

One Piece 521

Chapter 521 - 521: Volume 4 – Chapter 40: It Exploded at a Glance

Half a day later...

A ship flying the World Government's flag sailed into the inland sea of the Red Line. After docking, its passengers switched to a carriage, entering Mary Geoise in secret.

Inside the smooth, rocking carriage, Lone Wolf wore a fawning smile, cautiously asking the silent Stussy seated across from him, "How are you feeling? If you need, the organization has excellent doctors. I can arrange a full checkup to make sure there are no lingering injuries."

Stussy, wearing a medical mask, replied indifferently, "No need. I've mostly recovered."

Only then did Lone Wolf breathe a sigh of relief. His face darkened in anger as he said, "Those damn Marines, how dare they lay a hand on you!"

"Don't worry, I won't let them get away with it!"

Stussy glanced at him through her mask, then suddenly smiled.

"Thank you."

Lone Wolf froze, and then his heart exploded with joy, his face beneath the mask flushing bright red.

She smiled at me!

Soon, the carriage stopped before an ancient and majestic building.

The two of them stepped down from the carriage.

Stussy subconsciously lifted her head to look at the towering, sacred castle in front of her. Her eyes behind the mask filled with complicated emotions as she stood there in a daze.

The snow-white walls glistened under the sunlight, and the emerald-green roofs rose like obelisks, piercing the sky with awe-inspiring grandeur. The mottled scars on the stone walls and the vines winding through them gave the fortress a feeling of weathered solemnity.

Mary Geoise, perched atop the Red Line, overlooked the entire world, a symbol of the Celestial Dragons' supreme power and status.

And the castle before them stood at the very summit of Mary Geoise, dominating the Holy Land below.

The castle walls, situated ten thousand meters above sea level, were shrouded in rolling white clouds. From Stussy's vantage point, she couldn't even see the peak, making the scene all the more humbling.

This was Pangaea Castle.

The power center of Mary Geoise—and of the entire world.

"The Five Elders summon you."

While Stussy was lost in thought, a ghost-like figure appeared silently behind them.

Dressed in a ghostly white robe and wearing an eerie mask, the figure moved without a sound, like a breeze.

Even though he was standing right there, his voice sounded distant and hollow, sending a chill down their spines.

"Yes."

Stussy and Lone Wolf immediately knelt.

Led by guards clad in silver armor, the two of them passed through the grand hall of Pangaea Castle and arrived at a finely adorned chamber.

The room's atmosphere was serene.

A pot of tea simmered on a charcoal stove, releasing gentle curls of steam into the air.

Stussy and Lone Wolf knelt on one knee, bowing low.

"Greetings, Five Elders."

Five aged figures, each exuding an aura as deep and still as a bottomless pool, stood or sat casually, glancing at them with detached indifference.

It was just a fleeting glance, but Stussy instantly felt her whole body tighten, her pupils contracting sharply. It was as if five terrifying monsters had locked onto her, filling her with a primal fear.

This was the ultimate authority of the World Government—the Five Elders.

Just a glance from them was enough to freeze her in place, unable to move.

"Not a bad reaction. It seems handing the Pleasure District over to you was indeed the right decision."

The one who spoke was a Five Elder wearing a white robe and glasses. He sat cross-legged on the floor, a long, jet-black sword resting horizontally across his knees, polishing the blade with quiet concentration.

One of the Five Elders—the Warrior God of Finance, Saint Ethanbaron V. Nusjuro.

As he spoke with a calm smile, the oppressive force that had frozen the air around Stussy suddenly lifted, and she regained control over her body.

"Thank you for your appreciation, Saint Nusjuro. It is my honor," Stussy whispered, not daring to lift her head.

The blond Elder poured himself a cup of clear tea, took a gentle sip, then fixed his gaze on Lone Wolf and asked, "So, how did the mission go?"

"Reporting to Saint Shepherd Ju Peter! Your subordinate has successfully completed the task!"

Lone Wolf knelt on the ground in fear and answered,

"Admiral Sengoku of the Marine Headquarters has been notified and has promised to thoroughly investigate the incident as soon as possible!"

The Warrior God of Environment, Saint Marcus Mars, nodded slightly.

"Hm. Sengoku is still quite trustworthy."

He wore a dark blue suit, with long straight white hair and a long beard.

"Who's in charge of the investigation this time?"

Lone Wolf hesitated, a flash of hatred flickering in his eyes, before answering in a low voice,

"It's Vice Admiral Rogers Daren from Marine Headquarters."

He paused, then added,

"But in my humble opinion, Rogers Daren is arrogant and unruly. He may not be trustworthy."

Upon hearing this, Stussy, who had remained silent, showed a slight change in her expression.

"Oh?"

Saint Nusjuro, dressed in a robe, glanced at Lone Wolf.

"It seems this operation didn't go so smoothly."

At that moment, another of the Five Elders, with curly white hair, a fluffy beard, a flat hat, and a scar on his left cheek, sneered coldly.

"What exactly happened?"

Seated with both hands resting on his cane, he squinted at Lone Wolf.

Hearing the question from the Warrior God of Science and Defense, Saint Jaygarcia Saturn, a glint of cunning flashed through Lone Wolf's eyes.

He knew this was his chance!

If he could seize the opportunity to slander that damn Marine, and if luck was on his side, the Five Elders' fury might lead them to execute him directly!

Quickly gathering his thoughts, he spoke bitterly,

"Reporting to Saturn-sama! Rogers Daren directly disobeyed orders and attacked both Fox and me... If Sengoku hadn't intervened, he would have succeeded!"

"This man has no respect for government authority. Even knowing that I represented the government, he still acted so recklessly!"

"I truly cannot tolerate this!"

He spoke hoarsely, his face twisted with resentment.

"This is a provocation not only against the government but against all of you as well!"

Lone Wolf firmly believed that with the supreme authority and pride of the Five Elders, they would never allow anyone to challenge them!

Sure enough...

"How dare he!!"

Saint Saturn exploded in fury, his wrinkled hands slamming the cane heavily onto the ground.

"To think such a ridiculous thing could happen!"

A strange red light rose from his eyes, and the intense killing intent he unleashed made the air tremble and ripple around them.

Success!

Feeling the Five Elders' growing anger, Lone Wolf cheered inwardly, his hands trembling slightly from excitement.

"Are you speaking the truth?"

Saturn asked coldly as wisps of jet-black, flame-shaped clouds began swirling around him, dancing through the air.

"Lone Wolf, raise your head. Look at me and answer."

A triumphant smile crept under Lone Wolf's mask as he lifted his head and declared firmly,

"I wouldn't dare deceive you, my lords!"

The smile on Lone Wolf's face grew even wider. He knew that Marine was finished!

"Very good," Saturn said, staring at him deeply.

Then...

A flash of eerie red light gleamed in Saturn's eyes.

The smile on Lone Wolf's face froze instantly.

Smack!

His head exploded like a watermelon, red and white matter splattering across the floor.

Kneeling beside him, Stussy's pupils shrank to thin slits as she stared at the scene in horror, barely able to believe her eyes.

Just one glance—just one—and Lone Wolf's head had burst apart!

With a dull thud, his headless body slowly collapsed, the mixture of blood and brain matter soaking his white robe and spreading across the floor.

A chilling air filled the room, and the thick stench of blood assaulted the nose, making one want to retch.

The other four Five Elders remained calm as they watched the scene unfold, sipping tea, smoking, wiping their blades—none showing even a flicker of surprise.

"Take it away. Clean this place up,"

Saturn ordered lightly as the black flames around him gradually faded.

A sneer twisted the corners of his mouth.

"CPO's quality is dropping lower and lower. They actually dared to try using us... How absurd."

Stussy bowed even deeper, a cold sweat sliding from her forehead beneath her mask.

It was like walking on thin ice...

Chapter 522 - 522: Volume 4 – Chapter 41: Warrior God of Justice - Topman

Stussy knelt timidly on the cold marble floor, not daring to look up at the Five Elders.

At this moment, her palms were covered in cold sweat.

What kind of ability was that?

Just one glance, and Lone Wolf's head exploded like a watermelon hit by a hammer.

If she hadn't seen it with her own eyes, she wouldn't have believed it... That such a terrifying, powerful, strange, and special ability existed in this sea!

