

One Piece 541

Chapter 541 - 541: Volume 4 – Chapter 60: Playing House

"Damn that brat Daren..."

Kaidou gritted his teeth and growled, his face flushing red with rage as hot breath spewed from his nostrils, turning into two streams of white smoke.

This was a secret he had never shared with anyone.

Aside from Arber, whom he trusted most, not even Queen knew about this hidden cave.

And it wasn't for any complicated reason... it was simply too humiliating!

His own flesh and blood, Yamato—who should have grown into a powerful, free pirate—actually said that the man she admired most wasn't her old man... but a damn Marine!

The worst part was, if Yamato admired some other Marine, Kaidou could still stomach it.

Garp, Zephyr—those men had ruled the seas in their prime and earned the title of "legends." If Yamato looked up to them, Kaidou could accept it.

Garp, hailed as the "Strongest Marine," had once joined forces with Roger to end Captain Rocks' ambitions.

Though they were enemies, Kaidou still respected Garp's strength and spirit.

As for "Black Arm" Zephyr, who had fought across the seas with Armament Haki rivaling Garp's, there was no questioning his strength.

On top of that, the countless elites and monsters Zephyr had trained over the years made Kaidou begrudgingly respectful, even if he didn't show it on the surface.

Sengoku, though his battle record was somewhat mediocre and his strength not as dazzling as Garp's or Zephyr's, was still a Marine Admiral from the same era, and the likely next Fleet Admiral...

That, Kaidou could barely accept.

But Yamato—his own daughter—of all people...

She chose to idolize that cunning, despicable brat Daren!

Kaidou's fury exploded instantly!

What a joke!

That little bastard had ruined his plans again and again, forced the Beasts Pirates' original base into destruction, and even had the audacity to "visit" Wano Country from time to time...

Fine!

But now he was rallying others to stir up trouble and challenge him?!

What the hell was this?!

This was Wano Country!

This was Kaidou of the Beasts' territory, not Rogers Daren's backyard or private training ground!!

"No! I can't let Yamato continue like this!"

Kaidou glared at the walls plastered with newspapers, canvases, and photos, his fists clenching tighter as he stormed deeper into the cave.

After winding through several corridors, Kaidou finally arrived at the back of the cave under the terrified, respectful gazes of a dozen Beasts Pirates members.

He stopped in front of a "cell" secured by iron bars.

The oil lamps hanging on the walls cast a dim, flickering light, barely keeping the darkness at bay.

Before Kaidou could even get close, a childish voice, trying its best to sound deep and mature, rang out from the depths of the cell.

"Evil pirates, you are all under arrest!"

"What? You don't even know my name? How ridiculous... Listen up, you stupid pirate! I am a Vice Admiral of the Marine Headquarters—the world-renowned 'King of the North Blue'!"

"That's right!! I'm the handsome, mighty, and famed monster of the Marine Headquarters, the Legend Slayer, the heir to the Three Pillars, the uncrowned King of the North Blue, and the future Flying Admiral!"

"Power is my ladder, and beautiful women are my passion... I am Rogers Daren!!"

Listening to that "fierce" yet "adorably fierce" voice, Kaidou's face darkened until it was as black as the bottom of a pot.

His features twisted further with sheer rage.

The two Beasts Pirates members standing guard beside him didn't dare to breathe, heads bowed low, trembling against the wall without making a sound.

They didn't even need to look—they knew Kaidou-sama's expression was absolutely terrifying at that moment.

"How's Yamato been these past few days?"

Kaidou suppressed his anger and asked.

The two pirates exchanged glances and said tremblingly,

"Reporting to Kaidou-sama, the young master has been in good health these past few days, but she gets bored sometimes, so she asks us to play games with her."

"Play games?"

Kaidou narrowed his eyes, a sudden bad premonition flashing through his mind, and asked coldly,

"What kind of games?"

At that moment, one of the pirates who looked a little sharper quickly spoke up,

"Actually, it's just a simple game of house. Begou is inside playing with the young master right now."

Kaidou pondered for a moment.

"Open the door."

The two dared not refuse and hurriedly opened the cell door.

Kaidou lowered his head and strode inside.

That childish voice came again, growing clearer as he approached.

"Hahahaha! So this is Wano Country!"

Kaidou's heart skipped a beat, and he subconsciously quickened his pace.

He turned a corner, and the scene before him suddenly opened up.

However, what greeted his eyes nearly made him pass out, and he almost spat out a mouthful of blood.

There stood a tiny figure, her delicate white feet standing on top of a pirate, hands on her hips, laughing triumphantly:

"Have you seen my power?!"

It was a little girl who looked about three years old, with short, gradient-colored hair that shifted from white at the roots to green, then to blue at the tips.

Two crimson devil horns poked out from her white hair, making her look incredibly adorable.

At that moment, the little girl, dressed in a white kimono, a red long skirt, and a rope tied around her waist, was pointing at the pirate under her feet and laughing gleefully.

She wore a paper mask cut out from a newspaper, and the face on the mask was unmistakably that of Daren—handsome with sharp features.

The pirate being stepped on was pretending to cry out in pain and beg for mercy.

He also wore a crude mask.

The mask's face... was none other than Kaidou himself.

Kaidou's face turned bright red in an instant, as red as pig's liver, veins bulging on his forehead as if they were about to burst.

His rough hands unconsciously gripped the kanabō tightly, trembling uncontrollably.

"Hahahaha!"

At that moment, "Daren" looked down at "Kaidou" under her feet and said cheerfully,

"Well, that's all for today!"

"I'll come visit you again next time, Kaidou-sensei."

Kaidou: ...

The world fell dead silent for a moment.

Then—

"What the hell are you doing!!!"

Kaidou's furious roar echoed throughout the entire cave, the terrifying sound shaking the mountain itself.

Boom!

The mountaintop suddenly exploded open, and a pirate wearing the "Kaidou" mask was sent flying, disappearing into the distant sky as a tiny black dot.

Chapter 542 - 542: Volume 4 – Chapter 61: When I Grow Up, I Want to Marry Daren-san

The mountains shook, and countless rocks rolled down the cliffs, crashing into the deep valley and kicking up dust everywhere.

Hearing this exaggerated noise, Queen, who was hiding in the laboratory, shrank his head.

He squeezed his round body behind the wall and hid, carefully poking his head out to look at the cliff in the distance from the window, his head covered in cold sweat.

"Kaidou-san really lost his temper... I wonder which unlucky guy it is."

He thought for a moment, then suddenly smiled maliciously.

"But what does this have to do with me..."

"Hehehe, luckily I can run fast!"

The fat man in suspenders turned around triumphantly, lit a cigar, and hung a napkin around his neck, leisurely savoring the freshly cooked red bean soup.

...

In the cave.

Sunlight streamed through the cracks in the cave walls, casting dust particles into the air.

Kaidou looked breathlessly at the little girl with tears in her eyes, and her pitiful appearance made him unable to continue.

At this moment, Yamato was sitting on the floor with several smoking bumps on her head, a band-aid on her nose, and a colorful picture book tightly clutched in her hands, looking very wronged.

"Give me that thing!"

Kaidou gritted his teeth and said.

"No!!"

Although she had been beaten up, Yamato stubbornly raised her childish little face, puffed out her cheeks, and said fiercely,

"This is Daren-san's picture! It's a rare edition that I worked so hard to get... He's the most handsome and powerful man in the sea! He's my idol!"

"I'm not giving it to you!"

She was clearly less than three years old, but was fierce and feisty, and as she spoke, the two red horns on her little head seemed to twitch with anger, making her look extremely cute.

Hearing this, the blue veins on Kaidou's forehead bulged even more, almost as if they were about to explode, causing the two pirates beside him to blink rapidly.

"Picture? Where did you get this!?"

