

Chapter 39: Surprises In Strange Places

“So tell us about the lower levels,” Luffy ordered, leaning against the nearby wall in the small corner of the cell that he, Buggy and Bon Clay were standing in. He was a little concerned about leaving Sanji alone, but Sanji was one of the three most resourceful of his crew, so it wasn’t a big concern. And he would rather like some more information going forward. So far, everything had been going well, but Luffy knew his life far too well to think that would continue going forward. *The longer it goes well, the more it means Lady Luck is winding up for a kick. And this adventure of mine right now is far too important for me to let it happen.*

Buggy scowled, still thinking he might have been able to haggle a better deal, but obeyed, leaning back against the wall. There was something a little... scary about this guy, something that reminded him of his old Captain for some reason. “All right, well, the first thing you have to know is this level is easily the busiest of the prison levels. The guards are constantly bringing prisoners down here to torture before returning them to their previous floors. The kitchens are also on this level, at least the ones for the prisoners and one of the guard divisions. The officers have their own separate kitchen, as do the marines stationed outside the prison, and I think even the Den Den Mushi operators their own.”

“Wait, wait, wait~, how exactly do you know that?” Clay interjected. “I’ve never heard of it, baka~.”

“Ha, that’s just because I’m flashily smarter than you!” Buggy huffed. “I can detach my ears and eyes, you know? With them, I can flashily scout around easily. The guards here don’t look too closely at us prisoners.”

“And seriously, why do the guards let you use your Devil Fruit powers? I know they think you can’t escape and you mentioned the Zoans worked ya over to break your spirit, but it seems kind of stupid of them, considering how easily ya could use your powers to make trouble for them at the very least,” Luffy interjected. “Hell, if I had your power, I’d be pulling pranks and causing chaos all over the place.”

“Bah, that just means you’re a flashy idiot! Causing trouble for them wouldn’t help me, it’d only make things worse. Eventually, I’d be caught, tortured or tossed down into Frozen Hell,” Buggy broke off sneering at Clay to wave his hand, literally, at Luffy’s question. It popped off at the wrist to float in the air above them for a bit. “What’s worse, I know Magellan. If a prisoner stands out too much, Magellan will make him an example.”

“He’s right about that, Luff-chan,” Clay agreed for once not twirling in place as he spoke. “Escape is the only thing that matters, and there’s no way even I could cause enough disorder to get out of here, not with Seastone worked into the main doors up on the surface.” Clay pouted, looking like a cross between a kicked puppy and a unhappy transvestite And even if we could get to the surface, where would we go? This is the Calm Belt, you know~~?”

“Exactly,” Buggy agreed with the crossdresser’s last point, feeling a little ill while doing it but pushing on. “Like the Okama-ass said, the Calm Belt’s just another layer of defense for the prison. You’d have to go across into one of the other oceans without knowing where you are in relation to any of the islands within, braving the Sea Beasts and making headway with no wind to power your sails. Or, you would be taken to Marineford or Enies Lobby. Without someone on the outside in a ship able to traverse the Calm Belt...” He waited until Luffy nodded, saying nonverbally that he did have such, before going on, breathing an internal sigh of relief. “Escape would be impossible.”

Luffy scowled slightly, but refused to be drawn by either Buggy or Clay’s interested looks at what other resources Luffy had access to. “And what is the Frozen Hell like?”

At that, the other pirate Captain puffed up a bit, knowing that these two were relying on the information he had sweated to get. “The next floor is the biggest by floor size, but its the one with the fewest prisoners, well, living ones anyway. It is so cold down there that after more than a few moments, you will have frostbite or start to freeze in place. Even the food they deliver down there freezes within moments. I should know. I was on a detail to bring some food down, and I watched it freeze in my hands to the plate.”

Buggy shivered a bit. “You better believe I dropped that plate flashily quickly! Worse are the wolves down there. They’re monstrously huge, taller than I am, able to bite a normal person in half without any effort. They were put down there because they were so strong, they ate several other animals on the Beast Floor years ago. Rumor among the prisoners is even the Sphinx wasn’t as strong as the wolves when they fought in packs.”

While Clay looked appalled, Luffy snorted at that, wondering if Zorro would leave any of the wolves for the rest of them to beat up on. *The beasties here might’ve been a threat once in my old life, but I’m much stronger now than I was then.* “Anything else you can tell us about the frozen hell?”

“I know where the entrances are, and there aren’t many Observation-type Den Den Mushi down there. It’s too cold for them to survive,” Buggy answered. “But I know a flashy lot about the actual prison guards, way more than this one might not know.” He thumbed the gesture towards Clay, who began to twirl in place, making threatening noises at how Buggy was so dismissive of him. But Buggy ignored him, going on quickly. “First, you should know about Magellan. It’s not just a regular poison. It’s venom. It can create a gas that will kill you or knock you out. If you touch it, it’ll get straight into your system too.” When he saw that Luffy wasn’t surprised by that, Buggy scowled a little. “He can even overcome Busoshoku!”

“How? Busoshoku forms an armored barrier that...” Luffy began in surprise. He had seen Magellan’s toxic fume attack, but hearing that the touch-based venom would get through someone’s Busoshoku was astonishing.

“Busoshoku is still technically skin. It deadens the pain of the venom for a bit, but if you’re in contact with the flashy venom for long enough, your Busoshoku will start to fade,” Buggy explained once more popping off a hand to wave away Luffy’s words. The fact that a rookie Captain like Luffy knew about the Busoshoku was interesting, but at least he was now taking the threat of Magellan seriously. “Worse, I know at least three flashy Busoshoku users among the prison guard. His second-in-command, a little shrimp named Saldeath, and the sexy yet disturbing sadist.”

Clay tsked at that. He’d seen Busoshoku in action during the breakout from Alabasta and knew how useful it was. But Clay hadn’t been able to develop any of his own. “Don’t even joke~~, Sadi-chan can use Busoshoku?! That’s not funny at all, baaaka~!”

“Oh yeah, she can. I’ve seen her use it on her whip a few times to deal with flashily strong prisoners,” Buggy shivered. “It wasn’t pretty.”

Even Luffy frowned at that, wondering how good all three of them were with the technique but acknowledging that they would probably prove to be a threat. “What about Kenbunshoku?”

“Ha!” Buggy guffawed. “That technique is a lot rarer than Busoshoku, let me tell you. If one out of every hundred people can use Busoshoku, one out of a thousand can use Kenbunshoku.”

Frowning thoughtfully, Luffy nodded. “Anything else?”

There turned out to be quite a lot. Buggy knew practically everything about the various divisions of the guards and told him about the Blue Gorillas who were under Saldeath’s command. Those beings, which may or may not be human, were strong enough to frighten the beasts up on Beast Hell, and cow nearly any prisoner, either alone or in groups. But they were almost mindless and had to be ordered into action, mainly by a flute Saldeath controlled.

Buggy also told them about the four Zoan types, who were similarly under Sadi’s command. They were easily the most dangerous threat on this floor. “One of them is away right now, Minorhinoceros. But Minotaurus is around here, and so’s the Zebra and Koala. Any one of them could flashily beat most of the prisoners on this level.”

More importantly, Buggy told Clay and Luffy about a roving type of Observation-type Den Den Mushi, who could blend into the background so well that you would be hard-pressed to find them, a completely different system than the ones who remained in place. Luckily they moved slowly, and there were only a few per floor.

Luffy had a minor heart attack just then, closing his eyes quickly and looking around using his Kenbunshoku to see if any of the little critters were in their cell. Luckily there weren’t, and he breathed a sigh of relief, but Luffy reminded himself to always keep his Kenbunshoku up. Something he was still somewhat struggling with, especially when having a serious conversation.

That was about all Buggy knew. He didn't know anything about the marines. Still, since one of them was a vice admiral, Luffy felt the guy would probably be a threat too. Not up to Gion's level, let alone his grandfather Garp, but it was very possible he would be the equal of Doberman or Strawberry or the other vice admirals he tangled with, despite his bad showing during the chaos in the receiving chamber.

Breaking in might just have been the easy part. But then again, breaking in, we only had secrecy, stealth and surprise on our side. Breaking out? It would be way better for us to be able to sneak out, but my life doesn't work that well. If we're spotted, stealth goes out the window, and chaos takes over, Luffy thought, fighting back an ego and battle junky driven thrill at the idea. But when trouble comes, I will put money down on my ability to use that kind of confusion better than anyone else can every time.

When it became clear that Buggy had no more information to share, Luffy gestured the two men back towards the cell entrance. "Okay, I think we all know more about what we're getting into now. Let's get going. We need to meet up with my crewmate again, and then we'll head down."

And I am looking forward to seeing Buggy's face when we meet up with Zoro, Luffy snickered a bit as he disappeared again under his Umi-Sen-Ken.

"OY idiot!" But he shouted, trying to get into Luffy's face, but since he disappeared, he got it wrong, shouting at the wall beside where Luffy was standing, having taken a few steps towards the door himself. "What did I say earlier! We can't go down to the next floor without some flashy preparation! We'll freeze, all of us!"

"I've a technique that can keep us warm, for a while anyway," Luffy answered, causing rock Buggy to turn in place and glare at nothing again as Luffy it already moved away, still snickering a little to himself. "Besides, you already mentioned there's a ready-made source of fur coats right there."

Buggy gaped while Clay laughed, throwing off his earlier concerns about the wolves. "Don't worry~~ about it, coward clown. From what I have seen of Luffy, no little wolf will bother this huntsman."

At that, Buggy scowled but hurried after the other two. *I want my treasure, and I want out of this hellhole, damn it. And this looks to be the best chance to escape I'm going to ever flashily get.*

Sanji was not where Luffy had left him, working with one of the local gangs of workers to pull at the chains that moved the stirrers in the blood soup. Luffy once more wondered why someone would go to the trouble of boiling blood like that. There was little to no point to it, in his opinion. *Do they do it just for the aesthetics of the thing? That's bonkers.*

But he shrugged that off, frowning a little before quickly discerning Sanji's mind from the several thousand other minds scattered across this floor. His was one of the few distinct ones, the others being the dead, barely discernible minds of the three Zoan monsters on this floor. *And I still can't sense anything below us.*

Setting that mystery aside again, Luffy unerringly directed the other two toward Sanji. He was somewhat unsurprised that Sanji had made his way to the floor's kitchen.

In point of fact, Sanji wasn't just working in the kitchen. He had taken it over within about five minutes of his arrival, and as the trio of pirate captains entered the cafeteria, Sanji was laying into one of the prisoners who had been forced to cook for their fellows. "You call this cooking!? I wouldn't serve this to a dog, you baka eggplant!"

Luffy watched as Sanji flung a plate at the terrified prisoner, who screamed and ducked, only to still be hit in the head by the plate which shattered, the man receiving several cuts across the face as Sanji turned to another one of the cooks, shouting, "And you! I said cook, not charbroil! Can you not tell the difference! Do you have eyes or even a nose! Just because this food is meant for prisoners is no reason to lower standards!"

That worthy trembled, and Sanji stalked past him, pushing him away from the oven he was working at, pulling out something from a shelf, and then beginning to chop it into smaller bits with a speed and dexterity that caused gasps from several of the prisoners around them waiting for their meal. They'd already gotten a show; now it looked like they would be fed well for a change. Indeed, a few of the common guards on duty in the room also looked on, drool appearing from under their dungeon masks.

"Slice it evenly. That is the first thing a cook needs to learn! Don't waste anything. Even burnt bits can be used to make sauces. Watch! And if you do not tenderize the meat, I'm going to tenderize your skulls!"

Soon, Sanji had a sauce going and had prepared several other meat-based meals to one side. Finished, he turned and waited a millisecond before shouting at the top of his lungs, "What the hell are you eggplants waiting for, to set down roots? Get moving! You have hungry mouths to feed."

All around him, the prisoner cooks shouted and began to move in various directions.

"Mah, that smells delicious, cook-san~~! Do you think I could..." Clay began, only to be interrupted.

"If you want to eat, get in here and help, Aho-kama!" Sanji said, looking over in Clay's direction and shivering even as he recognized the other pirate's voice. *God damn it, I wish Luffy had been joking about finding Clay. He's so disturbing... but wait, he might still have Nami-chwan's glorious visage in his mind... if he uses his Devil Fruit powers, then... no! Stop thinking about it!*

Clay bounded forward in delight while Buggy huffed but rubbed his stomach. That food smelled a lot better than normal prison rations for sure. "Maybe I can sneak a bite..."

Snickering, Luffy decided to announce himself to Sanji. Moving through the crowd was quite difficult, and eventually, Luffy had to take to the rooftop to avoid getting bumped. But finally, he was above Sanji, leaning down to whisper in his ear. "I'm back. I see you've made yourself at home."

Sanji flinched just a little, not having gotten used to talking to Luffy while he was invisible like this. *I know he explained it like he was just hiding his presence from my senses, making me unable to actually look at him, and he wasn't really invisible in the way a chameleon or something is, but fuck me if it isn't the same thing as being invisible!* "I got bored, and then I saw some of the shit the prisoners were getting. I had to step in. My pride is a chef could not allow me to ignore it."

Luffy nodded, unseen by any, then looked at the dishes that Sanji was preparing. "Huh, I would've thought there would be a lot of fish dishes or even dishes based on the Sea Kings. But most of these look like pork-based meals. I wonder where they get all the meat from?"

The unseen martial artist had meant the question seemingly innocently. It was in no way Luffy's fault where Sanji's mind went. That had to do with a series of horror stories that Zeff had told him at one point to scare him away from the Baratie and the sailor's life in general. At one point, Zeff had been so determined to convince Sanji to leave the ocean behind that he told him stories which hit them both close to home, stories about being shipwrecked with no food. Only these stories didn't end 'well' as Zeff and Sanji's had. Instead they turned into violent, bloody affairs as the survivors turned on one another, and then... began to do worse...

Luffy watched as Sanji stared down at the food in front of him, the meat which had come in a small, mass-produced package. That he had been preparing. Then Sanji stared at the knives in his hands, then at those hands, a subtle flick of the eyes, before he dropped the knives and turned away from the meat. Sanji's face was now locked in an utterly furious expression despite the green creeping up his face.

He turned and marched over to the nearest guard, who had surreptitiously been watching, somewhat envious of the food now being prepared for the prisoners. Before he could say anything, Sanji grabbed him by the throat and lifted him into the air as if he weighed no more than a sack of wheat. "You! Where does the meat come from! Where does it come from?!"

Instead of answering this question, the guard panicked, and he shouted out for help instantly. "G, get him off me! He's gone crazy!"

This... was not the right decision. Instantly the man felt himself being flung sideways into two of the other guards in the cafeteria. He bowled them over as Sanji shouted, "Where does the meat come from?!" As he charged towards them, intent on mayhem.

Behind him, Luffy watched in confusion, shaking his head, murmuring, "Was it something I said?"

Not so with Bon Clay. The Okama Kenpo user had quickly begun to help make a few meals and had just snagged a slice of meat from a plate. Now he looked as green as Sanji and spat it out, staring at the meat in horror. Then the green faded, and he shrieked, "Don't even joke, you bastards!" his normal annoying manner of elongating his words in abeyance and a fiery light of retribution in his eyes.

With that, Clay launched a kick toward one of the guards who had just rushed past him a moment. The blow caught him in the back of the head and hurling him forward. "That's too, too horrifying! How dare you make a man of my tastes eat something like that!"

Soon, a complete brawl began. While many of the prisoners on this floor were those taken here to be tortured, those who remained on this floor were among the toughest in Impel Down. They were always ready for a brawl, and any chance to make trouble for the guards, so long as Sadi or the Zoans weren't around. But the cafeteria was one of the places where the Awakened Zoans didn't like to go all that often. Even the one assigned to follow Sanji around had not entered.