Was it some kind of special Paramecia-type Devil Fruit?

Or was it Haki?

No, Stussy quickly rejected both of these guesses.

Because she noticed that when Saturn released that strange ability, a circle of black flames appeared around his body.

Stussy had seen a description of this in a highly classified file of the CP0 organization.

There were countless Devil Fruits with strange abilities in this sea, and each Devil Fruit was unique, but generally speaking, Devil Fruits were divided into three categories.

The first type is the Logia, represented by the new generation of monsters in the Marines, which have the ability to transform into natural elements and have an overwhelming advantage against enemies who have not mastered Haki.

The second type is the Paramecia-type, which has a wide variety of abilities. When developed to the extreme, they also have the power to destroy the world, such as Shiki's Fuwa Fuwa no Mi, Whitebeard's Gura Gura no Mi... and that bastard Daren's Jiki Jiki no Mi.

The third type is also the most common Devil Fruit: the Zoan.

Zoan Devil Fruit users have the ability to transform into the corresponding animal form and possess the characteristics of that animal. Because of the Devil Fruit, users will have strong physical enhancements and bonuses, giving them a clear advantage in close combat.

Compared to Logia and Paramecia-type Devil Fruits, Zoan-type Devil Fruits are the most common, and the increase in combat power is relatively small, so the price on the black market is also lower.

But this is only true for ordinary Zoan-type Devil Fruits.

In addition to ordinary Zoan-type Devil Fruits, there are two extremely special categories.

One is the Ancient Zoan, which is based on various ancient creatures.

The other is the Mythical Zoan, which is modeled after mythical creatures!

In that special top-secret file of the organization, Stussy had once seen this description:

"When a special Zoan Devil Fruit user awakens, a black flame may surround their body as a distinctive sign."

Stussy's face changed slightly when she thought of this.

Could it be... Saturn was a Mythical Zoan Devil Fruit user, and he had developed his Devil Fruit to the point of awakening?

That terrifying move just now, where he exploded with just a glance, was one of his Devil Fruit abilities!

But that was a bit too much of an exaggeration...

After all, although Lone Wolf's strength was not considered top-notch within the organization, he was definitely on par with a Vice Admiral of the Marines.

Although he didn't use his Haki to defend himself in advance, just one glance was enough to cause him to explode on the spot...

This kind of pressure...

This is the highest power of the World Government... the Five Elders!

...

At this moment, soldiers of the Holy Land Guard wearing silver armor came in trembling, cleaned up the scene, and sprayed a refreshing fragrance to cover the nauseating smell of blood.

"You fool, how dare you try to use us as pawns? How ridiculous."

Saturn sneered, picked up his teacup, took a sip, then slowly turned his gaze to Stussy and asked indifferently,

"Fox, what do you think?"

"Is Vice Admiral Rogers Daren of Marine Headquarters suitable for this investigation?"

"Do you agree with Lone Wolf's judgment?"

Feeling Saturn's gaze on her, Stussy's muscles tensed up and her back was instantly drenched in cold sweat.

Her expression struggled, and she wanted to blurt out, "Everyone, you're wrong! That bastard Daren is the mastermind behind the hunt for the Shichibukai candidates. He wants to manipulate the selection of the Shichibukai!"

But with the example of Lone Wolf before her, and even Stussy could faintly smell the lingering scent of blood and flesh in the air, how could she dare to speak such a truth!

Who knew if, after she said those words, the moody Saturn would take her "honesty" as a deliberate provocation and give her a glare as well!

She didn't dare to gamble.

If she won, it would be fine, but if she lost, she would lose her life.

She was not afraid of death, but she was even more afraid that if she died, Dr. Vegapunk would have no one he could trust.

Without her intelligence support and secret protection as a double agent, Dr. Vegapunk's situation would become even more dangerous.

So Stussy gritted her teeth, bowed her head even lower, and said in a hoarse voice,

"I believe Vice Admiral Rogers Daren is a very suitable candidate."

As soon as she said this, she felt a strong sense of defeat and humiliation in her heart.

This meeting with the Five Elders was supposed to be the best opportunity to expose Daren's true colors.

She could have taken advantage of this opportunity to escape the control of that lecherous, shameless bastard.

But now... because of that idiot Lone Wolf, she had to say something that went against her heart!

Hearing Stussy's answer, Saturn's expression did not change much. He just nodded slightly.

He turned his head to look at the one of the Five Elders who had not spoken a word since the beginning.

That Elder was dressed in a dark green suit, bald, with a moustache and a birthmark on his forehead.

He was the Warrior God of Justice, Saint Topman Warcury.

"Topman Warcury, what is your opinion?"

Hearing this name, Stussy cautiously raised her head.

Saint Topman Warcury... She was very familiar with this name, as familiar as thunder.

It wasn't because of anything else, but because this man was the controller and supreme leader of their CP organization!

Saint Topman Warcury, the Warrior God of Justice of the World Government, held all judicial power in the World Government.

This unassuming bald old man held all the power in Enies Lobby, the CP organization at all levels, and part of the Holy Land's guard army. Among the Five Elders, his power was supreme.

Warcury was his real name, but CP members were more familiar with his other name: Sword of Judgment!

This was the pseudonym used by Saint Topman Warcury when he traveled the seas and even joined the Knights of God to hide his identity. It was as if it were a prophecy of his destiny. Saint Topman Warcury was not born into a prestigious Celestial Dragon family, but with his wisdom and martial arts skills, he rose to the highest position of authority.

Just as his name suggests, the legendary Sword of Judgment, which holds the power of life and death, symbolizes the supreme authority of punishment, perfectly aligning with the judicial power he wields.

...

Chapter 523 - 523: Volume 4 – Chapter 42: Stussy's Fear

The Celestial Dragons had always drawn sharp lines between nobility and inferiority, even among themselves. Different families within the Celestial Dragons were clearly divided into higher and lower standings.

Topman Warcury, no, Saint Topman Warcury, came from one of the weaker Celestial Dragon families.

Yet from a young age, he had lofty ambitions. To restore his family's honor, he willingly gave up his privileged life, concealed his identity, and sailed across the seas. Eventually, he relied on his formidable strength to become a member of the God's Knights.

Beyond his overwhelming martial prowess, Saint Topman Warcury was also renowned for his "profound wisdom," having personally resolved many difficult and critical issues with his intelligence and strategy.

As far as Stussy knew, every organizational system from CP1 to CP0 was deeply tied to Saint Topman Warcury.

It could be said that the unification of judicial power under the World Government and the strength and efficiency of the CP divisions were largely due to his efforts.

For this man who controlled all CP agents, Stussy harbored nothing but deep respect and fear.

...

Upon hearing Saint Saturn's words, Saint Topman Warcury, who had been sitting with his eyes closed, slowly opened them.

Though small in stature, simply sitting there, he radiated an immovable majesty, like an ancient sage from myth.

He glanced at Stussy, then spoke in a hoarse voice:

"That kid Rogers Daren is rebellious and unruly. He's certainly not easy to tame."

At these words, Stussy's eyes lit up.

Truly worthy of being the Warrior God of Justice and the symbol of "wisdom," Saint Topman Warcury!

His insight was extraordinary!

However, just as she thought Saint Topman Warcury was about to remove Daren from the investigation, his next words left her stunned.

"But assigning him to this investigation is the best choice."

Stussy could hardly believe her ears. She tried to keep her expression in check, but her fists clenched tightly.

A knowing smile curled at the corner of Saint Topman Warcury's lips as he continued calmly:

"The murderer targeting the Shichibukai candidates is clearly trying to interfere with, or even destroy, the Shichibukai system."

"Rogers Daren has no such motive. After all, the two confirmed Shichibukai—'Crocodile' and the 'Demon Heir' Douglas Bullet—were both personally recruited by him for the Marines."

"If he had intended to disrupt or sabotage the establishment of the Shichibukai, he could have easily acted behind the scenes long ago."

"And most importantly, someone like Rogers Daren is a beast born of chaos, obsessed with power and status, known far and wide as 'scum'... precisely the type who values his position above all else. He wouldn't dare risk it by doing something like this."

...

Hearing this logical and thorough analysis, the other four Five Elders nodded in agreement, smiling as they praised:

"As expected of you, Saint Topman Warcury."

