

One Piece 721

Chapter 721: Volume 4 – Chapter 240: Where Did the Protector Come From!?

North Blue.

Philseque Island.

The battle on the frozen sea outside the island remained locked in a tense stalemate. Yet, both sides couldn't help but divert some attention, quietly focusing on the turmoil unfolding deep within the island.

Deep within the island.

As the harsh buzz of the military Den Den Mushi's severed signal echoed through the air, a suffocating pressure slowly spread across the surroundings.

The silence was so intense, it made hearts race.

"So, this is the power of the World Government?"

Vice Admiral Daren's playful voice shattered the stillness without warning.

The aura radiating from the Five Elders turned frigid.

“What the hell did you do!?”

Saint Saturn’s fury boiled over. His gaze turned vicious as he glared at the half-smiling Marine and growled hoarsely.

The persistent beep of the disconnected Den Den Mushi now sounded unbearably sharp—like a series of slaps echoing in his ears, making his face burn with rage.

Even worse were the strange glances Dragon and the others cast his way, making the veins on Saturn’s forehead bulge.

Why... had someone invaded the CP Department’s secret stronghold!?

Could this really be that Navy brat’s trump card?

Daren simply smiled and shrugged, his expression laced with open mockery.

“I didn’t do a thing... I’m right here in front of you, aren’t I, Your Excellency Saint Saturn-sama?”

Saturn faltered.

"You must have a death wish!"

His eyes glowed an eerie red. A black spider leg, wrapped in Haki, shot out like a spear, aiming to pierce Daren's skull.

Boom!!

A violent shockwave exploded outward, forcing Kuma and Ivankov to stumble back several meters.

But just ten centimeters from Daren's forehead, the spider leg came to an abrupt halt—severed cleanly by a large, firm hand.

Crack!

Dark green blood splattered. Saturn let out a muffled grunt and staggered back several steps.

Beside him, Warcury—transformed into the monstrous boar “Houki”—stepped forward with a thunderous stomp that made the earth groan in pain.

“Daren, you’ve reached the end of our patience!”

Rubble burst into the air as Houki’s deep, thunderous voice rumbled. He was clearly suppressing his anger.

“You think you can truly oppose the World Government?”

“I’ll give you one last chance—kneel before us... and submit!!”

In his blood-red eyes, the size of lanterns, a chilling threat flashed. With a roar, an overwhelming surge of Haki burst forth!

ROAR!

BOOM!!

A deafening roar erupted from Houki’s gaping maw, sweeping out a powerful wave of Conqueror’s Haki like a missile strike, radiating in all directions from the island’s core.

Black and red lightning crackled across the sky, shaking the cloud sea and casting the world in shifting light and shadow.

Dragon and the others' faces twisted in alarm.

Kuma gritted his teeth, his massive frame unmoving like a cliffside boulder. But even he couldn't help sliding backward under the force of that monstrous Haki.

"Kuma!!"

Ivankov's face turned pale as he practically buried himself behind Kuma's back.

Dragon didn't fare much better. His eyes were full of dread.

Under this sheer pressure, he felt as if his body might dissolve into the wind.

Instinctively, he turned to look at Daren—

And froze.

The Marine Vice Admiral stood motionless, calmly enduring most of Warcury's Haki head-on, as if unaffected.

That guy's Haki... had grown stronger!

The unbelievable realization hit Dragon like a jolt.

At the same time.

The explosive wave of Haki surged out for several kilometers in the blink of an eye, even knocking out several young Marines fighting on the island's outskirts!

"That Haki...!"

"What the hell is happening?!"

"Damn it... my body won't move!"

"What terrifying Conqueror's Haki!"

"..."

Marines in the midst of battle trembled, their expressions stricken with horror as they turned toward the island's depths.

Some of the weaker ones rolled their eyes back and fainted instantly, collapsing where they stood.

Sengoku, Big Mom, and the others all froze briefly, their movements halting as they glanced toward the source of the blast with uncertainty.

“Wororororo! This suffocating pressure... it's got my blood pumping!!”

Kaidou's eyes blazed with violent excitement. His battle lust surged, and he could hardly wait to leap in.

Even under this crushing aura, Kuzan felt his heart pounding wildly.

“Not even Roger's Haki was this intense, right...?”

But Kaidou suddenly sprang into the air, laughing as he brought his kanabō crashing down.

“Nope! Roger's Haki was way stronger than that old fossil's!”

“Otherwise, Rocks wouldn’t have lost to him back then!”

Raimei Hakke!!

Kuzan hastily summoned a massive ice bird to block the blow.

Pheasant Beak!

BOOM!!

The thunder-charged kanabō shattered the ice bird with ease. As Kaidou grinned, ready to press the attack—

A dark red magma hound suddenly burst from the icy debris, leaping with a roar.

“Inugami Guren!”

A violent collision!

Lightning and magma exploded in tandem, tearing apart the icy ground for a kilometer, shockwaves soaring skyward.

But just then—

Another fearsome aura suddenly erupted from deep within the island, clashing head-on with the previous Haki blast.

The impact unleashed a cataclysmic storm, black-red lightning swirling around the island and ripping through the clouds.

In the stunned eyes of the Marines, the two overwhelming auras pushed against each other—

Forming a sharply divided world of black and white.

An even match.

...

“Honestly, if this had happened half a day earlier, your Haki might’ve actually overwhelmed mine.”

Daren smiled as his aura surged forth like an unending series of crashing tsunamis.

After being baptized in the blood of 238 noble Celestial Dragons, he had long felt his Haki stirring restlessly.

Conqueror's Haki Intensity... 89.999!

Compared to before the World Noble Hunting Tournament, it had jumped by nearly ten whole points!

As he unleashed his Haki without restraint, Daren felt utterly invigorated.

"Damn it! Your Conqueror's Haki!!"

Warcury, who had been certain of victory, now stared in shock—his pupils shrinking to pinpricks as he gaped at the overwhelming Haki erupting from the "insect" before him.

He couldn't believe what he was seeing.

This Marine brat's aura... was actually on par with his own!?

“How is this possible!?”

Based on the World Government’s intelligence on Vice Admiral Rogers Daren, his Haki shouldn’t be anywhere near this level...

Wait!

“Jaygarcia Saturn! What the hell did you do!?”

Warcury, sharp as ever, suddenly grasped something and whipped around to glare at Gyūki, who was still regenerating his body. He roared through clenched teeth, furious enough to use Saturn’s full name.

There was nothing wrong with the intelligence. That meant the root of the change had to be something that happened here on Philseque Island.

Saturn’s face darkened. His tone was laced with anger.

“That brat slaughtered a massive number of Celestial Dragons and used their blood to strengthen his Haki!”

Dragon blinked in surprise.

Slaughtering Celestial Dragons... had that kind of effect?!

Before he could process it, Warcury's tone turned cold and threatening.

"Daren, do you really think you can win?"

"Even if you survive... will your loved ones survive?"

The moment he spoke, Dragon, Kuma, and Ivankov's expressions all changed.

They immediately thought of the same person—

Amatsuki Toki.

Daren's pregnant wife.

Dragon seemed to realize something. His face went pale as he staggered back.

"Didn't see that coming, did you, Daren?"

“CPO... has already entered Marineford.”

The Five Elders turned to Daren, their eyes filled with mockery, searching for any flicker of fear, panic, or dread.

But there was nothing.

The “insect” in their eyes didn’t flinch. He simply met their gazes—calm and steady.

“I already told you... My power, my status, my network, and my resources—none of it came from you.”

“...And you can’t take any of it away.”

Just as he finished speaking—

“Bru-bruu, bru-bruu...”

A short ringtone rang out from Saturn’s coat.

He immediately pulled out a military Den Den Mushi and answered.

“Reporting to Saint Saturn-sama. The target has been located.”

Saturn shot a look at Daren and sneered.

“Restrain the target. Bring her back to Mary Geoise.”

“But, sir... the target has a protector.”

The voice that came through the Den Den Mushi was hoarse and cold, yet carried a palpable note of caution.

Saturn froze.

Warcury froze.

The other Five Elders froze.

Protector?

Marineford was a fortress. Aside from the World Government itself, no one else could possibly get past the Gates of Justice and into the base.

And nearly all of the Navy's top elites were here, on Philseque Island.

So how the hell could there be a protector?

Where did the protector come from!?

“—Who is it!?”

Saturn's bloodshot eyes burned with rage as he demanded an answer.

