended us from them. Indeed, they might have ordered me to pick out such and send them off myself!"

The old women all looked away, knowing that before their time that kind of thing had indeed happened more than once. Sacrifices would be made to the Tenryubito to keep their attention away from the island. It was better, they felt than the constant warfare they'd seen before the rise of Granny, then Shakky and finally Hancock. Three generations had kept the island relatively safe.

"And if I tried to defend those taken, I would've lost my status anyway." She shook her head, and tossed the old woman aside languidly, uncaring if she could land on her feet or not.

Granny did. Despite her age, Elder Nyon had been a warrior herself at one point. She glared at Hancock, her face lined with worry, not for her treatment at the young woman's hands but for their people.

She made to open her mouth, but Hancock had already turned away, gesturing out to the docks below. "No, my alliance with Luffy will serve us far better in the long run."

"And what of breaking our laws and bringing a man here?" Another one of the oldsters argued, her voice filled with loathing, "I speak for many of the Kuja on the island, and we all believe should not have been allowed."

"Franky is a special case on many levels." Hancock snorted. "In fact, if not for the fact he has reacted numerous times to my obvious beauty, I would question if he was still a man at all." This got confused looks the room, but she waved them off, ignoring Marigold's snickering from behind her with equal aplomb. "Franky is most decidedly not the type of person to bother our womenfolk. Putting up with his shouts of 'super' will be somewhat annoying, but he truly is the best shipwright I have ever seen. And I want him working on our ship right up until the point where the World Government calls and orders me to Marine ford."

Hancock looked away again, slightly worried about the fact that they wouldn't be arriving there in the *Everlasting Resolve*. Tsuru had hinted at the fact that the Marines wanted to examine the Stray Hat's vessel. Still, Hancock also remembered that she had told the old woman that she might allow that only if she was in a good mood. Showing up in a different ship would probably be put down to fit of pique on her part. "And if any of our fellow Kuja has a problem with that, they can come to me!"

That threat hung in the air for a moment and all but Granny bowed their heads in submission. They had given their opinions and that was all they could do. Granny though, had always had a problem keeping her nose out of Hancock's business. "We still have to talk about this! Just because you fell in love is no reason to threaten the peace and stability of Amazon Lily!"

Hancock shook her head, waving her hand away. "Whether or not I have the Love Sickness is immaterial. This is simply put a good deal, and I will follow through with it!" She glared at the old woman, and after several fulminating moments, Elder Nyon looked away,

cowed for now. Hancock knew that wouldn't last forever, but she would take what she could get. "Now, Franky supplied us a list of metals he needs to create cannons, and a list of the types of wooden planks and so forth he needs to finish our ship off. I want our shipwrights working on that starting now. I will also be conducting a series of games to determine who among our warriors is worthy of joining my crew going into this mission..."

OOOOOOO

Despite Clay's ability with Okama Kenpo, he could not keep up with Luffy's ridiculous speed, which slowed his traversing the level quite a bit. However, getting to the level below was easy, as there were no guards or even anything nailing the grates covering the holes in the floor down. Once you moved one, you could leap if you wanted to the level far below.

But below this hole, much like the one Sanji had dropped down, was a wide seething pool of lava. The only landing area visible was a series of moving gantries connected to a single central turnstile. On these gantries were a series of cages, some normal looking, others more like iron maidens, racks or other torture implements. From them, prisoners screamed in agony under the tender ministrations of Sadi-chan's personal retinue. If you didn't time your jump right, you would be falling into the boiling blood below, which was so hot even Clay would have been burned badly.

But with Luffy there, the pair could use the cheat code 'Geppo.' Which, like Sanji before them, made it easy.

"We're going to have to be careful about this, so act as if you're kicking off the ground," Luffy ordered, getting behind Clay and grabbing his side, lifting them into the air trying hard not to let his pants or shirt ride up as he did to give the game away.

"Don't even joke~! This feels funny!" Clay whimpered, as he found himself kicking off into the air over the hole. The pair dropped for several hundred feet, before Luffy began bouncing in place, held there in midair by Luffy's Geppo, with Luffy still struggling to not let Clay's clothing move under his hands.

A moment later, they touched down lightly on the walkways, staring around first at the prisoners being tortured and then at the prisoners being forced to work on the turning devices.