But as the brawl spread from one end of the cafeteria to another, Minotaurus entered. He began to lay about with his mace, smacking prisoners left and right, some being pulped in place, others being hurled into the walls or ceilings. Many on this level could take blows like that without being instantly killed. But all of the prisoners bar Sanji and Clay subsided the instant they saw the Zoan, and behind it more guards rushed into the cafeteria, trying to subdue Sanji.

While Luffy clung to the ceiling and watched all of this, still wondering what had happened, Sanji launched kick after kick, sending guards flying. He could even bat aside the Zoan's mace as he went. Two kicks caught the beast in the chest, hurling it back into the cafeteria wall. Before it could get back to its feet, Sanji had leaped over the intervening guards, landing and stomping down hard several times, kicking it in the side of the head as he continued to shout, "Where, where you fuckers!?"

Two of the guards tried to tackle Sanji by the knees just as he knocked the beast out, much to the horror of the guards. Sanji bounced up and off the wall, kicking out and sending both flying before jumping up and kicking off the ceiling, smashing several more guards flat. "Where does the meat come from!"

"From our gardens and farms, you crazy asshole!" A guard shrieked just as Sanji was about to land on his face with both feet. Seeing those feet coming towards him, the man grimaced, closing his eyes in preparation for what he no doubt would be quite violent death.

When nothing happened, he opened his eyes and found that both feet, which should've spelled his certain doom, had landed to either side of his head instead. He flinched as Sanji reached down, picked him up, and gently set the guard down in front of Sanji just as several of his

fellows were about to stab forward with their tridents. They stopped, and Sanji gently dusted the man down and said calmly, "I'm sorry, what? You have farms here?"

"Yes!" The man said, now thoroughly spooked instead of simply afraid for his life. "We have several floors underneath our living quarters before you get to the actual prison devoted to underground farming! We've got cows, pigs, deer and a lot of other animals there."

"Then why didn't someone say that!" Sanji said, sighing and moving back as if nothing had happened into the kitchen, muttering under his breath.

The man stared after him, and the question came to them unbidden as he asked, "W...where do you think the meat came from?"

Sanji didn't answer for a moment, finding his way barred by the trident wielders and the recovered Minotaurus. Seeing this, Luffy scowled, knowing those things would be tough opponents for Sanji or Zoro given their durability and ability to recover from wounds, almost like Luffy could.

The Zoan looked as if all he wanted was to smash Sanji to pieces but there were too many guards between them for the moment, and given the fact the riot had halted, the Zoan would not simply smash through them. "I grew up on stories about pirates, and some of those stories were horror stories, about... Large crews being shipwrecked or marooned with no food or being out to sea for too long. You put it together."

The guards did, and even the most vile among them looked horrified at the very thought. As one, all of them pulled a Nami, their teeth changing into fangs, visible through their masks as they shouted, "What the hell do you take us for?!"

Before we put this operation in place, outside of his issue with women, I thought Sanji was the sanest one of my crew members. Turns out, he fits right in with the rest of us, Luffy chortled above, finally understanding where Sanji's mind had gone, and equally as disgusted as the guards with the very idea.

Needless to say, the guards were not very happy with Sanji remaining in the kitchen after that, and despite his extremely mild protests, he was quickly shooed outside. There the Minotaurus once more began to follow him around for some time.

Eventually, Luffy led Clay and Buggy to join Sanji. The pair didn't say anything or even act as if they knew one another without any direction from Luffy. Both of the other pirates had automatically understood that was the best plan going forward. And frankly, unlike most of Luffy's crew, Clay and Buggy could act very well.

Luffy waited nearby, sweating a little from the heat down here. He watched not only with his eyes but with his Kenbunshoku, watching for the chameleon Den Den Mushi. Several did, but they slowly made their way away once more once it became clear that Sanji wouldn't make any more trouble.

In this manner, the hours passed as the Minotaurus continued to watch Sanji with gimlet eyes. Until the shift change occurred. At that point, nearly four hours later, Sanji was once more forced back into one of the cells, this time along with Buggy and Clay.

Coming closer, Luffy was amused that the conversation they instantly began to have was about Sanji's freak-out, despite the intervening hours. "Seriously, that's what you thought? I didn't care where the food came from when I first entered this place. I was just concerned about any un-flashy additions it might have," Buggy said, shaking his head from side to side so hard it came off his shoulders, rolled down his arm and then back up again. "That's the norm in most prisons, after all."

"What do you mean?" Sanji asked, looking confused.

"Flashy moron," Buggy sighed. "There are a lot of chemicals that can make people docile and meek. Most prisons put some of that stuff into the food they feed their prisoners. But here, they don't bother with it."

Deciding to interrupt at this point, Luffy whispered, "Buggy, you said you knew the way down to the next floor?" They weren't alone in this cell at the moment, all the prisoners on Sanji's work gang having been hustled inside. Eventually the guards outside would leave, and so too could the prisoners, spreading out into other cells nearby that were currently empty, but for now, they were still being observed.

"Two ways. One way is to join a work gang taking food down. Given what the blonde idiot did, I don't think we can go that way. The other way... The other way is a chute that goes straight down to the next level. Normally, it's used for repeat offenders who have become too durable for the Zoans to deal with on this floor. I saw it used once as I was brought down to this level. The guy they tossed down there died to the wolves within minutes. The guards let the shoot open so those of us nearby could hear his screams..."

Buggy shivered, but Sanji simply shrugged his shoulders, like Luffy showing a distinct lack of concern about the wolves. This seemed to incense Buggy, and Buggy got into Sanji's face and Clay's, bashing their heads together as he shouted out, "What happened to your sense of self-preservation, you flashy morons!"

Sanji would've retaliated, but he noticed the looks they were already getting from several of the other people in the cell and subsided, glaring back at Buggy. "Remember, you'll not see your money unless you help us. Whatever my captain's promised you, we can definitely deliver. We still have a lot of the gold we took from Thriller Bark, and even some from before that."

That statement caused Buggy to turn green with envy, and he snarled, "Fine, but you people have to flashily protect me down there! I'm not a monster who can just ignore those wolves."

He then seemed to calm down a little, running a hand down his blue ponytail, making Luffy realize that the two of them had a fashion in common at the present moment, which made

Luffy gag a little. Buggy seemed to have mellowed considerably, but he still wasn't exactly Luffy's favorite person.

"Besides, it's probably a good idea to get away from here regardless. Your little outburst might've attracted some more attention. I definitely don't want to deal with Sadi, let alone her boss. And Magellan's main office and living quarters is on this floor."

"Wait, what? Why didn't you mention that earlier?" Clay hissed, speaking for Luffy and looking both incensed and frightened.

"Because he doesn't really act all that often. His Devil Fruit gives him serious stomachache or something. Sticks him in the toilet a lot," Buggy shrugged. "But his office is down here because this floor and the next one are where the most dangerous criminals are. I would've thought it was obvious. Still, like I told you before, the next floor is too cold for the Mushi to operate. The guards hardly bother to do anything but take food down there, let alone keep track of prisoners."

Hearing that again, Luffy smiled. *Putting my brother down there in Seastone cuffs would be honestly a good idea, but if there aren't any Mushi, well that opens up a lot of possibilities.*

Sanji really wished he had a smoke right now but shook his head, simply muttering about how he wondered how the hell each of these floors was kept so different. Then he gestured towards the door. "The guards have moved of, we can go now if you want."

Despite the many eyes from the other prisoners on them, Buggy and Clay nodded. The three of them got up and headed towards the door, with Luffy following after. Like the other guards, Minotaurus had wandered off somewhere, leaving Sanji without his minder. Buggy led them straight to the shoot, and upon opening it, it was very clear that there was something very cold down there. Despite the heat around them, which quickly turned to steam and fog as the cold air from below wafted up, Clay and Sanji shivered.

"Well, no time like the present, I suppose." With that, Sanji leaped into the cold, feeling it going over his body and welcoming it somewhat, despite the fact it was just that side of too cold even so.

He went feetfirst, and Clay followed quickly, leaping forward and intending to kick Buggy in the back as he went. "Un, Deux, Ora, onward, my darlings!"

Buggy spotted this attack coming and came apart, letting Clay pass through his body parts as they quickly reformed, shaking his head as he stared down into the darkness, having second thoughts as he remembered what he had seen and heard of the next floor. "Is... is going down there really worth all the money?"

"The money and helping you build your own new pirate ship," Luffy hinted from beside him. Then he grinned and, hopping in midair over the shoot letting the cold fog obscure his position as he reached over and grabbed Buggy, his hand coated in Busoshoku so he couldn't get away.

“Besides, we got a really good doctor, so if you permanently lose any bits, he can sew you back together.”

“You flashy asshole!” Buggy shouted as he was hurled headfirst down into the hole, with Luffy hopping down after him, reaching up to close the hatch behind him.

Scene break

Out at sea, Robin and company were still anxiously waiting as dawn broke. Finally, when no word came through the Mushi, Robin gave the order. Still concealed by the fog from Nami's Clima Control staff, the ship pulled back from the prison, moving until Laki, who had bounced well above the fog and the top of crow's nest via her dial skates, could no longer see it.

Of course, this, and the fog, would have caused a problem if not for Perona's ghosts showing Laki the way back to the ship through the fog. With Perona's help, the operation went smoothly and soon they were more than eighty leagues away from the prison out into the Calm Belt.

Thanks to the *Everlasting Resolve's* coal engine, the Calm Belt was no issue for them. Similarly, here in the Calm Belt, Nami's old compass was useful once more. After all, while there was no wind or current here, there were still the four normal compass points. Nami barely took five minutes to figure out how to direct them back from over the horizon to the prison despite the fact it was a wholly artificial island, something that in the Grand Line would have made it utterly impossible to find.

“Even without my compass, I bet I could figure it out,” she mused now as she looked up at the sun, beaming as the sun's rays caressed her face. “There might be no major currents, but the movement of the Sea Kings and the ocean are still disturbed by it, and by the Tarai Current. Small clues, but they'd add up.”

“That's well and good, but I have to say, even knowing the only ships coming into this area will be taking the Current being out here so close to Impel Down is making me nervous,” Perona admitted, drawing the eyes of the other girls to her. Chopper didn't look in her direction, simply enjoying the sea breeze and the undiluted sun. After so long under the ocean, feeling it like this was lovely.

Robin nodded slightly. “Impel Down is something of a known horror to many a pirate. I knew I was terrified of being sent there. Still, we are not exactly close, remember? Our Eve here can cover quite a lot of ocean very quickly. For a sailing vessel we would be about, what, five hours away?”

“Hell yea! Even if that whole fleet at Impel Down came out after us, we'd be able to sail rings around 'em. And even without Luffy and the rest here, we have Franky's air cannon and our secondary weapons.” Eve's voice was practically bloodthirsty as she jumped up and down, her toothy smile so wide it nearly seemed to split her face.

“Enough of that,” Nami admonished. “Good grief, you’ve spent far too much time being influenced by Luffy and the rest. We’re not here to start a fight---”

“We’re here to end one, if we have to,” Robin interrupted firmly. She glanced over at the nearby Den Den Mushi, sighing in some annoyance with both herself and with this whole process. *I am still getting used to having loved ones at all, worrying about them while they are out doing dangerous things is entirely another.*

For the rest of that morning, Robin and the others spread out across the deck of the Everlasting Resolve. None of them were willing to go inside for any reason beyond food, and even then, it was the time of snacks aboard the ship. Having spent so long cooped up inside and below the ocean, none of the girls were eager to have some time in the sun, even if Laki and Robin had to take turns keeping an eye out for any marine vessel that might be out there.

Twice they were forced to move on from where they had dropped anchor. Once, when a group of bull Sea Kings got in a major brawl nearby so violent that it threatened to drag in others from other species. Chopper had warned them that was coming, and the ship had more than enough time to get away.

The second time was a little more serious. Laki saw several marine vessels coming up over the horizon, and Nami was forced to use her Clima-Control staff to again create fog in order to cover the ship as they retreated still further away from Impel Down. Despite the surprise of the marines moving out on maneuvers, and apparently having a mock battle against one another, the ship remained unseen in its personal fog bank, which covered several dozen leagues in every direction so it looked more natural.

A few hours later, Perona reported that the marine ships had turned about, heading back to Impel Down. The moment they were over the horizon, Nami stopped using her staff, letting both of the ends drop to the deck with a clatter. As they rolled away, Nami began rubbing her sore arms come before yelping as several hands appeared sprouting from her stomach and back, reaching up to knead sore muscles. “Ughhh... that feels good Robin, thanks. Gah. having to keep my staffs in motion like that for so long is really annoying.”

“You speak like you think the Clima-control staff is a finished product,” Laki huffed. “It’s a work in progress.”

Above them, Perona heard all this through the Den Den Mushi next to her, then looked at the hands which had sprouted of which were holding up a spyglass to a set of eyes that had appeared on the outer side of the Crows Nest as the fog faded. Looking down, Perona also saw several arms passing out small plates of food from the cafeteria. Here she couldn’t hear it, but she could almost feel the ship shuddering to a halt as its engines powered down.

Hopping out of the windowsill and climbing down the rungs set into the main conning tower, Perona soon landed next to Robin, patting her companionably on the back. “You’re amazing, you know? You have to be the queen of multitasking.”

“Perona’s right. If we didn’t have you along, this whole trip would’ve been impossible, even with Eve helping as best she could,” Nami agreed, whimpering as Robin found a part of her shoulder that was sorer than the rest.

Robin flinched, looking away from all of them, before shaking her head opening her mouth to say something. But Nami had seen her flinch, and looked at her in confusion. “You don’t like the word queen?”

At that, Robin paused, her mouth closing for a second as she thought of what to say in response to that. Then, she decided to simply state the truth. “With my Luffy desiring to be the Pirate King, it is undoubtedly more than likely that whoever is publicly seen with him often enough will be called his queen. But as much as I enjoy being with Luffy, I have no desire whatsoever to be called such.”

“Why not? I mean don’t get me wrong, I would **hate** the notoriety, but Pirate Queen certainly sounds better than Demon Child,” Nami teased gently, knowing that Robin disliked her appellation quite a bit.

“Perhaps it is. But I would not like to paint an even larger target on my back that already exists.”

“More than being a part of the new Pirate King’s crew would do?” Eve asked innocently, her voice ringing with certainty that Luffy would succeed in reaching his dream, just like all of them would. “If I’m going to be the second ship to ever be able to sail every ocean in the world, to be to every island in the world, I know that I’m going to be the target of a lot of other ships... oh, and their crews, I guess.” The small spirit grinned evilly. “And I’m fine with that. That is what Luffy calls a target rich environment.”

“Seriously, why did you have to take on so many of his mannerisms? You’d be so much cuter if you weren’t so blood thirsty,” Nami said, while nearby Perona muttered something about Eve being a ‘oppai murder goth’. Ignoring that, Nami looked back at Robin, a question apparent on her face.

Once more, Robin had to fight with old instincts to keep things to herself, but this time, the fight was short. “Eventually, the notoriety we gain will become a reflection of the Pirate King’s. Beyond Silvers Rayleigh and Shanks, who can name any of Roger’s crewmembers?” when none of the girls could think of any, she went on. “Luffy’s name will come to encompass the majority any legends the rest of us make. Which is good for me, because there may come a time, when I’m in my forties or a little later, where I will wish to sink into anonymity.”

The other girls looked blank, and Robin coughed delicately, reflecting that it wasn’t only the menfolk among their crew who could be dense at times. “I meant that I will want children. I will want to become a normal mother, to be there for my child.” *Not like my own. Despite our closure, not having Mother around still hurts.* “But as Pirate Queen, I would have no chance of that.”

Robin could almost see a question popping up behind Perona and Nami's faces in particular, and she held up a hand to forestall them, a wry smile on her face. "And before you ask, yes, if Luffy and I are still together ten or so years down the line, I would indeed like him to be their father. It is my relationship with him, knowing Luffy's strength, that has given me a home, that has allowed me to leave my former lifestyle behind and my overwhelming fear of the WeeGee and the Buster Call. I cannot see a future where he and I are not together."