The CP0 agent on the other end swallowed hard, then rasped:

“...Former Admiral of Marine Headquarters—‘Black Arm’ Zephyr, and his students.”

Chapter 722: Volume 4 – Chapter 241: As Long As You Can Kill Me!

Marine Headquarters, Marineford.

The night sky was oppressively dark, the heavy, twisted heavens pressing down like a weight on the earth, suffocating the very air.

Drip... drip...

Cold rain began to fall from the pitch-black sky, turning into a torrential downpour as the wind howled.

Boom...

Lightning crackled across the sky, followed by thunder that shook the earth. A pale bolt split the heavens, illuminating the tall figure standing before a grand Japanese-style mansion.

“Who’s there!?”

A furious, chilling voice burst from the military Den Den Mushi—an agent of the World Government’s highest authority. It echoed like a death god’s whisper, clinging to the heart.

The CP0 agent holding the Den Den Mushi stared blankly at the figure standing firm at the mansion’s entrance, a katana in hand, then nervously swallowed.

Lightning flashed. Rain poured.

The broad-shouldered man with short purple hair held a cigar in his mouth. Even as cold rain drenched him, the cigar stubbornly glowed red—like a weathered old soldier, burning to the end.

He stood there, silent and unmoving, yet his presence alone felt like an immovable fortress.

Like an unbreachable wall, he blocked the dozen-strong CP unit completely.

Then, one figure after another leapt out from the storm.

They broke through the curtain of rain, landing one by one behind the man.

Their faces were pale, tension clear in their expressions, but their hands were firmly gripping their swords.

Raindrops splattered around them.

The lead CP0 member took a deep breath, squinted slightly, and answered:

“...Former Marine Admiral ‘Black Arm’ Zephyr—and his students.”

A killing order crackled through the Den Den Mushi before the connection was abruptly cut.

The agent’s face twisted with indescribable emotion.

It wasn’t fear of the former admiral before him, but something else.

Confusion. Doubt. Disbelief.

Why would these Marines dare to stand in their way?

What gave them the nerve to challenge them?

The figures stood grimly in the rain, silent and unmoving, ready for battle.

The atmosphere tightened, like a drawn bowstring about to snap.

The world held its breath.

Then, the old admiral, now all but retired, finally spoke in a low voice.

“At first... I didn’t want to believe it.”

“A high-ranking Marine officer—a hero who earned countless merits for the Marines, for justice, even for the World Government’s prestige—his wife and child were threatened. Even assassinated. By the World Government.”

“No matter what he did, at the very least... his family was innocent, wasn’t it?”

A slow-burning fury rose from Zephyr’s chest, growing harder to restrain with each word.

The CP0 leader suddenly laughed.

Behind the mask, the arrogance of a World Government elite returned.

“The World Government doesn’t tolerate anyone challenging its authority.”

His voice was icy, slipping out from behind a mask etched with strange patterns.

“No matter how strong, how talented, how powerful, how revered... the elders won’t allow such people to exist.”

His voice carried a trace of mocking sneer.

“I thought you understood that by now... didn’t you?”

“...Zephyr-san.”

Zephyr’s massive frame trembled. His eyes lost focus as he stared at the CP team before him.

A bitterness he couldn’t put into words surged from the depths of his heart—memories he never wanted to revisit flooding back.

Behind him, his students seemed to realize something. Their pupils shrank to needle points, blood vessels popping in their eyes.

“Yes... I know.”

The rain ran down the deep lines of Zephyr’s face, forming a bitter smile at the corners of his mouth.

"I know better than anyone."

"I just didn't think..."

"...you'd stoop this low."

Crack!

He suddenly bit the cigar in two, fists clenched tight, knees bending sharply as his body dropped.

Crackle!

The ground within ten meters exploded beneath him. Rocks shot into the air, shredded instantly by a violent wave of Haki.

His white cloak billowed in the curtain of rain, rippling violently. The word Justice on his back flared upward, letting out a piercing wail.

Zephyr looked up abruptly. Bits of cigar still clung to his lips. His face twisted into a fierce snarl, eyes blazing.

“What I’m saying is... how many times are you trash going to use the same damn trick!?”

As the words left his mouth—

Boom!!

The calm air around him shattered. His demeanor flipped, and like a tiger unleashed, he roared forward.

His speed exploded to its peak.

The Marine Academy’s chief instructor displayed peerless mastery of hand-to-hand combat in that instant.

In less than a hundredth of a second, the purple-haired figure had already burst through the curtain of rain, growing rapidly in the CPO leader’s widening pupils!

So fast!

Is this even still Soru!?

The CP0 commander's heart jolted, his pupils contracting to the limit.

"You want to take Toki? Sure—go ahead!"

Zephyr's eyes burned blood-red. In his rage, the murderous intent in his gaze was no longer hidden.

Swish!

Jet-black Armament Haki surged like a tide, engulfing both arms.

His black iron fists crashed forward like falling meteors!

"—As long as you can kill me!"

The CP0 leader's entire body shuddered. Zephyr's strike was too fast, too fierce. Caught off guard, he could only raise his arms instinctively to block.

Fist met arm.

A sickening crack rang out—the sound of bones shattering!

Before the stunned eyes of the other CP members and Zephyr's students, that furious punch obliterated the CP0 leader's entire arm!

Blood and flesh exploded through the air, instantly washed away by the relentless rain.

The blackened fist didn't stop—slamming straight into the CP0's chest. The overwhelming force tore through his Haki like paper.

Crunch!

His chest caved in with a grotesque curve, blood spurting out from beneath his mask.

Boom!

A burst of blood and rain rippled outward. The CP0 leader shot back like a cannonball, smashing through several buildings before crashing deep into the ground.

The earth rumbled, cracks splintering across the ground as dust and debris rose into the storm.

Zephyr landed, his breath slightly ragged. His eyes never left the spot where his enemy had fallen.

“Tch tch tch... You really are a former Admiral. Strength like that—it’s monstrous.”

The CP0 leader slowly crawled out from the rubble, a chilling laugh echoing beneath his mask.

The Marine students looked on in disbelief.

At the mangled stump where his arm had been, thick, squirming flesh began to regenerate. Within seconds, a new arm had grown.

His crushed chest pulsed and bulged grotesquely, rapidly restoring itself.

“In that case, I’ll just have to take you out first.”

The CP0 leader chuckled darkly. His voice cut through the storm, sending shivers down the spine.

“After all, I’ve regretted not fighting you that night at Marineford... Zephyr-san.”

It hit Zephyr like a bolt of lightning.

His arms—arms strong enough to split mountains—trembled uncontrollably.

“Zephyr is mine. The rest of you, split up and engage your targets.”

With a cold smirk, the CPO leader gave the order.

Whoosh! Whoosh! Whoosh!

The other agents scattered like shadows.

The young Marines gritted their teeth and chased after them. Battles erupted all across the rain-soaked chaos.

Only that purple-haired figure remained still, unmoving. His once-proud frame now seemed hunched.

Crack!!

A pale bolt of lightning tore across the sky, illuminating the former Admiral’s face—drained, stricken with pain.

Tears streamed down his cheeks.

Chapter 723: Volume 4 – Chapter 242: Hand-to-Hand Combat with Houki!

North Blue.

Philseque Island.

"...Eliminate anyone who dares to intervene. Secure the target at all costs!"

Saint Saturn's icy command echoed through the frozen landscape, colder than the howling winds of the North Blue.

Dragon's pupils contracted, his entire body shuddering.

They've lost their minds...

The Five Elders were actually targeting Daren's wife and child—with no regard for limits!

Trying to threaten Daren this way!?

“You filthy bastards!”

Fury erupted from Dragon’s chest. In an instant, a twisted, compressed hurricane swirled into his palm. He hurled it straight at Saint Saturn.

“Storm!”

As he struck, a flash of murderous intent gleamed in the eyes of the Five Elders.

The wind projectile expanded rapidly along its trajectory, boiling with power in the blink of an eye—morphing into a towering cyclone.

Everything in its path—rock, snow, trees, anything—was pulverized to dust.

“Garp’s son... Don’t get cocky!”

Saint Mars, in his Itsumade form, let out a piercing screech. Spreading his massive wings, he shot into the air. His gaping beak opened wide and spewed a blazing crimson firestorm that slammed directly into Dragon’s wind column.

Boom!!