Luffy was doing the same, and couldn't spot Sanji anywhere. With a frown, he looked to either side, staring down several short hallways to other areas where teams of prisoners could be seen moving around. Some were walking about freely others were chained to the large metal chains that seemed to run everywhere, connected to the winches that turned the higher torture platforms. Nowhere could he see Sanji.

Cracking his neck, Luffy closed his eyes and concentrated on his Kenbunshoku, trying to discover where Sanji's mind was. Yet to his surprise, all he could sense of his cook was a vague

sense of his direction, he was actually at the far edge of Luffy's range despite the lightning fruit enhancing his Kenbunshoku's range to a crazy degree. "Damn, how big is this level?" Luffy asked aloud, shaking his head unseen.

"I don't know, Luffy-kun," Clay whispered back, looking around him thoughtfully, not realizing the question had been rhetorical. "But since we came from above, we should be allowed to walk freely for a bit without the guards bothering us and until it comes time for a shift change. Then I'll be forced to join the others pulling one of the ropes."

"And do you have any idea how we get to the next floor?"

Clay shook his head, and whispered that he didn't know. "I know it's the level Ivankov-sama is supposed to be on, and I heard there is a rather sharp contrast between this level next. But how the two of them connect, I don't know. We might have to try to attack guards to find out, maybe? Or you'll just have to scout around on your own. You're certainly going to be better at that than I am."

He'd said all this in a low whisper as if talking to himself, having gotten used to hiding Luffy's presence by this time. Like Sanji and Luffy, Clay was great at improvisation, and was a great actor too. Given his powers, that made a lot of sense, of course, but it was still nice to see he hadn't lost his edge, even if Luffy still wanted to beat on Clay a tiny bit when he thought about how Mr. 2 had used that power of his: to imitate Vivi's father and others to sow discord in her country.

Clay had proven to be a great help. Kenbunshoku gave Luffy only a minimal understanding of the physical surroundings around himself bar the animals and people. He could sense plants to a certain extent, but not the layout of the land beneath. Without Clay, Luffy would have been slowed even more than he was by Clay's lack of speed with his need to explore Starvation Hell.

Had Clay been anywhere else talking to himself like this public would have garnered a few odd looks or confusion. But here, especially on Fiery Hell, the prisoners did not have any willpower left to notice anything beyond their own concerns. Their own fears rather: fears of tripping, of getting caught shirking by one of the Beasts, or simply fear of the whips of the guards as they patrolled alongside the work gangs. And of course, there was the fear of being randomly chosen to replace one of the unfortunates up on the torture platforms.

Several of those guards were currently looking at Clay, scowling in irritation. The guards on this level wore different garb than the jailers Luffy had seen previously. Instead of a simple uniform, the guards here wore protective clothing for the most part. A massive hood that looked like something taken out of a sadist's dungeon coupled with heavy, thick cloth covering them from shoulder on down, perhaps to protect them from the heat? Luffy wasn't certain, although he doubted it was pleasant regardless.

All the guards had seen Clay come down, and been completely fooled into thinking that he had been the one using Geppo. None of them knew about the Rokushiki but they had certainly seen him use it to land safely, and more than one there had seen Black Leg use the same technique. That was more than enough for them to your and by his presence. But as he was rapidly moving away from area, they had initially landed in, none of the guards moved to stop them or do anything about it.

To the guard's minds, even if Clay was used to the heat of the level above, the humid, hellacious heat of this level was a completely story. The heat would get to him eventually.

Luffy told Clay the direction he could sense Sanji's mind, and they were on their way. They passed by what looked like the entrance to the kitchen. After that, they passed through what was undoubtedly the area where the prisoners were kept while not being tortured or put on duty at the winches. On this level, there were several dozen large communal cages, in which men slept on the floor or in racks cut out of the walls at the back.

It was outside the last of them that Luffy paused, but not because he had spotted Sanji physically. The cook was still several miles ahead of them, although Luffy could tell he was now exerting himself in some fashion but otherwise seemed unhurt. No, Luffy had seen someone else he hadn't expected to see ever again. "Well now, this is interesting."

Clay paused hearing that, frowning as he shook his head looking into the cage to one side which was the only thing that Luffy could find interesting at all about this hallway. "What is it?"

"A blast from the past."