Laki and Perona both oohed at that but Robin shook her head, a look of worry flashing across her features. "But I have no wish to be known as his woman. Any child of the Pirate King would be hounded, hunted from birth, for something beyond his or her control. That is something I can relate too all too well given my own life after the WeeGee decided to attack Ohara. Further, no matter how powerful Luffy becomes, there will always be someone who wants to hurt him through any supposed weakness he might have. Or me for who I am. No." Robin's tone turned so firm it was like a judge handing down a verdict. "No. I will not allow any child of mine to go through that. Thus there cannot even be a hint of my relationship with Luffy off this ship."

Laki and Perona both nodded soberly at that, while Nami shivered theatrically, deciding to lighten the mood. "I think I'm pretty good with kids, girls anyway. Boys not so much. But I have no desire whatsoever to **ever** have any of my own."

"And you all of eighteen and saying that," Robin chortled quietly. "Wait until you are over thirty and declare that same thing."

"Is that why you're not bothered by the fact that Hancock and Luffy got together?" Perona asked quizzically. "I'd been wondering." Robin had not struck Perona as the sort to share.

"Partially. I could see their growing rapport, and decided to not try and pick a battle that I might lose eventually. Besides," Robin said, looking to the side with a faint smile on her face. "It isn't as if I cannot see the attraction of Hancock myself."

That brought the other three girls up short, and they looked at one another, then very visibly decided not to go down that road. The conversation died down for a bit, as the girls went their separate ways again. All of them were still dressed in their bikinis, and now laid out in the sunlight, enjoying the day on the Calm Belt. The Sea Kings didn't bother them thanks to Perona's ghosts flashing around and under the ship, although Chopper and Eve remained on guard just in case.

Hours later, as the afternoon began to ebb away, thanks to her Negative Hollows Perona became the first of the crew aware of an incoming Sea King who looked as if it was going to plow straight into the ship. Despite the fact it looked like an herbivore this was very obviously an attack.

"Chopper, get your lingual skills ready. We have an incoming Sea King portside. It looks like a beast on a mission, or at least one with an appetite, which is strange given it looks like a plant

eater. I could take it out, but I am actually kind of curious what it wants. It looks like one of the ones you were talking to when we were coming up out of the water.”

Robin quickly created a plank of living hands that pushed out from the side of the ship, letting Chopper walk out on them out the other end where he sat on a series of hands like it was a chair well away from the ship. And directly in the line of several of the secondary guns. Just in case Perona’s ghosts weren’t enough to deter the beast.

Oh man, that really feels weird. Trying to not concentrate on the fact his chair was made of hands, Chopper shouted out at the incoming Sea King. “What are you doing!?! Are you looking to attack us despite our warnings?”

The Sea King astonishingly stopped at that, slowing and then coming to a halt right to the side of where Chopper sat on his chair of hands. It then began to make noises for several moments before pausing as Chopper nodded.

When he turned back to the rest of the crew and relayed the Sea King’s words, this time, his face almost changed to resemble that of a woman, complete with his eyepatch turning into a heart shape. Although thankfully for Nami’s sanity, he couldn’t change its color. When Chopper spoke, he almost sounded like what Luffy/Ranma would call an American Southern Belle. “Why, I do declare, I would probably get a stomachache trying to eat you, landform. But there seems to be another landform out there in trouble. We can understand it, but it seemingly can’t understand us, which is quite a mystery, isn’t it? But whatever else is going on, it’s making a lot of noise in a most unseemly manner, disturbing some of my more bitey friends. If there’s any such thing as loyalty between you landforms, perhaps you should mosey on over there.”

With that, Chopper pointed straight west, saying that was the direction the Sea King had pointed with one of its flippers.

“I take landforms mean creatures like you Chopper, who come from the land, and not just us humans? I know that the Sea Kings have called us humans before,” Robin surmised. “Or at least you translated it as such.”

“Probably. I’ve got no idea what a landform would be doing out here, let alone making a lot of noise, but maybe we really should check it out?”

“Why did the Sea King pass that on?” Nami asked, somewhat suspiciously.

“I think the noise was bothering her sensibilities. And, er... she might have assumed it was poisonous like they think we are,” Chopper answered trying hard not to look at the orange-haired girl, remembering last night.

“GRRRRR...” Nami snarled, annoyed by this and the smirks on Laki and Perona’s faces, but trying hard not to let it get to her.

“Regardless, whatever this ‘landform’ is, it’s an unknown, and I don’t like unknowns,” Robin stated, causing a chuckle of ‘No, really!?’ to go around the rest of the crew.

Soon, the *Everlasting Resolve* began to move along a new course, with Perona’s ghosts spreading out over the horizon, further than even Laki could see from the crow’s nest. This meant that again, Perona was the first to see anything.

At first that ‘anything’ was not a good sight at all. “HOLD IT!” she shouted. “That’s a marine ship out there. Looks like a full battleship, not one of their more modern ships, and it looks like it’s lost one of its turrets. But it’s definitely a marine ship.”

“Out here?” Nami frowned. “The heck? We’re well away, at least a day or more for a ship like that from the Tarai current. We’re they attacked by Sea Kings and forced out of... no that makes no sense, not from this direction.”

“There is something odd going on,” Perona interjected before anyone else could. “My Ghost doesn’t see nearly as many marines as they should for a ship that size. And... um... well...” For once Perona’s normal semi-arrogant self-confidence had fallen by the wayside. “You all need to see this. Even a Grand Line native like me can’t really believe what I’m seeing here.”

Scowling, Robin thought for a moment. “I dislike the idea of us coming any closer to a marine ship. But I also don’t like the idea of anything unusual. Can we get close without them seeing us?”

“Yes!” Nami said instantly, grabbing up her Clima Control staff. “This thing can create mirages, or illusions if we use hot air and some steam. Laki and I experimented with that function back at Shabondy.”

“Do it then. Eve, we’ll close slowly, and use our binoculars to see what’s going on before we close.”

The general rule of thumb on the ocean was the tallest mainmast wins. In this case, winning meant seeing the other ship before they could see you. The *Everlasting Resolve* had a decently tall conning tower, so hopefully that advantage would go to them.

Laki spent a few minutes bouncing around the ship, watching as Nami’s illusion fell into place before she was satisfied. “Looks good!”

“Good. Come on back in, Laki,” Robin shouted, as hands appeared from seemingly nowhere in two long lines. They beckoned her to move between them, and Laki did so, landing easily.

Moments later, Robin Nami and Laki along with even Chopper all could agree that Perona’s earlier comment. From the Crow’s nest all of them stared through their spyglasses at the distant ship, while Eve whined in the background about wanting to see. The others didn’t respond. Words failed them.

The ship ahead of them, around nine leagues away was indeed a marine battleship, larger and bulkier than the *Everlasting Resolve*. It sat low in the water, as if carrying some heavy weight. And it was very clear that the ship had been the site of quite a lot of hasty remodeling. To either side of the ship, a paddlewheel spun, apparently broken away from whatever was meant to actually power it, which was obviously not the coal engine normal for such vessels. Instead, in the center of the deck was an open hatch leading into the ships interior. Above this was a hastily built roof, as if someone had created a larger version of the kind of covered barnlike area that a farmer would use with his livestock.

And underneath that wooden roof was a dinosaur. The kind all of them, even Laki, had read about in children's books. The fact it was sitting at what looked like some kind of massively enlarged bicycle system was merely icing on the cake of weird.

"That... That is a T-Rex, right? The whole original Thunder Lizard thing?" Laki asked cautiously. "The pictures in the book I saw of them wasn't all that good, but it got the big head and the small forearms thing right."

Around the T-Rex were a dozen or more marines. Well, Laki thought they were marines. She had the best eyes of the girls, and thought the marines looked really scruffy. That didn't match the impression of the marines she'd made since coming down to the Blue Sea. They were also following the orders of the T-Rex, rushing every which way under its spoken orders.

It was that sight that finally broke the girls out of their paralysis. As one they followed Chopper's lead as he put his spyglass down, clapped a fist into his open palm and exclaimed, "Ah, of course, a Devil Fruit!" The others stopped there, with Chopper going on to exclaim, "That's an Ancient Type of Zoan, those are really rare!"

"Makes sense he would be giving out orders too." Nami handed her spyglass over to Eve, shaking her head. "Don't the marines make DF users officers right away?"

"They do, but..." Robin's reply broke off as someone new appeared on deck. A woman had just come on deck, and even from here, Robin could tell she was a beauty. Not up to Hancock's level certainly, but still gorgeous, with long black hair, a heart-shaped face, and puffy lips combined with a body that was curvy in all the right places. *Not up to myself in some areas, but still more than enough to turn any sailor's mind to mush.*

That was not the most important thing about the woman though. *I know of every female marine, and I do not know this woman. Yet she is wearing a captain's uniform... for a certain extent, anyway.* The woman was wearing officer's pants, but not the blouse to go with it, and her officer's coat was tied around her waist, leaving her upper body bare save for a swimsuit top. "That is not a marine officer," she intoned. "Not only do I not know her, but no marine officer would ever wear something like that around the lower rankers."

"So what are they then? Because as battered as it is, that's a marine ship for certain," Nami said, shaking her head and looking down at the compass. "They must have come in from the Grand

Line, but damn it if I know why...huh..." She looked down at the compass again, then without a word left the Crow's nest, heading into the conning tower and down into the ship to her room.

The others looked after her in confusion, then shrugged and turned their attention to Eve, who stated, "Those are not marines, none of them." Her voice harkened back to the time when she had schizophrenia, her former marine side from back when she was a marine ship coming to the fore. "First, none of those changes are any good, they're very makeshift. No marine bosun or carpenter would let that kind of work stand. The Bosun would also be furious seeing even one man looking so slovenly. Even after a major blow or a fight marines don't look that sloppy."

"So we have a whole crew of pirates one supposes, having captured a marine ship. That's well and good, it isn't all that unusual," Robin drawled, looking over at Eve who snickered. "But what are they doing here?"

"Besides whimpering and trying their best to repair their propulsion, I don't know," Laki snickered from where she was still looking through her spy glass at the other ship from the crow's nest. "They don't even have a lookout in their crow's nest!"

"Perona, can you hear through your ghosts?" Robin asked, now fully invested in solving this mystery, her eyes shining with interest.

Perona nodded, although she added the caveat that her ghosts were not exactly invisible, especially on a sunny day as Nami returned. She watched as the woman put her map down, and began to work at it, frowning. "What are..."

"Hush." Nami cut Perona off absentmindedly, working at her map and a piece of parchment for a moment with a pen. A few minutes passed as Chopper and the girls looked at Nami in confusion, when she finally said, "Okay, I have it! That ship has an Eternal Pose to Enies Lobby!"

"Wait, what? Those are really hard to get, how did pirates that stupid looking get something like that?"

"Who knows? But it's clear to me they are just slightly off course for Enies Lobby from a position in the Grand Line. They must have been following a straight line there." Nami whistled. "That's either really lucky, or really smart."

"So we know what they've done, but not the why. So the question now is, should we just leave them to flounder or..." Laki trailed off looking at Robin expectantly.

"Hmm... I rather would like to fully solve this mystery but do these pirates add anything to our overall mission?" Robin in turn looked around, and saw none of the others looked like they had any opinions. Chopper looked interested to speak to another Zoan type, while Nami and Laki looked interested in figuring out the mystery but also ambivalent about going out of their way to do so.

“Nami, switch to the fog again. Let’s see how close we can get before they notice us. We’ll use the ghosts to overhear anything that they say.”

Not forty minutes later, the former marine ship was engulfed in fog. As the Everlasting Resolve closed, Perona sent off her ghosts, and quickly began to hear some voices through them. Eventually she cancelled all but one group of three, letting her concentrate on the various voices.

“Work blast it! You didn’t take us this far just for you to fail, did you? This is not an ending that I, a Mighty Warrior of the Sea, will ever accept!” The voice of the large dinosaur sounded remarkably whiny for such a massive beast. “I know we’re close, the captain’s super-secret Vivre-card is pointing in a different direction than the Eternal Pose, that means we have to be close.”

“Yes well, being close doesn’t matter except in horseshoes and cannonballs,” a feminine voice drawled, sounding smooth and demanding at the same time.

Perona likened it mentally to a cross between Hancock and Laki’s voice for some reason. *Maybe she’s a smoker too?*

“We haven’t even come up with a plan of what to do when we reach Impel Down,” The female voice continued. “and now we’ve gotten lost in this fog. Knowing our luck we’ll just flounder here for a bit before the fog disappears, only to find ourselves facing down the guns of several marine ships of the line!”

“Come on Alvida, I got us all here, didn’t I? My plans have...”

“Your plans were to run around like a chicken with his head cut off instead of a mighty king of dinosaurs,” The woman, apparently called Alvida, interrupted the Zoan’s words. “Give it a rest, Usopp! I’ve followed you so far because you’ve managed to convince the rest of these idiots that you had a plan, but I know the truth.” The woman’s voice lowered and became a bit kinder. “We’ve come this far by luck. Its only pride and hope that’s keeping us going now. Loyalty can only demand so much.”

When Perona relayed this to the others, Nami blinked, then shook her head. “That has got to be another Devil Fruit! I know Alvida, she’s from East Blue like me, Zoro, Chopper and Makino. She was a pretty smalltime pirate, but known for her ugliness, size and strength. No way can that woman be her unless it’s a Devil Fruit kind of thing.”

The others all looked confused, forcing Nami to explain her first meeting with Luffy as she stole from the rich to give to her town... and herself, obviously. “Anyway, she was huge, like as big as you all described that Kuma guy maybe? And fat, really fat. And she wasn’t a good leader, or one willing to follow anyone else... I didn’t think. So definitely some kind of Devil Fruit.”

“Hmm... so two devil fruit users...” Robin mused. “How intelligent is she?” When Nami indicated she didn’t know, Robin continued to think for a few moments.

Perona then blinked, shaking her head as she relayed the ongoing argument. “Does anyone know a Buggy? The name sounds familiar, but I can’t place it. It’s who they’re trying to get to Impel Down to free. And... the only plan the two have come up with is to use disguises and Alvida’s sexiness to get past the marines. It, it really sounds like they don’t know anything about Impel Down beyond its location.”

“BUGGY?” Nami exclaimed.

Back on the captured marine Vessel, Usopp had returned to his normal body, ducking down into the hold with Alvida following him to take over trying to repair the Dynamatic 4000, his personal invention to replace the coal engine when it got damaged as they tried to take over the ship. That this also allowed him and Alvida to continue their conversation without the rest of the crew overhearing was also a consideration.

“Look, we can’t turn back anyway,” Usopp hissed as he quickly discovered the problem. Holding back a few choice mutters about idiots not knowing a sprocket from a wrench, he went to work, continuing his argument with Alvida. “We don’t have enough food for us to get back out of the Calm Belt. Its either we find Impel Down or the Tarai Current, or we die.”

“DAMN it,” Alvida growled, smacking her hand against the back of Usopp’s head. “Why the hell did I listen to you about this wild scheme, huh?”

“My scheme!?! It was you who decided to steal this ship, remember?”

“I said a ship, not this one,” Alvida growled again. “You were the one who chose it after I convinced the marines around us to leave us alone, and then you started a fight for it too!”

“ERK,” Usopp looked away, and Alvida sighed.

The truth was, Alvida had also been taken in by Usopp’s words at first. And, although she would never admit it, Alvida was frightened of leaving the crew behind, no matter how much smaller the crew was. The Grand Line was utterly terrifying, and they’d already met several people who her beauty could not sway. It was horrifying and that fear had swayed her to stay when the other men wanted to follow Usopp. *And now we’re stuck here blast it!* “Fine, Davy Jones take my soul. If it’s a choice between dying out here or finding that prison, then I suppose we’d best keep going.”

Neither Alvida nor Usopp saw the ghostly head poking in from the nearby bulkhead.

