

One Piece 701

Chapter 701 This is... an Order!

"What... what kind of ability is that..."

"He blew his head off with just one glance..."

"It's unbelievable..."

"That's the highest authority in the government... the Five Elders!"

"..."

The Marine generals were shaken to the core, unable to believe what they had just witnessed.

They had never heard of such a bizarre and overwhelming ability existing on these seas.

Before they knew it, a trace of reverence crept into the eyes of the senior and mid-ranking Marine officers as they looked at the old man in the black flat cap.

Cold sweat beaded down their backs, and their scalps tingled.

Without any preparation—if Saturn-sama's cold, oppressive gaze were to fall on them—could they really survive it?

They didn't dare to think any further. Unbidden, a line from ancient religious lore surfaced in their minds:

—"Do not look directly at God."

The Marines stood frozen, trembling, their expressions conflicted.

"So this is the supreme authority of the World Government? It's... really terrifying."

Borsalino looked genuinely surprised, then turned his head.

"Don't you agree, Sakazuki?"

Sakazuki, standing beside him, wore a dark expression. His gaze remained fixed on the tall figure of the Vice Admiral at the bow of the official ship.

It was as if Saturn-sama's overwhelming presence had nothing to do with him at all.

Borsalino blinked in surprise, then gave a teasing smile.

He cast a glance toward another direction not far off.

There stood Kuzan, dazed, also watching the receding figure of the Vice Admiral. The fiery spirit he once had seemed lost, his eyes rimmed red and filled with bloodshot veins.

"I'm really not used to this..."

Borsalino scratched his head and muttered helplessly.

...

As the World Government's flagship entered the blockade, the other three official ships loaded with young Celestial Dragons gradually appeared on the distant sea.

Escorted by Marine warships, the ships steadily entered the military-restricted zone of Philseque Island.

Compared to the silence on the first ship, the elite Celestial Dragons on the remaining vessels were buzzing with energy—arrogant and carefree, chatting and laughing, clearly thrilled about the upcoming "hunt."

Once all the ships flying the World Government flag passed into the Marines' blockade and began to fade from view, the Marines finally exhaled in relief, their strained nerves slowly relaxing.

Especially those Marines who had kept their heads down the entire time—they exchanged glances, each seeing lingering fear and tension in the others' eyes.

The World Government had ruled these seas for 800 years. Its monstrous, suffocating authority was deeply imprinted in the hearts of all. Under such extreme oppression, the awe accumulated over centuries couldn't be easily erased.

Particularly within the Marines—an enforcement institution built on absolute obedience—independent thought and personal autonomy often fell short of even the civilian norm.

For many, that deep-rooted reverence for the World Government was nearly unshakable.

To them, it was preferable to return to the battlefield and fight the Beasts Pirates or the Big Mom Pirates... than remain here, enduring the arrogant presence of these Celestial Dragons.

"But what exactly is our mission this time?"

"Who knows? The only thing we've been told is to blockade Philseque Island."

"Even Admiral Sengoku and those monsters have been dispatched... Could there be a Great Pirate hiding on the island?"

"Come on, be serious. If there really were a powerful Great Pirate here, there's no way the Celestial Dragons would be anywhere near this place."

The Marines aboard the warships murmured among themselves, confusion written all over their faces.

"Judging by the way they looked, it seemed like they were going hunting..."

"Hunting? But Philseque Island is covered in snow all year round. What prey could possibly be there?"

"Even Saturn, one of the Five Elders, showed up in person..."

"And what about Vice Admiral Daren? Why is he on a World Government ship? Wasn't he still in the New World intercepting Whitebeard's crew?"

"He's probably about to get promoted. Didn't you see him sharing the same ship with one of the Five Elders?"

"Escorting the Celestial Dragons... that's a job usually reserved for an Admiral!"

"So you're saying... could it be..."

Hiss!! A wave of gasps rippled through the crowd.

"There's no doubt. Our Vice Admiral Daren is probably going to be promoted straight to Admiral!"

"How enviable... He's only 23, right? I think the youngest Admiral before was Zephyr, and even he wasn't promoted until he was 38!"

"Well, it makes sense. Just look at Vice Admiral Daren's record—he's taken down pirates like Byrnni World, the 'World Destroyer,' and even Shiki the Golden Lion."