Kaidou gritted his teeth, but in the end, he couldn't bring himself to take his anger out on his own daughter. He could only turn his head and glare at his two subordinates, shouting coldly.

The two pirates knelt down on the ground with a bang, their faces pale with fear, begging for mercy.

"Kaidou-sama, we are truly sorry!"

"The young master threatened to kill herself, so we had no choice but to ask the merchant caravan to buy it from overseas..."

Kaidou's expression froze, and his eyes were about to shoot fire.

He had seen that kind of picture before.

Today's Rogers Daren was no longer the green Marine who had just started out in the North Blue.

Especially after his surprise attack on Totto Land and the hunt for Shiki, his fame had spread throughout the seas.

The reputation of the "King of the North Blue" had become a source of fear for countless pirates around the world, and he was also an idol worshipped by thousands of Marines.

His powerful strength, legendary stories, and dazzling good looks and temperament made Daren the dream lover of countless noblewomen, ladies, wives, young girls, and princesses.

Men wanted to be him, and women wanted to be with him.

Because of this, a fan economy followed.

A large number of newspapers, news agencies, and commercial stores saw a business opportunity in this and continuously developed "Rogers Daren" related merchandise, like sharks smelling blood, frantically pushing the trend forward and earning huge profits.

The full-color picture book that his daughter was clutching tightly in her hands was one of these products.

"I brought you here... to take good care of her, not to help her chase after a celebrity!"

Kaidou stared red-eyed at his subordinates kneeling in front of him begging for mercy, purple lightning bursting uncontrollably from the kanabō in his hand as he walked toward them step by step.

"Kaidou-sama, we were wrong!"

"Please!"

The two pirates were so scared that they broke out in a cold sweat, bowing their heads repeatedly as they begged for mercy.

"If you want to fight, fight me! Don't hurt them! It was all my idea!"

Little Yamato ran over barefoot, blocking Kaidou's path with her arms outstretched, her childish face filled with courage.

Kaidou looked at Yamato, who stood before him with a determined look, his expression shifting unpredictably.

The father and daughter, both bearing devil horns, faced each other, locking eyes without either backing down.

The two pirates didn't dare breathe, lying on the ground trembling.

After a few seconds, Kaidou finally slowly released the kanabō.

He exhaled a long breath, looking at Yamato who bravely stood firm under his pressure, and suddenly burst into laughter.

"You are truly my blood... such courage and spirit..."

"Wororororo!"

His laughter grew louder and louder, like muffled thunder shaking the cave walls, causing dirt to fall. His gaze at Yamato was filled with undisguised pride and admiration.

After laughing for a while, Kaidou suddenly plopped down on the ground.

"Yamato, you're still young... there are many things you don't understand yet."

He pulled out a wine flask from his waist and took a hearty swig of liquor.

"Daren isn't worth your admiration. He's just a cunning and deceitful little brat."

"Compared to a sneaky punk like him, your father... is a true hero!"

At this point, Kaidou looked proudly at his precious daughter.

"That's not true!" Yamato said incredulously.

Kaidou widened his eyes and roared angrily,

"How is that not true!?"

"You saw it yourself last time! Your Oyaji... I beat him to a pulp!"

Yamato's little face flushed red as she retorted,

"That's because Daren-san is still very young!"

"In a few years, he'll definitely beat you to a pulp!"

Kaidou: ...

He covered his chest with his hand, his breathing turning ragged from anger.

You're my daughter!

Are you really wishing for your father to be beaten down!?

"Your old man has an Indestructible Body! How could he possibly be beaten to a pulp!?"

He growled viciously.

Yamato said proudly,

"Daren-san also has an Indestructible Body!"

Pfft!

Kaidou spat out a mouthful of wine, gasping for air.

That brat's Indestructible Body... was taught by me!

No, wait, I didn't teach him!

But he learned it anyway!

Damn it!

Did I teach him or not!?

"No matter what, he can't beat your old man!!"

Faced with his precious daughter, Kaidou refused to admit defeat, clenching his fists tightly in anger.

Yamato lifted her head, her eyes sparkling, and began proudly counting on her fingers:

"Daren-san destroyed our headquarters."

Kaidou: "..."

"Daren-san easily invaded Wano Country."

"..."

"And... Daren-san defeated Shiki the Golden Lion, whom even you couldn't beat!"

"..."

Listening to his daughter's endless list of "examples," Kaidou's face turned a mix of red and purple.

Finally unable to endure it, he gritted his teeth and growled,

"So what!?"

"You are my daughter! You can't become a Marine!"

Yamato froze, her eyes quickly turning red as tears welled up in her eyes.

"Then... then... I don't care! I don't want to be a pirate! I want to be a Marine!"

She waved her little fists fiercely.

"I want the pirates dead!!"

Kaidou's eye twitched violently, his rage reaching a boiling point.

"You are destined to be a pirate for life!!"

He punched the floor heavily, leaning forward with bloodshot eyes locked onto Yamato.

"Even if I let you set sail, the Marines would never recruit you!"

Yamato's face turned bright red, and she slammed her small, pink fist against the floor.

She raised her head, her smooth forehead pressing against her father's, her stubbornness surging up as she shouted back fiercely,

"Then I'll work hard, grow up, and marry Daren-san!"

"Become his wife!!"

The moment these words left her mouth, Kaidou froze as if struck by lightning.

A fatal blow.

In his mind, the image of Rogers Daren's smug face appeared, and he could almost hear that damn brat's mocking voice.

"Kaidou-sensei, I'll take good care of Yamato."

Pfft!

Kaidou suddenly spat out a mouthful of blood, startling Yamato.

Under the stunned stares of the two pirates, he staggered to his feet and wandered out of the cave with lifeless eyes.

His back looked unbelievably lonely and desolate.

"Kaidou-sama, are you all right?"

"Uh..."

A few seconds later—

"Queen!! Where are you!!??"

A furious roar that shook the heavens exploded outside the cave, as if a storm of thunder and lightning was ripping through the skies.

The two pirates shivered uncontrollably.

"Yeah, he's fine."

"Y-yes, he's fine."

...

In the laboratory.

The fat man in suspenders, who had been happily drinking red bean soup, instantly turned pale when he heard the roar like thunder.

"It's over..."

He said miserably, his face twisted with despair.

Chapter 543 - 543: Volume 4 – Chapter 62: The Disruptive Force in the Underworld

New World, Pleasure District.

Stussy sat in her luxurious office, flipping through an urgent intelligence report.

Today, she wasn't wearing her usual charming and elegant white dress. Instead, she wore a black suit skirt, looking capable and mature. Her slender legs were clad in black peep-toe high heels with red soles, perfectly matching her professional outfit.

"So, you're telling me that little brat Doflamingo plundered one of our merchant caravans?"

Stussy furrowed her brows, lightly massaging her temple with slender fingers. The black nail polish on her nails gleamed with an intoxicating shine.

Before her, a subordinate dressed in a black suit knelt on one knee on the cold marble floor, head bowed respectfully.

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"This isn't the first time this has happened. After the last incident, to prevent a repeat, we strengthened the merchant caravans' armed escorts in advance. But we didn't expect Doflamingo's strength to be far beyond our estimations."

"The person in charge of the caravan was killed before he could even send a distress call with a Den Den Mushi."

"Over three hundred members of the caravan were slaughtered, and more than five hundred million Belly worth of goods were looted."

"Damn it!"

Hearing this disastrous news, Stussy bit down on her silver teeth and couldn't help but curse under her breath.

A few months ago, a mysterious mafia force had stormed into the New World's underworld, using swift and brutal methods to continuously assault and seize the territories, resources, and influence of various major factions.

The ruthlessness and speed of their operations instantly intimidated many of the underground world's powers, big and small.

Stussy had been plagued by headaches over this matter for quite some time.

The New World's underworld was a tangled web of powers, where each "Underworld Emperor" commanded independent and mature industries and territories.