Back on the *Everlasting Resolve*, hidden behind its illusion, Perona relayed all this to the others. Nami, who had quickly outlined her, Zoro and Luffy’s (Ranko’s) run-in with the Clown Pirate, shook her head. “I mean, I know the guy escaped and apparently massacred a marine base, but I wouldn’t have thought he could have gotten another crew, let alone one so loyal. I mean, he isn’t exactly charismatic at all.”

Chopper held up a paw. “I er, I remember a paper a paper I read back on Water 7 about some guy with a funny nose being captured. But that was more than a month ago now. Er, right?” Time on the Grand Line sometimes blurred, thanks to how many days and nights you had to stay awake for. “Wow, they really must be loyal!”

“That, or this Usopp guy is just really gullible, a dreamer who holds loyalty as high as this... mighty Warrior of the sea thing he wants to be,” Robin murmured. It was a toss up if she was being condescending or not.

Usopp was about to transform when he suddenly doubled over, sneezing several times. “Oof, someone must be talking about me.”

Beside him, Alvida rolled her eyes, “Get on with it, oh mighty Thunder Lizard.”

“Well, it’s clear they won’t be a threat to Impel Down,” Laki said, after Perona once more reported in, saying the ship had gotten underway again. “That means we can let them go and cause as much trouble as they can, right?”

“Hmm... agreed. And if they are moving again, we can make use of them without revealing ourselves,” Robin murmured. A part of her had wanted to help these pirates. No sailor wanted to leave someone else to die out at sea. But right now, they had a lot more to think about than just helping someone else. They had their mission to see to. And while it was quite duplicitous, using other pirates like this was nothing compared to what Robin had done in the past.

“Eve, pull us back and away. Nami, chart our course so that we can move up behind them unseen. Once there, Nami, start making as much fog as possible. This might be a good time for you and Laki to finish work on the larger version of the Clima Control,” Robin hinted, gesturing towards the central-most turret. “We’ll need enough fog to cover both our ships and not be obvious that it is covering something. We’ll stay with this Alvida, Usopp and their crew. And if possible, we’ll try to time their arrival to Luffy contacting us, if he can. If not... we’ll wait until dawn tomorrow, then send them in.”

If this rescue attempt takes longer than that, it certainly won’t be a good sign. But, Luffy is always saying that chaos will favor him over anyone else, so if we add more random factors, perhaps we can help more than we could by simply being the getaway vehicle. And that at least will make me feel better, Robin thought, as the rest of the crew got to work.

Scene break

“Awwuuuuu!!!” A wolf howled, his howl stopping with the abruptness of a guillotine as it found its neck broken from a chop from its would-be victim.

Its fellow was launched through the air, its jaw and teeth shattered by a kick as Zoro bellowed, “Swordless style, Oni Giri!” The second, third and fourth wolves were all flung away, bones broken as they flew through the air.

Zoro sighed, shaking his head. "Come on you idiots. I've killed at least a dozen of you so far, I've got a coat made of the skin of one of you, and I even tried to cook one of you too." *Who knew that even cooking over an open fire was so hard, I could barely even start a fire it's so damn cold down here, the wind blew it right the fuck out. Ugh, I'm so hungry I'm even missing the Aho-cook's food.* "When will you learn to not mess with me?"

He kept on scowling in annoyance as he finally left the forest behind, coming out into an open area, a vast plain of snow and ice. The cold wasn't bothering him much any longer, thanks to his exceedingly makeshift coat of wolf fur, although it did still drip blood behind him. Zoro had felt that was a small price to pay, not understanding how this contributed mightily to the different wolf packs both finding him and attacking him. That, and the fact they were different packs, of course. Again, something that Zoro, no woodsman, was unaware of.

That trail of blood was also why Minorrhinoceros could follow him so easily. This would not have been an easy task otherwise. Zoro's trail through the wood could be likened more to a rope that had been left in the shed for a long time, coiling around itself as such things were wont to do. Still, the nearly mindless Jailer Beast followed along.

Now Minorrhinoceros reached down into his loincloth. It was the only item of clothing he wore, and it wasn't just to hide his danglies. This was proven now as he pulled out a Mushi from within. The snail looked almost sickly now. Eyes screwed closed and pulled into its shell, the Mushi's face was set into a rictus of horror, the tiny nubs that served as arms moving as if it would like nothing more than to cut off its nose.

The frigid weather made it shiver, but only at a tap to the Mushi's shell did the creature open its eyes. Obeying genetically ingrained commands, the Mushi locked onto Zoro, the only individual in sight, then swept around to the detritus of his latest fight.

As the Mushi was doing so, one of the wounded wolves that Zoro had sent flying behind him by at least half a league regained his feet and attempted to attack the seemingly unaware Zoan from behind. But when it tried, Minorrhinoceros's weapon flashed around, smashing into the wolf and sending it flying.

By the time the dead wolf's body landed, Minorrhinoceros had pushed the now badly shivering and practically frozen Mushi back into his loincloth. The Mushi's face, as it disappeared underneath the leather pouch, was one of a creature choosing which horrific manner it wanted to die, and was still trying to make up its mind when one horror was replaced once more with another.

Unaware of his follower or its tormented companion, Zoro stared around him, sighing. "Great, just great. From trees to nothing. Ugh. No wonder other people get lost around here."

Ignorant of the world-ending amount of irony in that statement, Zoro continued on in what he thought was a straight line. He had no real goal just yet except maybe for finding Ace. Doing so before Luffy arrived would be a nice feather in his cap. Or just knowing the guy was down here

on this level, which Zoro felt made a lot of sense given Ace's powers. *If I could use Seastone cuffs on him, I'd sure as hell stick a guy who normally uses fire down here. No way he could have built up an immunity to cold with his DF powers. And those with DF powers can't move very well anyway once in contact with seastone.*

"Heh. Well, whatever. I figure if I go in a straight line, I'll eventually find the edge of this floor, then be able to at least find my way back to the entrance. Right? Right," Zoro murmured to himself, moving forward out into the plains, ignoring the sight of two mounds to one side of his course. When he found himself standing within several more later on, Zoro glanced into them and saw they were cages made to house prisoners. There were even one or two still alive within, but they were frozen in place, covered in icicles, only their eyes flickering towards him showing they were alive.

Zoro ignored them, as did Minorhinoceros as he cut across Zoro's course, catching up quickly. It had its orders, and like all orders given to it, the nigh-mindless Zoan would follow it to the best of his abilities.

Scene break

High above in the suite of rooms dedicated to the surveillance Den Den Mushi, nearly forty-eight World Government employees sat at an equal number of stations. Each floor of the prison had a dedicated suite and team of operators led by shift bosses who all reported to Domino. This was her domain, and she had her own desk in the center of the room dedicated to the first floor.

As that was normally the quietest floor in terms of trouble from the prisoners, Domino was free to react to anyone else bringing her information about trouble elsewhere, and could use her screen, connected to the Granny Mushi, to look through the eyes of any of the Den Den Mushi used throughout the prison. The Granny Mushi was the progenitor of the first generation of Mushi born in Impel Down, and through them it could receive signal from any of them.

Now seeing the video of the Den Den Mushi being carried by Minorhinoceros, Domino only had one thing to say. "That poor Mushi. We might just be in the unusual position of retiring a Den Den Mushi for psychological reasons."

The shift boss who had brought her the information chuckled at her joke, but pushed on, gesturing to the frozen image on the screen. "That may be, but this Zoro character is quickly proving to be too strong for the wolves of Frozen Hell to deal with. And with that fur cloak, the cold isn't going to bother him too much longer either. What should we do?"

"Hmm... I don't think we need to do anything. Frozen Hell doesn't have any fruits or vegetables, after all. If we just don't feed him, Zoro is going to start to weaken and may even die of malnutrition eventually. I can't say I know how long, but he isn't strong enough to break out, and he doesn't seem to have any plan or goal. It just seems as if he is trying to survive from one moment to another." Despite that, Domino was about to send out a request to Sadi-chan to

have one of the other Zoan Guards join Minorhinoceros just in case when another shift boss came in. "Yes?"

This worthy was the shift boss for Blazing Hell. Since this was the hotbed for both trouble from the principles and sheer number of prisoners coming and going, it was given to the most senior among Domino's men. He saluted now, then stood at attention. "Ma'am, beg to report some movement on the Devil Cook front."

Domino groaned mentally. The pirate who had so successfully flirted with her upon arriving yesterday had not been idle since Sadi-chan had dropped him off in Blazing Hell. Now, barely twenty hours into his arrival at the prison, he had taken part in some strange food riot, proving able to fight Minotaurus on an even footing while doing so.

While the first wasn't really cause for alarm, the ability to fight Minotaurus and Sanji's ability to use Haki meant he was now on a special watch list. Any operator who caught a glimpse of him was to make certain to watch him especially. The mobile Chameleon Mushi were also to follow him whenever they could, although thanks to how slow they were, that wasn't all that helpful.

Reports should not get up to Domino herself unless something unusual was happening, and right now, Domino felt a headache coming on. "What is it?"

"It was just for a moment, Ma'am, but we saw Hell Cook working with the Clown and one prisoner we couldn't identify. They seemed to be moving in the same direction, but we couldn't find them quickly enough to see where they were going. And none of the Chameleon Mushi were in the area."

"What number?" Domino ordered brusquely, referring to the fact each of the Mushi had an assigned number on its shell. A moment later the image popped up, and she stared at it for a moment, then blew up the image of the third pirate's face to look at it more closely. Ten minutes of searching allowed her to match it with still photos of their prisoners taken during the ingress operation. "Bon Clay, captain of the Okama Pirates, assigned to Level Three...hmmm... Get me Supervisor Voss."

Voss, another one of her senior operators, soon showed up, and reported they had seen Clay departing for Level Four late the night before. As it had been Starvation Hell, there had been no way for the prisoners to tell time, but the operators could. Hence why Domino knew how long it had been since Sanji had arrived in the prison.

Biting her lip, Domino leaned back in her chair, running one hand through her hair, entirely unaware of the twin gulps of her officers or exactly how sexy she looked at the moment. No, unlike Sadi-chan, Domino was a thoroughgoing professional, despite of how good she could make the Sensor Operator's female uniform look.

Even with her general intelligence, it never occurred to Domino to question why there was a female Sensor Operator's uniform when she was the only female who worked there. It just

made sense to her that there would be a special uniform for women. Sadi-chan, on the other hand, had created her uniform, such as it was, from scratch to create the impression she wanted to project.

“Someone head over to records. I want to know all we can about this Clay person. The Clown... I don’t know enough about him either beyond his threat level. Bring of their records since their arrival and what we have of them prior to that.”

That took more than fifty minutes, but soon she had the information in front of her. Which at first read very strangely. Buggy the Clown and Bon Clay had never come in contact in the prison. One was a near non-entity despite his Haki skills, having been thoroughly thrashed first by Akainu then by the Zoan Guards under Sadi, he seemed almost a broken prisoner, the ideal Impel Down strove for. The other hadn’t had nearly as fraught an apprehension, but had not made any trouble since arriving, without the need to beat him down first. Moreover, Buggy had been taken directly to Blazing Hell, while Clay had started in Beast Hell, and then made his way down to Starvation Hell for some reason.

“So what is their connection,” Domino mused aloud, before looking at Sanji’s picture. Which, she felt, did not do him justice. He was far more handsome in person. “Hmm... wait, wasn’t East Blue where the Clown massacred his way out of a marine base? And Sanji is from there, isn’t he?” she didn’t notice the twitch that using the pirate’s real name garnered from her officers, perusing the data once more.

That turned out to be a dead end, but when she looked for connections to Bon Clay, Domino pulled up a report about a battle that occurred near Alabasta between then-Commodore Hina, the Straw Hats and Okama Pirates. “Damn it! That’s the connection between Clay and Sanji. But then, why Buggy? Is he just a hanger-on or what?”

What Domino didn’t realize was that information was itself currency even in Impel Down. But she did know that Buggy could also use Haki techniques, if pushed, just like Sanji. He too had been on a special watch list for a time after he arrived, although he had never shown any inclination to make trouble before this. But the idea of two Haki users working together was worrisome enough to cause Domino to bite her lip once more.

Senior Operator, Morris, of the Blazing Hell had just entered her office as she did, and had to bite back a whimper. He was one of many who had a massive crush on Domino, and her worried, stern expression was a major turn on for a man who hadn’t seen any other women beyond Sadi-chan and Domino since his last vacation. “MM, um, m, ma’am, we had another sighting, longer than the last because of where it was.”

Without waiting for an order, he quickly gave Domino the number, and she and Morris both watched as Clay, Sanji and Buggy appeared to argue, and then open one of the hatches leading down to Frozen Hell. Used to deposit food when the guards didn’t have a full work gang of prisoners they wanted to further intimidate or bully - depending on who you asked, these were

much the same things - to take food down to Frozen Hell by hand. *Not that our guards do much down there besides find a few cells where there are still prisoners alive and dump the food outside them.*

But now, with the information gleaned from the file on Bon Clay from before had been brought to Impel Down, Domino's thoughts on the food distribution could not stay in her mind. "Clay is a known collaborator of the Straw Hats. If he can somehow keep the peace between them, or worse, has some kind of plan he wants to bring them in on... Blast it!" She hissed, standing up and moving to a nearby communication Mushi.

Morris looked at her in confusion, but Domino ignored him, and after a moment, Magellan's voice came through the snail, it's face changing into his own lugubrious expression, complete with tired but angry looking eyes and baboon-like colors. Little devil horns even started to morph out of it's head as Magellan spoke. "Why have you called me out, Domino? I was in my special room. I want to go back into the darkness there, the darkness of my soul as soon as possible."

Domino shook her head, knowing full well Magellan had once more been in his private bathroom. She didn't know if it was a personal preference on his part, that he just liked small, enclosed rooms, or if he really did have severe stomach issues, but right now, it didn't matter. "Sir, I think we have a small problem here I need your input on. I am not certain, but we might have been wrong about San...er, Hell Cook and Pirate Hunter not wanting to work together any longer. Hell Cook and two accomplices have just gone down to Frozen Hell. Further, Pirate Hunter seems to be too strong for the wolves. If that's true when he doesn't have access to swords, then we have to assume that Hell Cook can handle them and the cold as well. If that's the case..."

Domino trailed off there, letting the implications sink in. Impel Down was supposed to break it's prisoners will, to make them face true hell as enemies of the World Government and peace. If prisoners could somehow make a home for themselves within the prison, that would fly in the face of that mission. Worse, it might give other prisoners hope, something no warden would ever allow.

She waited a few moments, then Magellan breathed out a sigh so loud that Domino feared for a moment that some of his poison would come through the Mushi. "Tell me more. And get Hannibal up. If I have to work, so does he."

Scene break

"And you are positive that there aren't any observation cameras on this floor?" Luffy asked, looking over at Buggy, crouching down in the snow behind a pine tree, hiding in place in the normal manner rather than using his Umi-Sen-Ken.

"Positive! They literally can't survive here in the cold. They freeze to death within one or two minutes. You know, just like I'm doing now, you flashy fuck! Why don't you break out that

technique you said you had to keep us warm down here!?” Bucky shouted, pointing at himself. His big red nose was now blue and dripping icicles, and his visible skin had slowly started to turn whiter and whiter as the cold hit. His arms were wrapped around one another, pieces coming off and reforming to hide as much skin as possible from the flensing wind coming through the trees.

Sanji and Clay were not much better although unlike Buggy they tried to hide it behind their bravado. Sanji simply stood there, idly wishing aloud that he had a cigarette to warm him up trying hard not to let his teeth chatter even as he crossed his arms and stuck his hands underneath his armpits for warmth. His feet were also turning blue quickly, but there at least Sanji could bounce in midair with Geppo, avoiding the frozen snow below. Buggy could have done the same if he was thinking clearly, but he wasn't the cold threatening to freeze his brain along with other equally important dangly bits.

Meanwhile, Clay began to dance in place, using exercise in order to keep himself warm, as he shouted, “Un, deux, ora, this is nothing! Just like the heat and lack of food, an Okama's mind can be trained to overcome anything~!”