"Still, that would make him promoted faster than Sakazuki-san... and suddenly he'd be Sakazuki-san's superior..."

"You think Sakazuki-san will take that well?"

"Shh... quiet! Vice Admiral Sakazuki's temper is no joke. If he hears you, you'll be in real trouble!"

...

The Marines continued their hushed speculations, caught between doubt over the island blockade and envy toward Daren's likely promotion to Admiral.

"Quiet, everyone!"

Suddenly, Sengoku's cold, thunderous voice exploded across the sea, carried far by the icy wind.

"I know all of you are curious about the details of this mission—but I have nothing to tell you!"

"You don't need to know what's going to happen on that island. Your mission is to blockade it. No one is to enter or leave. If anyone tries to break through... kill them on the spot—no questions asked!"

The Admiral's expression darkened, his tone even colder than the wind whipping across the sea.

"For the next twenty-four hours, no matter what sounds you hear, ignore them. Stand your ground. Remain on alert."

"Until I give the order—no one is allowed to abandon their post!"

As his words fell, thousands of Marines across the massive warships straightened, raised their arms in salute, and shouted in unison:

"Everything for justice!!"

Borsalino watched the fierce show of discipline, the corner of his mouth curling into a mocking smile.

"For justice... huh?"

Sengoku shot him a glance, then looked away.

He strode quickly toward Kuzan, who stood frozen in place, eyes vacant.

Lowering his voice, Sengoku spoke through gritted teeth.

"Especially you, Kuzan..."

"Without my permission, you are not to leave this warship."

"This is... an order!"

Chapter The Hunt Begins!

Philseque Island.

The vast, snow-capped mountain range stretched like the spine of a colossal white dragon, disappearing into the horizon with an awe-inspiring majesty.

At the base of the mountains, a tall platform had been hastily constructed.

Though temporary, it still appeared grand and imposing, with gilded drapes hanging from both sides.

The "cross" flag representing the authority of the World Government flapped proudly in the wind, rustling crisply in the icy air.

The elite Celestial Dragons who had come to participate in the hunt had already assembled here, each holding exquisitely crafted weapons that gleamed with a cold luster beneath the reflection of the snow.

Standing off to one side, Daren watched the scene quietly, his eyes growing colder by the second.

As if reminded of something, he took out a pocket watch and checked the time.

Soon, the distant rumble of wheels crushing snow drew his attention.

Emerging slowly from the snow-laden forest were muscular slaves, bare-chested and shackled at the wrists, struggling to drag a series of heavy carts across the frozen ground.

Blood dripped from their bodies, and their bare feet had turned a deep purple-black from frostbite. Even if they survived, their feet would likely be beyond saving.

On top of those heavy carts sat massive black iron cages. Inside, trembling young faces peeked out, staring in terror at the hundreds of Celestial Dragons brimming with excitement. Their entire bodies trembled uncontrollably.

Slave traders and World Government officials sat atop the carts, cracking iron whips in hand and grinning cruelly as they drove the slaves forward.

"Hahaha, not bad, not bad!"

"Looks like we've got a bonus round!"

"These must be the precious little 'rabbits.'"

"At least now the game will be much more interesting."

...

The Celestial Dragons dressed in hunting gear cackled maliciously as they examined the figures inside the cages, as if picking out their favorite prey.

"Barbo-sama!"

A slave trader wearing a top hat and jeweled rings on both hands scurried over in fear, kneeling on the ground with an obsequious smile as he saluted the red-haired Celestial Dragon.

"I've gathered a few interesting specimens just for you, milord. They're all from the Amazon Lily Empire."

At those words, Daren frowned slightly.

Barbo had little interest in speaking to filthy trash like this, but he'd been keeping a close eye on the Vice Admiral—and had keenly noticed the subtle change in Daren's demeanor.

Amused, he chuckled lowly.

"Bring them over. Let me have a look."

The slave trader flushed with excitement and quickly called out.

Soon, a guard dragged over three girls, all with shackled wrists.

The moment the three appeared, everyone present seemed to stop breathing, their mouths inexplicably dry.

Some of the more impulsive Celestial Dragons even felt their trousers stir with arousal.