"Your analysis is indeed spot on."

"Rogers Daren is a hungry hunting dog. As long as you throw him enough bones, he won't dare bite the hand that feeds him."

"..."

As the highest authorities of the World Government exchanged words, Stussy's expression beneath her mask froze completely.

She was utterly stunned, her heart howling in disbelief.

What... what is this!?

Your Excellencies, you're mistaken!

That bastard isn't some hungry dog—he's a vicious, cunning wild wolf!

And Daren never intended to destroy the Shichibukai system—he only wanted to ensure his chosen candidates became Shichibukai!

The corners of Stussy's eyes twitched uncontrollably. She was on the verge of losing control, desperate to blurt out the truth.

But she couldn't say a word.

With no evidence left at the scenes of the candidate assassinations, even if she told the truth, the Five Elders wouldn't believe her.

Worse, they might even accuse her of questioning their judgment and authority!

...

"Fox, what do you think?"

The blond Five Elder, Saint Pete, suddenly turned his gaze toward Stussy.

Stussy trembled, bit her red lips, and lowered her head, saying,

"I believe that your judgment is absolutely correct."

"Hmm," Saint Saturn seemed to remember something and said,

"I heard that after Daren attacked Totto Land, he stayed in your Pleasure District for a few days?"

Stussy didn't dare to hide anything.

"Yes, we did have some contact."

"Did he realize who you are?" Saint Topman Warcury narrowed his eyes.

Stussy was swept by Saint Topman Warcury's cold gaze and felt the hairs on her entire body stand on end.

"He... he discovered my true identity."

She knew that Saint Topman Warcury had probably guessed something, so she decided to tell him part of the truth.

Saint Topman Warcury smiled slightly and said,

"That doesn't matter."

"That kid is smart, so it's only natural that he noticed something."

"It's precisely because he's smart enough that we entrusted him with the task of investigating the Marines in the North Blue Celestial Dragon murder case."

...

Upon hearing this, Stussy's pupils contracted and her heart began to race.

A bone-chilling coldness rose from the soles of her feet, shot up her spine, and into her brain, making her scalp tingle.

So that was it!

No wonder Lone Wolf's provocation had no effect!

It turned out that Daren had previously had dealings with the Five Elders and had carried out their secret mission to investigate the Marines!

Damn it!

She had been completely tricked by Daren!

No wonder he wasn't nervous or wary of her little moves. He must have already been in cahoots with the Five Elders!

In that case, her actions in guiding the investigation had suddenly become completely ridiculous!

Hearing this, Stussy finally understood.

Whether or not the Five Elders truly trusted Daren was not important.

What was important was that they believed they could keep Daren firmly under their control!

But the actual situation was not like that...

...

"Leave the investigation to that brat Daren... But before that, we must first find out who leaked the list!"

Saint Topman Warcury's voice suddenly became cold and sharp, like a sword blade choosing its target, and the room was instantly filled with a cold killing intent.

"As far as we can see, the number of people who are qualified to know the list of candidates for the Seven Warlords of the Sea is extremely limited."

"We can rule out the Marines first. Neither Kong nor Sengoku would dare to leak the list, and as for that brat Daren... his security clearance is not high enough, so it's impossible for him to know the contents of the list."

"In that case, the person who leaked the list is most likely within the CP."

"Stussy... do you have any ideas?"

...

As soon as the words fell, Stussy was struck as if by lightning.

A drop of cold sweat seeped from her smooth forehead and slowly slid down.

She maintained her outward calm, but inside she was overcome with fear like never before.

Because the person who leaked the list... was herself!

...

Chapter 524 - 524: Volume 4 – Chapter 43: Make Him Fall Head Over Heels for You

The moment she realized that she had become the subject of the investigation, Stussy immediately broke out in a cold sweat.

She never imagined that her momentary act of defiance towards that bastard Daren, when she showed him the list of candidates for the Shichibukai, would lead to such consequences today.

She regretted it deeply and cursed Daren countless times in her heart.

Feeling the gaze of the five most powerful people in the World Government, Stussy felt as if an invisible mountain was pressing down on her, making it impossible for her to breathe.

"Your Excellency..."

She swallowed nervously, then suddenly gritted her teeth and said,

"I think the person who leaked the list of candidates for the Seven Warlords is... most likely Lone Wolf!"

The moment she said this, she felt the heavy, scrutinizing gazes slowly shift away, and her body suddenly relaxed.

"Oh? You mean Lone Wolf is the traitor in CP0?"

Mars, the Warrior God of Environment with a long white beard, frowned.

"But what is his purpose in doing this?"

Stussy had already made up her mind.

She knew that if she couldn't give a reasonable explanation, the Five Elders would suspect her next!

On the contrary, Lone Wolf had already died under Saturn's watchful eye, leaving no evidence behind and making it impossible to verify anything.

"Your Excellencies, I do not know Lone Wolf's purpose."

Stussy took a deep breath, quickly calmed her tone, and said in a deep voice,

"But one thing is certain, from the beginning, he tried to shift the focus of the investigation to the Marines. It was clearly an attempt to deliberately confuse everyone and blind you all to the truth."

"This includes his attempt to sow distrust between Vice Admiral Daren and you all."

"If it weren't for your wisdom and insight, which allowed you to see through his tricks at a glance, I'm afraid I would have been deceived by Lone Wolf."

She analyzed with a heavy heart.

However, strangely enough, the deeper she analyzed, the more she found that her analysis and logic were correct.

If she didn't know the truth, she would have thought that this was all a conspiracy by Lone Wolf.

"Hmm, that makes sense."

The blond Five Elder and the Warrior God of Agriculture, Saint Ju Peter, nodded in agreement.

"Stussy, you are indeed very capable."

Stussy bowed her head in fear and said,

"Thank you for your praise, Saint Peter. It is my greatest honor to serve you all and the government."

"Let's put this matter aside for now. Next, we need to confirm the list of candidates for the Shichibukai."

At this moment, Topman Warcury, who was holding a teacup, slowly spoke up.

He took out a document from beside him, handed it to Stussy, and said indifferently,

"There are 17 candidates on the preliminary list for the Shichibukai, but only four are still alive. After careful consideration and judgment, we have decided to add five more people to the list, bringing the total to ten."

...

Add more people to the list?

Stussy was taken aback and subconsciously took the document with both hands and opened it carefully.

Then, under her fox mask, her beautiful eyes widened in shock, as if she had seen a ghost!

Because she saw several familiar names on the latest list!

Dracule Mihawk!

Fisher Tiger!

Gecko Moria!

Stussy's heart skipped a beat.

Except for the 3-year-old Amazon Lily, Boa Hancock, all of the people Daren had asked her to gather information on had made it onto the list of candidates for the Shichibukai!

This meant that... everything was according to his plan!

Stussy understood instantly.

That guy's motive... By continuously hunting down those he deemed "unworthy" candidates for the Seven Warlords, he was ensuring that his chosen ones would make it onto the list!

Damn it!!

Looking at the names on the list, Stussy felt her heart sink.

Knowing Daren's personality, if he had chosen these people, then they must have the strength to become members of the Shichibukai!

In that case, with his help, it was a foregone conclusion that these people would be elected as members of the Shichibukai... and no one could change that.

Stussy quickly ran through the situation in her mind.

There were seven final spots for the Shichibukai.

Among them, two were already taken—"Desert King" Crocodile and "Demon Heir" Douglas Bullet—both deeply tied to Daren.

Of the remaining five spots, Dracule Mihawk, Fisher Tiger, and Gecko Moria would likely take three.

In other words, just through Daren alone, five of the seven Shichibukai seats were already spoken for!

Damn it!

Stussy bit down on her red lips, her silver teeth making them pale.

The scales of victory were tipping more and more toward Daren's side, and she could feel herself on the verge of losing the bet.

Just the thought of having to shamefully call that despicable bastard "Master" if she lost made her grit her teeth in hatred.

No!

I still have a chance!

She suddenly clenched her fists tightly.

There were still two seats left among the Shichibukai.

As long as she could control those two seats—no, that was too difficult—as long as she could keep Daren from getting them, she could still win the bet!

Now that she knew the final list of ten, she had the upper hand.