Wind and flame collided in a deafening roar, erupting into a hellish storm of fire and heat.

Waves of scorching air blasted outward, forcing Dragon and the others to fall back.

In the swirl of smoke and ash, a sudden glint of red flashed in Dragon's eyes—as if he had sensed something. His expression changed drastically as he shouted toward the Marine Vice Admiral locked in a standoff with Saint Warcury.

“Daren, watch out!”

The warning hadn't even finished—

Boom!

The ground beneath the Vice Admiral's feet exploded apart.

A grotesque Sandworm—dozens of meters tall—burst forth, tearing through the earth like paper.

Its gaping maw, packed with writhing, razor-sharp teeth, sprayed corrosive slime as it lunged forward and swallowed the Vice Admiral whole!

Dragon's face paled in shock.

Ivankov screamed in horror, "He got eaten!"

But at that moment—

"Shoot it!"

A cold voice rang out from deep inside the creature's belly.

Whoosh! Whoosh! Whoosh! Whoosh!

Four streaks of razor-sharp phantom light shot across the ground, slicing through towering trees in an instant. They wove around the roaring Sandworm, crossing paths with blinding speed!

Slash!

Blood and gashes tore across the creature's massive body. Yellow-green fluids splattered in every direction.

The Sandworm, transformed from Saint Peter, was nearly cleaved in half. Its massive head was sent flying into the sky.

The next moment—

The Marine Vice Admiral, his body steaming with white vapor, burst from the creature's belly like a meteor—launching straight at the enormous boar “Houki,” the beastly form of Saint Warcury!

In Dragon's stunned gaze, Daren struck a bold, dominant pose.

One hand forward, one behind—index and middle fingers together, ring and pinky curled—like a pair of crushing dragon claws!

Ryusoken!

“Hahahaha! That's my technique!”

Dragon blinked, then roared with joy.

“Take him down, Da—!”

His shout was cut short.

Itsumade's savage form slammed into Dragon, sending him flying into the distant jungle. Trees cracked and collapsed in his wake.

Boom!

Facing the ruthless Vice Admiral, Saint Warcury sneered arrogantly. His massive tusks gleamed as he charged forward!

He intended to clash head-on with Daren—who bore both the “Indestructible Body” and the “Giant's Strength”!

Boom!!

Two vastly different figures collided like meteors, sending shockwaves ripping through the battlefield.

Black and red lightning surged wildly with each clash of Haki, tearing through the sky.

Daren's bare arms bulged with muscle. His fingers, thick and powerful, clamped down on Houki's massive tusks. His gaze was cold and unflinching.

Beneath his skin, it was as if dragons coiled and surged. The sheer force radiating from his grip shattered the very air in thunderous blasts.

Smoke erupted, and the ground within a hundred meters crumbled beneath them—splintering and collapsing in every direction!

“Looks like you're not some brittle pushover like Saturn, Warcury-sama.”

Daren could feel the raw hardness and brute strength radiating from the monstrous beast before him. His eyes lit up with fiery excitement—like a hunter spotting worthy prey.

It had been a long time since he felt like this.

If Saint Saturn had pushed the limits of his Devil Fruit with sinister abilities like “Suppression,” “Explosive Gaze,” and “Venom,” then this wild boar “Houki” standing before him gave off only one overwhelming impression:

Uncompromising, absolute hardness!

From its diamond-like tusks to skin as tough as Kaidou's dragon scales, just standing there, Houki exuded an impenetrable presence. Daren couldn't find a single weak point.

Even when he unleashed the full force of Ryusoken, Daren clearly felt something strange—an uncanny recoil.

It was like most of the impact had bounced right back at him through Warcury's power as “Houki”!

If not for Daren's monstrously durable body, that counterforce alone might have wrecked his arms.

It was like facing an “anti-damage” armor—combined with the overwhelming power of a Giant—and laced with that intense, almost physical Conqueror's Haki from earlier. Warcury truly lived up to the title of the World Government's supreme judicial authority, the “Warrior God of Justice” commanding the entire CP network.

But the more indestructible Warcury seemed, the more Daren's fighting spirit blazed, surging like wildfire.

Because at the peak of their clash, he felt it again—

That elusive, mysterious sensation!

A faint but unmistakable pulse of warmth flowed through his muscles, like a spark of energy awakening.

Strength +0.03!

His power, which had remained stagnant since “graduating” from Saint Saturn, was finally moving again!

The thought made Daren’s gaze toward the towering Houki burn even hotter—so intense that even Warcury hesitated for a beat.

These Five Elders... what a bunch of unexpectedly delightful “treasure hoarders!”

“Though I really don’t know where your confidence comes from...”

A cold sneer flickered in Warcury's enormous lantern-like eyes.

“But do you really think some washed-up Marine Admiral can protect your wife?”

“Don’t be so naive, Daren.”

Chapter 724: Volume 4 – Chapter 243: Give Me One

“Zephyr’s era is over. He lost his nerve long ago—he’s no longer the ‘Black Arm’ who once ruled the seas!”

Topman Warcury let out a savage roar. His massive limbs slammed into the ground with earth-shaking force. As the ground quaked beneath him, his enormous frame lunged forward like a collapsing fortress. His thick, razor-sharp tusks drove upward with terrifying power—

Launching the Marine Vice Admiral straight into the air!

Despite the overwhelming size difference, Daren was being overpowered by sheer brute strength.

“With the strength he has now, he doesn’t stand a chance against Ghostweed—one of the strongest CPO operatives, personally trained by me and hailed as the ‘Celestial Dragons’ strongest shield!”

The beast-form Houki let out a thunderous bellow. The blood-red tusks jutting from his maw twisted under swirling black smoke, morphing into twin massive blades, gleaming even sharper than before.

Another bone-crushing charge!

Still midair, Daren’s pupils contracted. He crossed his arms on instinct, bracing for impact as Houki’s meteor-like blow crashed into him head-on!

Boom!

A wave of raw force rippled outward in a massive shockwave.

Daren was blasted backward. A streak of blood trickled from the corner of his mouth.

“Our power isn’t something a pest like you can stand against.”

The cold, cutting voice came from behind.

A towering shadow loomed, rising from the earth like a mountain.

Ivankov and Kuma stared in horror as the massive Sandworm—sliced clean in half by Daren just moments ago—had somehow reformed completely. Its enormous maw, packed with writhing teeth, lunged viciously toward the Vice Admiral’s falling figure.

A strange red glint flickered deep in Daren’s eyes.

He didn’t move.

A spark danced at his fingertips.

In the next instant, multiple razor-sharp phantom slashes shot forward, piercing clean through the worm's gaping mouth.

Yellow-green mucus exploded everywhere. Peter, transformed into the monstrous Sandworm, screeched in agony—but still snapped his jaws shut without hesitation!

Clang!

Daren's Haki-coated hands seized the worm's thrashing fangs, even as the sharp teeth tore through skin and flesh. Blood dripped from his palms.

"Even if Dragon is holding off Mars... so what? With your current injuries and exhaustion, there's no way you can beat us."

A hoarse voice rumbled from within the worm's maw, followed by a gust of bloody, foul-smelling wind.

From Daren's vantage point, he could clearly see the pulsating flesh and digestive fluids inside—it made his skin crawl.

"Face reality, you foolish little Marine."

The worm's jaws clenched tighter. The gnashing teeth twisted like a massive grinder, ripping open Daren's chest, then violently hurling him aside.

Before he could hit the ground—

A massive shadow leapt from the earth.

Saint Nujuro's skeletal horse, Bakotsu, wrapped in an aura of deathly chill, rammed into Daren's back like a meteor.

Boom!

Frost burst outward, rapidly spreading across Daren's back, freezing his movements on the spot.

Blood seeped from his mouth and nose. His body stiffened mid-air and was flung at an angle—

Only for Gyūki's massive form to catch him in its sights. A black spider leg, thick as a pillar, drove straight through his abdomen and launched him again.

"No! Stop them!!"

Watching Daren being battered back and forth like a ragdoll between the four monstrous creatures, Ivankov and Kuma's faces twisted in panic.

Ivankov took a step forward. His dramatically-shadowed eyes snapped open.

"Death Wink!"

A violent blast erupted across Saint Saturn's body, leaving a gaping, burning hole.

But within seconds, the wound began sealing itself—restoring his form completely.

"Damn it! How is this even possible!?"

"Are they... immortal?!"

Ivankov was frozen in disbelief. He blinked furiously.