Surprisingly this seemed to be working as he was at least able to move around and seemed energetic enough. Thanks to the cold, the other two were barely able to keep their eyes open and their feet moving, as their bodies slowly slipped into hyperthermic shock.

For his part, Luffy barely felt the cold. In both this life and his last, Luffy/Ranma had been trained to ignore such things from an early age. Now he led them forward, his eyes closed as he concentrated on his Kenbunshoku. Almost instantly he found a few nearby minds, their owners slowly fading away under the impact of the cold and conditions. That it was slowly rather than quickly said something about their basic endurance, but Luffy knew that was probably a given on this floor.

He could also feel several minds that read to his Kenbunshoku like they were animal minds. Predators for certain, minds like arrows, focused and hungry. The owners of a few of these minds were even stalking towards them now. Letting more of the world seep into his senses, Luffy found two other minds at the outside edge of his range. One he was happy to find so quickly, while the other worried him. “Well, good news and bad news folks,” he said, not addressing Buggy's demand.

“If it doesn't include you using that technique you said you had or finding us some clothing fit to be used down here, and that flashily quickly, I don't want to hear it!” Buggy shouted.

“Then you're in luck. Were about to be attacked by a few wolves, and their pelts should do for jackets.” Luffy announced dryly.

“The proper way to cook a wolf is somewhat like bear, you have to marinate the meat while grilling at a slow heat, tenderizing as you go,” Sanji mused, although if he was making it up or not, Luffy couldn't tell. Then Sanji sneezed, and some of his pretend poise disappeared as he

looked over at his captain shivering in place. "Although if we could see to this quickly captain, I think that would be a great idea."

Luffy nodded, and gestured to the other three to follow him. Clay did so eagerly, dancing through the snow after him in a series of leaps and twirls. Buggy and Sanji moved after them, the chill and the wind getting to both despite being in the air.

"Maybe there is something to that Okama power that Clay mentioned a moment ago if it's able to let him deal with this cold," Buggy murmured under his breath.

Sanji still heard it through the background wind however, and he turned with blazing eyes to Buggy, looking almost as if he had thrown off the cold entirely thanks to the heat coming from his eyes. "There is no such power, you red nose idiot!"

"What did you call my nose!?" Buggy shouted, forgetting the cold himself and getting into Sanji's face, therefore heads cracking against one another.

Their argument was interrupted by a series of howls as six wolves came out of the woods all around them. It was a well-planned ambush, none of them bar Luffy had even seen anything coming. They also came at them from all sides, with two wolves assigned specifically to Clay and Luffy as the seemingly most energetic of their four targets.

Unfortunately for the wolves, they just didn't bring enough bang to the party. Before they could even close, Luffy leaped to engage the two coming at them from the front, single blows smashing into the sides of their faces caving in skull and brain alike. Behind him, Sanji had shifted away from Buggy, who instantly came apart, letting one of the wolves pass through him. That wolf ate a foot to the face courtesy of Sanji which smashed into its nose and skull with almost as much force as one of Luffy's punches.

"Okama kenpo Urabure Swan Butokai!" Clay shouted, furiously attacking one of the other wolves with a flurry of kicks and punches. It grunted under the impacts of his strikes but moved so each hit's impact was kept to a minimum. But his footing betrayed Clay, opening him up to an attack, one of the large wolf's paws catching him in his side.

That light impact hurled him into a nearby tree, nearly breaking ribs. There one of the other wolves attempted to bite into Clay, but he rolled away, lashing out again into a kick that caught the beast in the back of the head, burying its face into the frozen snow. It was still alive given its wriggling, but at least it was out of the fight for now, allowing Clay to turn his attention back to his former opponent only to find it had already been slain by Luffy. The last of the wolves had also fallen to Sanji, who landed on its back with both feet, snapping its spine and destroying much of its innards in a single blow that slammed it down into the ground.

"Well, that was anti-climactic," Sanji muttered, hopping off and looking over to where Buggy's head lay, having been smacked of the air by one of the wolves tails, hard enough to make the clown see stars. Both he and Clay were looking much the worse for wear after their little run in,

despite not taking that many hits, but Sanji hadn't even been touched. *I wish I could put that down to my own strength, and I can, but that strength is based more on training as hard as I have been thanks to Luffy being such a damn taskmaster*, he thought before setting the thought aside as he watched Luffy make a ki blade around two of his fingers and begin to cut into one of the wolves. "Anything I can do to help?"

"Gather Buggy's parts first, he looks a little out of it. And we might still need his information sometime. Then start a fire somehow."

Sanji would've mentioned the fact that as a lightning man, Luffy should've been able to do that, but given that Sanji couldn't make blades of life energy like Luffy could, he wouldn't have been able to skin the wolves. *And at least this makes me feel useful*. "Right, how big of a fire?"

"A tree trunk should do. We'll want to cure these furs, unless we want to drip blood wherever we go."

"Let me help you, cook-chan," Clay said, hopping to his feet looking battered but still good to go. Buggy too was already starting to come out of his mildly concussed state. But like Sanji, he was still showing the effects of the cold, as was Clay now as well. The Okama pirate was shivering in place as he waited for Sanji to lead the way, his extremities turning blue.

Within an hour, Luffy had the pelts off of the five wolves which had attacked them, then surprisingly proved to be a dab hand at sewing. Soon, all of them had wolf pelts around their shoulders and down their bodies like loose cloaks or ponchos, protecting them from the worst of the cold. But even that hour had been enough to merely freeze Clay, Buggy and Sanji, despite the fire that Sanji had started. It was just that cold on this floor, making Sanji remark once more as they set off, "Seriously, how the hell do they do this! I'm a cook, I know about heat and cold, and having Blazing Hell directly above this place, it's impossible."

"Bah, that's what you know, dumb blonde," Buggy said, trailing at the back of the group now, but far warmer than he was before. "You didn't notice how long it took us to get down here?"

The others looked at Buggy in confusion, but Luffy slowly nodded. "That chute did seem to go on for a while. How many stories do you figure there are in between each of the floors?"

"It varies for certain, but between this floor and Blazing Hell, at least six or seven," Buggy answered definitively. He knew about distances and stuff like that, having been apprenticed to the carpenter for the Roger pirates and having designed the *Big Top*, his ship.

That he did so poorly at it, was something that none of his crew at the time had dared to comment on.

Buggy shook himself, and a finger came off of his hand to wave in front of Luffy's face. "Now get with the Kenbunshoku, you! Just because we've got fur cloaks doesn't mean I'm freezing any less. Let's find Fire Fist Ace or your swordsman and then we can figure out how to escape."

Sanji suddenly stopped in place, smacking one hand against his forehead, then reaching over to grab Luffy's shoulder as he made to keep moving. The group were out in a small field at the moment between forests, with no other discerning features of the landscape around them, and stopping was the last thing any of them wanted to do in this cold wind, but Sanji had something to say. "Luffy, wait a second."

Rama looked at him quizzically, and Sanji went on hurriedly, looking back at the other two, wondering if it was worth it to ask for some privacy. But he decided not to. Not only would it be pointless, but he doubted it would be obeyed. At least by Buggy. "Luffy, listen. There was another reason why Gion wanted to come here and escorted me and Marimo into the prison in person. Your grandfather, he's here!"

Luffy blinked at that, then blinked again, and raising a finger as if about to say something before slowly withdrawing it as he stared at Sanji. "What? Why?"

Like Sanji, he did not mention his grandfather's name. That would probably cause trouble with Buggy at the very least, although Clay might remember that Luffy had said he was related to the Hero of the Marines before this.

"I don't know. They didn't mention why he was here, only that he was. And that it was a very recent arrival," Sanji explained.

"Wait, so you are a legacy pirate? And your grandfather was famous enough to get stuck here? Who is he? And why would a Vice Admiral want to meet him? To Gloat?" Buggy asked directly, wondering if he would know the man. After all, while he had been more than happy to hide away in East Blue, he had traveled the world with the Roger Pirates. There was barely any of the real powers in the world that he didn't know about in some fashion.

Ignoring him, Luffy shook his head. "Well, if he's here, and they put him down in Freezing Hell, I doubt it's bothered him all that much. I could see them thinking the cold might bother Ace, but Gramps? The only place we've seen that would bother him would be Starvation Hell, and that slowly." Luffy snorted. "Hell, he'd probably just imitate a bear and hibernate."

"I believe it, but I still thought you needed to know. If he's really here, well, figuring out why might be a good idea."

Luffy nodded at that, and, still ignoring the looks of curiosity from Clay and Buggy, gestured the group to keep moving. Since they still wanted to get out of the wind, none bothered to argue further, though Buggy still shouted questions at Luffy as he once more began to concentrate almost entirely on the Kenbunshoku. he eventually found Zoro's mind again, trailed by that same near-animal mind as before. It felt like an animal who was both docile and mad at the same time in some strange way. *An attack dog who was trained to always obey its master but without mind enough to make its own decisions. That's got to be the Zoan Magellan had accompany Zoro down to this level.*

"I found Zoro, he's in that direction," Luffy said aloud, gesturing in that way. "But we'll have to take care of his minder first."

"Minder?" Three different people asked as one before two of them glared at one another.

"Don't copy me red nose!/flashily copy me you swirly brow baka!"

Luffy ignored them, turning away and leading them towards where he sensed Zoro, while continuing to open his mind to his Kenbunshoku further and further. And still further. He found lots of minds, about a hundred all told, but all of them seemed to almost be in a torpor, a semi-cryogenic state thanks to the frozen conditions of this floor. Not one of them was one he recognized as either his brother or his grandfather. "Again, the size of this place is defeating me. I pushed out past the edge out into the ocean it's just too big."

"All the floors are circular, I think" Buggy cautioned. "So if we keep on pushing one direction, were certain to get there eventually. Work our way around the edge. And this might be the biggest floor of them all, you know? It makes sense for each floor to be larger than the one above it."

Luffy frowned, trying to work out how long they been in the prison for, then shook his head. It really didn't matter, whatever the answer was. "We don't have time for this. Sanji, grab Buggy's feet, I'll carry Clay. We'll circle around where I found Zoro and the Zoan assigned to watch him, take it out, and then grab up Zoro. We need to get a move on, damn it."

"Wait, what?" Buggy asked, before he found himself upended, automatically coming apart as his back hit the snowy ground behind them. A second later, Sanji took off after Luffy, who had gone from a standing start to a full sprint in less than an eyeblink while carrying Clay. The Okama pirate was shouting and whooping at the speed they were now going even as he began to freeze in the cold wind of their passage.

"Flashy Fuckers!" He cried, as his body parts flew up into the air, and then raced after his feet as fast as he could make them go, once more freezing as he did, only his upper body in the fur poncho until he was able to reconstitute his body. This time Buggy reformed them into a small bowl shape in midair above Sanji, completely covered by his fur cloak barring his eyes which popped out and floated above the bundle.

Within thirty minutes, the group, with Buggy cursing the others out all the while from his body cocoon, had crossed the intervening distance between where Rama had sensed Zoro's mind, and their original starting position. They skirted around it to one side as Luffy led the way, and then Sanji and Luffy snuck up on the Zoan.

Animal instincts blaring a warning, Minorhinoceros twisted around, bringing up his club to ward off a blow from Sanji. The club shattered underneath Sanji's foot, although he grimaced at the same time, realizing with some embarrassment that he needed to start coating his feet with Busoshoku. While his body had been toughened up to match his greater strength, Sanji was too

used to having specially designed shoes on to help mitigate the impact of his strikes. *I might have been a bit complacent there...*

Minorrhinoceros stumbled back and never even saw Luffy getting behind him until one arm grabbed at the side of his head, the other wrapping around his neck. But before Sanji could take the opening Luffy had set him up for, Minorrhinoceros's hunched forward, almost throwing Luffy off as he tried to reach up behind him to grab it Luffy. His flailing hand found Luffy's shirt, but Luffy clung on easily, and once more went for a chokehold as Sanji caught Minorrhinoceros on the chin with a kick causing his head to snap backward and for his whole body to be nearly raised off the ground. Seeing this as an opening, Luffy bent backward, piledriving Minorrhinoceros into the ground.

Deciding that they had to put this guy down for good, Luffy hopped to his feet. *I don't like taking someone's life like this, but if we fought you straight up, you might cause trouble for Sanji and Zoro. Letting you live to come after us later is just not going to happen.*

Covering one of his hands in Busoshoku, Luffy punched down with a stabbing blow into the creature's neck. As durable as the Zoans were, Busoshoku could overcome it, and did so now. Luffy's hand stabbed deeply and nearly out back out of Minorrhinoceros' neck, nearly separating its head from its shoulders.

Letting the body collapse, Luffy flicked off his blood from his hand, looking around at the others, who were somewhat stunned at how quickly one of the most dangerous prison guards had gone down to a surprise attack. "Well, that's one less enemy," Luffy said with a resigned sigh.

Nearby, Zoro had heard the commotion, and turned around, coming back in their direction, and even Zoro couldn't mess up where the sounds of battle was coming from over a flat plane like this. Not very much anyway. He was off course still, walking almost 45° at an angle away from where Luffy and the others were, but Luffy spotted him quickly and shouted for his attention. "Over here, Lost Boy!"

Snickering quietly to himself at the inside joke, Luffy ignored the looks he was getting from Buggy and Clay, as Zoro trooped up to them, through the snow muttering how it was impossible to tell one direction from another here. Sanji on the other hand simply scoffed and pointed out, "That must mean you're right at home swordless wonder. After all, you can never tell what direction is which anyway."

"What was that Aho-Cook! Your lifelong ambition is to be buried in a refrigerator? I can oblige!" Zoro growled. He then turned serious, holding out his hands towards Luffy. He said nothing, but Luffy understood what he wanted, and promptly pulled out Zoro's swords from his energy space, getting exclamations of shock from both Clay who had not seen that particular trick before while they were fighting their way out of Alabasta, and Buggy, who shouted out what was the obvious explanation in his mind. "Devil Fruit!"

“Not quite.” Luffy answered, as he held out the blades to Zoro, watching as he hung them one after another on his belt, then bowed formally towards Luffy.

It was a strange moment, seeing Zoro of all people being formal, let alone in such a strange, freezingly austere setting, but Luffy understood where the other man was coming from. His swords were a swordsman’s life, and Zoro had been forced to leave his blades behind, been forced to live with the idea that his enemies had claimed them since entering Impel Down. Even Luffy’s earlier words of encouragement when Zoro started a fight during the handing off inspection was scant comfort compared to that.

When he stood up, Zoro grinned for the first time since he’d entered this prison, one hand resting lightly on the hilts of his three swords, feeling the connection between them, the quiet, almost humanly serene presence of Wado Ichimonji, the grim, uncompromising and somewhat angry feeling of Shusui, furious at the fact that his swordsman had been so lax as to let him be taken by someone else while still alive. And finally, the demon blade, Sandai Kitetsu, bloodthirsty and even more furious at being left behind, taken as a prize once more. “So, I’ve been walking around here for hours, and I’ve not seen any sign of Ace Luffy, could he be in a special kind of cell maybe?”

“That’s what I’m thinking. Maybe instead of relying on seawater handcuffs, they rely on seawater cages on this floor, and stick them in out-of-the-way areas. That’ll make finding him really hard, but not impossible,” Luffy admitted, shrugging his shoulders. “We’ll find a way to the edge, then we’ll use that to go around the whole circle, as I use my Kenbunshoku to probe inward.”

With Clay and Buggy still leading the way in a straight line from where they had slain Minorrhinoceros, Luffy trailed behind the others, concentrating on my Kenbunshoku. He didn’t find anything unusual, and soon, they were within the site of the edge of the floor, a huge, towering edifice of stone ahead of them, a wall going from one end of their admittedly quite limited line of sight to another.