The advantage was hers!

Stussy's eyes lit up with a competitive gleam.

I will never lose to you, Daren!

"Your Excellencies, what should I do?"

She asked respectfully.

Topman Warcury said calmly,

"Keep the list strictly confidential. Also, you need to further investigate Lone Wolf. If he has any accomplices within CP, make sure to root them out completely."

Stussy shivered slightly at the chilling killing intent hidden in the Warrior God of Justice's voice and hurriedly responded,

"Yes, Topman-sama."

"If there are no further orders, I will take my leave."

"Mm."

Topman Warcury raised his teacup and took a light sip.

Stussy rose from the ground and was about to turn and leave when a hoarse voice called out from behind her.

"Wait."

Her body stiffened. She forced herself to stay calm and turned around.

"What are your orders, Saint Saturn?"

Saint Saturn asked,

"You mentioned that brat Daren had some dealings with you in the Pleasure District?"

Stussy didn't really understand but nodded anyway,

"Yes."

Saint Saturn paused for a moment, then smiled faintly,

"That little Marine brat is infamous for being a scoundrel, but his abilities are undeniable. If possible, I hope you can maintain a good relationship with him."

He gave Stussy a deep, meaningful look and added,

"Isn't he famous for being lewd and lascivious? With your skills, it shouldn't be too difficult to make him fall head over heels for you, right?"

Stussy: ...

"I'll do my best, Your Excellencies."

She said through gritted teeth, the corners of her mouth twitching.

Chapter 525 - 525: Volume 4 – Chapter 44: A Big Surprise

Seeing Stussy's back as she walked out of the assembly hall and the heavy red lacquered doors slowly closed, the Five Elders remained silent.

The boiling tea continuously emitted white mist, and the magnificent hall suddenly became quiet.

"Do you believe what she said?"

At one point, Saturn, wearing a black flat hat, suddenly spoke in a hoarse voice.

A faint sneer appeared at the corner of his mouth.

The other Five Elders also had a hint of mockery in their eyes.

"Lone Wolf is dead, and there is no evidence... but knowing his personality, he would never dare to leak that list."

"That's right. On the contrary, the most suspicious person is that woman, Stussy."

"But that doesn't matter."

"She already has the new list... If the hunt for the Shichibukai candidates really has something to do with her, she will definitely leak it again after she gets the new list."

"We'll know the truth then."

"Topman Warcury, your method is indeed ingenious... You truly live up to the reputation of the Celestial Dragons as the sword of wisdom and judgment."

Topman Warcury smiled confidently and indifferently:

"If Stussy is innocent, then we can continue to employ her."

"But if she has a traitorous heart and tries to continue hunting down the candidates..."

A cold glint of murder flashed across his dark pupils.

"...she will receive a big surprise."

...

Led by the Holy Land guards, Stussy walked out of Pangaea Castle with trepidation.

She got into a carriage and rode until they left Mary Geoise. Only then did she breathe a long sigh of relief, her tense muscles relaxing as she leaned back against the carriage and gasped for air.

The pressure of the World Government's supreme power was not easy to bear.

Especially since Stussy herself had a guilty conscience, she was terrified that if she slipped up even a little, the five old men — with their overwhelming presence — would notice. Every second, she was on edge.

But now...

"I finally got through."

Stussy exhaled, and a smile appeared on the corner of her mouth.

She clutched the brand-new list in her hand tightly, her beautiful eyes sparkling.

With this list in her hands, she would definitely be able to gain insight into the situation and win the bet!

"Just wait, Daren."

Stussy gritted her teeth and said,

"I will definitely win."

With that in mind, she opened the list again and started reading.

...

The warship sailed at a leisurely speed, leaving a white trail across the sea.

Inside the cabin, oil lamps flickered stubbornly, casting dancing lights.

Daren sat there, half his body hidden in the darkness, looking extremely mysterious.

The military Den Den Mushi in his hand emitted Momonga's low voice:

"So, the government has started an investigation?"

Daren lit a cigar and smiled casually.

"Yeah, but I'm the one in charge of the investigation now."

Momonga: "..."

The corner of his mouth twitched, and after a long silence, he muttered,

"A reasonable choice."

"Who says it isn't?"

Daren smiled.

Momonga pondered for a moment and asked,

"Now that the investigation has begun, should we continue our operations?"

Daren exhaled a puff of smoke and frowned.

"No rush. If I'm not mistaken, the government has probably replaced the list."

"We made too much noise last time, so the government will definitely be on guard."

Momonga was slightly startled, but quickly realized something and whispered,

"You think there's something strange about the new list?"

Daren said,

"Maybe, maybe not. Except for those five old fools, I don't think anyone knows."

"But to be on the safe side, let's keep a low profile for a while. I don't want you to run into the 'Celestial Dragons' strongest shield' while hunting down the targets on the list."

At this point, his eyes narrowed dangerously.

He never underestimated his enemies, especially when his opponent was the World Government, which had ruled the world for 800 years. Daren was naturally more cautious than usual.

Hearing this, Momonga's pupils contracted on the other end of the Den Den Mushi.

Indeed, their previous actions had been too conspicuous.

The World Government would not sit idly by.

They hadn't left any clues or loopholes in their actions, so the only way the government could deal with them was to set a trap and lure their prey into it.

If they weren't careful, their next target might be the CP0 that the World Government had inserted into the new list.

"I understand. Then let's pause our operations for now."

Momonga said in a deep voice.

"Mm," Daren nodded and continued,

"You can return to the North Blue first and take care of the military affairs of the fleet. I'll handle things here."

Momonga was taken aback, and his eyes suddenly lit up.

"You're going to make your move?"

Daren smiled slightly.

"Mm, it's time to go talk to those little brats."

After hanging up the Den Den Mushi, Daren slowly walked out of the cabin and came to the bow of the warship.

There, Borsalino was lying on a beach chair as usual, leisurely sunbathing.

This investigation was of great importance, so to show Sengoku's seriousness, he had even sent his own adjutant, Borsalino, to accompany him.

However, looking at Borsalino, who looked like a salted fish, Daren couldn't help but think that Sengoku simply didn't want to see this guy around.

"Do you think we'll get anything this time, Daren?"

Seeing Daren come out of the cabin, Borsalino adjusted his sunglasses, smiled, and asked casually.

Daren shrugged and said,

"Who knows? I'm just following orders. I can only do my best... Right, Vice Admiral Borsalino?"

Borsalino smiled and said,

"Of course, but I don't think the killers on the list will show up again anytime soon."

"If they dare to take the risk and strike again, the government will probably have a big surprise waiting for them..."

Hearing these words, Daren immediately narrowed his eyes and smiled wryly.

"I think so too, so I'm not getting my hopes up."

"Yes..."

Borsalino yawned and covered his face with his hat, adjusting his sleeping position.

"Let's just take it easy and go for a walk. I'm not going to run around."

He picked up his hat, covered his face, adjusted his sleeping position, and the corners of his mouth curved upward, peeking out from under the brim.

"So if Vice Admiral Daren has something to take care of, you can leave with peace of mind... I'll stay here and keep an eye on the warship."

Daren took a long look at him and smiled broadly.

"Then I'll leave it to you, Vice Admiral Borsalino."

Chapter 526 - 526: Volume 4 – Chapter 45: Who's the Fool Challenging Me?

The warship sailed smoothly.

Daren stood at the bow with his hands in his pockets, a lit cigar in his mouth, gazing out at the endless sea ahead, lost in thought.

The sea breeze blew cold and sharp against him, making the large cloak of justice behind him flap wildly.

"Vice Admiral Daren, how should we proceed next?"

A young Marine captain quickly walked over. His slightly immature face held a calmness and determination beyond his years, and he raised his hand in a crisp salute.

The look he gave Daren's back was filled with bright admiration.

Daren snapped out of his thoughts, turned his head, and smiled slightly.

"You seem very excited about this mission, Arthur."

Arthur said excitedly,

"Yes! After all, this is my first time going to sea on a mission with Vice Admiral Daren!"

Daren smiled.

He had a good impression of Arthur, a young man full of youthful energy, especially that gentle temperament so reminiscent of Dragon before his "defection."

Optimistic, positive, and brimming with life.