"Death Wink!"

"Hell Wink!"

...

Boom!

Boom!

Boom!

Explosions tore across the monstrous forms of Saturn, Nusjuro, Peter, and Warcury, kicking up waves of smoke and wind.

But the sight that followed was devastating.

No matter the damage, the wounds on these four hellish monsters healed within seconds.

Warcury, now in his Houki form, tanked Ivankov's assault without flinching. Not a scratch marked his body.

The next moment—

Houki charged again with overwhelming force.

Boom!!

Daren's body hit the ground like a cannonball, exploding into a crater in front of Ivankov and Kuma.

The earth split and crumbled. Rocks erupted into the air.

Through the clearing dust, the two could finally see him—

They gasped in unison.

The Vice Admiral looked like he'd been dragged through hell—his entire body was covered in blood and wounds.

Cold frost, burning embers, poisonous purple fluid, and corrosive green slime tormented every gash on his body, causing his muscles to twitch uncontrollably.

"This is just insane... I didn't think I'd actually be overpowered."

Daren used his blood-soaked hands to brace himself as he rose to his feet again. He glanced at the wounds on his body and slowly exhaled a heavy breath.

Boom... Boom...

The four massive beasts stomped forward step by step, each stride shaking the ground, radiating a crushing sense of pressure.

"Your talent is indeed remarkable—perhaps even beyond that of Roger, Garp, and Kaidou in their prime... But you had too little time to grow."

"Two and a half years of training is nothing—just a ripple in the World Government's 800-year reign."

"If you'd had a little more time, maybe we would've actually had reason to fear you."

"But that chance will never come."

"Today, you die on this island."

The domineering, arrogant voice echoed from all directions, sending a chill down the spine as it merged with the thunderous footsteps.

"Is that so?"

The Vice Admiral raised his hand, wiping the blood from the corner of his mouth, then suddenly grinned.

He turned to Ivankov and the others, who stood frozen in place, and snapped,

"You followed Dragon-san all the way here just to stand there like spectators?"

Kuma flushed with embarrassment.

Ivankov snapped back to reality, gritting his teeth.

"They're immortal! Attacks don't work at all!"

Daren waved dismissively and rolled his eyes.

"Cut the crap. I've been at this long enough. Hit me with it already."

Kuma and Ivankov were both stunned, shock rippling through their hearts.

This lunatic... He's already seriously wounded, and he still wants to fight!?

Boom!

The dust scattered.

The massive Houki, eyes glowing blood-red, charged through the thick smoke. His enormous fangs gleamed like twin blades, and black-red lightning crackled through the air!

"Damn it! This is insane!"

Ivankov and Kuma exchanged a glance, then braced themselves against Houki's overwhelming presence and rushed forward.

Ivankov's right fingers suddenly sharpened into needle-like tips.

He drove them hard into the wound on Daren's arm!

"So tough! I think my fingers are about to snap!"

Ivankov's eyes twitched uncontrollably. Only now did he truly grasp how monstrous Daren's body had become.

And this was with Daren forcibly relaxing his muscles. If it were his normal state... even a surprise attack probably wouldn't break the skin!

"Emporio Tension Hormone!"

The instant the needle pierced his flesh, the Vice Admiral's body jolted violently!

His breath grew heavy, and his eyes blazed red.

Inside his chest, his heart thundered like a drum, as if some terrible beast was awakening within him...

Chapter 725: Volume 4 – Chapter 244: The Attacking Giants!

Boom! Boom! Boom!

Like the thunderous rumble of an engine, the heart beneath the Vice Admiral's bloodstained chest—tough and relentless like a dragon—began pounding wildly, as if triggered by something deep within. His skin visibly reddened, and hot steam blew from his nostrils.

A low, beastlike growl rumbled out. Under the stunned gazes of Ivankov and Kuma, Daren's seemingly lean figure suddenly shot forward like an arrow!

He charged straight into the raging, brutal Houki!

It was like a meteor slamming into the earth.

Blood-slicked arms latched tightly onto Houki's massive fangs, and then—

Boom!!

More than a dozen muddy water columns, each several dozen meters high, exploded into the air behind the Vice Admiral. The earth beneath them couldn't handle the sheer force of the clash and crumbled with a tortured groan.

Not a single step back!

"Hahahaha! That's what I'm talking about!!"

Daren threw his head back and roared with wild laughter. The wind whipped through his black hair as fire blazed in his eyes.

An uncontrollable force erupted from every pore of his body, compelling a furious roar from his throat. The surge of blood energy rolling off him made even Ivankov and Kuma's scalps go numb.

Ivankov, especially, stood frozen, disbelief etched into the eyes beneath his purple eyeshadow.

"He... he blocked it!!"

Seeing this insane clash between figures of such wildly different sizes, Ivankov raised his hand to shield against flying debris, barely believing his own eyes.

"My Tension Hormone... is this strong!?"

"No. It's Daren-san's physique that's just too powerful."

Kuma's voice was low and heavy, but his eyes betrayed his shock.

This level of raw power was beyond anything he'd ever imagined.

"This... is impossible!"

Topman Warcury let out a violent roar, his lantern-sized blood-red eyes locked on the tiny figure before him.

The other three Five Elders were just as shaken.

When it came to strange abilities, Warcury couldn't compare to Saint Saturn's Gyūki.

In raw attack power, he was outmatched by Saint Nusjuro's Bakotsu.

In regeneration and recovery, he was no match for Saint Peter's Sandworm.

But in terms of physical toughness, defense, and brute force, the monster form of Warcury—Houki—was unquestionably the strongest among them.

Forget mere humans—even the most elite warriors and elders of the Elbaph Giants couldn't take a full-force charge from Houki.

Yet now, the scene before their eyes shattered everything they believed.

"You decrepit fools relying so much on Devil Fruits... what do you even know about a body honed through countless life-and-death battles!?"

Daren sneered, his arms swelling with muscle like coiled dragons, massive and bulging.

With Ivankov's Horu Horu no Mi stimulating him, he felt power surging endlessly from within.

Every pore, every cell, every nerve seemed to scream with joy, urging him to let loose everything he had!

The overwhelming sense of strength threatened to burst from his body.

He could feel it—under the boost of the Tension Hormone, his strength and speed had increased by at least twenty percent!

If he had to put it into numbers, his current power level had definitely surpassed 98 points!

"Get the hell up!!"

Madness flickered in Daren's eyes as he bent his knees and sank low—then exploded with force!

"Just how strong am I now..."

Under the frozen stares of the Four Elders, he clutched Houki's massive fangs—and lifted the towering beast, tens of meters tall, into the air!

"...Even I don't know!!"

And then—he slammed it viciously into the ground!

Boom!!

Like a meteor crash, Houki smashed into the earth like a collapsing skyscraper, flattening a swath of forest and leaving behind a gaping crater from the impact.

The ground shook violently!

"Attack!"

Saint Nusburo's eyes sharpened. As his hooves thundered, his figure blurred into a streak of black and shot forward, diving from above.

"We can't afford to drag this out any longer!"

He couldn't help but urge the others on.

This Marine brat was just too strange.

His body should be at its limit, and yet the longer he fought, the stronger he became.

His terrifying growth rate was downright chilling!

But right then—

A bear-like figure silently appeared behind Daren like a ghost.

With a focused expression, he raised one large paw and gently patted the Vice Admiral on the back.

Thud.

A soft, muffled sound echoed through the air.

"No!"

Bakotsu Nusjuro's pupils contracted sharply.

Under Kuma's gentle pat, the Marine Vice Admiral's body trembled slightly—then a dark, red-black gas in the shape of a bear paw suddenly separated from his chest.

In that instant, the world seemed to slow down.

As the strange, red-black mist drifted away from his body, Daren felt an overwhelming sense of relief—every ounce of exhaustion and pain that had clung to him since the beginning of the battle vanished in an instant!

Then...

That murky, ink-like ball of intangible energy floated upward—rising just in time to sink into the body of Bakotsu Nusjuro, who was descending from the sky!

In a flash—

Bakotsu Nusjuro's eyes froze.

Something seemed to explode within his massive body. His limbs spasmed uncontrollably, and strange ripples shimmered across his skin.

"Ah... aahh..."

Low, agonized howls escaped his throat, each one sharp enough to trigger shockwaves through the air.