The two girls trailing behind looked utterly terrified, but the black-haired girl at the front possessed a face and bearing that radiated breathtaking beauty.

Though she appeared only seven or eight years old, she already had the features of a budding beauty—bright eyes, perfect teeth, porcelain skin. Her uniquely styled princess-cut hair added to the captivating image, leaving everyone stunned in the midst of the swirling snow.

"Damn!!"

"I want her!"

"Barbo! Give her to me! I'll trade anything!"

"Back off, all of you! She's mine!"

...

The Celestial Dragons flushed red as they fought to claim her, eyes filled with unrestrained greed and lust. Even their breathing had become ragged.

As so-called "gods" with the right to everything, their lives revolved around surpassing boundaries, chasing ever more intense pleasures and desires.

And yet—what kind of beauty, what kind of plaything hadn't they already seen?

But this black-haired girl... she was different.

Even those Celestial Dragons who had long since grown bored of such amusements felt their hearts race the moment they saw her.

A girl like this, if properly trained and molded, would become the most exquisite toy in the world.

Daren, too, was momentarily stunned.

But not because of her looks.

It was because he recognized who she was.

Six months ago, he had used Stussy's intelligence network to search for this girl.

The future captain of the Kuja Pirates. The Empress of Amazon Lily. One of the Shichibukai... the "Pirate Empress" Boa Hancock.

She had ended up here?

No... Even though her mature appearance made her look eight or nine years old, Daren knew that at this moment, Hancock should be only five or six.

"Shut up, all of you."

Barbo sneered as he silenced the others.

"This one's mine. What, do you want to make enemies of the Figarland family?"

As he spoke, he cast a sidelong glance at Daren, the corners of his lips curling into a cold smirk.

He stepped forward and gently lifted the black-haired girl's chin with the tip of his rapier. She met his gaze defiantly.

The moment Barbo saw her face clearly, his eyes flickered and his expression shifted.

Such beauty...

He swallowed hard, then turned to the slave trader and nodded in satisfaction.

"Very good. I like this gift a lot."

"Go see my personal administrator to collect your reward."

The slave trader beamed with joy, taking one last reluctant glance at Hancock before quickly withdrawing.

"As for the three of them..."

Barbo glanced playfully at Daren, then suddenly said,

"Let's make them one of the prizes for the winner of this competition. How about it?"

The moment those words fell, the Celestial Dragons all held their breath. Then their eyes flared red as they tightened their grip on their weapons.

"Of course! No problem!"

The Celestial Dragon officiator, flushed with excitement, grabbed the microphone and shouted,

"Now then—let me explain the rules!"

"Eight rare-class prey! Each is worth 10,000 points!"

"Three hundred excellent-class prey! Each is worth 2,000 points!"

"As for the rest of the island's common prey—every confirmed kill will earn 500 points!"

"This tournament has some truly luxurious rewards. Besides a Devil Fruit, the overall winner will be offered an apprenticeship with the God's Knights, with full training to become a reserve officer!"

"In one hour... the hunt will officially begin!!"

He raised the microphone high and laughed loudly.

"Did you hear that?"

"To the 50,000 civilians of Philseque Island—miserable ants that you are... you're all prey in this grand hunting tournament!"

"Run! This game will last one full week!"

"And if you manage to survive until the end... the great Celestial Dragons will grant you freedom and a new life!"

The officiator's voice echoed across the island through surveillance Den Den Mushi installed at every corner, reverberating through the frozen air.

Chapter 703 Sorry to Disappoint You, Saturn-sama

At that moment, all the people of Philseque Island knelt in terror, their faces filled with unprecedented despair as maniacal, savage laughter echoed through the air.

The Celestial Dragons... those self-proclaimed "gods" above all...

were actually going to hunt them like animals!?

One second.

Two seconds.

Three seconds...

Finally, the slaves brought here from all corners of the world began to react.

Trembling with fear, they stumbled out of their unlocked cages and broke into sobs as they ran for their lives!

The clatter of chains dragging across the ground rang out nonstop.

They bolted in all directions—some toward the snow-capped mountains, others into the jungle, some just running blindly like headless flies.

Overwhelming fear and a desperate will to live pushed them to use every last ounce of strength... to escape!

Even though they knew the Celestial Dragons' words couldn't be trusted...