Though open and secret struggles between them were constant, they maintained relative peace on the surface.

After all, they were all in it for profit.

No one wanted to see one side dominate, so through mutual restraint, the giant pie of the New World's underworld had been divided up according to an unspoken agreement.

The mighty Underworld Emperors ate meat, while the gangs that served them or the independent dark organizations sipped soup.

For many years, this arrangement kept the peace.

This was the "rule" of the New World.

No one dared to casually break it.

Anyone who tried would spark a scramble for resources and power, a situation the Underworld Emperors were desperate to avoid.

Since no one had the overwhelming strength to unify everything, it was better to coexist and profit together.

Those who dared to disrupt the rules would quickly find themselves the target of universal hostility, hunted down and eliminated.

In the past, a few reckless fools had tried to break these "rules," but they rarely lasted more than a few days before their bodies were found floating at a port or rotting in some sewer, eventually sinking into the sea without a trace.

Their killers were either subordinates of the Underworld Emperors, underground bounty hunters and assassins... or sometimes even their own betrayed men.

But this time was different.

Because the leader of the rampaging crew was Doflamingo.

And Doflamingo's surname was... Donquixote.

A former Celestial Dragon.

Even though Doflamingo's status as a "Celestial Dragon" had been stripped by the Holy Land, the "most noble and sacred" blood still flowed through his veins.

Because of that, the Underworld Emperors were completely powerless against this newcomer who was running rampant across their territories!

"This is tricky..."

Stussy felt the situation growing increasingly difficult.

They couldn't take the initiative and could only passively defend... and the most terrifying part was, according to the latest intelligence, Doflamingo's strength was increasing at an alarming speed.

"Have you found any other information about Doflamingo?"

She pulled out a long, slender cigarette, lightly placed it between her red lips, and lit it. Her smoking movements were so graceful they seemed almost intoxicating.

Her subordinate replied,

"We've uncovered the specific roster of officers in the Donquixote Family. Every member is a strong Devil Fruit user."

"Doflamingo, a Paramecia-type Ito Ito no Mi user. He can turn his body into sharp threads, easily slicing a ship in half with a single strike. It's highly likely that he has also mastered Haki, and preliminary estimates suggest he may possess the ability to fly."

"Trebol, a family officer, is a Beta Beta no Mi user."

"Pica, a family officer, is an Ishi Ishi no Mi user..."

"No, I mean information beyond just their strength."

Stussy waved her hand to cut him off.

Doflamingo's identity made it impossible for her to act recklessly with force.

Since she couldn't attack him directly, she had to think of another way to specifically hinder Doflamingo's growth.

Otherwise, if he continued to grow at this rate, it wouldn't be long before the brat carved out a huge chunk of the underworld for himself!

Her subordinate hesitated for a moment before slowly saying,

"As for information beyond the Donquixote Family's combat strength, we haven't uncovered much yet... The family originated from one of the Four Seas—the North Blue. It's said they already ran rampant there long before they entered the Grand Line."

"Wait!"

Stussy's expression shifted slightly, her eyes locking sharply onto her subordinate.

"You're saying Doflamingo is from the North Blue!?"

The subordinate, somewhat puzzled by his queen's rare look of surprise, nodded and said,

"Yes. Before stepping into the Grand Line, the Donquixote Family rose to power in the North Blue."

"They rampaged through the North Blue without restraint, unifying the region's underworld forces. Their power there was so overwhelming that even the local Marines had no choice but to turn a blind eye."

At this point, a sneer curled at the corner of his lips.

"Everyone calls Rogers Daren the so-called 'King of the North Blue,' but from the looks of it, he's just an empty name. He couldn't even handle a single mafia family. It's all just reputation without substance."

Stussy ignored her subordinate's sarcasm.

Her mind, however, sank deep into thought.

Given what she knew of Daren, there was no way he would allow a pirate crew to run rampant and act arrogantly in his territory.

Which meant there were only two plausible explanations.

The first possibility was that Daren and Doflamingo had entered into a partnership.

But that was clearly unreasonable.

Stussy silently shook her head, immediately rejecting the idea.

Doflamingo's blatant arrogance and domineering personality made it obvious he would never willingly serve under someone else—especially with his Celestial Dragon lineage, which made him look down on everyone.

It was impossible for a former Celestial Dragon like him to lower himself and cooperate with a Marine as an equal.

Chapter 544 - 544: Volume 4 – Chapter 63: Stussy's Smile

As a member of CP0, the World Government's highest intelligence agency, Stussy had carried out many escort and security missions for the World Nobles, allowing her to observe that group of arrogant beings more closely than most.

Paranoid, twisted, sickly, arrogant, dark... Those who called themselves "gods" embodied almost every dark emotion and desire of humanity, trampling any bottom line or rule beneath their feet.

Doflamingo, once a member of the Celestial Dragons, was naturally no exception.

Expecting Stussy to believe that he would "cooperate equally" with a Marine was as absurd as asking him to bow down and acknowledge Daren as his godfather.

Stussy immediately ruled out that possibility.

Thus, after eliminating all the unreasonable explanations, only one remained.

Daren must have discovered Doflamingo's true identity as a Celestial Dragon and was helpless against him, forced to allow him to run rampant in the North Blue.

"So, they are most likely enemies..."

Stussy carefully analyzed the situation and quickly reached this natural conclusion.

"Have you found out if Doflamigo and Rogers Daren ever clashed?"

She suddenly asked.

Her subordinate froze for a moment, then nodded and replied,

"Yes. When Doflamigo first arrived in the North Blue, he and Daren had a fierce conflict on Rubeck Island. They almost destroyed the entire town, but in the end, for some unknown reason, both sides agreed to a truce."

Stussy sneered inwardly, even more convinced.

It was very likely that Daren had discovered Doflamigo's true identity during that clash and had hesitated to go for the kill.

"And after that?"

She pressed further.

Facing someone as cunning and deceitful as Daren, she had to be thorough and double-check everything.

Her subordinate thought for a moment, then as if recalling something, added,

"I remember now!"

"When Rogers Daren was captured alive by Kaidou, his adjutant—now North Blue Admiral Momonga—led five warships to blockade Rubeck Island, the Donquixote Family's base, creating a highly tense standoff."

That's it!

Stussy's eyes immediately lit up.

Back then, during the Marine mission to capture Douglas Bullet, Daren was captured midway by Kaidou, and his fate was unknown. Upon hearing this news, the North Blue had fallen into turmoil and unrest.

Momonga's move was clearly a contingency plan Daren had set up against Doflamingo!

Seeing it all laid out, her deduction was undoubtedly correct.

Those two... were definitely enemies!

"If that's the case... then maybe there's some room for cooperation between me and Doflamingo?"

The sudden idea made Stussy's heart race.

"So... my lady, do we need to take further action against Doflamingo?"

Seeing Stussy fall silent, her black-suited subordinate cautiously asked,

"This brat's actions have severely impacted our business in the Pleasure District. If he continues raiding our caravans, the Pleasure District's reputation might suffer."

Naturally, he didn't know about Doflamingo's true background, as it was a tightly kept secret.

"No, not for now."

Stussy quickly snapped out of her thoughts. Her seductive red lips curled into a radiant smile, blooming like a wickedly beautiful mandrake flower.

"We don't need to rush. That brat has made too many enemies already. Someone else will get impatient and make the first move."

The Queen seemed to be in a much better mood now...

Not long ago, she used to throw tantrums almost every other day...

The black-suited subordinate stared blankly at Stussy's dazzling smile, unable to stop the thought from popping into his head.

"Yes, my lady."

He nodded respectfully and quickly turned to leave.

After her subordinate was gone, Stussy took a slow drag from her slim lady's cigarette, her mind turning again.

She hadn't forgotten that damned bet she made with Daren.