From the second battlefield on Miracle Island where he intercepted the Whitebeard Pirates, to the Holy Land, to hunting Celestial Dragons on Philseque Island, to the brutal showdown against Saint Saturn—Daren hadn't rested once!

The accumulated fatigue and pain from this relentless slaughter, from wounds so deep they should've been fatal... it all transferred into Bakotsu Nusjuro!

Boom!

The massive figure of Bakotsu crashed to the ground, rolling violently and kicking up a blizzard of snow and dust.

His skeletal frame gushed black blood, painting a grotesque and horrifying scene.

Even with his near-immortal regeneration, this kind of torment—pain and fatigue that gnawed at the soul—was unbearable.

"Damn it! That brat's energy is recovering—fast!!"

Saint Saturn couldn't bring himself to glance at Bakotsu's pitiful state. His eyelids twitched wildly, and a foreboding sense of dread surged in his chest.

"All-out attack—kill him!!"

Saint Peter roared, voice hoarse with fury. Transformed into a Sandworm, he lunged up from underground, jaws wide open, aiming to devour the Vice Admiral whole.

But just then—

A surge of overwhelming bloodlust and energy burst out from the heart of the swirling dust cloud!

"You think... you're the only ones who can get bigger?"

A cold, mocking voice echoed.

Everyone froze.

Ivankov and Kuma were struck speechless, faces stiff with disbelief.

Even the Four Elders stood stunned, unable to process what they were seeing.

From within the cloud of dust, that small, insect-like figure suddenly emitted sharp cracks of bones shifting—his body expanding at an incredible rate, rising like a mountain!

Three meters... ten... thirty... fifty... eighty... one hundred meters!

He now stood on par with, if not larger than, the monstrous forms the Five Elders had taken!

Before they could even react—

A massive, blood-drenched arm reached out from the dust and clamped down on the oncoming sandworm's gaping maw.

Then, a towering black-haired giant, bare-chested and wild-eyed, lunged forward—both hands grabbing the writhing jaws of the Sandworm.

With a furious roar,

He pulled.

—RIP!!

A storm of yellow-green ichor sprayed into the air as the colossal Sandworm was torn apart—alive—ripped straight down the middle from its mouth by the raging giant.

Chapter 726: Volume 4 – Chapter 245: An Enemy More Terrifying Than Shiki?

"Tatakae!!"

The giant's earth-shaking roar thundered across the sky.

Dust swirled wildly, slime splattered everywhere. Under the crushing weight of the colossal, skyscraper-sized body, vast swathes of jungle and snow-capped peaks crumbled and collapsed, churning up blizzards of snow and shockwaves of icy wind.

The deafening roar, the cataclysmic movement, and the ground-shaking footsteps instantly drew the attention of everyone on the island.

The fleeing Celestial Dragons...

Civilians and slaves trembling in the shadows...

Dragon, locked in guerrilla combat with Saint Mars in his monstrous bird form...

Even Kaidou, Big Mom, Sengoku, and all the elite Marines stationed on the frozen sea far from the island...

All of them instinctively turned their heads, their eyes widening in horror as if they had just witnessed something beyond comprehension.

A hundred-meter-tall, black-haired giant stood amidst the chaos—bare-chested, muscles like coiled steel, his body streaked with blood and wounds.

Like a savage warrior from a primeval hunt, he held the massive Sandworm high above his head, slime dripping down his body, and let out a thunderous roar to the heavens.

It was a sight that would be forever burned into the memories of everyone on Philseque Island.

One of the Five Elders, the "Warrior God of Agriculture" Saint Shepherd Ju Peter... in the form of the demonic Mythical Zoan Mongolian Sandworm... was being hoisted into the air like a freshly hunted beast!

The giant's bellowing cry echoed like a declaration of victory to the world.

The Marines stood in stunned silence, gazing up at the black-haired colossus deep in the heart of the island. His war cry shook their souls, and none of them could believe what they were seeing.

After all, Marine Headquarters had its own Giant Corps.

Adult giants, by virtue of their immense size and strength, were considered on par with Vice Admirals.

Which is why every giant enlisted in the Marines held at least the rank of Vice Admiral.

But compared to the mountain-like figure towering in the distance, their usual twenty- to thirty-meter-tall giants looked like children still waiting to grow up!

"What... is that...?"

"A giant?"

"That's impossible... Not even the giants are that big!"

"Unless... he's from the Oars clan, with oni blood!"

"No—wait, that face... He looks familiar!"

"Wait a minute! That's our Vice Admiral Daren! No, our enemy—Vice Admiral Daren!"

"He turned into a giant!?"

"And he's tearing the Five Elders apart with his bare hands?!"

The moment the realization hit, the Marines gasped in unison, eyes darting between each other.

The scene unfolding before them was so surreal it scrambled their thoughts. None of it made sense.

Wasn't Vice Admiral Daren supposed to be fully human?

How could he transform into a giant?

Could he have Elbaph blood hidden in his lineage? Or even the legendary bloodline of the "onis"?

"Dahahaha!! Daren is so cool! He can turn into a giant!!"

Kuzan forgot all about the blood dripping from the corner of his mouth, his eyes sparkling like a kid at a festival as he stared at the towering black-haired giant.

Even Sakazuki paused mid-movement, a flicker of disbelief flashing through his usually stern gaze.

Borsalino, lazily stroking the stubble on his chin while holding the Ama no Murakumo sword, chuckled with a smirk.

"So you're the one hiding the biggest secret... What's your connection to Elbaph, Daren?"

Kaidou gripped his kanabō tightly, chest heaving with ragged breaths. His eyes burned with furious disbelief, his sharp teeth clenched so tightly they looked ready to shatter.

"I knew it! That guy's body isn't normal!"

"There's no way he could've trained something like the Indestructible Body on his own!"

It was as if he had finally found the justification he needed. He let out a roar, almost in self-denial.

Yeah, that had to be it!

That damned brat Daren didn't gain the Indestructible Body because of Kaidou's beatings.

It was because he already had a powerful bloodline from the start!

That was the only explanation!

If getting stronger just took a few beatings, that idiot Queen would've achieved the Indestructible Body long ago!

Big Mom, on the other hand, erupted in delighted laughter, her cheeks flushed with excitement, shoulders trembling as she cackled.

"Mamamama... So this is the man I chose!"

She licked her luscious red lips, staring at the black-haired giant with eyes so feverish, she looked ready to devour him whole. Her entire body quivered with anticipation.

"The bloodline of the highest-ranking giants... such a powerful and flawless body... I must have his genes!"

"I'll create the strongest army of giant warriors in Totto Land!"

"—Over my dead body!"

Sengoku charged in fury, transforming into the golden Great Buddha and unleashing a devastating punch.

A burst of golden light erupted.

His heart was filled with shock.

Daren... actually carried the top-tier bloodline of the giants!?

If that were true, could he be connected to Elbaph, the strongest nation in the world?

Even if there was no link, just this overwhelming strength alone was enough to dominate the seas!

An Indestructible Body, a terrifying oni-giant form, mind-bending physical power, and the strange mechanics of the Jiki Jiki no Mi—Daren's combat potential had long since defied all logic!

Storming fortresses, seizing territory, even transporting islands—none of it would be beyond him.

And yet, someone with power that could shake the world was forced into direct opposition to the Marines by the Five Elders!

At that moment, for the first time in his life, Sengoku felt a faint but undeniable crack in his faith in the judgment and authority of the World Government.

"Mamamama! Why wouldn't it be possible?"

BIG MOM laughed sweetly while brandishing her flaming blade, parrying the Admiral's assault.

"Daren's no longer one of your Marines. The World Government left him no choice but to defect."

"Sengoku, tell me—now that Daren's cut ties with the Marines, with that 'rebel' streak of his... don't you think he'll finally embrace the life of a true pirate, free to sail the seas?"

Her words hit like a bomb.

Sengoku's pupils shrank.

Caught off guard, he took a direct punch from BIG MOM to the face, staggering backward as his cheek visibly swelled.

That brat Daren... a pirate?

He didn't even care about the searing pain on his face—his complexion drained of color, and his heart thundered wildly in his chest as a terrifying image flashed through his mind.

With Daren's monstrous strength and the flight power of the Jiki Jiki no Mi...

The man once seen as a top-tier Admiral and future Fleet Admiral suddenly gulped in dread.

This was another "Flying Pirate" Shiki in the making—a disaster waiting to be unleashed upon the world.

No—

What Daren had shown today... his power, his threat level...