Most importantly, Arthur had earned Daren's recognition for the courage and willpower he showed during the battle on Coin Island against the Charlotte brothers.

As promised, Daren had asked Sengoku to transfer Arthur under his command.

"This mission is very complicated. I'm afraid you'll be disappointed."

Daren chuckled and patted Arthur's shoulder.

"Go on. Do your job well. I'm looking forward to your performance."

Flushed with excitement from Daren's friendly pat, Arthur saluted again.

"Yes, Vice Admiral Daren! I will do my best!!"

Watching the kid rush off full of energy to his patrol duty, Daren shook his head with a laugh.

Just then, the Den Den Mushi in his pocket suddenly rang.

Daren paused, took out his military Den Den Mushi, and answered the call.

"Momonga, what's wrong?"

"Are you back in North Blue?"

Momonga's odd tone came through the Den Den Mushi.

"Yeah, but something strange happened here. I thought about it and figured you'd better handle it."

Daren was taken aback.

With the competition for the Shichibukai candidates heating up, he was just about to act, putting pressure on the few he'd selected.

He was right in the middle of it.

"What happened?"

The Den Den Mushi vividly mimicked Momonga's odd expression as he said in a low voice,

"One of the people you're after showed up in North Blue. He attacked a small Marine base. No casualties so far, but he's shouting about challenging the famous 'King of North Blue.'"

What?

Daren was genuinely stunned.

Someone actually had the guts to invade North Blue and declare a challenge to him, the "King of North Blue"?

For a moment, he found the news so ridiculous it was almost funny.

"So... who's the idiot?"

Momonga said in a deep voice,

"Gecko Moria."

Daren: "..."

This guy... still stubborn before getting crushed by Kaidou, huh.

"Alright, got it. I'll head back."

Daren sighed, feeling like the whole situation was absurd.

He hadn't even gone looking for Moria yet, and Moria had already delivered himself right to his doorstep.

Well, it certainly saved him a lot of trouble.

...

North Blue.

327 Marine Base, a branch of the 321 Marine Division.

Three conventional warships docked at the port had been completely dismantled, their wreckage scattered across the sea, thick black smoke billowing into the sky.

Atop the collapsed gun emplacements and shattered military fortifications, a towering figure nearly seven meters tall sat among the ruins, an enormous sawtooth blade slung casually over his shoulder, wearing a sinister smile.

He had dark red hair like burning scallions, skin so pale it seemed almost sickly from years without sunlight, and a thin, gaunt frame. Two pale horns jutted from the sides of his forehead, and his pointed ears and fanged grin made him resemble a demon from legend, terrifying to behold.

The man wore a bat-collared shirt and Gothic-style clothing. His chilling presence, paired with such eccentric attire, gave off a bizarre, almost artistic aura.

"Gecko Moria, you heard me."

Momonga put down the Den Den Mushi in his hand, stared at the man with a cold, expressionless face, and said sharply,

"I've already informed Daren. Now, shouldn't you keep your promise and return the soldiers' shadows?"

He was in a foul mood, blue arcs of electricity crackling faintly from his fingertips.

He had rushed back to North Blue from the New World without even stopping for a sip of tea, only to be immediately called to handle this mess.

Gecko Moria. Originating from the West Blue. Bounty: 148 million Belly.

This guy, who should have crossed the Grand Line straight into the New World, had instead foolishly barged into the North Blue, even attacking one of their small Marine branches.

As if to mock or humiliate the North Blue Marines, Moria hadn't killed anyone—he had simply stripped every Marine at the 327 Base of their shadows, using them as leverage to issue a challenge to the so-called "King of the North Blue."

"He's really asking for death..."

Momonga looked at the smugly grinning Gecko Moria, this thought rising in his mind.

He glanced off to the side.

The Marines, stripped of their shadows, were now hiding in dark corners or within ruined fortifications to avoid the deadly sunlight.

This was Gecko Moria's ability.

The Kage Kage no Mi... Gecko Moria could steal the shadows of others, and once someone's shadow was taken, they could no longer withstand direct sunlight. Exposure would reduce them to ashes.

In a way, once someone's shadow was stolen by Moria, their very life was firmly in his grasp.

"Kishishishi, no need to rush. He's not even here yet..."

Gecko Moria laughed arrogantly. Behind him, a writhing, pitch-black shadow rose like liquid darkness, twisting and shifting shapes as it pushed away the surrounding sunlight. The eerie scene sent chills down the spine.

"I've heard the name 'King of the North Blue' many times, even way out in the West Blue. I've always been curious just how strong the man who killed the legendary Great Pirate, Shiki the Golden Lion, really is..."

Moria sneered, looking down at the Marine Captain before him.

"I set sail from my homeland, fought my way through the West Blue and into the Grand Line. I never once encountered a worthy opponent... I conquered the West Blue, and Paradise..."

"But just as I was about to step into the New World, I heard about the death of Shiki in the North Blue."

"Shiki the Golden Lion... Kishishi, he was someone I always wanted to challenge."

"That's why I came here. Before entering the New World, I must conquer the North Blue to prove myself!"

Chapter 527 - 527: Volume 4 – Chapter 46: One Is More Stubborn Than the Other

Seeing Gecko Moria's confident and arrogant expression, Momonga's mouth twitched slightly.

This guy is seriously fearless...

Did he really not hear about Daren's brutal methods before making a move?

The number of people who've fallen at Daren's hands can't even be counted on one hand anymore.

"Why don't you think it over again?"

Momonga considered it for a moment but couldn't help advising,

"If you really piss off Daren, you won't walk out of North Blue."

Since Moria hadn't killed anyone yet, and he was one of Daren's potential picks, Momonga figured he'd at least try to talk some sense into him.

Otherwise, if Daren got annoyed and simply wiped him out, it would be a real hassle.

Who knew whether the soldiers' shadows would even come back after Moria died...

"Kishishishi!!"

Moria suddenly laughed maniacally, as if he had heard the most ridiculous joke in the world.

"What kind of joke is that?!"

The black shadow behind him twisted violently with his surging emotions, and a powerful aura erupted from his body.

"I came to the North Blue for the sole purpose of challenging him!"

"Marines... you'd better stay out of my way, or I might not be able to resist taking you down too!"

Momonga: ...

The corner of his eye twitched, and his fists clenched involuntarily.

Were all the young people these days this full of themselves?

Looking at Moria's smug face, Momonga seriously weighed whether he should just deal with this idiot before Daren arrived.

But before he could make a move, a sharp, explosive noise suddenly pierced the air from far away.

It was the sound of something tearing through the sky at terrifying speed, breaking the sound barrier.

Momonga froze, then quickly withdrew his crackling hand.

He glanced pityingly at Gecko Moria, who was still laughing loudly, and said flatly,

"Good luck."

Moria blinked in confusion, but before he could react, a white figure suddenly shot out from the distant clouds and plummeted straight toward the ground at an incredible speed.

Boom!

The entire Marine base shuddered violently as a massive cloud of dust erupted into the air.

As the dust swirled, Moria's face darkened slightly. He raised his arm to block the gusts and stared sharply at the figure emerging through the smoke.

"Gecko Moria... I was just looking for you."

A low, steady voice echoed from within the dust, as a tall, imposing figure in Marine uniform stepped forward, his gaze half amused, half serious.

Gecko Moria froze for a second—then burst into wild laughter.

"Kishishishi!! You actually came so fast! I've been waiting for you, 'King of the North Blue'!"

Grinning fiercely, he struck without hesitation!

Without so much as a gesture, the massive black shadow behind him suddenly dispersed, morphing into a swarm of black bats.

The bats carried a rotting stench and spread out like a chilling death net, rushing toward Daren.

"Brick Bat!"

The sky darkened under the thick cloud of shadow bats, each pair of glowing red eyes and razor-sharp fangs thirsting for blood.

Daren narrowed his eyes slightly, frowning.

"I don't like being bitten by bats... Vampires I can deal with."

He casually waved his hand.

From the wreckage around them, the broken cannon barrels twisted and reformed, instantly launching a hail of metallic bullets that tore through the incoming bats like a storm of death.

But strangely, the bats, when shattered, burst into thick, sticky shadow goo that slithered back toward Moria like living creatures.

"Kishishishi!! You're strong! Just like I hoped!! If you were weak, this would've been so boring!!"