In fact, it was precisely because of that shameful wager that Stussy had been restless these past days, her temper growing more and more irritable.

Yet the current situation was anything but optimistic.

With the second list of candidates revealed, the scales of victory in this bet had completely tilted in favor of that despicable, shameless, lecherous bastard!

Of the final seven seats for the Shichibukai, besides the current "Desert King" Crocodile and "Demon's Heir" Douglas Bullet, there were three more candidates—Dracule Mihawk, Fisher Tiger, and Gecko Moria—all selected by Daren!

Out of seven slots, he controlled five!

Although it hadn't been officially confirmed yet, judging from Daren's confident tone, it was almost guaranteed.

At this rate, if she wanted to win the bet, her only hope lay in manipulating the remaining two spots.

"Maybe... I should recommend Donquixote Doflamingo as one of the Shichibukai?"

The thought flashed through Stussy's mind, and once it appeared, it rooted itself deep within her, impossible to shake off.

According to the intelligence currently at hand:

Doflamingo was a former Celestial Dragon, arrogant to the core, and it was absolutely impossible that he would ever cooperate with Daren.

Given their history in the North Blue, they likely harbored deep hatred toward each other.

Which meant—Doflamingo could not possibly be one of Daren's chosen candidates!

If she could just offer an olive branch to Doflamingo...

No, doing so openly would be too risky and might alert Daren.

She couldn't afford to show any overt goodwill.

This had to be done from the shadows.

There was room to maneuver. Doflamingo's strength alone was more than enough to qualify him for the Shichibukai.

The key issue was his identity...

He had already been completely stripped of his Celestial Dragon status and rights by the Holy Land.

The Five Elders likely harbored resentment toward him, and under normal circumstances, would never approve of him becoming one of the Shichibukai.

She simply needed to wait for the right opportunity...

It could definitely work...

The more Stussy thought about it, the more brilliant her plan seemed!

Daren would never in a million years expect her to place her wager on one of his sworn enemies!

As long as Doflamingo became a Shichibukai... she would have the chance to stomp that shameless bastard underfoot!

"You seem to be in a very good mood today, my Queen..."

A deep voice suddenly broke her train of thought.

Stussy glanced over and saw a Marine Vice Admiral leisurely floating through the window, surprising her for a moment.

Resting her cheek in her palm, the sleek curve of her body emphasized by her black business suit, she smiled sweetly,

"With the King of the North Blue visiting the Pleasure District, how could I not be delighted?"

Just wait, Daren. I'm going to win this!

At the thought, her smile bloomed even brighter, full of allure and charm.

Her gaze toward Daren... was like a predator eyeing a lamb ready for slaughter.

Chapter 545 - 545: Volume 4 – Chapter 64: Peep-Toe Heels

"You seem to be in a good mood today. Is there something worth celebrating?"

Daren narrowed his eyes, walked right up to Stussy, picked a lady's cigarette from the table, lit it, and smiled.

Something was off about the way this woman was looking at him.

He was well aware of it.

Generally speaking, women's gazes toward him fell into three categories.

The first was naked, fiery desire—like the hungry noble ladies, wealthy merchants' wives, and court princesses back when he was in North Blue. Daren had always been generous with women like these and never minded spending a night together.

Well, except for Big Mom—that crazy old hag obsessed with having kids.

The second was admiration and adoration, sometimes mixed with a bit of fondness and shyness. This type usually came from young girls, like royal princesses or some of the younger female Marines...

Daren never hesitated to build pure friendships with these young girls, becoming the dream lover they tossed and turned over late at night.

The third kind was filled with love, passion, and tenderness.

Daren often saw that look in Toki and Gion.

But the Queen of the Pleasure District standing before him...

She was a fourth kind, entirely different from the others.

Sometimes angry, sometimes resentful, sometimes burning with passion, sometimes filled with raw desire... depending on the occasion, and whether it was before or after.

But the look in her eyes right now—Daren had only seen it once before, during their very first meeting.

Back then, she had planned to use her beauty and Devil Fruit powers to extract information from him.

It was the confident gaze of a hunter eyeing helpless prey.

"Didn't I already say it?"

Stussy shot Daren a coquettish glance, pursed her lips, and giggled.

"It's been so long... I'm just really happy to have Vice Admiral Daren visit us again..."

As she spoke, she crossed her legs with a slight smirk. Her black pencil skirt perfectly outlined the queen of the Pleasure District's flawless curves.

In the lavishly decorated office, a mature and enchanting woman, dressed in a professional outfit, leaned lazily against her hand, smiling as she smoked a lady's cigarette. A few strands of hair fell over her cheek.

It was like a breathtaking painting hidden behind a veil of mist—mysterious and dreamy.

"Then let's not waste any more time..."

Daren glanced at her high heels, suddenly smiled, took a step forward, and teasingly lifted Stussy's chin.

"W-What are you trying to do?"

Stussy immediately broke character, staring at the Vice Admiral in panic.

For some reason, flashes of that night in the abandoned warehouse at Marine Headquarters resurfaced in her mind. Her legs shifted uneasily.

She tried her best to stay calm, but her face was quickly overwhelmed by a flush of red.

After all, what had happened that day was far too shameful.

The dusty, abandoned warehouse, the CP0 uniforms and masks, the suppressed gasps, and the cold clinking of iron shackles...

She couldn't even remember how she managed to walk out of that warehouse that day.

All she knew was that afterward, she slept for two whole days just to regain most of her strength.

And now...

Staring at Daren's handsome, unruly face closing in on her, the strong scent of tobacco clinging to him, Stussy's throat moved uneasily.

"You... you promised... until the bet is over..."

"I know."

The Vice Admiral's deep voice sounded like a devil's whisper in her ear.

"Last time was an accident..."

"I may be despicable, shameless, a smoker, a drunk, greedy, and lecherous... but I've always lived by one great motto."

"Keeping my promises is my way of survival!"

Hearing that, Stussy rolled her eyes but quietly let out a sigh of relief.

Yet when she felt Daren's hand brush against her cheek, her delicate body trembled. Gritting her teeth, she asked,

"Then what... what are you doing now?"

Daren shot her a wicked smile, then slowly lowered his gaze to her feet clad in peep-toe heels.

Through the gaps of the heels, her white toes painted in bright red polish peeked out, looking like flawless works of art, sculpted by the gods themselves.

Stussy froze for a second, then immediately understood, her ears flushing crimson.

This pervert!!

She was about to refuse when the familiar voice rang in her ear again.

"You wouldn't want to..."

...

Twenty minutes later.

Stussy, now putting her high heels back on, glared hatefully at the Vice Admiral lounging casually on the leather sofa, puffing on a cigar.

This bastard... is he really a Marine?

How does he even know so many bizarre, colorful tricks!?

And the most infuriating part was that he wouldn't even let her clean up afterward.

The lingering discomfort inside her high heels made her feel even more humiliated, her expression twisting in frustration.

What kind of twisted fetish is this!

"So what the hell are you even here for!?"

Stussy clenched her fists, her face flushed as she snarled through gritted teeth.

The way she glared at Daren made it seem like she wanted to tear him limb from limb.

Mm, that's more like it...

Daren leisurely blew out a smoke ring, smiling playfully.

"What's wrong? Weren't you thrilled to see me just now?"

"Why the long face?"

Stussy snapped,

"I was happy too soon! Enough! Get to the point already!"

She finally understood.

There was no need to be polite with this despicable bastard.

Because he never showed her any politeness either!

Seeing her reaction, Daren chuckled inwardly.

A little bit of a broken spirit now, huh?

"It's nothing much. I just wanted to check in on our little bet."

Stussy sneered coldly.

"Starting to panic already? I guess it makes sense. The government has issued strict orders to thoroughly investigate and hunt down the murderer of the Shichibukai candidate... I bet someone's sweating bullets by now."