He had already surpassed the Golden Lion, Shiki!

Chapter 727: Volume 4 – Chapter 246: You're Being Foolish, Sir!

From a distance, Sengoku watched the terrifying might of the black-haired giant and felt a suffocating pressure that made even a Marine Admiral like himself shudder. His scalp tingled.

At that moment, Sengoku had to admit—what that madwoman Big Mom said might not be so far-fetched after all.

The World Government had pushed Daren to the brink, and CP0 might have already been dispatched to Marineford. With Daren's vengeful nature, there was no telling what outrageous thing he might do.

If that brat completely lost it and hoisted the pirate flag, Sengoku didn't even want to imagine the consequences.

Just one Golden Lion had been enough to throw Marine Headquarters into chaos. They had no way to stop him, and Marineford had nearly been destroyed in the process.

So what about Daren, whose strength and cunning now surpassed the Shiki?

Cold sweat trickled down Sengoku's back.

If Daren really turned against the Marines...

Or worse—if he fell into darkness and allied with that lunatic Big Mom...

The entire world could be plunged into chaos and fear!

“Damn it... the Five Elders... they’ve lost their minds this time...”

Sengoku cursed inwardly.

Daren had been serving as a Marine just fine. Aside from his petty flaws—power-hungry, greedy, a bit of a lecher—he was practically a model Marine.

That kid had racked up incredible military achievements for the Navy and the World Government. And yet, the Five Elders insisted on pushing him to the other side!

What else could that be but self-sabotage?

Who knew—if they pushed Daren too far, might he actually “submit” to Big Mom?

That woman may be deranged, but she still had a certain allure...

As countless chaotic thoughts raced through his mind, Sengoku let out a helpless sigh and charged back into Big Mom's assault.

...

Deep within the island.

A snowy mountain collapsed.

The towering giant exhaled a burst of hot white mist and hurled the massive Sandworm—torn in half and still writhing—onto the ground like a snake handler flinging a venomous serpent.

Boom!!

The ground within a kilometer was smashed into a massive crater, cracks spidering outward as rubble exploded into the air.

Witnessing such a devastating scene, Saint Saturn and the others involuntarily flinched.

“Something’s seriously wrong with this brat!”

“He can transform into a giant?!”

“We’ve never seen intel like this!”

Monsters exuding a sinister aura encircled the black-haired giant, their deep voices filled with growing unease.

“Nasujuro, how are you holding up?”

Warcury, now in his Houki form, asked coldly.

“Bakotsu” Saint Nasujuro, panting and trembling, forced himself back to his feet. Black smoke surged over his body, quickly mending his wounds.

“I’m... fine.”

At the same time, the enormous Sandworm began to reassemble itself, twisting as it climbed back up.

“Looks like you’ve tapped into a power even we’re unaware of,” Saint Peter growled.

He had never endured such disgrace in his life!

To be torn apart like a bug in front of everyone by this damn brat—unforgivable!

“Stop wasting time.”

Warcury cut in coldly.

“Finish him off now.”

With that, Houki drove his massive limbs into motion and charged straight at the black-haired giant.

Boom...

The earth let out a deep groan.

Daren bared his teeth in a savage grin—and charged in without hesitation!

Boom!

The two giants collided with an earth-shattering crash.

Daren clamped down on Houki's tusks with both hands as his massive foot came crashing down on the beast's skull!

Boom!

Houki's head was stomped straight into the ground. All around them, the earth ripped apart wildly, like countless mole dragons tearing through the soil, turning several kilometers of land into a wasteland.

Bakotsu's figure suddenly appeared behind him, wrapped in a chilling wind—but the giant seemed to have sensed it coming. Without even glancing back, he slammed his elbow backward!

Boom!

It was like a missile exploding midair. The ribs of the skeletal horse were crushed under the immense force, sending it reeling.

At that moment, the Sandworm coiled around the black-haired giant like a massive python, tightening violently.

The giant let out a furious roar, yanked the Sandworm off with one hand, and flung it to the ground. In the blink of an eye, Saturn—now in the form of a giant spider Gyūki—lunged at him.

“Sword!”

The black-haired giant suddenly burst into manic laughter, his blood-streaked hand spreading wide.

A sinister black blur shot out from the void, expanding rapidly in midair. In the blink of an eye, it transformed into a colossal black sword nearly a hundred meters long.

The Cursed Blade—Enma!

A Meito said to be capable of destroying even the underworld!

Daren gripped Enma’s hilt with both hands and brought it down with a savage grin!

A black sword wave shot skyward, slicing through the clouds.

Sssch!!

Green blood sprayed everywhere as Gyūki's massive body was cleaved nearly in half, crashing to the ground with a thunderous boom.

Dust and blood spread in every direction, thick in the air.

Empowered by the abilities of Ivankov and Kuma's Devil Fruits, Daren felt an overwhelming surge of strength!

The stimulating adrenaline from the Horu Horu no Mi, combined with the Nikyu Nikyu no Mi's power to expel pain and fatigue—these two powerful officers under Dragon were the greatest support anyone could ask for on this sea!

"Come on, you beasts."

Daren raised the giant black sword with one hand, glaring down at the four monsters wreathed in black smoke like a war god, grinning fiercely.

"Round two begins!"

“Insolence!”

"You're playing with fire!"

“Wretched insect!”

“ ... ”

The four Five Elders roared in unison and charged in again!

Ivankov and Kuma, who had already retreated several kilometers away, stared dumbfounded at the scene, the corners of their mouths twitching uncontrollably.

“T-this is insane.”

“No human could ever pull this off.”

As the titanic figures clashed across the battlefield—colliding, smashing, and slicing—Ivankov and Kuma stood frozen, unable to believe their eyes.

When they'd first met Dragon-san, they'd already been awed by his power.

But never in their wildest dreams did they imagine someone even stronger and more unhinged than their leader could exist in this world!

This wasn't a fight they had any place in.

What they didn't realize was that the four Five Elders currently locked in combat with Daren were just as shaken—if not more.

He was too strong.

At this moment, the strength this Navy brat was displaying was simply overwhelming.

If it weren't for their "immortal" bodies, they'd have lost long ago.

Yet even with four of them, they couldn't gain the slightest advantage over Daren!

"Daren, you brat—don't think this means you've won!"

Houki roared, ramming into the giant's chest and forcing him back several steps.

Warcury growled with twisted malice,

"Zephyr can't protect your wife!"

Daren grunted from the impact, but his face remained wild with arrogance.

"Don't underestimate that stubborn, purple-haired old man... he's..."

With one hand gripping Houki's skull, Daren drove the giant black sword straight into his eye socket!

Sssch!

Crimson blood gushed like a fountain as Houki howled in pain.

"—the teacher of Rogers Daren!"

Chapter 728: Volume 4 – Chapter 247: Just One Arm

Marine Headquarters, Marineford.

Rain poured relentlessly, shrouding the entire world. Thunder rolled across the pitch-black sky, lightning flashing like cracks in the darkness.

But in this moment, the world's most fortified military stronghold had fallen into an eerie silence, as if someone had pressed the mute button. There were no signs of troop deployment. Patrol ships still followed their predetermined routes, as if the fierce clash that had just erupted outside the high-ranking officers' quarters had never occurred.

Outside the traditional Japanese-style mansion, the surrounding buildings had completely collapsed, turning half the district into a field of rubble.

For reasons unknown, all civilians had already been evacuated.

Everything around was empty and silent—like a graveyard.

Boom!!

Two pitch-black fists collided midair, black lightning crackling through the downpour, sending shockwaves bursting outward. Both figures staggered back, sliding across the rain-soaked ground for over ten meters before coming to a stop.

"Tsk, tsk... You really are the youngest Admiral in Marine history. That close-quarters combat skill, that Haki strength... You're practically a monster."

CPO agent Ghostweed glanced down at his twisted right wrist, showing no hint of pain as he let out a sinister laugh.

“Never thought even my Armament Haki could be suppressed.”

He raised his left hand, grabbed the right wrist, and twisted hard.

Crack!

The fractured joint instantly reset, and fleshy buds began sprouting and swelling from it, like mushrooms multiplying—dense and nauseating.

Once the wrist was fully restored, CPO slowly lifted his gaze, sneering at the former Admiral standing in the rain, gasping for breath.

“I’m just curious, Zephyr-san... how much longer can your body hold up like this?”