Within the cage slumped against the far wall was a blue-haired middle-aged man with a big red nose. *Buggy the clown. I guess he got captured again, although what the hell did he do to be put down on this floor? Is it just because of that marine base he wiped out, or what? Ironic to think it was that escape, and the escape of my first bounty that provided the story to let Luffy accompanying Gion Impel Down in the first place. I hadn't heard anything about him being captured, but then again, I hadn't exactly been looking.*

Luffy whispered all this to Clay, snorted in amusement of the randomness of it. Then Clay shouted, "Ahoy there! Hey, blue haired clown, what are you in for?"

"What did you call me!?! And what the hell are you wearing!?" Buggy shouted back, pushing off of his bed and glaring through the bars at Clay. "And I'm Buggy, not a clown!"

Luffy had to give that to Buggy at least. He had also been thrown off by Clay's outfit. It wasn't all that unusual to go shirtless even in Starvation Hell with its abundant sun, but instead of just getting rid of his shirt or using it in some fashion, Clay had torn his shirt into pieces and

somehow made a ballet dress out of it. It was an ugly ass one, but still very obviously a ballet tutu.

“Then maybe you should get rid of big red nose of yours if ya don’t want to be called a clown!” Clay shot back.

“It’s my real nose you asshole!” Buggy growled, by this point having made her his way to the bars. Now he reached through them, then shot his hands out with his powers, grabbing at Clay’s head and pulling him into the bars with a loud clang. “Hah, serves you right!”

Huh, he can use his powers? Why doesn’t he have Seastone handcuffs? Hell, Clay doesn’t have them either. Are they so certain in their security here they don’t care about the powers of their prisoners? Or do they have some way to see through Clay’s shapeshifting?

As Luffy was thinking this, Clay reached up and grabbed the hands on his head, gripping them hard and turning around. “Thanks for the hands~~, I’m sure they’ll be of great use somehow~.”

“Gah, oh god no, hey! Get back here!” Buggy shouted, his body coming apart and flowing through the bars after Clay. “Use your own hands, damn it, not mine!”

The former cabin boy of the Pirate King didn’t notice Luffy as he followed. They were almost back to where the entrance to the kitchen was by the time they stopped. As they ran, Buggy continued to try to stop Clay by pelting him with body parts, but Clay kicked them all away.

Luffy watched this until one of the kicked parts was redirected over Buggy’s shoulder. At that point, before Buggy could regain control of the body part, Luffy smacked it back towards Buggy from behind, hitting him in the back of the head.

Buggy looked around, frowning in confusion and wondering how the heck that had happened when a male voice whispered in his ear, “Don’t look around, we’re being watched by some of the guards and those Mushis. Keep going with your argument with Clay, for now.”

Confused, and more than a little worried about the fact that he was now talking to an invisible voice, which he seemed to have heard before, Bucky glanced up at the ceiling, noticing several of the mobile recording snails had moved into the area and were now watching him and Clay fight as several guards moved in their direction. *Okay, so the mystery voice was right but what the hell? Where did the mystery voice come from, and did it somehow convince this idiot into trying to start a fight with me?*

Regardless, he decided to leave Clay now that he’d gotten his hands back. He marched back to his cell with Clay following after them, still taunting him. Whatever this was, he wanted no part of it. The only way to survive in Impel Down was to not get involved. The time he’d

spent here, which was anyone's guess really, had been more than long enough to teach him that.

As he went, the mystery voice hissed, "You know anywhere not under observation here?"

Glancing around Buggy noticed the guards from before were still moving in their direction, so didn't go with his first impulse, which was to shout at the mystery voice to leave him alone. Instead, he kicked out hard, catching Clay midstride. The other guy raised his foot, blocking the kick with his knee, and Buggy roared out, "Leave me alone! Why the hell are you following me now, huh!?"

"Hell no! And as for why, you might have information I need," the voice hissed. "All that matters is whether or not you're going to give it for free or if you want something in return."

By that point, the guards had reached them, and Buggy held up his hands, making no effort to try to fight back. Not that it mattered at all to the guards, who laid about both men with their whips and tridents. The blows sent Buggy to his knees then Clay who hissed and ranted against the beating.

Watching, Luffy was tempted to intervene, but he couldn't touch someone without coming out of the Umi-Sen-Ken or bringing the person he touched into it. Whichever would be noticed, and there were still a few Surveillance Mushi nearby.

Instead, Luffy left Clay behind for a second, heading back the way they had been going when he had spotted Buggy. Dodging around guards and over prisoners, Luffy even clung to the walls occasionally and took to the roof or the chains hanging from it as he made his way swiftly across the level.