"Yeah, I really do have a headache..."

Daren sighed dramatically, pretending to look troubled.

"After all, I'm the one in charge of the investigation. If I don't find any results, I'll probably get scolded again..."

"That's why I'm under so much pressure. I'm just so stressed out."

Stussy: ...

Stressed out, my ass!

You're the murderer!!

Damn it!

She gritted her teeth, swallowing the humiliation and fury bubbling inside her, her eyes flashing dangerously.

Just a little longer...

Seeing that insufferable grin on Daren's face, Stussy wished she could just rush over and rip it off.

Go ahead, laugh while you still can...

Once I push Doflamingo into the Shichibukai, let's see whose face will be smiling then.

Chapter 546 - 546: Volume 4 – Chapter 65 Another bet?

"So what? Investigating has nothing to do with you coming to the Pleasure District, does it?"

Stussy's face was cold as ice, showing Daren no kindness as she spoke sharply.

Even though she'd been taken advantage of, she stubbornly maintained her dignity as the Queen of the Pleasure District.

"This case is too important. We can't afford to miss any clues or intel... In the end, I'm just an employee too."

Daren raised his hands helplessly, making a gesture of surrender.

"Ever since the government and military issued orders for a thorough investigation, the hunts for the Shichibukai candidates have completely stopped. Looks like the killer caught wind of something and decided to lay low for a while."

"Of course, there's another possibility."

"Maybe most of the people on the list have already been eliminated, and now the killer's looking for new targets... if there are any."

As he spoke, he glanced at Stussy, his eyes filled with hidden meaning.

"The Five Elders... they wouldn't happen to have another list of candidates, would they?"

Hearing this, Stussy's hand paused mid-smoke, her pupils shrinking slightly.

This guy... he figured it out!

Waves of shock surged through her heart.

What kind of monster was he, to be able to deduce even something this classified?

No—he wasn't just guessing—he had predicted the Five Elders' moves and reactions!

"So there really is a new list, huh..."

Although Stussy did her best to stay calm, Daren easily noticed the slight change in her expression and smiled with satisfaction.

"In that case, I can rest easy."

He stubbed out his cigar, stood up from the leather sofa, and got ready to leave.

Confirming the existence of the new list was enough.

As for Stussy, Daren figured she probably wouldn't get her hands on it this time.

After all, the first Shichibukai candidate list had leaked from her, and with how cunning the Five Elders were, there was no way they'd entrust the new list to the same group.

They would definitely select a new batch of CP0 members to handle the Shichibukai selection task.

"Wait!"

Just as Daren was about to walk away, Stussy's voice called out from behind him.

"What is it?"

Daren turned around, puzzled, and looked at her.

Stussy stared at the Vice Admiral before her, her expression shifting.

"I get it now."

Daren made an exaggerated "sudden realization" expression, then casually began walking toward Stussy while stripping off his military jacket.

"What are you doing!?"

Stussy was stunned at first, then quickly glared at him, her eyes flashing with anger.

"You called out to me. Didn't you want something?" Daren asked, giving her a strange look.

Stussy: "..."

She shot him an annoyed glare, then pulled a top-secret document from the safe and casually tossed it onto the table.

"This is the government's new list."

She deliberately avoided meeting Daren's eyes, a faint glint flashing deep within her gaze.

"Aren't you supposed to be on an investigation mission?"

Stussy tried to sound casual.

"The Five Elders instructed me to cooperate with you, so I think you have the right to see this new list."

"After all, having the new list might speed up the investigation. At least you can make some targeted moves."

However, what she didn't expect was that when Daren looked at the list on the table, he showed no sign of surprise.

Instead, he narrowed his eyes slightly, the corner of his mouth curling into a mocking smile... directed at her.

"What are you laughing at?"

Stussy frowned, clearly unhappy.

She hated the way Daren looked at her like that—it felt like he was always plotting something behind her back.

"So you mean... this is the new list of candidates for the Shichibukai?"

Daren asked with a half-smile.

Stussy said, "That's right."

Daren blinked and asked, "The Five Elders just handed you such a top-secret new list?"

Stussy said impatiently, "Is there a problem with that?"

Daren suddenly laughed again.

This time, his smile was even more sarcastic.

"Of course there's no problem, but I have a suggestion... I advise you not to set your sights on any of the candidates on the list. Of course, you should also pray that nothing happens to the candidates on the list, otherwise..."

"Otherwise what?"

Stussy raised her eyebrows provocatively.

Daren grinned:

"Otherwise, you're dead."

Stussy was taken aback.

A deep sense of doubt welled up in her heart, but accompanied by Daren's teasing gaze, she gradually realized something, and the color quickly drained from her charming face.

"It can't be..."

She muttered incredulously.

Daren walked over to Stussy and gently cupped her face in his hands.

"Yes, the Five Elders have begun to suspect you. Of course, this is most likely just a test."

"If I'm not mistaken, they only gave this new list to you."

"This means that if the candidates on this list are hunted down again, they will be able to deduce..."

Stussy's face turned pale, and she leaned weakly against the back of the chair, her voice hoarse.

"They'll know that I leaked the previous list..."

Daren patted Stussy on the shoulder, bent down, and said softly,

"So you have to be careful, Queen-sama. Don't die so easily."

He tilted his head.

"You're my favorite toy."

"If you die, I'll miss you."

Stussy's whole body trembled.

She gritted her teeth and looked up, saying,

"Impossible!"

"The Five Elders can't suspect me!"

"I clearly pinned everything on Lone Wolf. He's the most suspicious one!"

Daren laughed and said,

"Then let's make another bet?"

Stussy's expression froze.

Another bet?

She was now almost hypersensitive to the word "bet."

But her competitive nature drove her to say,

"What do you want to bet?"

Daren smiled maliciously and took out a Den Den Mushi.

Stussy's face changed, and her eyes widened.

That wasn't an ordinary Den Den Mushi.

It was an... image Den Den Mushi!

...

Three hours later.

New World, a deserted island.

Boom!

In the distant mountains, a shrill sword slash shot up into the sky, instantly flattening a mountain peak.

The roar of the collapsing mountain echoed continuously, stirring up dust everywhere.

High in the sky,

Stussy looked pale as she watched the terrifying aura erupt from the mountains, her heart surging with waves of emotion, not caring that Daren was holding her waist.

The top fighter in the CP0 series!

She would never mistake that cold, numb aura!

In less than three seconds, a pirate they had casually grabbed was easily torn to pieces by that guy.

And the target they were after was clearly CP0, who was hidden in the list of candidates for the Shichibukai!

In other words, this was a trap!

If she had acted on impulse earlier and tried to take action against the people on the list out of anger towards Daren... then this "surprise" hidden in the list would have been hers!

The Five Elders... really doubted her!

Damn it!

At this thought, Stussy's heart was filled with fear.

"Don't be nervous, our secret won't be revealed, you're still safe."

Daren whispered gently in Stussy's ear.

He could feel Stussy subconsciously tighten her grip on him, and a smile appeared on the corner of his mouth.

This was a sign that their relationship had grown closer.

He really didn't expect this...

The actions of those old farts actually pushed Stussy in his direction.

That saved him a lot of effort.

Chapter 547 - 547: Volume 4 – Chapter 66: Do Whatever You Want
Pleasure District.

The top floor of a hotel, a luxurious private room.

Daren casually flipped through the new list of Shichibukai candidates in Stussy's hand, a faint smile playing on the corners of his mouth.

There were indeed many new names on the list, including Gecko Moria and Dracule Mihawk.

Everything was going according to plan.

The only surprise was that Fisher Tiger was not on the new list.

But that was normal.

At this point in time, Fisher Tiger was not a pirate, but a legitimate adventurer.

The "selection" criteria for the Shichibukai were powerful Great Pirates who could intimidate other pirates, and Fisher Tiger did not fit that criteria.