He raised both hands, and strange, spore-like flesh continued to grow from his fingertips, pulsing with life and sending chills down the spine.

CP0's eyes narrowed as he stared at Zephyr's left hand, now coated in those same fleshy spores. A ghostly laugh echoed from beneath his mask.

"I ate the Noko Noko no Mi, a Paramecia-type. That arm of yours... I'd say it's just about numb by now, isn't it?"

Zephyr panted heavily, his hot breath turning into clouds of white mist in the cold rain.

He glanced down at his left arm—dark, purplish-black spores had spread from the wrist to the forearm, creeping steadily upward.

What was even more terrifying was that with every inch they advanced, he was losing control. His arm was becoming sluggish—unresponsive.

"So what?"

He suddenly grinned, twisted and mocking.

"That creepy regeneration of yours—it's just another Devil Fruit trick, isn't it?"

"I thought you were immortal or something."

“But with that reckless use of your Devil Fruit... how long do you think your stamina’s going to last?”

CP0, codename Ghostweed, froze for a second before letting out a cold laugh.

“‘Immortality’... that's something only the Five Elders get. I’m not worthy of that privilege.”

“As for how long I can keep going...”

His figure suddenly vanished like a pale phantom.

The torrential rain whipped into chaos.

In the blink of an eye, CP0 had crossed dozens of meters and reappeared at Zephyr’s side, his long leg slicing downward like a steel whip!

Rankyaku: Surprise Assault!

"More than enough to take down a wheezing old man like you!"

Zephyr, who had already activated his Observation Haki, lashed out with a kick—landing before the other even struck!

With a thunderous bang, the rain split apart.

Another Rankyaku clash!

CP0's right leg twisted grotesquely on impact—but he didn't seem to care.

"Zephyr-san, do you know something?"

"My ability fuses with the flesh and blood of my targets, allowing me to keep growing. Which means—even your powerful Haki can't purge it."

"It's thanks to this strange yet potent ability that I was personally promoted by Warcury-sama to the strongest rank in CP0!"

"—'A force comparable to a Marine Admiral'... the strongest shield of the Celestial Dragons!"

"I don't even need to kill you directly. I just have to wait until the spores overtake your arm, then your whole body. Soon, you'll become a beautiful fungus."

His tone turned fanatical, like a zealot of some twisted cult.

"A fungal colony born from the flesh of an Admiral-level warrior... That would be the most beautiful organism in the world!"

"...You're insane."

Zephyr's voice was cold, his face unmoved.

Seeing Zephyr's unshaken expression, CP0 seemed irritated. His smile twisted into a sneer.

"You think you can really protect that woman?"

"You can't stop me. And your batch of greenhorn students? They've got no chance against my subordinates!"

"Everything that happens today... will be just like back then."

"Except this time, you'll be lucky enough to witness Daren's wife and child die right before your eyes!"

Zephyr's pupils instantly shrank into needle points.

Time seemed to freeze.

The roar of the rain filled the silence.

Watching the Marine Admiral's face go pale, Ghostweed burst into crazed laughter.

For CP0, cultivated from birth by the organization, their ultimate goal was to become a top-tier fighting force—"not inferior to a Marine Admiral"!

That ambition was etched into their very bones, like part of their DNA.

And now, to be able to personally slay a Marine Admiral—

It would be the crowning achievement of a lifetime!

Seeing Zephyr's shaken state, he trembled uncontrollably with excitement.

This is it... I was born to defeat you, Zephyr-san!

"No. You're wrong about two things."

In the cold rain, the former Admiral—his purple hair soaked and tangled—spoke in a hoarse voice.

"Unlike you killing machines, I believe in my students more than anyone."

"They have enormous potential."

CP0 snorted with scorn.

"And the other thing?"

"The other thing is..."

Zephyr suddenly looked up.

His bloodshot eyes blazed crimson, seething with rage and killing intent so intense that CP0 instinctively stepped back.

"You people... have no idea what a real Admiral is!"

"An arm? Just an arm..."

Under CP0's stunned gaze, Zephyr suddenly grinned—a wild, defiant grin.

"...I can give you that!"

Without hesitation, he raised his right hand, clamped it over his left shoulder, and twisted fiercely!

Rip!

His entire left arm was torn clean off, hitting the ground with a wet slap.

Blood gushed forth, and Zephyr staggered from the pain.

His face grew paler, grimmer—but his eyes gleamed brighter than ever.

He burst into laughter.

His aura surged, towering like a mountain erupting from the earth!

It was as if the legendary "Black Arm" who once ruled the seas had returned, hoisting the pure-white seagull banner high once more!

"But your life—must be taken by me!"

"Not just for Toki, but for..."

Zephyr's eyes flew open, and his Haki erupted, surging into a dense web of black lightning.

Killing intent exploded!

"—my wife and child!!"

Chapter 729: Volume 4 – Chapter 248: A Life-and-Death Bond

At the same time...

Elsewhere in the rain-drenched streets surrounding the Japanese-style mansion, the battle had reached a fever pitch.

The sharp clashing of fists, feet, and blades rang out endlessly. Sparks burst through the darkness, briefly lighting up the pale, youthful faces caught in the chaos.

Bang!

Two jet-black fists collided with force, sending a wave through the rain.

The Rear Admiral stumbled back, his wooden clogs splashing ripples in the puddled street. A thin line of blood trickled from the corner of his mouth, quickly washed away by the downpour.

"Has the Marine Headquarters run out of capable men? Even trash like you gets promoted to Rear Admiral?"

The CP0 agent in a white suit sneered as he wiped the blood from his own lips, eyes fixed murderously on the scrawny, sly-looking figure before him.

"You're one to talk. Judging by your condition, you're not doing much better than me."

Tokikake spat out a mouthful of blood, full of disdain.

His brown cap had long since been destroyed, probably swept away by the storm. His tangled hair drooped wet and heavy over his face, clinging to his skull. Bloodshot eyes glared out from beneath the mess, and his thin frame looked even more fragile in the pouring rain.

CP0's gaze grew colder.

"You really think you can stop me?"

"Besides, someone of your rank should know very well what kind of power backs us... Interfering with a mission from the Government does you no good."

"Step aside. Pretend you didn't see anything. Once the mission is over, I'll report it to the higher-ups. You'll get all the wealth and glory you want."

"Rear Admiral Tokikake, don't you want women? Just move aside. Whatever kind you want—you can have them all."

"Rogers Daren is already a dead man. There's no reason for you to be buried with him."

Tokikake seemed to consider it, nodding thoughtfully.

"I'll admit, that's a tempting offer."

"So you're saying..."

"I refuse!"

He suddenly pointed and shouted,

"You think you represent the World Government!?"

"You're not even one of the so-called strongest shields of the Celestial Dragons—just a CP0 lapdog. You think you're in a position to negotiate with me!?"

"Yeah, I'm greedy and lustful, but do you really think I'd sell out my comrades for something like that!?"

The CP0's face twisted in fury. He held back his rage and said coldly,

"Whatever Rogers Daren offered you, the Government can pay double!"

"I still refuse."

Tokikake stared back with nothing but contempt.

"Then you're asking to die!"

With a roar, the CP0 lunged again. His speed and strength suddenly surged—clearly using some kind of technique that burned through his life force.

Caught off guard, Tokikake took a full punch to the chest. His ribs caved in with a sickening crunch.

Blood gushed from his mouth as his body was sent flying like a ragdoll, crashing into a nearby building. The impact was so fierce, the structure collapsed in an instant.

"You idiot. You think just because you trained under that washed-up Zephyr for a while, you've become strong?"

The CP0 marched toward the ruins, each step faster than the last.

"You have no idea how much hell we CP agents went through—how much blood, how much death—to reach this level of power!"

"...Is that so?"

A raspy, mocking voice echoed from the rubble.

CPO's expression darkened. He instantly flickered forward, reappearing at the edge of the collapsed building.

"A cold and ruthless guy like Rogers Daren is just using you."

He smirked and raised his fist, ready to deliver the final blow to this stubborn Rear Admiral.

He swung—

Bang!

A thick, black-furred arm, beast-like and clawed, suddenly shot out from the rubble and locked onto his fist with a crushing grip.

CPO's pupils shrank into pinpoints.

The arm, muscular and covered in coarse hair, radiated an overwhelming force that froze him in place. He couldn't move. His fist was completely immobilized!