Once there, Buggy and Clay began to argue about which direction they wanted to go, with Buggy claiming that right was clearly superior, and Clay doing the same for left. Zoro and Sanji, obviously enough in Luffy’s opinion, decided to join in on either side of the argument, the better to argue with one another.

Luffy only let that go on before cutting in. “As funny as it is watching the two of you fight like an old married couple, I was serious when I said we had to get a move on. Let’s go right,” he said, having chosen the direction randomly by turning in place a few times.

The others all nodded in grudging agreement. After all at this point, all they were doing was basically following Luffy around. None of them had Kenbunshoku. Not even Sanji had developed anything but the most rudimentary ability to read his opponents in battle yet, while Zoro had some ability with it, but only in relation to his swords and their ‘souls’. And Buggy, for all that he

was the most experienced of the group by a decade or more, had never learned even a hint of Kenbunshoku. It was that rare a talent.

The other four talked amongst themselves and eventually start to guide Luffy by hand on his shoulder as he concentrated fully on his Kenbunshoku, opening it up further and further. At this point, Luffy felt he could feel about 17 miles all around him, but even so, he couldn't yet find his brother or his grandfather. Not in any direction, above, below, or to the side. He also still couldn't feel any Sea King minds either, which was surprising. Luffy was becoming very worried as time went on and no sign of his brother or grandfather could be found.

About forty minutes passed and then Luffy paused, staring ahead of them and calling a halt to their progress. Then he began to grin in victory. "Remember what we said about maybe devil fruit people being separated into a separate cage or something? Well, ahead of us, there seems to be some kind of side area. It's hard to find minds through stone and the ocean, but I just sensed at least two minds ahead of us disappearing into the wall.

"OOOH! Then we're closer to finding both your brother and Ivankov-sama?!" Clay exclaimed, twirling in place, his wolf cloak billowing out around him as he did.

"Who?" The others all asked, but Luffy waved them to silence, urging them on quickly. At this point he was getting more anxious with every passing minute, knowing they had taken so long to get down here and not knowing when the marines would be coming for his brother.

This didn't stop Clay from explaining his own mission though. When he did both Buggy and Sanji had issues with meeting someone who could be called the Empress of Okamas, shivering in far more disgust than cold for several minutes while Zoro also shook his head, a little freaked out by the idea.

When they went forward however, all they found were footprints in the snow. Several sets of footprints, or one individual passing through several times, Luffy couldn't say. But it was obvious where they stopped: a blank spot in the wall. "Huh...you know, this doesn't look like it's separate and secret, so much as hidden."

Sanji nodded sagely, while the others looked blank for a moment until the cook explained. "Bakas, what my captain means is that this place doesn't look like it's an official part of the prison. It looks like its hidden from the guards instead of by them."

At that, Clay began to practically vibrate in place as he spun so fast the snow flew in every direction. "YES!! My dream, my idol, yes~~!!!"

"This Ivankov you mentioned earlier?" Buggy mused. "What, does he have some kind of digging-type Devil Fruit?"

"No~/No." Clay and Luffy said at the same time, if in extremely different tones, although only Clay went on.

“There is a legend among the prisoners, a rumor that only a few hear. The rumor is that there’s a secret area down here on Frozen Hell, a secret hideaway. It was originally made by a man with a mole Devil Fruit, but he died ages ago. It’s since been taken over by Ivankov-sama, a prisoner sent here because he was part of the Revolutionary Army, and is my idol~~!” Clay practically shrieked like a little girl at the end, staring at the wall.

“Hmmpf,” Zoro grunted. He too had been staring at the wall, his eyes alight with interest, a sharp-edged interest that none of the others seemed to notice.

Luffy went over to the wall, scowling. “Well, I can sense all the minds within, and none of them are Ace or Gramps.”

“Who you still haven’t told us the identity of,” Buggy grumbled.

“But whoever’s behind here might know where they are. Short of going back to the next level and grabbing a few guards to interrogate, questioning these guys seems to be the best idea.” Luffy stepped forward, and punched out with about fifty percent of his max strength, only to grunt in surprise when his first blow didn’t even result in a crater, let alone cracks.

Another full power punch results in cracks, but only outward. Once more there was no sign of the wall giving way, only breaking in place. “Okay, there’s no tunnel beyond this, it’s solid stone. I don’t care how thick, I should have at least made a crater if there was space beyond this wall,” Luffy stated definitively.

“I don’t know about that, but I can say this much. This wall? It’s been cut recently,” Zoro announced, causing everyone to turn to him. “It’s a feeling a get when I look at it, as if a swordsman, or someone like one passed through here.”

“...I realize I might sound like a broken record player, but could it be some kind of Devil Fruit?” Buggy asked.

“Probably,” Luffy nodded. “Still, that just means we need to get through this somehow.” *And if the Ivankov really is behind that wall, I am going to hurt him. I know he... she... whatever he was born as, was just this world’s way of explaining away what that Gyaru Goddess did to me, but even so, I owe him a punch to the nose at least.*

“Let me,” Zoro said, still locked into the idea of this passage, if such it was having been opened by a swordsman. That, and probably eager to use his swords for the first time in more than a week. Luffy wasn’t certain which feeling was driving him more, but as he watched, Zoro covered his swords with Busoshoku, and a visible battle aura appeared around him. “Santoryu style, Leopard Spinning Balls!”

With a sound like a dentist’s drill going through a particularly tough tooth, Zoro’s swords didn’t so much as cut as they drilled through the wall. It wasn’t instant, but within a dozen revolutions, Zoro sliced through meters of solid earth, bursting out the other side to land with

his swords ready in hand, only for Wado Ichimonji to nearly drop from his mouth as Zoro stared around in shock and horror. “Wh, what is this fresh hell?”

On the other side of the cut passageway, several dozen people were staring at them in shock. But not just any people. These were all dressed in various type of bondage or drag outfits. In the background, music was blaring, the kind of music you could find in a nudie bar, maybe? Or a really bad dance club, although frankly it was too nicely lit and clean to match any dance club Luffy had ever seen.

The dance club idea thought was probably closer to the truth, as Luffy had never chased his old man out of a nudie bar that had not one but several sparring balls hanging from the ceiling. There were also a dozen people moving about with drink trays and food too, and there was at least one bar in sight from the entrance Zoro had drilled for them.

Shockingly, there were nearly as many women as there were men in the crowd, although Luffy noted most looked as out of place as the men did in their strange outfits. Most seemed somewhat normal in terms of strength, as normal as the prisoners on Blazing Hell at least. A few stood out though. One, a thin, severe looking man with glasses and multi-colored hair stood poised nearby. One hand held a glass of something bubbly, while the other had shifted into a pair of scissors.

But standing out even more to Luffy’s senses was a large man/woman/thing that towered over the rest of the crowd. Or at least, it’s face did. *No way can someone who has a face like that be entirely human!*

The man in question was tall, almost as tall as Magellan, his hair an afro of eye-searing indigo. His face, which was at least half of his body in height, with no neck to speak of, sat on a wide, powerfully built body, albeit one whose arms looked small in comparison and whose legs looked like stumps. Really, he looked as if a human had mated with a square table, then wrapped their offspring up in a drag outfit before tattooing his chest with a pirate mark, a skull backed by strangely pointing arrows.

“Ahh, what is this, my darlings? Do we have some new arrivals?” Emporio Ivankov exclaimed as he took in the five men who had just burst into his little home away from home.

“Ivankov! I’ve got a beef with you!” Luffy shouted, recognizing the man despite it being nearly two decades since he saw him right before he lost his ability to think clearly to his baby-brain.

“Oh, and what would that be, my young man? Or should that be young girl, hmm?” Ivankov asked, sauntering forward.

Instantly the frozen Sanji, Zoro and Buggy all retreated, with Sanji starting to weep in sheer horror. “Stay back you, agghh!!” he cried, turning to flee back to Frozen Hell, only to slam into Buggy, both of them falling to the ground in a heap.

Clay on the other hand darted forward, laughing in delight. "Ivankov-sama, you're alive, alive! Haha! Luffy-chan~, thank you seriously for bringing me to my paradise!"

"Oooh?" Ivankov stopped, and some of the tension, which, Luffy now realized, had probably been entirely fake, went out of the strange room. "Ohoho, I can tell by your manner of speech and how you've tried to make your prison outfit work that you are one of us, aren't you, my darling?"

Before Clay could answer, Luffy's punch had crossed the intervening distance and hurled a fist at Ivankov's large face. Ivankov raised a gloved hand, but though he caught Luffy's fist, the impact still send the man ass over kettle to crash into and through several tables. "That's for using your power on a baby you asshole!"

"Ivankov-sama!" Shouted many a throat. "How dare you!" Some of them made to charge forward.

But then Sanji was in their faces, his eyes weeping bloody tears. "How dare you, how dare you show such horrible sights to my eyes! You bastards!"

Zoro, getting over his own shock and Horror pushed past Clay, who was trying to shout Sanji and Luffy down, trying to play peacemaker. "Oy," he yelled out loudly. "Which one of you is the swordsman who makes your normal entrance to Freezing Hell?"

As the man with multicolored hair responded, setting his glass down, his hands morphed into scissors. "I am he. If you think you have some kind of trouble with me, I will eagerly show you that stone isn't the only things this Choki Choki no Mi can cut."

Bursting out of the rubble of several tables which he'd flipped over as he landed, Ivankov shouted, "I'm alive, you idiots!"

Once more the tension fled the room almost as if it had been fake as the surrounding crowd shouted, "Ah, Ivankov-sama, such a kidder!"

"Now, boya, what exactly did you mean that I used my powers on you as a baby?" Ivankov went on, turning to look at Luffy, seeming non the worse for wear despite the punch from Luffy. "I've never used my powers on a baby, I think I'd remember it..."

"Oy yeah, then why did my Pops tell me it was because of you that I've got this weird curse!?" Luffy growled, before reaching to a nearby table. There he grabbed up a glass with several ice cubes that had melted and tossed it over his head, triggering his curse. *I won't need my lightning to deal with these idiots if I have to, and I do need to finish out this little play after all.*

The redhead wiped at her wet hair, glaring at a now-stunned Ivankov. "You were saying you bastard!?"

“Ah, ah... Little, Luffy-boy?! Dragon’s kid!?” Ivankov shouted in shock, causing a ripple of reactions from all those around them.

Nor was that the only reaction to Luffy’s sudden change. Behind him, Buggy gaped, now horrified for far more than a general response to the large group of Okamas. “What the fuck!? The redhead?! YOU FLASHY BITCH!!!”

One beatdown and one closed tunnel later, things had somewhat calmed down. Sanji and a thoroughly depressed, angry, and beaten Buggy were now sitting at a table near the entryway, looking as if they were within an inch of bolting or attacking. For Sanji, this was simply in reaction to the sheer horror he felt at the sights around them. *So many ladies, but none of them real, so many ladies, but all of them like the captain! This, this is indeed a fresh hell...*

For Buggy’s part, his reaction to this place was further colored by the ‘Ranko’ revelation, kicking himself for not remembering Zoro’s appearance. But now, as he calmed down a bit, Buggy realized he was in no position to care about his vendetta against Ranko/Luffy. *The fucker’s still my only chance to get out of Impel Down, and frankly, he’s proven too damn strong for me to fight anyway. Best to set aside my pride and concentrate on the payoff.*

Zoro, having seen that the sword user was just a Devil Fruit user, had lost interest in anything but booze, carefully turning his back on the scene around them. Like the other two he was not comfortable here. Clay on the other hand was in his element, and had swiftly been dressed in a new tutu and leotard, discarding his makeshift getup.

Meanwhile, Ivankov and Luffy sat discussing things. After hearing Ivankov apologize, Luffy got right to the reason for his being here, getting Ace out. “Along with my Gramps if he’s really here. Sanji, the blonde over there, said he is, but I’m not certain I believe him. What possible reason could my Gramps have for turning on the marines? That’s about the only reason he would be sent here I can think of.”

“Oh, he’s here alright,” Ivankov chuckled darkly, turning away for a moment to wink at Sanji who shivered and flinched, trying to hide behind Buggy. When Ivankov turned back, his normal persona was in stark abeyance, even while around them the eternal revelry of his hidden Newkama Kingdom continued. “Gave us one hell of a shock when I looked to see who the newest prisoner was.”

“How... Nevermind, I’ll learn why he’s here when I free him. Can you tell me where they’re keeping him and Ace?”

“I can, I suppose. Though why are you calling Fire Fist your brother? I know that you’re Dragon’s only child,” Ivankov wondered.

“Family is a lot more than blood,” Luffy answered sharply. “Hell, I don’t really like even knowing the manwhore and I share blood at all. Ace, he and I exchanged sake and vows. And as for

Garp... well, he might have hurled me off the mainmast of his ship, over the side of a cliff, and left me with bandits, but he still did a better job raising me than Dragon did.”

“Ouch, so harsh,” Ivankov sweat dropped, understanding why Luffy was saying that, but not happy about it. Then he shook his head. “But your grandfather here and Whitebeard’s lack of connection to the Revolutionary Army sort of muddies the water here.”

“What do you mean by that?” Luffy growled.

“Garp being here will eventually get out and his incarceration will just as eventually start to cause trouble for the World Government. There is no way that the WeeGee, and I do like that name, Luffy-kun, can sit on that, or what happened when he turned his coat. Garp is one person whose existence could never be buried here, no matter how hard they try.” Ivankov winked, causing Luffy to fight back a shiver like the one Sanji had a moment ago. “The Revolutionary Army can use that kind of thing.”

Ivankov then shrugged. “And as for Ace, you might call him brother, but as I said, I know Dragon only has one child. Whatever blood ritual or whatever you both went through is not worth revealing myself and my darlings to the rest of Impel Down. Not when the Revolutionary Army recently lost one of our best most deep-set agents, apparently.”

That cause Luffy to wonder how Ivankov learned anything from the outside world while down here. But he figured they might have tapped the prison’s communications system somehow. And the guards here, just like most seamen, would gossip. *Still, what is he talking about them losing... shit, you mean to tell me that crap Kuma tried to feed me about being a Revolutionary was real!?*

Not aware of Luffy’s thoughts, Ivankov made to reach forward, then thought better of it. “But you, Dragon’s son? You I will help escape, if that’s what you want. I can help you do it that easily. We can get you up to the connecting point between Blazing Hell and Starvation Hell. From there, well, you got yourself down here, so I wager...”

The Emperor of Okama Island froze as Luffy stood up, releasing the Haoshoku as he did. Knowing that not only his brother but grandfather were here somewhere, hidden away, ate at Luffy, who well understood that getting down here had taken them far too long. *I am running out of time and this fucker is just sitting here and...*

Luffy’s Haoshoku flared out, a suppressive, nearly murderous aura of power that told nearly everyone who felt it that here was a Conqueror, a being so above them that fighting back that even breathing in his presence was impossible. Practically all of the Okamas fell unconscious, bubbling at the mouth, something they had in common with nearly everyone in the Frozen Hell beyond. Many of the prisoners out there, already in near frozen states, simply collapsed, their hearts finally giving out.

And near the official entrance to Frozen Hell, a dozen of the guards who were routinely stationed here, experts at dealing with the conditions there, also felt it.

Scene break

Staring down at his second-in-command and around at the other guards with them, all of whom had also fallen unconscious, Magellan decided to wake Hannybal up by the simple expedient of slapping him senseless. With a man whose hands were as big as Magellan's, this didn't take very long, and Hannyabal was quickly crying out, "Sorry Chief Warden, I'm sorry, I won't try to lace your food with laxatives again, I promise!"

"So it was you, you bastard!" Magellan roared, letting some venomous gas release from his mouth for a moment, before shaking his head, and shaking Hannyabal in turn, much like a dog would a rat. "None of that! You fell unconscious due to someone using the Haoshoku!"