Soon Luffy found Sanji situated near the far wall from where he and Clay had come down, working with one of the furthest work gangs. Nearby he was being watched by the Cow Zoan that had accompanied the Rhino Zoan and Sadi-chan when they met Zoro and the rest on the first level. *Fuck. That could be difficult to deal with... well, it would be if I really cared about any of these other assholes. As it is, lots of opportunities present themselves to someone under the Umi-Sen-Ken.*

Luffy had also seen two other Zoan types around the place as he travelled towards Sanji's position. One almost looked like a koala that had been beaten by an ugly stick, while the other looked like a zebra whose hair had been colored violet and was understandably sad about it. Regardless of what they looked like, though, all were dangerous opponents, and utterly brutal to the prisoners.

Going wide around the Cow Zoan, Luffy landed nearby Sanji's position, and leaning in quickly told him what was going on. At first, Sanji lamented the fact Luffy was in his male body

for a moment, but as his captain's tale went on, the cook had to fight to keep his eyes from widening in shock at the fact that Clay was here, as well as hearing about Buggy. Although he had never met the clown-faced pirate, he had heard from Nami, Luffy and Zoro about their brief fight with him and his crew.

"Just stay here until we come to get you," Luffy ordered. "I'll cause a bit of commotion, and we'll steal away once Buggy either tells me what we need to know or agrees to help us."

Several other prisoners around them were so close that Sanji didn't answer verbally, just nodding his head slightly. Still, Luffy took that as a sign, and moved off, getting out of range just in time as the Cow Zoan moved around the group of prisoners, poking and prodding them with the tip of his club.

Returning to Clay, Luffy found him and Buggy being dragged into a nearby jail cell, the guards having tired of beating on them. "And be glad that Sadi-chan and the Hell Beasts didn't see you, or else both of you would be feeling their tender mercies! Honestly, starting a fucking fight on this level of all places, what the hell were you thinking!?"

Buggy grumbled but didn't argue, while Clay made a loud argument by the door. "Oy, I'm telling you it was all his fault, don't even joke~~, I just came here to look around, see if it was really worse than Starvation Hell, and he attacked me!"

"Hah! And you think you can then just turn back now you've been here? I wonder if we've recently started adding hallucinogens into the prisoner's food," one of the guards joked, causing laughter from many of the other humans. "Just shut up, keep your head down, and maybe you won't lose it. Or be added to Sadi-chan's current toys."

Several of the other prisoners snickered at Clay as well at that but said nothing to draw any of the guard's attention until they walked off. Then, before they could, several of them began to fall to the side, eyes rolling back in their heads from precise strikes to the side of the head or back of the neck.

Buggy watched, tensing and staring all around him trying to use his very limited Kenbunshoku to discover what was going on. But while he could use Busoshoku to a certain degree, Buggy had never had much skill with Kenbunshoku. He didn't find anything not a single hint that someone else was around bar himself and the tutu-wearing freak. *The invisibility fruit wouldn't be able to block someone using Kenbunshoku from finding him, so what is this?!*

"We can talk now," the mystery voice sad from the deepest, darkest corner of the cell. It was the only place that the surveillance mushi couldn't see. "But keep on making it look like you're talking just to Clay. But first, introductions." The mystery voice turned somewhat sardonic then, the jocular tone making Buggy even angrier, "Bon Clay, captain of the Okama pirates, this is Buggy of the Big Top Pirates or something. Buggy, Clay."

“What the hell is going on, and why are you trying to get me involved in it!” Buggy growled, shooting his hands forward again grabbing Clay by the scruff of the neck shaking him back and forth. “And where is the mystery voice coming from and why does it sound so freaking familiar to me!”

Huh, I... got nothing, really. He and I never met in my male body. “I don’t know why I sound familiar to you Buggy. Although I do know a lot about you from Bounty Hunter Ranko.”

“AH, that red-haired bastard’s daughter who captured me the first time!?! You’re in cahoots with her!?” Bucky practically shrieked at that, pointing at where he thought the voice had come from, the shriek so loud that it could perhaps cells all around them despite the ever-present background noise of the screams of the guard’s victims and the creaking and groaning of the various winches. “Where is she!?! Do you have any idea of the hell my life has been since then!?!?”