Gecko Moria looked at Daren easily brushing aside his attack, but instead of getting angry, he grew more excited, his pale face flushing red.

Daren: ...

He turned to glance at Momonga.

Momonga shrugged helplessly, returning a look that clearly said,

Don't look at me, I don't know if this guy's brain is fried either.

Daren's mouth twitched slightly but soon accepted the reality.

In an era crowded with ambitious warriors, guys like Bullet, Crocodile, and Moria were all the same—stubborn to the bone.

These so-called "great men" had been riding a wave of success from the moment they first set sail, bulldozing their way through the seas with sheer strength and Devil Fruit abilities, unstoppable as they tore into the New World.

Their dazzling victories and meteoric rise only fed their arrogance, making each one more self-important and headstrong than the last.

—Until the day they smashed headfirst into an immovable wall, bloodied and broken, finally realizing the massive gap between themselves and the true monsters of the sea.

It was precisely because of this brutal gap that, in the original storyline, both Crocodile and Moria fell into deep despair after their crushing defeats, never fully recovering afterward.

Simply put, they'd never really been beaten down by the harsh realities of the world before.

"Then there's no helping it. I'll just have to beat you into submission..."

Daren narrowed his eyes, a cold smile curling at the corner of his mouth.

Feeling the Vice Admiral's malicious gaze, Gecko Moria couldn't help but feel a chill run down his spine.

Especially the way that Marine kept glancing at his hands... Why was he staring at them like that?

"Damn it!"

"Doppelman!"

Seeing that the Vice Admiral still wasn't making a move, Gecko Moria gritted his teeth and unleashed the power of the Kage Kage no Mi.

In an instant, a human-shaped shadow emerged from the black mass behind him, a long shadow blade forming in its hands as it lunged toward Daren.

A single slash!

A flash of crimson flickered in Daren's pupils.

The moment he activated his Observation Haki, the Doppelman's attack trajectory unfolded clearly in his mind.

With a slight sidestep, Daren casually let the shadow blade brush past his hair.

"Kishishishi! You fell for it!"

Gecko Moria shouted gleefully, waving his hand.

"Black Box!"

The moment the words fell, the Doppelman beside Daren revealed a sly, human-like grin.

A towering black box, three meters tall, took form on the ground.

Gecko Moria himself showed a decisiveness that a rookie pirate shouldn't have. Grinning viciously, he clapped his hands together and thrust them forward through the air.

A jet-black spear shot out from under his feet, gathering tremendous force as it condensed into a long shadow spear—then pierced straight into the Black Box!

Tsuno-Tokage!

"Kishishishi! Got him!!"

Seeing the strike land, Gecko Moria laughed wildly.

"That's the end of the 'King of the North Blue'! Kishishishi!!"

He was supremely confident in the power of his attack.

The piercing strength of the Tsuno-Tokage was enough to easily rip through stone, steel, and even a Marine warship!

Trapped inside the Black Box, that Marine Vice Admiral had no way to dodge...

He was dead!

But at that moment, Moria suddenly noticed something strange.

The Marine Captain who had been sitting quietly on a nearby boulder since the beginning still hadn't moved an inch.

Not only that, he was even giving Moria a look—as if he were watching an idiot.

"What the hell..."

Gecko Moria froze, his manic laughter dying off.

Then—

Hiss!!

A sharp tearing sound split the air, like fabric being ripped apart.

Moria instinctively turned toward the noise, and his pupils shrank to pinpricks.

A hand...

A hand had just torn straight through his supposedly indestructible Black Box!

Chapter 528 - 528: Volume 4 – Chapter 47: Hey, That Hurts, Okay?

Moria's pupils shrank into tiny pinpoints, and the smile on his face froze.

It was a scene of overwhelming visual impact for him.

As the user of the ability, he knew better than anyone just how sturdy and defensive the Black Box was.

But that hand... had actually pierced right through it, as easily as tearing apart a cardboard box.

There wasn't even any Armament Haki wrapped around it.

It was pure brute strength!

Moria could hardly believe his eyes.

Before he could react, the hand that had reached through the Black Box groped around for a moment, then grabbed the broken edge... Like an ancient beast, it ripped the box apart with brute force!

Rip!!

The sound of cloth tearing echoed through the air.

The tall, imposing figure of the Vice Admiral slowly stepped out from within.

Completely unscathed!

"How... How is this possible!?"

Gecko Moria stared in shock, his eyes fixed on Daren's body.

The body that should have been pierced clean through by his Tsuno-Tokage didn't even have a scratch on it!

"Hey, you know... sneak attacks like that really hurt..."

Daren sighed helplessly, looking bored as he pulled out a cigarette, lit it, and took a drag.

Momonga: ...

Seeing Daren's expression, the corner of his mouth twitched uncontrollably.

Why did this guy feel more and more irritating? Was it just his imagination?

"Impossible!!"

Gecko Moria's face twisted in fury. He slammed his palms together and thrust them forward!

The shadow at his feet suddenly shot out, stretching forward and transforming into an extremely sharp shadow spear that hissed toward the Vice Admiral.

"Tsuno-Tokage!"

Facing Moria's attack, Daren acted as if he didn't even see it, simply puffing on his cigar!

Clang!!

The shadow spear struck Daren squarely in the abdomen, but all it did was spark off with a loud metallic crash, scattering a spray of sparks before bouncing off and falling limp.

Gecko Moria: ...

He stood frozen in place, his pale, sickly face flushed with a hint of red.

"Impossible... How is this possible... Not even a scratch..."

Moria stared blankly at the Vice Admiral smoking leisurely, unable to process what he was seeing.

Daren lazily blew out a smoke ring and said with a hint of annoyance,

"I said it hurt, okay? You almost broke the skin."

Gecko Moria felt a mouthful of blood surge up in his chest. His face flushed red and purple as he clenched his teeth tightly.

"No..."

His eyes suddenly bloodshot, and he roared in fury,

"I don't believe it!!"

He clasped his hands together again and thrust them forward!

"Tsuno-Tokage!"

Another spear shot out, only to be deflected once again.

"Tsuno-Tokage!"

"Tsuno-Tokage!"

"Tsuno-Tokage!"

"..."

Again and again, Gecko Moria refused to give up, repeatedly launching the strongest move in his Devil Fruit arsenal, desperately trying to break through Daren's defense.

But in the end, it only left him utterly hopeless.

Facing Moria's most powerful attack, Daren didn't even bother to dodge, standing there as if he were out on a picnic.

After the ninth attack, Gecko Moria could no longer keep up with the rapid expenditure of energy. He was left panting heavily, both hands braced against his knees.

"Well, got anything else up your sleeve?"

By now, Daren had finished his cigarette. He casually stubbed it out, yawned, and said,

"If not, I'm going to kill you."

At this point, Moria was still a formidable figure, proud and defiant.

To fully break a guy like him, he had to be shown true despair.

Only an overwhelming gap in strength could completely crush him.

That's why Daren wasn't rushing.

Hearing Daren's casual words, Moria's pupils shrank, and a chill ran down his spine.

He instinctively took two steps back...

But he quickly pulled himself together, gritting his teeth before letting out a sharp, eerie laugh.

"Kishishishi! As expected of the legendary 'King of the North Blue'—your strength really is terrifying..."

"But that's exactly why! Defeating you is the only way I can prove myself!"

Moria laughed maniacally, a powerful aura rising around him.

Momonga: ...

Daren: ...

The two exchanged a glance, both seeing the same speechless look in each other's eyes.

This guy... could he be an idiot?

Sure enough, every so-called "hero" in their youth seems to lack common sense.

"You've trained your physique to such a monstrous level... It looks like relying solely on Devil Fruit powers won't be enough to take you down,"

Moria muttered coldly, slowly tightening his grip around the exaggerated serrated blade in his hand.

"Kishishishi, let me show you the true power that allowed me to dominate the West Blue!"

As his words fell, boom!

An overwhelming aura exploded from his body, spreading like an invisible tide.

A raging purple storm engulfed the battlefield, distorting the sky and earth as it surged wildly toward Daren!

"Conqueror's Haki!"

Momonga's expression shifted slightly.

Gecko Moria... he actually awakened Conqueror's Haki?