"Yeah, Daren that bastard is insidious, cunning, and absolutely infuriating... Always stealing my spotlight—it pisses me off."

"But if you're saying he used me? That, I won't accept."

Boom!

A massive, black figure exploded out of the rubble with a thunderous crash.

Tokikake's form had changed dramatically. His body now towered over three meters tall, covered in coarse, steel-hard black hair. His once-skinny limbs bulged with layers of explosive muscle.

Two sharp tusks jutted from his mouth, and a foul stench puffed from his nose and lips. His towering frame cast a looming shadow that completely enveloped the CP0 agent before him.

"A D-Devil Fruit user!?"

The CP0's face twisted in shock.

This Marine... was a Zoan user!?

And judging by that presence—it was no ordinary Zoan!

That suffocating, primal bloodlust... It had to be an extinct ancient beast!

But if this guy had a Devil Fruit power, why didn't he use it from the start?

Why wait until he was half-dead!?

"Confused?"

Tokikake's monstrous face, now grotesque and warped, growled hoarsely. His blood-red eyes were brimming with uncontrollable killing intent.

"I don't usually like showing this form... Honestly, I think it looks way too ugly."

"But!"

The beast, like some hulking wild boar from the dark ages, looked down coldly at the CP0 agent.

"You got two things wrong."

"First, sure, you CP agents go through hellish training and endless killing. I'll give you that."

"But let me say one thing—if hard work was all it took, why would we need geniuses?"

"I'm a genius of the Marine Headquarters... Tokikake!"

With a sudden jerk, the giant boar's thick arm clamped down hard!

Crack!

CP0's wrist shattered, the ulna piercing right through the skin, forcing out a bone-chilling scream.

"And the second thing..."

Tokikake leaned in closer, his brutish face nearly touching the CP0's, voice low and grating.

"I don't know if Daren's been using me or not. But do you even realize the value of what he gave me?"

"W-What?"

The CP0 clenched his jaw, enduring the searing pain, and roared back,

"Whatever he gave you, the Government can offer even mor—"

Tokikake's face suddenly turned deadly serious. Word by word, he cut him off:

"When I was at my lowest, starving and broke... he gave me an unlimited black card to the Pleasure District."

The CP0 froze like he'd been struck by lightning.

That... was the answer?

"—That was the happiest time of my entire life, as a goddamn genius!"

"You call that being used? That's a bond forged through life and death!"

"And now, you want me to betray Daren and let you lay a finger on his wife and kid!?"

"What the hell do you think I am!?"

The towering beast roared in fury.

"Even a freeloader like me who never pays for a damn thing still has principles!"

"You've just insulted a top-tier VIP of Pleasure District... in the worst way possible!!"

Chapter 730: Volume 4 – Chapter 249: The Blooming of the Marines

Cold rain lashed against her smooth cheeks, and for a moment, the world fell silent—like a grave deep enough to bury a person's heart.

Raindrops slid down her back from her high ponytail, sending a chill straight to her bones.

Faced with the terrifying and frigid figure before her, Gion could feel her hands trembling uncontrollably as blood seeped from the corner of her mouth.

She was close to losing her grip on her blade.

This man's swordsmanship was sharp and unrelenting, every strike aiming straight for her vital points, leaving not the slightest room for error—completely disregarding her rank or identity.

Gion had only ever seen such fearsome swordplay from one person before.

No, not a man. More accurately, a boy.

A boy with hawk-like eyes who once claimed he lost an arm to Daren.

"Tsk, tsk, tsk... I never imagined I'd be so lucky—getting to kill the exquisite and beautiful 'Flower of the Marines' with my own hands... Just thinking about it makes me tremble with excitement!"

The CP0 agent let out a twisted laugh, his wolfish green eyes glinting with hunger. He stared greedily at the Rear Admiral's figure, her form even more alluring in the rain, and licked his cracked lips.

"You're about at your limit, aren't you?"

"Why bother with meaningless resistance? Just drop your sword... I promise I'll make it quick."

“I’ll use the fastest sword technique of my life to gently graze your smooth, delicate throat...”

“I swear, you won’t feel a thing.”

“That way, your perfect face will remain just as perfect... Hahahaha!!”

His laughter grew more deranged, and the scarred face twisted into something barely human.

Pervert.

Lunatic.

Gion’s eyes grew colder as the words echoed in her mind.

She had long been aware of the World Government’s methods in training assassins and agents, but the level of depravity in the man before her was still beyond her expectations.

Raised under harsh discipline, molded through suffering, and denied normal social interaction, these operatives often developed twisted, obsessive desires.

Drunkenness, lechery, split personalities, paranoia, compulsive behavior... Gion had even heard of elite agents who harbored necrophilic obsessions.

And the man standing before her was clearly among the most deranged of them all.

“What’s the matter? Changed your mind?”

Noticing the chill in her gaze, the CPO suddenly exploded in fury, letting out a roar like a wild beast.

“You think your protection means anything?!”

“That woman in the mansion behind you... she’s Daren’s woman!”

“If the intel’s right, you’re in love with that bastard, aren’t you?”

“Aren’t you jealous?”

“Someone like Rogers Daren isn’t even worth your blade!”

“Open your eyes, Rear Admiral Gion!”

“So what if she’s carrying his child? Didn’t he just coldly abandon her at headquarters to die?”

“If he had even an ounce of manhood, he’d be the one standing here, not you!”

CP0 grinned wickedly, staring hard at Gion’s face, searching for sorrow, disappointment—maybe even despair.

But he found nothing.

In fact, it was the opposite.

That Rear Admiral, a woman of unmatched beauty, presence, and talent, drew a deep breath—then, slowly, her lips curled into a striking smile.

In the cold downpour and shadowed world, her smile bloomed like a dazzling rose—brilliant, radiant, and breathtaking.

“...What are you laughing at?”

The maniacal smile on CP0's face gradually disappeared.

"Am I wrong?"

Gion slowly exhaled and smiled slightly.

"You're right about one thing."

"I am indeed jealous."

"But what I'm jealous of is that Toki-neesan was able to conceive his child, while I haven't."

"But you're wrong about one thing."

"The reason Daren isn't here isn't because he lacks the responsibility of a man."

"It's because he's probably facing an opponent who's far stronger and more terrifying than trash like you."

"Most importantly, unlike you... he deeply trusts us—his comrades."

Gion raised her head and stared proudly at CP0, whose face was gradually turning pale.

“He firmly believes... that we can protect his wife and child.”

“Even more than we believe in ourselves.”

“So I have no intention of betraying that trust.”

CP0 narrowed his eyes and suddenly grinned.

“Then there’s nothing we can do...”

Whoosh!

His figure vanished like a pale ghost from where he stood.

It was as if a phantom swept across the ground, dragging a curtain of rain in its wake.

In an instant, the CPO appeared before Gion, his twisted face flushed with madness, driving a blade straight toward her chest!

“...Then I’ll just cut you into piec—”

The smile on his face suddenly froze.

Clang!!

Sparks flew.

A hand—

A hand that didn’t belong to a human being—clamped tightly around the sharp blade.

Slender and long, the claws had razor-like nails, and the back of the hand was covered in soft, fluttering fur.

CPO’s pupils shrank to their limit. He raised his head and what he saw froze him in place.

A black ponytail cascaded like a waterfall, and from the roots, a seductive peach-pink hue began to spread, quickly overtaking the glossy black strands.

The beautiful face of the Rear Admiral began to shift dramatically—her jaw and mouth elongated, her features softened, and her figure grew even more graceful and full, exuding alluring charm.

Peach-colored fur swirled in the rain, and from her tailbone emerged a fluffy, short rabbit tail.

A delicate, enchanting allure sparkled in her blood-red eyes, like a mystical spirit meant to beguile the world!

“Zoan... this ability...”

CPO’s eyes widened.

“My swordsmanship may be inferior to yours. But unfortunately for you, I don’t plan to win with swordsmanship today.”

Gion smiled calmly.

That smile held a beauty beyond description, enough to bewitch all living beings.

Even the CP0 couldn't help but freeze in astonishment.

In that moment—

Gion's hand no longer trembled as she gripped her sword.

The Meito Konpira slashed upward, and a pink sword flash burst forth, lighting the world.

Hiss!!

A pillar of blood exploded from the CP0's chest.

His body was flung backward, pupils dimming, confusion flooding his gaze.

"The Flower of the Marines"...

Tonight, it bloomed in full—revealing its thorns to the world!