Even though they knew surviving a massacre like this was nearly impossible...

They had no choice!

Time ticked by.

Half an hour passed.

Bang!

With a gunshot fired into the sky by the Celestial Dragon judge, the bloodthirsty crowd of Celestial Dragons could no longer hold back.

Laughing madly, they grabbed their weapons and charged forward!

"Hahaha!!"

"Kill!"

"First place is mine!!"

"I want that black-haired girl!"

"..."

Insanity, chaos, frenzy—all erupted with the crack of gunfire.

The bloody curtain of this deadly game had fully risen!

Soon, most of the Celestial Dragons had left the platform, heading off on their hunt.

At that moment, Barbo Saint strolled calmly over to the Marine Vice Admiral and smiled.

"So, Vice Admiral Daren, what are you waiting for?"

"You've been checking your pocket watch ever since you landed."

Daren looked at him calmly.

"Was the lesson earlier still not enough, Barbo-sama?"

"Tch!"

Barbo suddenly let out a laugh.

"You really think Saturn-sama was standing up for you just now? Don't flatter yourself."

His expression twisted with malice as he leaned in close and chuckled darkly.

"I hear you're called the 'King of the North Blue'... and that in the North Blue, there's a saying—'you get the job done if you're paid,' right?"

"I'm honestly curious. In ten minutes, when the hunt truly starts... what kind of face will you be making then?"

The towering man, nearly two meters tall, lifted a hand and mockingly patted Daren on the cheek.

"You take the money, but you can't deliver. You can't even protect the civilians under your command... Tsk, tsk, how amusing. Hahahahaha!!"

He burst into wild laughter, as if washing away the disgrace he'd suffered earlier.

"Just stand there and watch, oh mighty Vice Admiral Daren."

Barbo stepped back and gave a noble's elegant bow, smiling with a hint of scorn.

"...With your Marines and your laughable sense of justice."

With that, he spun his Western sword in a flourish and turned to walk toward the distant jungle.

The Celestial Dragons nearby looked on with amusement, clearly enjoying the spectacle of mocking a powerful man.

After a few steps, Barbo paused. As if remembering something, he turned and smirked.

"Oh, right. Do you know why Saturn-sama insisted on having you come ashore earlier?"

"It's because he wanted you to watch all of this unfold with your own eyes!"

"One civilian after another dying in front of you—and you, unable to do a thing. Worse, you'll be escorting us, the 'murderers'... That helpless despair will devour you alive!"

"That old bastard... just wants to see how far you'll go before you break!!"

Snap!

Daren's pocket watch suddenly snapped shut.

"Are you done?"

He raised his head, his expression calmer than ever, and spoke softly.

Snowflakes, light as feathers, drifted down from the sky.

Looking into the Vice Admiral's emotionless eyes, the smile on Barbo's face suddenly froze.

The Marine's figure vanished on the spot like a ghost.

In that instant, a chilling sense of dread swept over Barbo like a massive shadow looming from above.

Could it be...

His eyes widened. Instinct honed by years of training made him swing his sword reflexively!

Clang!

A hand sliced across the air, effortlessly severing the Western sword mid-swing—and continued, cleaving into the flesh of the red-haired Celestial Dragon without slowing.

Barbo's pupils contracted.

Shff!

A severed arm, still gripping the sword, flew upward through the flurry of snow, blood trailing through the sky like a crimson arc.

The sudden turn of events made the surrounding Celestial Dragons pale in shock. Their gazes, once amused, twisted into disbelief—then fear.

"You... You dare hurt me!?"

Barbo roared in agony, staggering backward. Blood spurted from the gaping wound where his arm had been, dotting the snow like blooming red plum blossoms.

He couldn't believe it.

This Marine... was insane!

All he did was provoke him a little, and the man had completely lost control!?

But as he locked eyes again with the Marine's indifferent stare, the fury burning in Barbo's chest was snuffed out in an instant—replaced by something far worse.

Terror.

True killing intent!

This lunatic actually intends to kill me!

"No, don't come any closer..."

"My uncle won't let you get away with this."

Watching the blood-streaked Vice Admiral approach, Barbo felt true fear for the first time in his life.

But the Vice Admiral didn't stop.