A flicker of surprise crossed Daren's eyes too.

He hadn't expected that Gecko Moria—before his defeat at Kaidou's hands—had already awakened Conqueror's Haki.

After all, after being crushed by Kaidou, Moria's strength had plummeted so badly he couldn't even use Armament Haki against Luffy.

It really was unbelievable.

Feeling the heavy pressure from Moria's unleashed Conqueror's Haki, a surge of fighting spirit gradually welled up in Daren's gaze.

He could feel his blood starting to boil, the Conqueror's Haki within him stirring violently, almost breaking free from his body on its own.

Sensing this sudden change, Daren froze for a moment, then quickly understood.

When Conqueror's Haki clashed, it triggered a collision of spirit and will.

The pride of kings and indomitable will would instinctively ignite against each other... That's why when top-tier fighters met, they often couldn't resist greeting each other with an explosive clash of Conqueror's Haki.

It was because the spirit and will belonging to kings simply refused to be provoked!

"Kishishishi, you feel it, don't you?"

Seeing Daren remain motionless with a furrowed brow, Moria assumed he was frozen under the weight of his aura and burst out laughing.

"This is Conqueror's Haki! A power only fit for kings!"

"A power that lackeys of the World Government like you will never be able to wield—huh!?"

His face twisted abruptly.

Boom!!

A terrifying aura, deep and vast like the sea, suddenly erupted from the Vice Admiral's body.

A flood of dark red lightning rippled out like a massive web, blanketing the sky.

The blood-red Conqueror's Haki was so violent that it crushed Moria's purple vortex instantly, forcing it to shrink back rapidly.

Moria stood there dumbfounded, every pore standing on end, a chill running straight down his spine.

His Conqueror's Haki was shattered on the spot!

And in that instant, Daren moved!

With his Conqueror's Haki unleashed, the surging battle spirit within him could no longer be contained.

With a deafening boom, he stomped hard into the ground.

What happened next left Moria horrified—

Centered on the Vice Admiral, the ground within a hundred meters suddenly sank two meters, and towering pillars of earth shot skyward like erupting fountains!

"This monster!!"

Moria's spine froze with dread, his pupils contracting to the limit.

Just pure, physical strength alone had caused such devastation!

Chapter 529 - 529: Volume 4 – Chapter 48: All Weaklings

"Is this really something a human can do?!"

Seeing the outrageous scene before him, Gecko Moria's eyes nearly bulged out of their sockets.

Momonga's face also changed slightly as his figure vanished into a flash of lightning, pulling away and leaping high into the sky.

Watching the ground collapse and giant pillars of mud shoot upward, it felt as if the entire island was trembling under Daren's terrifying strength. Momonga's mouth twitched uncontrollably.

"This guy... is he planning to tear down the entire branch base..."

Crack, crack... Daren twisted his neck, sharp pops echoing like roasting beans, a savage grin curling at the corner of his lips.

"Come on then, Gecko Moria."

A near-violent surge of Conqueror's Haki burst from his body. His military uniform and cape flapped wildly in the howling winds, as fierce as a raging inferno.

The crimson storm of Haki instantly engulfed the entire island.

Even the surrounding walls and loose gravel on the ground began to crack and jump, sharp cracking sounds filling the air.

Compared to Gecko Moria, the pressure radiating from Daren at this moment was far more oppressive and heavy, like a tangible force crushing down on everyone's hearts.

The Marines hiding in the shadows, their shadows stripped away, clutched their heads in agony, wailing like ghosts.

Conqueror's Haki: 75.822!

Standing at the forefront, Gecko Moria instinctively raised his arms to shield his face, his massive frame pushed backward by the roaring hurricane.

"Damn it... How is this possible?! You're just a Marine! How can you possess such powerful Conqueror's Haki?!"

He gritted his teeth fiercely, a storm of shock raging in his heart.

He had never set foot in the New World, nor had he ever encountered another opponent who had awakened Conqueror's Haki, leaving him utterly unable to comprehend what he was witnessing.

"Conqueror's Haki is nothing rare..."

Daren grinned.

"In the New World, those with the spirit of a king are as common as fish swimming across a river."

Gecko Moria was struck as if hit by a bolt of lightning.

He had never imagined that the Conqueror's Haki he prided himself on was something so commonplace in the New World!

"Damn it! Even so, I won't lose to you!"

With bloodshot eyes, he let out a furious roar. His massive body leaped from the ruins of the military fortress, brandishing his unique serrated blade with both hands as he charged toward Daren.

Countless shadowy bats fluttered around him, and under the coating of Armament Haki, arcs of purple electricity danced across his blade!

At the same time he moved, Daren's power also reached its peak.

With a heavy boom, like an invisible giant stomping the earth, the ground around him tore apart for dozens of meters, and the Vice Admiral's figure shot out like a cannonball.

His speed was unbelievable, flashing before Gecko Moria's eyes in an instant.

Moria's eyes bulged wide as he swung his sword with a ferocious roar!

Daren grinned broadly. As he struck, Armament Haki surged across his right hand like a black tide.

His fingers closed into three, bent slightly, forming a dominating dragon claw.

"Ryusoken..."

A dragon claw came crashing down!

In the next instant, Moria's serrated blade and Daren's dragon claw collided fiercely.

Bang!!

The clash of Armament Haki produced a deep, muffled roar, followed by a shockwave that swept across the ground like a raging sea, lifting massive waves of mud that surged outward in all directions.

Countless shards of stone were blasted into the air. Gecko Moria's expression suddenly shifted in horror, his eyes widening.

He watched as his long sword, coated in Armament Haki, began to crackle like shattering glass, spiderwebbing with dense fractures.

His Armament Haki... was being completely overpowered!

Moria's heart quaked violently.

The Marine Vice Admiral in front of him bared a vicious smile.

"Didn't you want to know how I took down Shiki?"

Moria froze.

Before he could react, a sharp killing intent flashed through Daren's eyes as he forcefully unleashed his three-fingered dragon claw!

"Dragon's Breath!!"

Boom!!

It was as if a dragon that had been gathering strength for ages finally unleashed a roaring blast of heat.

Under Gecko Moria's terrified gaze, the Marine Vice Admiral's dragon claw crushed everything in its path with overwhelming, unstoppable force.

The Armament Haki armor shattered.

The massive steel-forged blade shattered.

Then came Moria's right hand—the one gripping the sword...

From his fingers to his wrist, from his forearm to his upper arm—everything that stood in the path of the dragon claw was obliterated in an instant by the erupting impact!

Crack!!

As the dragon claw tore through, chunks of flesh and bone burst apart, exploding into a mist of blood.

"Rip!!"

From the shadows, the Marines hiding in the corners and Momonga in midair all inhaled sharply, their faces twitching uncontrollably.

"Aaaaaaah!!"

Gecko Moria let out a heart-wrenching scream, clutching at the gaping bloody hole on his right shoulder as he staggered backward.

His already pale face now looked deathly white, like a ghost.

"Lost an arm after all..."

Momonga covered his face helplessly and shook his head.

"...Damn it! You forced my hand, Daren!!"

Moria, gripped by agony he had never experienced before, twisted his face into a grimace of pure rage.

Blood poured uncontrollably from between his fingers, dripping onto the ground.

"I'll tear every last one of you apart!!"

He roared in a broken voice.

"Shadow's... Asgard!!"

As he shouted, countless shadows burst out from the collapsed buildings and cracked ground, rushing toward Moria like black streams flowing along the surface.

Moria opened his mouth wide, ready to absorb the flood of shadows.

His eyes burned with a savage desire for destruction.

This was his ultimate technique: using his Devil Fruit ability to absorb every shadow under his control into his body, expanding himself and massively boosting his strength.

As long as his body could endure it, he could absorb up to a thousand shadows—enough to smash an island apart with a single strike!

Even though he had only gathered a few hundred shadows from the Marines on the island, it was more than enough!

That damned Marine had dared to cripple one of his arms... Unforgivable!!

"Kishishishi!! You're dead!! Da—mmph!!"

Just as he was laughing madly, a massive hand appeared out of nowhere, brutally clamping down over his mouth and face.

The rushing shadows instantly lost their target, swirling helplessly in the air.

"You took way too long to set that up."