Hannyabal instantly sobered, setting aside his desire to oust Magellan as Chief Warden – or torment him to the point he left of his own volition - as he realized the seriousness of this just as much as Magellan did. There should have been no one capable of the Haoshoku in Freezing Hell. Pirates who could use that style of technique were few and far between. If one out of every one hundred individual could have Busoshoku, or one out of every five thousand Kenbunshoku, it was more like one out of every million when it came to Haoshoku. "Do you think one of the prisoners from below has escaped? Could it be Garp? There's been rumors about him having access to that kind of Haki too..."

"No. There is only one entryway to and from the sixth floor, and even the prisoners down there could not simply blast their way through several hundred feet of solid rock," Magellan said shaking his head. "This is something connected to why we were down here in the first place, Pirate Hunter and Hell Cook."

"You mean Buggy the Clown? I know Akainu told us to watch him, but he's never shown any--"

Magellan interrupted Hannyabal again by breathing out a bit of poison in his direction, just enough to get him to shut up and start coughing instead of speaking. "No, you moron. Buggy is intelligent and a survivor, but he's also weak. It must be Pirate Hunter or Hell Cook somehow. We need to shut them down quickly! But if they are so powerful as to have Haoshoku, my own abilities might not be enough."

Recovering from his brief period of coughing, Hannyabal looked at his superior officer in surprise. Magellan saw his look, and shrugged his large shoulders ponderously, his tiny vestigial wings moving with them. "It pains me to say it, but if those two pirates both have Busoshoku and work together, they could be a match for me. Especially if Pirate Hunter has somehow found a weapon down here. Besides, it might not be either of them, it could be someone else."

Magellan had been Chief Warden for many years now, and even before that, had been one of the strongest prison guards Impel Down had ever seen. He had been involved in shutting down

many of the largest riots the prison had seen in that time. Even with all the prison and the guards could do, a lot of pirates had enough will to not be broken by their experiences here in Impel Down and took any chance they could to cause trouble.

As such, Magellan had gained instincts over that time, and right now, those instincts were warning him that something more was in play than just two pirates who they thought might have been adversaries now that their captain was no longer around working together instead. The fact they were talking while standing over Minorrhinoceros's corpse was part of that supposition. The Jailer Beasts were among the toughest, most durable beings Magellan had ever seen, up to fighting some of those on the Sixth Floor. But it had died without even being able to sound the alarm.

"Retreat to Blazing Hell. Work with Sadi-chan and the remaining guards there and order Saldeath and his troops down to work with you. I will stay here, and keep going forward to engage whoever was behind that burst of Haoshoku. If they somehow evade me, it will be up to you and the rest to slow them down until I can catch up."

Hannyabal nodded, and as Magellan turned away and began to move towards where he felt the epicenter of the conquering technique had been, went about waking the guards around them up in turn.

Scene break

"Then why am I still talking to you?" Luffy growled, staring hard at Ivankov, the only one beyond the five he came in with who was still awake. "If you're not going to help me find where they are keeping my family then what use are you to me?" Luffy wouldn't normally speak like that about anyone or anything, but right now, he knew his brother was living on borrowed time, and he would be damned before he let this chance to save him go by just because he couldn't find him.

"Now, now, I wasn't saying that. Good grief, you really are Dragon's son, or is it daughter?" Despite the Haoshoku bearing down on her, Ivankov laughed. "Now, I won't lift a finger to help you, but I can at least help you along your way. You see, there is a major secret here in Impel Down that no one but the highest levels of the WeeGee know about. A Sixth level, the sixth level of hell. Where they put people they wish to erase from existence, not just incarcerate, not just revenge themselves on." Ivankov's smile grew although the humor in it leached away. "No, if you are put on the Sixth level, you are there to be utterly forgotten, never to see even a glimmer of light, let alone hope, ever again."

"Is it straight down?" Luffy asked quickly.

"Yes, it is. And I will do you one better. I will lend you Inazuma." Ivankov waved to the man whose hands had turned into scissors. His skills will get you down there far faster than even that swordsman of yours."

“Why don’t come with us, Ivankov-sama?” Clay asked, twirling in place in her new body. The Okama pirate wasn’t going to stay in this form for long, but for now it was nice to see and feel what it would have been like had he been born a woman.

“Hah! What would I be escaping from, hmm? I have my own little kingdom right here. No, I will remain here until Dragon himself calls on me. Then I will lead my lovelies here in a revolution against the prison, freeing all the prisoners to wreak havoc on the WeeGee, and tearing this whole place down,” Ivankov laughed once more before turning herself back to his male body with his Hormone-Hormone Fruit. “But I think with this, Luffy-chan, you have everything you need, hmm?”

“We do,” Luffy nodded, and stood up quickly. “Let’s go crew. And Buggy too I guess. Unless you want to stay here with Clay?”

Clay looked torn, but only for a moment. “Actually I’m coming with you, Luff-chan. While I might have left them behind, I still have my own crew to get back to. Alas, this means we must part, Ivankov-sama-chan!”

Ivankov laughed. “Well, far be it from me, the Miracle Man, to stand in the face of Dreams! Go forth, young Okama, and multiply!”

The Straw Hats and Buggy all retreated at that point, sharing looks of horror at the idea of this kind of madness multiplying. “I’m doubling the amount of money due me Luffy,” Buggy announced in a dead tone. “I’ll need it to pay a shrink to erase the memories of this place.”

The others all grunted agreement was no comfort to Buggy, who was now thoroughly squashing his anger at ‘Ranko’ as well as dealing with the horror of the Newkama Kingdom. *Flashily fuck my luck! My only chance of escape Impel Down is the same bastard who tried to send me there back in East Blue. If it wasn’t happening to me I’d think this was a bad comedy.*

Although annoyed that Ivankov was unwilling to help them personally, Luffy could understand where the Okama Emperor was coming from. *And frankly, I don’t really need their help, only the information he’s already given me, and Scissor Man’s aid to get in and out.* At the moment, they were still slipping through this prison unseen, and Luffy hoped that with Inazuma’s ability to make an entrance for them into the sixth floor, they would be able to keep that going. *Hey, a man can hope, right? And honestly, if we get into trouble on the way out, that’s one thing. This is another.*

“We will have to travel for some minutes deeper toward the center of Freezing Hell. While the prisoners of the Sixth Floor are all in individual cells, the floor does not cover as much space as this one. Indeed, you could almost think of it as a smaller offshoot of Impel Down, an almost entirely separate prison, than another floor,” Inazuma explained. “Furthermore, we do not know where in the sixth floor your...grandfather... or Fire Fist are being kept. I will first create a small hole leading downward, in order to make certain that we do not come out into one of the

prison cells below. Those below are so dangerous, that we will need to stay well away from them. Even someone like you, Luffy-sama, would be well advised to stay away from them.”

Luffy grunted at that, then gestured the man on. “Understood man. You’re the guy of the moment, so we’ll follow your lead.”

Next to him Luffy’s first mate made a growling noise, but it had been made clear during their interactions in Okama Kingdom that, despite Zoro’s initial impression of the man’s work, Inazuma was not a swordsman. So there was no real need to feel any sense of rivalry with the man. Zoro still obviously wanted to fight the man (currently a woman thanks to Ivankov) but he knew that wasn’t going to happen.

The group of six trekked through the windswept, frozen landscape for about thirty minutes all told before Inazuma stopped and gestured at the ground. There, a small turquoise painted rock lay on top of the snow by a tree at the outskirts of another woodland area. “That marks the beginning of the Sixth Floor, where Ivankov and I have ventured down there to learn of new arrivals we use this point. It will deposit us well away from the regular entrance, but within hearing range, so long as the prisoners are being quiet. If not,” the man turned woman shrugged, bringing Sanji and Buggy’s eyes to her chest despite the heavy fur coat he wore. “Then prepare your ears for an aural assault.”

Sanji shook himself, looking very annoyed with himself and the situation for a moment, muttering “And I thought having Luffy and his ‘Ranko’ persona around would be enough torture. More fool me, I suppose.” He then became serious. “How likely are we to be attack down there?”

“If you are fool enough to come within striking range of any of the folk down there, then it is a certainty,” Inazuma declared coolly.

“Clay, Buggy, you two and Sanji stay up here. Zoro, with me. Inazuma, you retreat up here once you’ve made our hole,” Luffy ordered. “Do it.”

Obedying quickly, the orange and white haired woman knelt, her hands turning into long scissors which began to cut into the ground beneath them as easily as if it was cloth. Within moments a small hole had been made, and Inazuma peered through it. A moment later he nodded, and began work on a long spiral slide leading down.

Once the main hole had been cut out, Luffy and Zoro were the first down, ready for anything. This was a good thing because the instant they touched down, fists were flashing out of the darkness of cages nearby to try and attack the two straw hats. Kicks too, and every attack was coming at a speed where any normal person would have found their bodies pummeled within a second. The prisoners in these cages were not normal, not normal at all.

But then again, neither were Zoro or Luffy.

Luffy battered aside several fists, returning a blow through a cage that caught the man standing there in the head. The strike hurled him backwards with a cry of agony and the crunch of broken bones, Luffy having put a lot of his strength into it as well as coating his hand in Busoshoku.

Behind his captain, Zoro was fast enough to block and then take a slice at the hand that reached for him, but stared in surprise as his blade bounced off someone using Busoshoku, the armor technique appearing on the man's arm faster than Zoro could track. Similarly his thrust through the cages of the door of the man who had attacked him bounced off in turn, although the impact with Shusui's tip caused the Level 6 prisoner him to stumble backward. Seeing this, Zoro grinned viciously. "Well now, we really are in the land of monsters here."

While those closest to the two interlopers were busy attacking the pair, others nearby and able to see the sudden light shouted out, "Look at that! They've made a way out!"

"Hell yes!"

"That's half the fight right there, now I just have to break out of this damn cage!" Roared a third, followed by a series of banging noises. "Break, damn it break!"

"Or they could be good little boys and let us go!" A female voice said, it's owner unseen in the darkness beyond the light coming down from freezing hell. "They'll be good boys and let us out, riiiiight?"

"As if any of us could ever know what a good boy looks like," another voice cackled. "Screw being good! You lead us out of here Ponytail, Swordsman, and I'll make it worth your while in gold! I'll conquer an entire island for you, how's that!?"

The shouts continued as Zoro and Luffy had backed away from the cages on either side of them, glancing at one another and shaking their heads. While they weren't all that concerned about any of the people in those cages breaking out, if any of them did, it was very clear that they'd be in for a fight. And while a part of both first mate and captain wanted to open the cages for that very reason, they were here for a specific purpose. *And we can't afford to wait until Magellan and the rest of the guards here arrive to pile in. They'd be able to hold us until reinforcements from the Marines arrive.*

"Which way Captain?" Zoro asked, his voice barely discernable through the tumult, having much the same thoughts.

Prompted, Luffy began to use his Kenbunshoku once more. But the minds of the prisoners surrounding them blocked his ability to feel out specific minds among them. This was the first time Luffy had ever been in the presence of so many powerful personalities, and he realized suddenly that too could impact his ability with Kenbunshoku when gathered together in an enclosed space like this. "Fuck... I..."

Luffy was brought out of his momentary stupor by a voice shouting at him by name. "You there, you would be Monkey D. Luffy correct? Your brother described you quite well."

Turning in that direction, Luffy was surprised to see a fishman in one of the cages. At first, the fishman looked overweight, but Luffy knew the man was probably built more like a sumo, with a lot of muscle under that weight. His skin was blue, and he had hair set in a crew cut at present. But his most prominent features were his large, webbed hands, a lightning bolt scar over one eye, and two large tusks sticking out of his bottom lip.

At first, Luffy was going to react angrily to the Whale Shark fishman. He hadn't had any interaction with them beyond needing to save Nami's village from Arlong, but that bastard's feelings of superiority over humans had been enough to leave a bad taste in his mouth. However after a second, he too recognized the other man from previous descriptions of him, and smiled suddenly, moving forward to hold out his hand to the other man. "Knight of the Sea, Jinbe right? Ace and old man Shanks described you pretty well too. What are you in here for?"

Although somewhat surprised to be recognized so quickly and that this young pirate knew Shanks, Jinbe got over it swiftly, and held out a hand through the bars to clasp Luffy's hand in turn. "I refused the summons to Marineford when I learned what their plans were, to start a war with Whitebeard using Ace to do it. I refused to take part of that, since Ace and I have been friendly rivals for several years. Further, I had no wish to fight Whitebeard, especially for such foolish reasons. But how are you here? How are you even alive?"

"Now that would be telling." Luffy snickered a bit, before becoming serious. "Do you want out of here too? I can't imagine being in that tiny cell is all that comfortable. But you're a Shichibukai, so..."

"Bah! What matters that to the bonds of friendship? If you are here to free Ace, I will join you. Whatever happens after we are out," Jinbe shrugged philosophically. "it is not as if I would willingly keep going as a Shichibukai after they have abused me so."

Besides, Whitebeard's name does more to defend Fishman Island than my Shichibukai status ever has, the Whale Shark fishman thought, shaking his head. That had been part of why he had taken the Shichibukai title when it was offered, the rest was to defend his crew from persecution. He'd been having second thoughts on that score recently, since those who had decided to no longer follow him had... not been acting in a manner Fisher Tiger, their former captain, would have approved of.

"Awesome." With that, Luffy looked at Jinbe's cell closely, or as closely as he could in the gloom down here. The metal looked... odd, darker than any metal he'd seen before. *Well, we won't know till we try.* Gesturing to Jinbe to do the same, Luffy gripped the bars between his hands. The two of them tried to bend the bar between them, but this cage had been made to keep someone like Jinbe inside, and the bar did not budge even an inch.

Well, if raw strength can't pull it, then let's try something else. With that thought, Luffy reached up with one hand setting it around the topmost hinge. Lightning crackled from his hand into the metal, warming it quickly. Within a few minutes the metal began to melt, surprising Luffy a bit. /

would have thought such a tough metal would need to have a ridiculous melting point. Guess not, but I sure as heck am not going to complain.

Jinbe watched in shock as Luffy did so, then continued to watch as the next two hinges were dealt with similarly. Both of them and Zoro ignored the increasing shouts of delight and eagerness from the various prisoners around them while Zoro guarded Luffy's back against any further attempts to interfere with him. A few prisoners did try to reach out through their cages towards them, but Zoro's blades defended the pair well enough.

Stepping back, Luffy watched as Jinbe pushed the door off, letting it clang down into the walkway beyond. "Now, you wouldn't happen to know where my brother or Gramps is would you?" *Direction, I can maybe push through the interference of the rest of these prisoners.*

"Gramps? Ah I do not... oh, Garp!?! You have a very odd family, you Monkeys," Jinbe chuckled as he stepped out of the cell, cracking his neck and stretching his legs a bit. The Cage he'd been in had been deliberately chosen so he couldn't move very well within it. Indeed, he had only been able to use his forearm strength a moment ago when trying to help Luffy pull a bar out of shape. "I believe they are over there, about two crossways down. I tried to talk to Ace when I first arrived, but the other prisoners soon put a halt to that."

Concentrating his Kenbunshoku as Jinbe indicated, Luffy quickly began to sift through the minds in that direction, swiftly finding Ace and his grandfather. Something that still shocked him despite Ivankov having agreed with Sanji that Garp was here. "Thanks Jinbe. Why don't you head back the way we came. This is going way too smoothly for my liking, and if something happens back up in Freezing Hell, I'd like to add to the firepower on hand. If any of the guys up there give you grief, tell them I sent you up and you're a friend of the family."

Snorting in good humor at that, and thinking that Luffy would probably prefer to have as few witnesses to the family reunion as possible, Jinbe nodded, heading toward the spiral staircase to join Sanji and the others in Freezing Hell above.

"Luffy! What the hell're you doing here?! D, do you expect me to be thankful for your trying to save me? I have my pride is the older brother you know!" Ace said as soon as Luffy was in sight.