“First, Ranko ain’t Shank’s daughter,” Luffy groaned as he came out of his Umi-Sen-Ken. Hidden in the shadows, he felt he was safe enough, and this was a conversation that should be handled face to face. “In fact, she’d be really pissed off at the very idea of being related to that aho. Where the hell did you even hear that from, huh? I thought she squashed that rumor. And just so ya know, I’m Luffy.”

Buggy calmed down a bit at that, while Clay moved over to lean against the wall near Luffy, hopefully fooling the last remaining Mushi outside into thinking that Buggy was still shouting at Clay. *I guess Luff-chan doesn’t see any point in mentioning his other form. And seeing as if Buggy-kun’s speaking like Luffy captured him, I can see the point,* the Okama pirate thought.

“Fine, so she wasn’t sent after me as some sort of initiation rite from that bastard Shanks,” Buggy muttered, staring hard at Luffy. Just like his voice, the guy looked a bit familiar. “Still a bitch though. And you’re still a friend of hers. I’d shout for the guards right now if I thought they’d believe me. As for you, you still look a little too familiar to me. And what the hell are you doing, going around invisible like that? No way would an Invisibility Fruit user or anyone with that kind of stealth be allowed to go around without a pair of Seastone handcuffs.”

“Still got no idea what you’re talking about, my dude. But it’s good to know ya understand the guards wouldn’t give a crap about whatever you said.” Luffy smirked. “But I got a question for you before we get to my reason for being here. You’re right I’m not a prisoner, though. Why don’t you have Seastone handcuffs? Clay I can understand, they don’t know about his Devil Fruit. But you? You’re using it openly.”

While intrigued by the idea the tutu wearer had a Devil Fruit, Buggy kept that question to himself for now. “Bah, the guards don’t care about it. They know this level’s too deep for me to escape from. They had Sadi-chan and one of her beasts work me over every day for the first week I was here, so they know I’m not strong enough to try and escape. Beyond that, for some

reason the guards don't seem to think much of Devil Fruit users trying to escape. If there's something specific behind that, I've got no clue."

Buggy's face firmed up then, and he raised a finger, looking as if he was thinking of prodding Luffy in the chest before thinking better of it. There was something about this guy that gave him the impression that would be a very bad idea. "Now what the hell is going on, and why the hell are you bothering me?"

"We're trying to do the impossible, break someone out. Two, or maybe even three someone's, actually. And for that we need information. Information you might be able to provide seeing as you actually live down here. And if you can... well, adding one more to our breakout wouldn't cost us all that much, you know?"

With that, Luffy had Buggy's undivided attention, even though his pigtail and general look was still causing Buggy to think they must have met before at some point. "Who the hell are you trying to rescue and how the hell did you get in here in the first place?!"

That took some time to clear up, but eventually, Luffy was done, and asking, "So, are you in?"

Buggy thought about it for a moment, then cracked his neck in either direction, looking around at the other prisoners that Luffy had knocked out as a gleam entered his eye. "My ship was destroyed and my crew nearly wiped out. If I get out of here, I'll need a map to some treasure or some actual payment to get started again. Provide either of those, and I'm in."

"Done." Luffy didn't even hesitate, holding out his hand. Grumbling and thinking he should have tried to haggle more, Buggy shook it, with Clay looking on with a wide grin. "Now, do you know of a way to get down to the next hell?"

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That night, Robin and the others prepared to raise the Everlasting Resolve back onto the ocean's surface. This meant that Nami had to brave the Sea King dominated waters to swim out and down to the bottom of the boat, where she engaged the ballast system that would allow the ship to rise up to the surface, creating a third bubble directly below the ship to buoy it to the surface.

Despite Chopper's 'diplomacy' and even with several of Perona's Hollows all around, this was not a safe operation. Some Sea Kings, in his words, were just assholes like that. And despite a single human being more an aperitif than meal, many would take any opportunity to feed.

But thanks to Perona's Hollows, only once did a Sea King get through to attack Nami. Yet even as she froze on her way back to the main deck, it too paused. It seemed to eye Nami for a second than twisted away, going back the way it had come, joining several of its fellows.

"I don't understand it," Nami said as she slowly pulled herself through the outer bubble coating, amazed at how the things worked once more. You just had to go slowly enough, and you could pass straight through, but if you weren't, or if too many things tried to pass through at once, it would burst the Yarukiman Mangrove sap bubble. "It came close enough I could count its teeth and then just turned away. Did you do something, Chopper?"