He had never demonstrated any powerful fighting ability, so it was only natural that he was not considered by the government.

"So, do I have to go to Fish-Man Island?"

A thought suddenly flashed through Daren's mind.

If it were someone else, Daren wouldn't have cared so much.

But Fisher Tiger was highly respected among the Fish-Man race and had the strategic advantage of Fish-Man Island, the gateway to the New World, behind him.

Although the Fish-Man race had always been oppressed by humans in the original storyline, the Fish-Man warriors were still quite powerful.

Daren had wanted to obtain the strength of the fishmen for a long time.

Although the North Blue fleet had been successfully established and air superiority had been secured, he had not yet conquered the deep sea.

In this vast and endless sea, control of the seas was undoubtedly extremely important.

If he could form a diving force with fishmen warriors at its core, and coordinate with the North Blue flying fleet's air strikes... there would be no military organization or force in this sea that could fight against him!

Just thinking about it was enough to make one's heart race.

With large-scale air strikes by the flying fleet and underwater coordination with the submarine fleet, no army, no matter how powerful, could withstand simultaneous attacks from the sky and the deep sea.

There would be no need for boarding battles.

Before the enemy could even react, their warships would be sunk, and then it would be time to reap the rewards.

Even if one day they were to find themselves at a disadvantage or in a desperate situation, these two independent fleets could simply disappear from the world's view and exist as a deterrent force.

This... was the blueprint for hegemony that Daren had conceived in his mind!

"Let's go take a look first, Fisher Tiger..."

Daren mused silently to himself.

He put down the top-secret documents in his hands, raised his head, and couldn't help but smile.

He saw Stussy sitting restlessly on the leather sofa, her brow furrowed, smoking one cigarette after another, surrounded by smoke.

Next to her, cigarette butts had piled up into a small mountain in a crystal ashtray.

"You look worried."

Daren lit a cigar, his tone somewhat gloating.

Stussy glanced at him but said nothing.

However, her tense body was enough to reveal her anxiety and worry at that moment.

The Five Elders had their suspicions about her...

This was undoubtedly fatal.

Stussy had infiltrated the World Government and become a member of CP0 in order to gain the trust of the World Government's top brass and better protect Dr. Vegapunk in secret.

But now, the highest authority of the World Government had become suspicious of her.

If she didn't handle this well, she might lose her life and even drag Dr. Vegapunk down with her.

"I don't think you need to be so nervous. It's normal for high-ranking officials like the Five Elders to distrust you."

"It might even turn out to be a good thing for you."

Daren smiled, stood up from the sofa, walked over to Stussy, and sat down beside her, expertly wrapping his arm around her waist.

Stussy's body trembled slightly, but she didn't show the same resistance as before.

"What do you mean?"

She turned her head sharply toward Daren, her expression tense.

Deep in her eyes, she hid a glimmer of hope that she would find a way out of this predicament.

Her soft hand even subconsciously grabbed Daren's arm, like a drowning person trying to grab a lifeline when there was no one else around... She knew the chances were slim, but she still clung to the last shred of hope.

Stussy knew very well that if there was anyone in this world who could help her escape from this crisis, it was this despicable and shameless guy in front of her.

He was very familiar with this kind of political game.

Moreover, with his ability to play the unfathomable Five Elders like a fiddle, he would definitely be able to do something!

Feeling Stussy's grip on his arm, Daren smiled secretly.

Under normal circumstances, this woman would not be so panicked.

It was just that this matter might involve Vegapunk's safety, and she was so concerned that she couldn't see it at first.

"Don't worry, this is just their daily test for you. As long as the candidates on the new list don't get hunted down like last time, you'll be fine... No, you're even safer than anyone else."

Daren stroked Stussy's beautiful and charming cheek as he analyzed the situation.

His tone was calm and confident, filled with an inexplicable persuasiveness.

"As long as the Five Elders confirm that the previous list was not leaked from your hands, they will confirm that you are trustworthy, and they will rely on you even more in the future."

"This also means that you will have access to more secrets and confidential information."

"It's a crisis, that's true, but it's also an opportunity."

The Vice Admiral of the Marines looked intently at the queen in front of him, gently raising his hand and lightly brushing a few strands of hair from her cheek.

"An opportunity to take you one step further and completely enter CP0, no, the power center of the World Government!"

"Then, won't you be able to better protect Dr. Vegapunk?"

Upon hearing this, Stussy's eyes lit up.

Yes!

As long as she got through this dangerous situation, the Five Elders would only trust her more.

"Then what should I do?"

She blurted out subconsciously.

But as soon as the words left her mouth, she froze, her face turning red little by little.

Because she saw Daren's malicious smile.

This bastard!

The prerequisite for gaining the trust of the Five Elders was that nothing unexpected would happen to the people on the new list.

And the so-called "accidents"... weren't they decided by the guy in front of her?

She was being blackmailed again!

Stussy gritted her teeth, her expression changing for a few seconds, and finally, as if accepting the cruel reality, she closed her eyes, lay down on the sofa, and said fiercely:

"Do whatever you want!"

Chapter 548 - 548: Volume 4 – Chapter 67: What Kind of Scene Haven't I Seen?

Stussy had completely given up and decided to go for it.

She lay flat on the high-end leather sofa, her hip-hugging skirt showing off her perfect curves, like a perfect painting slowly unfolding.

Anyway, this wasn't the first or second time this had happened, so she was already used to it.

What was even more ridiculous was that Stussy found that she had no physical resistance to Daren's lecherous behavior... She even found it somewhat... irresistible.

If she had to say that she was resisting, it was purely because she was frustrated that everything was being manipulated by that bastard Daren.

She would just have to endure it a little longer. Once this was over, with the help of that bet, she would be able to get rid of this bastard!

At that time, once she had pushed Doflamingo into the position of Shichibukai, she would be able to turn the tables and completely trample this damn guy underfoot!

Trample, trample underfoot...

When Stussy thought of this, she didn't know what kind of image appeared in her mind, but her face turned slightly red, her breathing became rapid for no apparent reason, and she was filled with the charm of a beautiful woman.

Her ten toes rubbed against each other involuntarily in her fishtail high heels, and the dry, sticky feeling lingered for a long time.

"Are you sure?"

With her eyes tightly closed, Stussy heard the low voice of the Vice Admiral in the Marines in her ear.

The words were spoken softly, accompanied by warm breath that brushed against her ear, making her feel tingly.

Stussy's body trembled slightly.

She felt that Daren was very close to her.

His palm, covered with thick calluses, slid across her cheek with a very light touch, as if a feather was brushing against her skin.

"Don't, don't talk so much."

Stussy didn't dare to open her eyes and gritted her teeth.

She didn't want to see Daren's teasing gaze, which made her feel inexplicably ashamed.

"Then I'll have to set up the Den Den Mushi first. After all, you lost the bet just now."

The Vice Admiral's amused voice rang in her ears again.

Stussy didn't say a word.

But her tightly clenched fists and red, burning ears completely betrayed her inner tension and turmoil.

Suddenly, there was a rustling sound.

"That bastard... He's actually setting up the Den Den Mushi to record..."

Stussy's heart was pounding, and her palms were sweating from clenching her fists.

She didn't expect Daren to be such a pervert!

Should she really agree?

But she had lost the bet...

However, if she agreed... This recording would definitely become a way for that bastard to blackmail her again!

Damn it!

For a moment, Stussy's heart was in turmoil, her brain was a mess, and she had no idea what to do.

As the Queen of the Pleasure District, she had been trained by the World Government and was well versed in the theory of all things related to pleasure. With her charming personality, she had seduced countless powerful and influential men.

She asked herself, what kind of situation had she not seen in her life?

She had never seen a situation like this with Daren before.

He was getting closer...