His figure vanished once more, right before Barbo's wide, trembling eyes.

Whoosh!

The snow was whipped into the air by a sudden gust of wind.

"No!! Saturn-sama, save me!!"

Barbo's fear exploded. His courage shattered, and he scrambled to flee, screaming madly as his mind gave in to panic.

Crackle!

A magic circle suddenly flared to life in the snow nearby, swirling with black flames and crackling lightning.

At its center lay a strange pentagram. Around it were the black numbers "5," emanating a sinister, mysterious aura that surged into the air.

The moment he saw it, Barbo's eyes lit up with hope.

"Hahaha—"

His laughter stopped dead.

Shff!

Scalding blood burst from his chest.

An indescribable pain—sharp, numb, consuming—overwhelmed all his senses.

He froze, slowly lowering his head.

A gaping, bloody hole stared back at him from the center of his chest.

And when he looked up again...

His eyes met those of the Vice Admiral once more.

That same cold, indifferent gaze.

As if he'd done something no more significant than brushing off dust.

In his hand, Daren held a still-beating, blood-drenched heart.

His heart.

The heart of a god.

"Heh... heh... you..."

Blood poured from Barbo's mouth and nose as his voice broke into meaningless mutters.

His pupils darkened. In his blurring vision, he saw the Vice Admiral turn away—calm, unhurried.

He killed me... without even glancing at me.

He never once acknowledged me.

A wave of absurdity washed away the last of Barbo Saint's thoughts.

Darkness swallowed him.

The red-haired Celestial Dragon's body collapsed onto the snow.

Black flames danced. Crimson lightning crackled.

Daren slowly turned, facing the aged figure now emerging from the center of the magic circle.

On his sharp-featured, handsome face, a faint smile appeared—for the first time since stepping foot on the island.

"I'm sorry to disappoint you, Saturn-sama."

He clenched his hand.

Snap!

The warm, beating heart burst in his grip, spraying blood across the Vice Admiral's face—adding a savage, demonic edge to his calm demeanor.

The Vice Admiral stared into Saturn-sama's dark expression.

"Me... I really can't stand the way you Celestial Dragons look."

"...It makes it hard not to just..."

He grinned.

"Wipe every last one of you out."

Chapter 704 The Whole World Fell Silent

The world was deathly silent, like a grave that buried the hearts of men.

Heavy snow poured down from the overcast sky as the sea of clouds above Philseque Island gathered. Billowing waves of dark clouds rolled and surged like a storm-tossed ocean.

Tick... tick...

Hot blood dripped steadily from the fingertips of the Vice Admiral's right hand, spreading into a glowing red stain on the snow at his feet.

Not far off, every single Celestial Dragon stood frozen in place, wide-eyed and slack-jawed, their faces filled with disbelief.

A bone-deep chill surged up from their soles, raced along their spines, and numbed their minds, making their scalps tingle.

Their bodies felt like they had plunged into an icy abyss—colder than even the frigid winds of the North Blue.

"What... did he just do...?"

"Figarland Barbo... is dead."

"He actually killed Figarland Barbo!!"

"He's insane!!"

"That Marine is finished!!"

"..."

Gasps of horror erupted, swelling into terrified and hysterical screams.

Still young and inexperienced, they simply couldn't believe someone had dared to kill a Celestial Dragon—especially right in front of one of the Five Elders, Saint Jaygarcia Saturn!

...

Snow drifted gently onto Saturn's black flat cap and cloak, the contrast making it all the more stark.

He leaned on his mottled cane, not sparing a single glance at Barbo's corpse. His eyes, cold and grim, locked onto the blood-soaked Marine Vice Admiral before him. Black lightning coiled around the magic circle at his feet.

"You have truly disappointed me, Daren."

He exhaled slowly, his hoarse voice echoing in the silence.

"You held out for so long... why not endure a little longer?"

His aged, sunken eyes were clouded with confusion.

"As far as I know, you were once responsible for protecting this island. But you're no longer the Admiral of the North Blue. There's no need to waste your time, energy—even your future and your life—for these insects."

"Your strength and abilities have earned our respect. You've long transcended the category of 'insects' and 'ants.'"

"In other words, you are no longer of the same species as the slaves and insects on this island."