"No... er... um," Chopper hemmed and hawed a bit, staring at the flashlight on Nami's head and the currently wet orange hair there. "I er... maybe it saw your um, your coloring?"

"What does my coloring have to do with it?" Nami asked, staring down at her body. She thought her tanned skin color was quite fetching, thank you very much. "Or are you saying an orange and blue bikini on a healthy tan is the trick to ward off Sea Kings."

"Er, no, Er, not your skin color, but um, your, er, orange hair, and the rest, um, yes..." Chopper gulped, slinking out of grabbing range and making ready to hide behind Laki. "Er, it's just um, in nature, bright colors like that, they usually mean the animal that has them is poisonous..."

"..." For a moment there was silence, then Perona and even Laki began to laugh, while Robin merely fufufued behind one hand. "Goodness, so her colors show everyone her actual personality, ouch!" Perona laughed haughtily.

"OY!" Nami growled angrily, her face shifting and her teeth becoming almost sharp enough to pass as a merman's before she huffed, and shook her head. "Well, whatever! It's just a stupid Sea King. It's not like anyone actually smart would ever think I'm poisonous in any way, righ~~t Chopper!?"

"EEEE!!!" Chopper screamed as she turned her fanged glare on him, quickly rushing behind Laki to the renewed laughs of the other girls.

The ship rose through the water, with Chopper shouting out into the water several times that they meant the Sea Kings no harm and were not good to eat.

The Sea Kings all seemed to listen, perhaps once more because of the color = poisonous equation. Indeed, the same one that had looked at nominee Nami with interest coming close only to leave after a few seconds of watching them. Seconds later more than half the Sea Kings around the ship had also pulled back and were studiously ignoring them as they went back to swimming around randomly. Laki noticed this instantly in her position in the crow's nest, but didn't comment, simply snickering to herself for a moment.

A few others looked more curious than anything else did as they came close, but replied to Chopper, stating that they weren't in any way hungry. For some reason the food around here was quite good and rarely did they go hungry.

The implications of that revelation went over the little doctor's head but Robin got it instantly, and watched as the implications hit Perona and Nami. Nami just gulped and turned back to her work at the wheel, keeping it steady and making notations every few minutes on a piece of paper with the help of a regular compass. As for Perona, it was as if all the time she had spent getting some sun since leaving Thriller Bark had gone away, she became so pale.

Nonetheless, the journey upwards continued, and then they were bursting out of the water.

First, the bubble they had used to gather smoke exited the water, releasing a plume of noxious black smoke above the ocean as it burst while the rest of the *Everlasting Resolve* followed the bubble around it bursting and letting the water splash across the ship's main deck and the outside of the conning tower. The ship continued to rise until it sat in the ocean like a normal ship, the last, ballast bubble still below them until at some unseen pressure valve it started to be pulled back into the coating machine.

"Oh, that feels good!" Eve exclaimed, running her hands up her body and then over her head as if she was in a shower stall, luxuriating at the flow of the water over her. "I had realized I'd felt kind of dirty, but I hadn't realized how hot I had been getting, until just now when it began to go away."

Nami and Robin didn't reply, while Perona simply nodded her head, staring out the window and waiting to see if she would need to help their ship escape from any sudden response to their presence.

Nami had brought them up at the farthest edge of what could be called normal site from their perspective in relation to the tower they had discovered under the water. But if Impel Down was built up beyond, say, a normal battleship's lookout position, then they would be well within the range of someone watching from the prison's battlements. It was just impossible for them to know what was up there until they looked, which itself would give the game away.

But thankfully, Laki was quick to report that she didn't see any initial response coming from the prison.

They waited for several minutes as she continued to look towards the prison through her spyglass, trying hard to ignore the fact that the Crow's Nest was now something like a steam room. Having previously been the hottest room aboard the ship, thanks to the coal smoke passing through the central plume, it had then been drenched as the bubbles burst, soaking the exterior and causing the interior to rise in humidity. *The Adam wood didn't burn or*

warp due to the heat coming from the funnel, but it definitely retained the heat. Damn, that was like watching the rocks in a sauna get hit by a ladleful of water.