The fact Ace was grinning through happy tears stole much of the fire from his words, and Luffy rolled his eyes. "Uhuh, and maybe ya should have thought about your so-called pride as an older brother before ya let yourself get captured. And against only one piddling pirate crew too. *Lame.*"

"P, piddling!?! You asshole, I killed most of Blackbeard's crew! Hell if it wasn't for some asshat arriving on the scene sneaking up and coldcocking me, I would've won!" Ace spluttered, still grinning. "Besides, I still remember the time you needed me and Sabo to save you from Dadan, don't talk to me about lame unless you've kicked that automatic cringe thing you do to the voice of feminine authority!"

As Luffy groaned and mimed holding his chest, Zoro snorted behind him, saying, “He still gets like that, but only occasionally. I’d say he’s worked it out of his system if the way he acts with the ladies in our crew is any judge. Although at first, he was kind of whipped by our navigator and Makino. Come to think of it, he still is by Makino.”

“Zoro, shut it!” Luffy growled.

As Ace laughed, Garp got in on the act. He had been silent up to this point, staring at Luffy as if he was seeing a ghost, which in a way he was. Despite his thoughts of hours ago, Garp hadn’t really thought that Luffy would still be alive. And now, to see him here, not just alive but having come up with some fool plan to save Ace? That was a shock.

A shock which Garp dealt with in true Monkey Family fashion. By getting angry and wanting to hit something. “Brat, how dare you play dead!? Do you have any idea how much trouble that caused me!”

“How dare you think I’d be killed so easy?” Luffy retorted even as he began to work on Ace’s cell door causing Ace to stare in shock. He knew enough about Luffy’s bag of tricks to understand that Luffy could possibly slice his way into the cell – if he didn’t care what happened to Ace, anyway – but melting his way through? That was a new one. “And besides, the fact that you’re here, shows that my last conversation with you was kind of spot on, wasn’t it?”

“Guh...” Garp grumbled. “Well, yeah, blood was gonna win over duty, especially once I learned how much Tsuru had to put into motion to deal with ya.” Then Garp rallied. “Damn it, why didn’t you become a Marine! That would’ve saved me so much trouble, you fucking brat!”

“Shut it, you old fart! It ain’t my fault that your blinders have finally been removed when it comes to yer precious marines,” Luffy retorted.

Now freed of his cell, Ace pulled him into a bro hug, whispering a thank you into Luffy’s ear, cursing the seastone handcuffs on his forearms as they sapped his strength so much he could barely move, let alone put in any real power into the hug. “But don’t get used to it, next time it’ll be me saving you.”

Putting an arm around his brother in turn, Luffy smirked back at him. “Maybe next time you won’t charge headlong into the unknown, huh?”

“Like you would have done anything different,” Ace retorted, before looking around at the prison cells all around them, whose prisoners were still shouting and shrieking to be released, surreptitiously wiping away the last of his tears and changing the subject in an obvious attempt to move on from the emotional moment. “You know, I’m wondering what this place would look like as a funeral pyre? Certainly burning Impel Down to the waterline sounds like a magnificent idea.”

“I thought the same thing, but I’m not willing to play executioner. Even for scum like this. We’ll leave them in the dark, forgotten again when we’re gone,” Luffy declared, before ordering Zoro

to see if he could cut through the Seastone around Ace's forearms. He knew from experience that he wasn't strong enough to tear Seastone apart.

Turning away from Ace, Luffy made his way over to Garp's cell, laughing loudly and pointing through the bars at Garp as he saw how many chains the man had been wrapped in. "Hahaha, you look like someone really didn't want you to escape, Gramps, even more than Ace. That, or thought ya had a future as the world's largest humidior."

While Ace laughed, Zoro sweat dropped at the strange family reunion, the taunts and ribbing continuing as Luffy burned through first the hinges on the door to Garp's cell. With that done, he began to melt away at some of the chains surrounding Garp.

Once a single chain fell away, Garp flexed, and Luffy instantly leaped back out of the doorway. An instant later, there were hundreds of loud 'spang' noises as the rest of Garp's chains shattered. "Hey, watch it Old Man, that looks like it'd hurt."

An instant later, Zoro sweatdrop increased in size as Garp leaped out of the cell, his Fist of Love crashing down on Luffy's head with enough force to send him to the ground, the impact causing a reverberation in the air around them. "Just because you've gotten so strong you can take on three Shichibukai and walk away from it doesn't mean your immune to my Fists of Love, Luffy! And making me think you died is more than enough reason for me to give you several dozen wallops of them!"

As a wincing Luffy began to argue back, Ace blinked, thinking back to how Garp had told him what had happened to Luffy. *Huh, but didn't Garp overheard Boa Hancock calling it in?* "Wait a minute, how did you..."

"I'll explain later," Luffy said, eager to use any excuse to get away from his grandfather for a bit. He hopped away, looking over at Ace, who was still handcuffed with seastone cuffs. "No luck?"

While Luffy had gone to work freeing Garp, Zoro had been attempting to cut Ace's seastone handcuffs. "No joy, Luffy. Seastone is harder than any metal I've come across."

"You won't be able to melt it either. Making this stuff is a high level secret of the WeeGee, and I don't think even Kaido or Whitebeard himself know how to work with the stuff." Garp shrugged. "Even I have to strain to do anything with Seastone, and if I tried, Ace's body would give out first."

Grumbling a bit at that Luffy shrugged, saying they would have to find the key then. "I even have two guys who might just be perfect for that job waiting for us up in Frozen Hell." Luffy then glared at his grandfather. "You're not going to give me some malarkey about how now that you know I'm alive, you don't have any reason to leave the marines, right? Or worse yet, stay here because breaking out like this would be wrong?"

Grumbling, Garp shook his head. “No brat, I’m not going to do that. I burned my bridges pretty damn thoroughly, thank you. Let’s get out of here. I have some real assholes which need kicking to get to.”

“Good, but I’m warning ya now, if either of you do that whole narco-thingie on me as we’re escaping, I won’t be held responsible for my actions,” Luffy warned.

Figuring that Luffy had done enough to earn the right to the last word, Garp nodded, and all three of them and Zoro led the way back the way they’d come. Or rather, Luffy did from behind Zoro. Zoro almost got lost and turned away to follow another hallway through another set of jail cells somehow.

Despite Zoro attempting to play lost boy once more, the group got back to the spiral slide that scissors man had created quickly, none of the prisoners trying to get in their way now that Garp was freed. That didn’t stop them shouting, and indeed the shouting and shrieking to be released grew, with several comments about their parentage and ancestry thrown in for good measure.

Garp gave as good as he got, being able to point out to several of the prisoners how they were here, having put them here himself. Ace ignored them, although he did glare occasionally when Whitebeard’s name came up, especially when hecklers shouted that, “Whitebeard must not be worth much any longer, if one of his crewmen has to be saved by some brat rather than by the man himself!”

Luffy on the other hand concentrated on explaining what he had been up to in the prison, and the nature of the breakout. He didn’t mention the alliance he’d made with Hancock, though, not just yet. This wasn’t exactly the time for it after all, and that was something he wanted to keep secret as long as possible from everyone, just in case. Luffy also had no idea how Garp would react learning of Luffy’s romantic entanglements with Robin and Hancock. Luffy could all too easily imagine Garp hating the idea, railing at how he had to have gone wrong somewhere in ‘raising’ Luffy, which would start another round of arguments that would take time they couldn’t afford just now.

He only responded to one shout from one of the other cells, coming from a giant of a man with a magnificent mustache. “How the hell can you live with yourself!? A pirate choosing to help a former marine is sacrilege enough, but helping a former marine and leaving your fellow pirates behind, that’s even worse!”

“Then it’s good thing I’m not exactly religious,” Luffy answered, smirking slightly delivering what he knew would be a killer line. “Besides, why do you think I would be listening to people like you, who were so weak they got caught and tossed in here in the first place?”

For a moment, that line froze everyone who heard it, then Garp and Ace began to laugh along with Zoro, as for the first time, the entire floor seemed to be united in fury. “What did you just say to us, you pigtailed asshole!” came from dozens of throats.

Soon after that, Luffy and the others were back in Freezing Hell. Whereupon the previously mentioned twosome that Luffy felt were perfect for a little side trip to retrieve Ace's key turned from Jinbe, took one look at Garp, and shrieked, "GARP THE FIST!" grabbing onto one another in sheer terror.

"Oh, Buggy boya? Huh. What's a weakling like you doing here, huh?" Garp asked, showing a familiarity with Buggy that drew some surprised looks, as well as causing Buggy himself to freeze in place, not even responding to the dig to his strength. Clay on the other hand simply passed out. Meeting Jinbe was one thing. Meeting Garp, who was a terror of most pirates everywhere, another.

Scissors man also seemed very nervous in Garp's presence. He quickly closed the entrance to the six floor, leaving it once more in darkness and with nothing there showing that he had used his powers at all. "Here is where I will leave you." The man said, glancing anxiously towards Garp and Ace both. "Keep our secrets, and good luck to you."

With that, he raced away, using a snowstorm that been stirred up during Luffy's absence to cover his tracks further.

Not that it helped to hide him from Luffy's Kenbunshoku. Indeed, the hidden Okama Kingdom was within his range, if barely. But Luffy had other, far larger and more dangerous individuals to worry about right now. "Shit! We've got Magellan incoming."

The others, those awake, anyway really didn't need his warning that something was up as to one side of where they had come up from the sixth floor, the sky was beginning to turn purple. As if something massive and leaking noxious fumes was coming towards them slowly. Indeed, the sight of that broke Buggy out of his catatonia, and he pushed away from Clay, muttering, "Too many flashy shocks, that's what my life has become. Damn it, just get me out of this place, please? And away from the crazy."

Luffy snorted at that, then began to issue orders. "Zoro, Sanji, bounce up into the air and make a hole up to Blazing Hell. I think our time to try and sneak around has well and truly passed, plus I want us to get up to Starvation Hell at least before we get bogged down since we have no idea how long it might take the WeeGee to send help here. I'll hold off Magellan while you get my brother and..."

"Now hold on a second, brat!" Garp exclaimed, smacking Luffy on the shoulder so hard he sent the younger man to his knees from where he glared up at his grandfather. "Just because Ace is weak thanks to those Seastone cuffs he's still wearing doesn't mean I'm weak enough I need your protection. Besides, you broke us both out of here, the least I can do is help us get out."

With that, Garp glared up at the distant ceiling, which was at least ten or twelve stories above them. All the floors of Impel Down were like that, to give the impression that each of them was their own separate little island. But that didn't matter as Garp began to laugh, pulling back his

fist. “Besides, you’ve had your chance to show off a bit, now it’s my turn!” With that, Garp launched a condensed air wave cannon up towards the ceiling. “Fist of Fury!”

Luffy had been able to use air cannon blasts since he was ten, as had Ace. Zoro too was well aware of such attacks, having been using them since before he became a Straw Hat. Buggy and Clay couldn’t, but they had seen such attacks before, where the air pressure flew out of your fist or from your kick to hit your target.

But none had ever seen an attack as big as this one. It encompassed nearly a dozen yards across, and despite the distance slammed into the roof of Freezing Hell like one of Garp’s hurled cannonballs. Once it hit, it became clear that the strike was filled with Haki too, showing a mastery of Haki that Luffy knew would take him years if not a decade or more to match. It was as if Garp had used both Busoshoku and the more diffuse version of it that the Amazons used to make their arrows or blows so much more powerful and instilled the air pressure of his fist with both.

The blow didn’t so much hit the thick area between floors as shatter it, before bursting through to the floor above. This despite it being removed from Freezing Hell by what Luffy estimated was at least eighty feet of rock. Garp had somehow chosen a point where one of the large cisterns of boiling blood sat in the floor of Blazing Hell, the bottom of which was far closer than the actual gantries and so forth that made up the rest of the level.

Instantly, the boiling blood from one of the large cisterns in Blazing Hell cascaded down, bringing with it several guards and a few screaming prisoners as they fell into the new hole thanks to the shaking and rumbling caused by the impact. The blood began to cool in the air, and by the time it hit the ground, it was almost to the point where it was turning into ice, despite having been so warm to start with. Similarly, the five guards and prisoners who couldn’t grab onto something to save themselves, dressed for the warm weather above, were not prepared for Freezing Hell. Many of them began to freeze in place where they lay after crashing into the ground.

The guards above were not stupid however. Many of them instantly began to retreat, grabbing at communication Mushi and calling the attack in, staring in horror at the giant hole that had just been blasted out of Blazing Hell, with several of them getting Hannyabal himself, who paled dramatically.

This was far worse than even Magellan’s worst concerns about prisoners making themselves at home here in Freezing Hell. That someone knew about the Sixth Floor, and wanted to free some of the prisoners there to help them in their breakout. He had, as per his boss’s orders, begun to gather a large force of prison guards including the Blue Gorillas, Saldeath, and the remaining Beast Guards and the weeping Sadi-chan, incensed and saddened by Minorhinoceros’ death. But even so, he wasn’t so sanguine about their odds against someone who could do that.

For all his ego and ambition, Hannyabal took his duties just as seriously as Magellan did. What mattered to their pride after all in the face of their duty? “Someone contact Domino! She is to use the gold Mushi to get a priority message to the World Government! Fire Fist Ace has broken out along with warlord Jinbe and unknown pirates! We may need help to contain them!”

Down below, Garp had stopped laughing, and now gestured upwards. “Now get out of here brat.” Garp said, turning towards the incoming purple wave of poison and venom. “I’ll be paying you back the rest of the way for this later.”

Snorting, Luffy looked over to Jinbe. “I don’t suppose you can use Geppo? Or do we have to carry you like we will Ace?” Not only did Seastone halt Ace’s ability to use his Devil Fruit power, but it also weakened him severely, to the point he could barely walk, let alone use Geppo.

“Ah, Geppo, the high level marine technique based on their Rokushiki. No, I do not use such a technique. But never fear, I can get myself up there in my own manner.” So speaking, Jinbe whirled his hands around to either side of him, then thrust them down towards the ground. “Fishman Karate, Flying Fish Bounce!”

With that, two powerful spouts of water appeared under his hands, blasting Jinbe upwards faster than even Sanji could move in midair.

Blinking, Luffy nodded judiciously. “Huh, well if ya gotta do something, do it with style. Let’s go, gentlemen.”

Soon all of the pirates began to bounce up through the air towards the breach that Garp had torn in the floor above.

Magellan saw them bounce into the air, having come close enough to make out individual pirates at this point despite his own inability to use Geppo or Soru to speed his process along. He was stunned to recognize Monkey D. Luffy from his wanted poster, but had no time to think through the long-term implications of his being alive just yet. Instead, Magellan had to concentrate on the here and now, to try and stop the pirates before they could get any further. “Venom Hydra!”

From all around Magellan, snake heads made of venom appeared, and instantly surged forward, rising into the air in an effort to intercept the Geppo using pirates. But as fast as they moved, each of them was suddenly shattered by blasts of condensed air, as Garp strode through the snowstorm towards Magellan, smirking wildly as he cracked his knuckles. “You know Magellan, I’ve wondered how exactly you would stack up against a Vice Admiral a time or two. Sad to say, I’m not a normal one of those, you know?”

“From hero of the marines to traitor, and now aiding and abetting the escape of Fire Fist Ace and several other pirates? How low the legend has fallen,” Magellan snarled, before launching his own poison attacks towards Garp. “You will find that Busoshoku is no defense against my venom!”

“We’ll see about that, there is Busoshoku and then there is Busoshoku, after all! Besides, it’d hurt this old man’s pride to let his grandson do all the work in freeing him, you know?” Garp said almost lazily as he too charged forwards.

Above, Luffy alighted on what had once been the bottom of one of the cisterns holding the boiling blood, pulling out from his weapon space a communication Mushi, one of the family paired together his crew had picked up well back in Logue Town. He had no idea if it would reach, but Luffy figured now was as good a time as any to try, and he could always try again with each level they breached going upwards. So long as they eventually got through and the *Everlasting Resolve* along with the rest of the crew were ready. “Robin, it’s Luffy. Get the ball rolling on your end, because we’re coming in hot!”

End Chapter