As he spoke, wisps of black flame began to burn around him like smoke, slowly wrapping around his entire body.

A suffocating pressure spread outward with the emergence of the black smoke, blanketing the surroundings.

"And yet now, for the sake of some insignificant insects, you would pit yourself against a power you cannot resist... Do you truly believe that is a wise decision?"

Daren stared silently at Saturn-sama, then suddenly smirked.

He shook the blood from his hand, pulled out a gold-embossed cigar from his coat, and bit down on it—brazenly, in front of the Five Elders and the watching Celestial Dragons.

"I don't get all that insect talk."

"If I take the money, I do the job. That's the rule of the North Blue... a rule I set myself."

"As for this power you say I can't resist..."

He blinked, eyes gradually lighting up with a fierce, feverish gleam, his grin growing ever more reckless.

"The more you talk like that, the more I feel the urge to fight you!"

That brat... Saturn-sama was momentarily stunned.

And in that instant—

"But before that..."

The Vice Admiral suddenly grinned and vanished like a phantom.

His sinister laughter rang out again—this time from nearby.

So fast!

Saturn's pupils narrowed as he whipped his head around.

"No... damn it...!"

An elite Celestial Dragon in hunting garb shrieked in terror as he was lifted off the ground, held high by the neck in the Vice Admiral's single bloodstained hand. His legs flailed frantically in the air.

"Let—"

Before he could finish the sentence, Daren's fingers clenched tight.

Crack!

The man's neck snapped cleanly.

Shff!

Blood burst forth in a high-pressure spray. The Celestial Dragon's wide-eyed head soared into the air, tracing a vivid arc of crimson through the falling snow.

As if feeling some power coursing into him, the Vice Admiral's blood-covered face twisted into an expression of pure ecstasy.

The ghastly, savage sight sent the young Celestial Dragons—most of whom had never witnessed such violence in their lives—into a frenzy of screams.

Overwhelmed with terror, they staggered back, their faces pale, and fled in all directions.

"He's crazy!"

"He really wants to kill us all!?"

"Run!"

"This madman!!"

"..."

The Celestial Dragons had never witnessed anything like this. They scrambled and stumbled away, desperate to escape the terrifying god of death.

As for the so-called Noble Hunting Competition—forget it!

If they didn't run now, they'd be the madman's next prey!

Screams, frantic footsteps, and panicked gasps echoed endlessly at the base of the snowy mountain.

...

"It seems you've made your choice. In the end, you're still just a worm."

Despite watching two Celestial Dragons die right in front of him, Saturn didn't even blink.

He slowly narrowed his aged eyes, and the scar beside them began to redden slightly—fueled by a surging, restrained rage.

"Obeying foolish, outdated rules and chasing after naïve freedom... is utterly meaningless."

"Is that so? Are rules and will truly meaningless?"

Daren casually tossed the Celestial Dragon's corpse aside, sneering coldly.

"If they were meaningless, then why go through all this trouble to push me to this point?"

"You dangled power and status in front of me as bait, deliberately arranged the hunting tournament here in the North Blue, and even assigned me the escort mission—forcing me to watch helplessly as the civilians under my protection were butchered..."

"Grinding down my edges, eroding my will, suppressing my spirit... Isn't that exactly what you lofty Five Elders have been trying to achieve all along?"

Saturn replied coolly,

"As a Marine, what need do you have for willpower or spirit?"

"A soldier's duty is simple—follow orders and carry them out without personal emotion. Nothing more."

"What a shame. Worthless things must be destroyed."

Suddenly, his eyes narrowed. A demonic red gleam burst forth from them.

Explosive Gaze!

BOOM!

An explosion erupted.

Daren didn't even have time to react before his entire head seemed to be struck by a massive cannon, swallowed by a storm of black smoke and flames.

Saturn shook his head.

"You brought this upon yourself, Daren."

His technique was subtle and lethal—so discreet that even top-tier fighters couldn't anticipate or react in time, much less defend with Armament Haki in advance.

No one had ever survived this move.

"If you had just endured a little longer, you could've had everything you wanted."

He murmured with a trace of regret, just as he turned to leave.

...

"Is that so?"

A low, rumbling laugh came from behind.

Saturn paused, frowned, and turned around.