Daren's figure silently appeared beside Gecko Moria, letting out a sigh of disappointment.

Then...

He grabbed Moria's head with one hand...

And smashed it viciously into the ground!

Moria's face slammed into the earth with a sickening crunch, blood gushing from his mouth and nose as his pupils quickly went vacant.

Boom!!

The ground within a hundred meters collapsed violently, massive cracks devouring the surrounding fortifications as a huge cloud of dust surged into the sky.

From above, the Marine base looked as though it had been flattened by a raging dragon, clouds of dust spiraling into the air.

The island trembled.

...

A minute later,

The Marine Vice Admiral dragged Gecko Moria, now limp like a dead dog, out from the ruined crater. Tossing him carelessly onto the ground, Daren lit a cigar.

"Patch him up. Don't let him die."

The Marines, having retrieved their stolen shadows, hurried over to carry out the order.

"You really went overboard this time..."

Momonga appeared at Daren's side, looking at the shattered ruins all around, his face dark.

Moria had only destroyed a few turrets and a fortress... Meanwhile, Daren had practically razed the entire base!

He was like a living, breathing Tyrannosaurus.

Daren exhaled a puff of smoke, a look of disappointment on his face.

"I was just starting to get fired up, and it's already over."

He cast a contemptuous glance at the unconscious Moria.

"Weakling."

Momonga: ...

Aside from monsters like Kaidou and Big Mom, isn't everyone a weakling to you?!

"How about I be your next opponent?"

Suddenly, a deep voice echoed across the sea in the distance.

Daren blinked, then as if sensing something, a strange smile curved his lips.

"Looks like everyone's coming to me now. North Blue really is getting lively..."

Chapter 530 - 530: Volume 4 – Chapter 49: Hawk Eyes' Challenge

Just as Daren easily finished off Gecko Moria, an unexpected visitor arrived at the Marine base.

"How about I be your next opponent?"

A voice filled with fighting spirit came from across the sea. It sounded young, but carried a hoarseness and sharp edge that made it unforgettable.

Momonga's face shifted slightly. He turned to look, and the sight before him made his pupils contract.

"What... is that?"

A small, pitch-black boat floated steadily across the sea.

The bottom of the boat was covered in strange markings, with a black rectangular silhouette. Blue flames from burning candles lined the hull, giving the vessel an eerie atmosphere—at a glance, it looked like a black coffin drifting across the waves.

Seated atop this coffin-like boat was a lone, gaunt figure.

It was a boy, looking about fifteen or sixteen years old. His short black hair was slicked back neatly, with long sideburns framing his face. He wore a floral shirt on top and black leather pants below.

The boy sat with his legs crossed, a massive pale-black sword strapped to his back, even taller than he was. The slender hilt was shaped like a cross.

The eerie coffin boat, the ghostly green candle flames, and the cross-shaped blade gave the cold, distant boy the aura of a death god, cruising across the sea to harvest souls.

Yet what shocked Momonga most was the boy's eyes.

Deep and piercing, his pupils had dark patterns against a muted yellow background, carrying a sharpness that seemed to see through all things—human nature, life, the world itself. Just one glance sent chills down the spine.

"That kid's eyes... they're not right... sharp as a hawk's..."

Momonga frowned. His hands, hidden under his uniform sleeves, subconsciously sparked with thin blue arcs of lightning, clearly ready to strike at any moment.

He could feel it—an overwhelming sense of threat radiating from this mysterious sixteen-year-old boy!

How was this even possible?

Momonga was stunned.

He wielded the Goro Goro no Mi, said to be the strongest Logia fruit, and had mastered Haki as well. Across all of North Blue—and even much of the first half of the Grand Line—there were few who could challenge him.

But right now, from a boy barely sixteen, he was feeling the threat of death!

"My North Blue sure is lively these days..."

Daren also turned, eyeing the boy on the coffin boat with amusement.

"You sure you want to challenge me, Dracule Mihawk?"

As the words fell, Mihawk remained silent, but Momonga's eyes widened in shock.

This mysterious boy... he was on Daren's list!

And just like Gecko Moria, he had come knocking on their door himself!?

Momonga instinctively glanced at Gecko Moria nearby, who, under the Marines' emergency treatment, had barely regained consciousness. His severed arm had been hastily bandaged, and he looked on the verge of death.

"You know me?" Mihawk frowned, fixing a cold gaze on the Marine Vice Admiral.

"I've heard your name before..." Daren smiled. "Though I'm more curious—after seeing how I crushed Moria just now, you should already know my strength, shouldn't you?"

"You're full of it! I hadn't even used my full power yet!" Gecko Moria, not far away, flushed red and screeched indignantly.

"Save your breath."

Momonga suddenly appeared beside him, shooting him an annoyed glare.

Gecko Moria's face turned even redder. Gritting his teeth, he said,

"I hadn't even used my ultimate move! If I had fused with those hundreds of shadows—"

"Even if you absorbed a thousand shadows, you'd still be no match for Daren. That's not a power you can control," Momonga cut him off, patting the wound on Moria's severed arm.

The intense pain made Moria's whole body tremble as he howled in agony.

"Sure, fusing with hundreds of Marines' shadows would make you strong—strong enough to crush a town or even an island," Momonga continued, "but Daren could do that without even trying."

Moria froze at his words, stammering without being able to respond.

Momonga sighed and said in a tone that was almost comforting,

"Losing to Daren is nothing to be ashamed of. On this sea, you can count on one hand the people who can beat him."

"Stop moving. Your wound's still bleeding. Let me take care of it... or with this much blood loss, you'll be dead in a few minutes."

Gecko Moria gritted his teeth, glaring at Momonga with bloodshot eyes and growled,

"Dammit! You're just a Marine Captain! Who the hell are you to lecture me!"

"I might not be able to beat that monster, but taking you down would be—"

Boom!!

A massive bolt of lightning suddenly crashed down from the sky, blasting into the ruins of a distant fortress and sending flames hundreds of meters high into the air.

"What were you saying?"

Momonga calmly retracted his hand, still crackling with electricity, and glanced expressionlessly at the stunned Moria.

Gecko Moria: ...

"N-Nothing."

His eye twitched, a bead of cold sweat sliding down his forehead. A flicker of fear appeared in his eyes as he stared at Momonga.

This guy... was a monster too!

Then, he noticed searing plasma gathering in Momonga's hand, reaching toward him.

"W-What are you doing?!" Moria cried out in terror, trying to back away.

But a few nearby Marines quickly pinned him down.

"Stopping the bleeding," Momonga said flatly.

Without waiting, he pressed his electrified hand directly onto the severed stump of Moria's arm.

"AAAAAAGH!!!"

Gecko Moria screamed in agony, his entire body convulsing violently as he kicked and thrashed uncontrollably.

Sizzle... The scorched flesh filled the air with a sickening stench.

Soon, the screams abruptly stopped as Moria passed out once again.

...

Mihawk merely cast a faint glance at the commotion, his sharp gaze lingering briefly on Momonga before shifting back to Daren.

By now, Mihawk's boat was less than a hundred meters from shore. He rose slowly to his feet and spoke in a deep voice,

"Your strength is truly beyond imagination. I've never faced an opponent like you before."

Locking eyes with Daren, a fierce fighting spirit burned in Mihawk's gaze. A small smile tugged at his lips.

"But it's precisely because you're so strong that challenging you has meaning, doesn't it?"

He lifted his hand, gripping the massive pale-black sword behind him—the hilt shaped like a giant cross—and drew it.

Clang!!

A resonant hum, like a dragon's roar, echoed across the sea. The once calm waters instantly whipped into a raging storm, waves surging violently as if stirred by a blade's edge.

The massive sword, taller than Mihawk himself, pointed straight at the Marine Vice Admiral standing on the shore. A heavy, crushing aura and a sharp, slicing intent radiated simultaneously from the blade, its tip flashing with a terrifying glint under the sun.

"The blade, a cross-patterned masterpiece... Its name is Yoru."

Mihawk's hawk-like eyes locked onto Daren as he spoke coldly,

"I am Dracule Mihawk. With this sword, I challenge you, Rogers Daren—the 'King of the North Blue'!"

"Draw your weapon. Let me see your true strength."

"And show me... that special swordsmanship of yours!"