After a few moments though, she reported that not only did it appear as if the prison wasn't aware of their presence, but none of the marine ships were moving about at night. "I don't know if that's because they're lazy or they just aren't expecting trouble, but I think we're in the clear for now. I'd recommend we back off a ways though, and go with Nami's idea of using her Clima-Control to create a fog bank around us."

At that news, Perona whooped and instantly pushed open the nearby door leading down to the main deck, letting in the cool ocean air. Even though that air wasn't moving all that much, barely enough to move some of her hair, it still felt great.

"Oh yeah, that feels so good!" For once, Nami was in full agreement with Perona, the two of them shared nods, as Nami passed the other woman, heading down to the main deck. The conning tower hadn't been as hot as the crow's nest, but it had still been uncomfortable.

On the main deck between the two forward turrets, Nami pulled out her Clima-Control.

The weapon had changed since its initial configuration thanks to Laki's continued tinkering with it. Now it was matte black instead of blue, and while it was still a sectional staff, with each section's ends marked by large dials contained in round protective layers, each segment was larger than previously by a good four inches, giving the overall staff a much larger reach. On top of that, each segment was a little different. The central one had several slightly built up segments for her hands, whereas the 'head' on one of the ends seems to flow down into the rest of the section rather than simply sit on top of it, looking even more like a mace than previously. The third section had several small, indented holes spaced out in a long series of rows up and down its length, interspersed with small bumps.

Now, Nami let the central portion fall to her feet as she twirled the two end segments in her hands, slowly weaving them around herself in a pattern. As the air around Nami began to take shape in two different forms, one looking almost like a ball of heat was appearing, while the other one looked almost like a gout of cold air. Occasionally these two forces struck one another, causing steam to billow out from her, creating fog in turn. "It's a good thing it feels like it's going to rain soon. That'll make this a lot easier along with the heat we're still putting out."

"And while she is doing that, we have work to do," Robin said from behind Perona, startling the other girl who hadn't realized the older woman had joined her. "Eve, is there any damage to the ship from our surfacing so fast?"

"Nope. But if you could, I would really appreciate a good cleaning inside. That coal dust crap got everywhere, and there's only so much I can do on my own."

“You don’t have to tell us about that,” Perona grumbled, nodding her head to Robin. Robin nodded back and crossed her arms, concentrating on her Devil Fruit powers for a moment. Eyes sprouted out from her, and then down into the ship where they were quickly joined with arms and hands. Soon two different jobs were being taken care of down below. One was moving the last of the coal from elsewhere in the ship into the coal locker near the engine room. They’d gone through a significant majority of the amount of coal they had on hand, leaving them with probably only half a day’s worth of normal running.

Which was not combat speed, something that Frankie had explained to escape from Water 7.

“OW! You want to be fast enough to dodge whatever incoming fire you can, rather than just take all the hits coming your way. That is why I built this baby for speed as well as striking power! In those categories, it is the most **Suuuuper** ship of all!” Frankie had shouted right before posing.

Given how quickly they’d gone through coal over the past week, Robin estimated that the ship had only about maybe an hour, maybe an hour and a half worth of coal at combat speed. Still, their plan didn’t call for the Everlasting Resolve to get into a fight until well near the end of the plan. *I know no plan survives contact with the enemy, but hopefully, this one will at least retain its shape if none of the details.*

Meanwhile, Robin also had her conjured up hands working on cleaning the ship from top to bottom inside. The coal dust had even begun to get into their private quarters, which was somewhat disgusting to think about. But now, she was quickly getting rid of it, while Nami continued to create the fog bank around the ship and Perona and Laki made them lunch and kept an eye out for trouble. Perona helped with both lunch and keeping an eye out, sending her Negative Hollows into the ocean to scare off or deal with any Sea King who looked as if he were going to take an interest in the ship, something of a constant job.

Soon, the ship was entirely covered by a fog bank, and the coal engine spluttered back into life, with Eve moving the ship in a circular pattern around Impel Down, while the ladies had an impromptu picnic out on the main deck, all of them still luxuriating in the feel of the sea air on their native skin. With the fog bank in place, they couldn’t be seen, but they also couldn’t see out. And none of the people who remained aboard the ship had awakened Kenbunshoku, although Nami was undoubtedly close. Still, at present hiding was more important than having an idea of what was going on beyond the ship. It was now fully up to Luffy and the boys to do their part. *All we can do is wait*, Robin thought, as she stared at one of the crew’s Den Den Mushis.

End Chapter