It was as if an image Den Den Mushi had been set up, and Stussy could hear the Vice Admiral's footsteps getting closer and closer.

With every step he took, her heart beat faster and her breathing became hotter and more rapid.

Feeling the masculine scent approaching, Stussy bit her back teeth hard, her whole body stiffened, and she even subconsciously held her breath.

The next second, she suddenly froze.

Because she felt a rough, large hand gently touch her cheek, and then...immediately withdraw.

"Hahahaha, just kidding."

"I told you, keeping my word is my way of life... I won't do anything to you until that bet is over."

The Vice Admiral's laughter suddenly echoed through the luxurious suite, then quickly faded away.

"Get some sleep. I won't let anything happen to you, my favorite toy."

Joking...

Joking!?

Stussy realized something and suddenly opened her eyes.

In the hotel suite, the figure of the Vice Admiral had already disappeared.

She was alone, sitting on the leather sofa, breathing heavily, her expression blank.

She had been tricked again!

Damn it!

Stussy quickly realized what had happened and gritted her teeth again, the grinding sound of her molars sharp in the air.

She had prepared herself for the worst and put herself in such a shameful position... only to be met with a lighthearted tease in the end!

What kind of joke was this!

Stussy clenched her fists, feeling an inexplicable wave of anger surge up inside her.

But she quickly came to her senses, and her expression shifted.

Wait—what was this emotion!?

What exactly was she mad about?

He was just joking... wasn't that a good thing!?

She hated that bastard anyway!

It was just that she had been forced to comply under threat!

And that perverted guy even went as far as setting up a Den Den Mushi—

Huh?

Stussy was taken aback.

On the coffee table next to her, instead of the image Den Den Mushi she had expected, there was a cup of steaming tea.

The tea leaves were a specialty from a small country in the New World, known for their calming and sleep-inducing effects.

Recalling Daren's parting words, Stussy stared at the steaming tea. For a moment, the resentment that had been boiling inside her seemed to dissipate, and her expression slowly calmed.

"Keeping my promises is my way of survival..."

"I won't let anything happen to you..."

"You're my favorite toy..."

Somehow, Daren's confident voice replayed in her mind, sending ripples across the calm surface of her heart.

After a long silence, Stussy pursed her lips, picked up the teacup, and took a sip.

It was bitter at first, but a sweet aftertaste lingered.

Subconsciously, she raised her hand to touch her cheek.

Her skin was still slightly warm, and the tender touch of that man's rough hand seemed to have left a trace that refused to fade.

Stussy's mood grew increasingly complicated.

Staring at the empty hotel suite, she felt an absurd sense of emptiness settle inside her.

"No, don't let that bastard fool you!"

Stussy suddenly slapped her own cheeks hard and gritted her teeth.

"He's just indulging in his twisted sense of humor!"

She set the teacup down, angrily clenching her fists, her vampire-like fangs slightly exposed.

"I won't lose that easily, Daren!"

...

New World, aboard a patrolling warship.

"Vice Admiral Borsalino, it's already been three days... Are we seriously going to keep circling like this?"

Arthur looked anxiously at the Vice Admiral lounging on a beach chair, clenching his fists and gritting his teeth.

Three days.

For three whole days, their warship had sailed the same route three times.

The ship's navigators had become so familiar with the path they could navigate it with their eyes closed, without even checking the compass.

Bored out of their minds, many soldiers had started playing cards and fishing on the deck.

Meanwhile, the temporary commander, Vice Admiral Borsalino, didn't seem to care at all, acting as if everything going on outside was none of his business.

Arthur had fought under Admiral Sengoku and served with many commanders before—he thought he had seen all kinds of commanding styles.

But he had never seen a commander like Vice Admiral Borsalino!

Three days!

He hadn't left that beach chair for three whole days!

Chapter 549 - 549: Volume 4 – Chapter 68: How Is That Possible?

If Vice Admiral Borsalino hadn't occasionally moved to turn over, Arthur would have thought he was already dead!

Arthur could barely endure it on the first and second days, but now it was the third day, and Borsalino was still lying there like a salted fish, basking in the sun... He finally couldn't hold back and asked.

You have to understand, every day a warship is at sea, it burns through a huge amount of resources and money.

With thousands of Marines to feed and the ship's fuel costs, wasting time like this was a crime!

They would be better off using these resources to hunt pirates in the nearby waters!

Hearing Arthur's anxious words, Borsalino lazily lifted his exaggerated frog-like sunglasses, glanced at him with lifeless eyes, and drawled,

"Don't be so impatient... Besides, I'm not the one in charge of this mission."

Arthur: ...

Borsalino's sluggish tone made him instantly shut his mouth.

"I can only wait for Vice Admiral Daren to return..." he thought silently to himself.

Just then, a figure came hurtling through the sky at high speed, landing steadily on the warship's deck.

"Vice Admiral Daren!"

The Marines, who had been slacking off playing cards and fishing, immediately dropped their cards and rods, stood up straight, and saluted in unison.

"It's fine, carry on."

Daren smiled and waved at them.

Arthur: ...

"What's wrong, Arthur?"

Daren noticed his odd expression and asked with a smile.

Arthur glanced at Borsalino, still sprawled out lazily on the beach chair, then at Daren, who clearly didn't care about the slacking Marines either.

The corners of his mouth twitched slightly, and he said faintly,

"Nothing, Vice Admiral Daren..."

Daren chuckled, easily guessing what was on his mind. He raised a hand and patted Arthur on the shoulder.

"It's good to have drive, but being an excellent Marine isn't just about fighting and killing. On this sea, you also have to learn to handle relationships."

Arthur didn't fully understand, but out of trust in Daren, he nodded and asked,

"Then Vice Admiral Daren, what should we do next?"

Over these three idle days, unlike the others, he hadn't wasted time slacking off.

He had kept up a strict regimen of training and self-discipline, and now he was eager to test the results of his hard work.

Arthur had never forgotten Daren's words...

He absolutely could not let down Vice Admiral Daren's expectations!

He had to perform well!

Thinking of this, Arthur's eyes lit up, filled with anticipation.

"Action? There's no action... Everything's already been taken care of."

Daren smiled as he spoke.

"Taken care of?" Arthur's eyes widened in shock.

They hadn't done anything these past few days... How could everything already be resolved?

"Have you heard any news about Shichibukai candidates being hunted in the New World these past two days?"

Daren asked with a teasing tone.

Arthur froze.

Indeed, over the past few days, there had been no reports from headquarters about any major incidents like that!

But... that didn't necessarily mean the problem was solved...

It could just be that the culprit caught wind of the situation and didn't dare to act again!

Seeing Arthur lost in thought, Daren chuckled softly and then turned to look at Borsalino.

"Vice Admiral Borsalino, you haven't been lying there for three days straight, have you?"

Borsalino grinned.

"Not exactly."

He paused for a moment, then added,

"I did sit up to drink something. Otherwise, I'd be starving..."

Daren: ...

Alright, you win.

"So, is everything settled?"

Borsalino asked with a half-smile.

Daren narrowed his eyes and smiled slightly.

"More or less. Thanks for your help."

Borsalino shrugged, indicating it was no big deal.

"What's your next move?"

"You've come all this way. You're not planning to head back so soon, are you?"

"By the way, the G5 Branch isn't far from here. As the G5 Base Commander, shouldn't you stop by and check in?"

Daren laughed.

"That's exactly my plan."

The appointment letter for the G5 Base Commander had been issued half a month ago, but too many unexpected things had delayed him.

Although his presence at G5 wouldn't drastically change that unruly branch, it was still his territory.

No matter what, he needed to make an appearance.

Following Daren's orders, the warship shifted course toward the G5 Branch.

The sea breeze was cool and refreshing as it swept across the warship.

Snow-white seabirds soared across the vast blue sky.

With Daren's return, a new beach chair had appeared on the deck.

"I can tell you've got your eye on that kid, Arthur."

Borsalino said suddenly.

Daren, who was lighting a cigar, paused for a moment, then glanced at the young figure training at the other end of the deck.

The sun-drenched Marine cadet was there, sweating profusely as he trained, his expression serious and meticulous, completely out of place among the lazy Marines around him.

As fatigue set in, his hands and legs began to tremble, but he gritted his teeth and pushed through it.

There was a different kind of passion and youthful vigor about him.

Daren's gaze softened slightly. He lit the cigar, took a slow puff, and smiled.

"Don't you think he reminds you of someone?"

Behind his sunglasses, Borsalino's expression gave nothing away.

"...A little, yeah."

He withdrew his gaze, then looked at Daren with interest and said,

"I heard he recently got a large sum of mysterious funding and started building his own army—calling it the 'Freedom Fighters'... Vice Admiral Daren, you wouldn't happen to be the one funding him, would you?"

Daren lifted his hands innocently, putting on an exaggerated expression.

"How could that be..."

"I'm a Vice Admiral of Marine Headquarters... How could I possibly have anything to do with a world-class criminal?"

"But I heard another rumor... The Freedom Fighters have been very active lately. Their intelligence capabilities have suddenly skyrocketed. They even managed to topple a country's government."

"Vice Admiral Borsalino, you wouldn't happen to be the one feeding them intelligence, would you?"

Borsalino also raised his hands in mock surrender and said in a surprised tone,

"How could that be..."

"I'm a Vice Admiral at Marine Headquarters... How could I possibly have anything to do with a world-class criminal?"

At that moment, the two of them struck identical surrender poses, looking downright ridiculous.

Then...

They both burst out laughing.

"Impossible!"

"Of course!"

Boom!

Suddenly, a dull explosion roared beside the warship, sending a massive spray of seawater into the air.

Waves surged violently, rocking the entire vessel.

"Artillery fire!"

"It's artillery fire!!"

"Enemy attack!"

"Prepare for battle!!"

Chapter 550 - 550: Volume 4 – Chapter 69: Robbery by Our Own People!

Boom!

The sound of cannon fire erupted, and dark cannonballs exploded continuously around the warship, stirring up the surging waves.

Smoke billowed.

The Marines aboard the ship reacted immediately, their once-relaxed expressions turning sharp and serious.

Without waiting for orders, they swiftly manned the cannons, the lookout posts, and the helm, grabbing their weapons and preparing for battle.

Although they had been slacking off earlier thanks to a certain 'lazy bum,' they were now showing the calm and bravery expected of the Marine Headquarters' elite.

Rifles were raised in unison, and the heavy cannons quickly adjusted direction, scanning the smoke-covered waters for any sign of the enemy.

The next second—

Clang!

A metallic sound echoed from the side of the ship, as if something had struck it.

Everyone froze and turned to look, only to see a series of rusty metal hooks piercing through the thick smoke on both sides of the ship.

The hooks were attached to thick hemp ropes, firmly latching onto the deck railings.

What is this...

The Marines' pupils shrank, their expressions changing dramatically.

"Grapple hooks!"

"They're under the sea!"

"The enemy's boarding!"

"Prepare for close combat!"

As soon as the words fell, before they could react, a group of soaked, ferocious figures climbed up the ropes and leaped onto the deck.

These men wore vicious expressions, their bodies draped in tattered hemp cloaks, wielding all sorts of weapons.

Even more bizarre was that every single one of them looked rough and misshapen—some missing arms, others with only one eye, some faces covered in scars, some with barely any teeth left...

In short, they didn't look like good people.

They were the very image of ruffians and cutthroats.

If it weren't for the ferocity of their boarding attack and the sheer murderous aura they exuded, just based on their appearances, one would have thought they were a band of thugs.

"Hahahaha! Didn't expect it to be a Marine warship!"

"But it doesn't matter! Tough luck for you guys!"

"Hand over your weapons and supplies!"

"Oh, and we're taking the ship too! You can all just jump into the sea!"

The thick smoke swirled around them as arrogant, brutal laughter filled the deck.

They looked at the Marines like a pack of ravenous wolves eyeing fresh prey, their eyes gleaming green.

The leader, a bald man with a bushy beard, arrogantly stood with his hands on his hips and laughed loudly,

"Hahahaha, you guessed right... we're robbing you!"

Robbing...!?

The Marines on board were completely dumbfounded.

They stared blankly at the group of grotesque-looking invaders, their minds a complete mess.

Because they had all seen it clearly...

Beneath those pirate-like cloaks, they were unmistakably wearing tattered Marine uniforms!

This group... wasn't made up of pirates—they were Marines!

Marines from the New World...

Marines whose behavior was more like a gang of thugs...

Could it be...

A ridiculous yet undeniable thought surfaced in each of their minds.

"Hahahaha! What's wrong? Scared by our tactics?"

Seeing the Marines standing there dumbfounded, the bearded leader thought they were terrified and laughed even more smugly.

"Come on, put down your weapons! Otherwise, we won't be so polite!"

"Hahahaha... Haha... Ha?"

His laughter gradually died down, and his face stiffened.

Because he suddenly noticed that all the Marines were looking at him with a gaze reserved for the already-dead.

There was even a trace of pity in their eyes.

"This is really scary... I never thought I'd get robbed my first time in the New World..."

At that moment, a slow, lazy voice rang out.

The "pirates" froze for a moment, then turned their heads toward the source of the voice.

Through the billowing smoke, a tall, broad-shouldered figure slowly rose from a beach chair.

His hands were tucked casually into his pockets, his large cloak fluttering in the sea breeze.

He looked at this group of "invaders" with a strange expression.

"You guys... must be the Marines from G5, right?"

"...Borsalino!?"

The deck instantly fell silent, then gasps echoed all around.

The "pirates" stared in horror at the calm, smiling figure, subconsciously stepping back.

Even though these guys never followed orders from headquarters and looked down on the so-called "elite forces," the name of the "monster" Borsalino was one they had heard countless times!

At this moment, intense fear filled their hearts.

We... we just tried to rob the monster from headquarters!?

"So, Daren, how do you want to handle this?"

Borsalino sighed helplessly, turned, and asked,

"According to headquarters' appointment... they're your subordinates now."

Daren!?

At the sound of that thunderous name, the "pirates" trembled, the blood draining from their faces.

They stared in disbelief at another figure rising from a beach chair, hearts pounding wildly.

A straight-backed man, his sharp, handsome features cold as ice.

Short black hair fluttered slightly in the sea breeze.

His explosive muscles stretched his Marine uniform tight, his cold eyes gleaming with mocking amusement.

A lit cigar dangled from his mouth, a faint red glow flickering in the smoke.

Even just standing there, he radiated an indescribable, crushing pressure—like a demon god descending.

"So... should I praise your courage, or scold your stupidity?"

The Vice Admiral spoke flatly.

His figure finally emerged fully from the smoke.

The "pirates" were struck as if by lightning.

They... had just tried to rob their own boss!

...

Two days later.

New World.

G5 Branch.

The island's military base was lined with towering fortresses, their walls blackened and cracked, windows shattered, all showing signs of long neglect.

The cannons and warships at the harbor were in just as bad shape, some covered in cobwebs, rust eating through the metal.

This base, which should have stood like an impenetrable fortress, now looked utterly dilapidated under the fading light of sunset.

"Vice Admiral Daren, it's been two days... Should we maybe... let them down?"

Arthur carefully stepped into the temporary office and glanced at the Vice Admiral, who was lounging on the sofa with his eyes closed.

As he spoke, Arthur couldn't help but sneak a glance out the window.

At the port of the G5 base, a row of figures hung suspended in the air like salted fish, hands bound tightly.

After two days of wind and sun, they had shriveled up miserably, looking like they were about to collapse at any moment.

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