From within the smoke and flames, the figure of the Marine Vice Admiral slowly emerged. Not a scratch marked his sharply defined, handsome face.

"Your ability's not bad. At least it helped light my cigar."

A shadow crossed Saturn's expression.

The pinnacle of Indestructible Body...

"Saturn-sama, you're actually right. A lot of things can be endured, and they'll pass."

Daren took a slow drag from the cigar lit by the explosion, exhaling smoke with a wicked grin.

"I thought I could endure it. But I didn't expect you all to keep pushing... pushing so far, even stepping on my face. So I thought it over and realized—this isn't right."

"Because the more I gave in and retreated, the more I noticed a serious problem."

"My Conqueror's Haki kept weakening. It even started to lose its effect."

"Until just now... when I finally couldn't hold it back anymore, and killed that disgusting Barbo-sama."

He spread his arms wide, eyes blazing with defiance as he stared at the World Government's supreme authority.

Then, he simply clenched his fists.

Zzzzz!

Surging black-and-red lightning erupted from his body in near frenzy, flooding the space around him.

The sky shifted. The wind howled like a furnace from hell.

A terrifying aura, like the depths of an abyssal sea, burst outward in every direction across the island—sweeping up snow in a storm of white chaos.

Amid the thunder and lightning, the Marine Vice Admiral roared with wild laughter.

"At that moment, I felt... the whole world had fallen silent."

Conqueror's Haki +0.2!

Chapter 705 This Is... My Hunting Ground!

Lightning tore through the sky. Thunder roared across the land.

Bolts of lightning, visible to the naked eye, shot upward like a storm, shaking the surrounding jungle and snow-capped peaks.

Daren slowly stretched out his arms. Black and red lightning erupted from his fingertips, distorting and blurring the very air around him.

His fingers trembled slightly, as though even he couldn't fully control the power bursting from within.

An indescribable rush surged through his eyes.

Killing two Celestial Dragons had already boosted his Conqueror's Haki by 0.2!

That meant... each Celestial Dragon was worth an average increase of 0.1.

And right now, how many Celestial Dragons—those World Nobles—were active in the hunting grounds on Philseque Island?

More than 500.

Even if the effect of each kill gradually diminished, like the inevitable cooldown after a euphoric high, the heads of 500 Celestial Dragon pigs would be more than enough to raise his Conqueror's Haki—currently at 81—well past the 90 mark!

...

Watching the Vice Admiral unleash his Conqueror's Haki like a man possessed, a rare hint of gravity appeared on Saturn-sama's typically aloof and arrogant face.

The overwhelming pressure radiating from this young Marine was so intense, even he felt short of breath.

And then—Daren moved again.

His figure vanished like a flash of lightning, moving so fast it left afterimages rippling through the air.

In less than a hundredth of a second, he had caught up with a fleeing blond-haired Celestial Dragon.

"No! Don't kill me! I'll give you anything!!"

The blond Celestial Dragon screamed in horror, eyes bloodshot. In his panic, he grabbed a nearby companion and shoved him toward Daren.

"You bastard!!"

The black-haired Celestial Dragon who was pushed forward shrieked, his eyes flashing with rage. He spun around and stabbed at Daren with a spear!

Zzzzz...

A metallic screech rang out as the spearhead scraped across Daren's neck, throwing off a burst of sparks.

But when he saw that the spear hadn't even left a mark, the Celestial Dragon froze as if struck by lightning. A numbing cold ran through his entire body.

"M-monster..."

In the next instant, a hand clamped down on his skull.

"No!!"

The black-haired Celestial Dragon let out a blood-curdling scream.

Those who had fled farther away instinctively turned back at the sound.

And what they saw nearly made their souls flee from their bodies.

One of their own—Saint Harkness, a noble from one of the powerful families of the Holy Land—was being held by the head.

The Marine Vice Admiral's hand gently pressed down.

Then—

BOOM!

Saint Harkness' once-handsome head exploded into a cloud of blood mist, and under Daren's monstrous strength, the rest of his body detonated with it.

Thick gore splattered across the snow in a chilling display.

Only a pair of legs remained, bones and flesh exposed, still upright in the snow. The gold-embroidered hunting boots on his feet were soaked through with blood and tissue.

Conqueror's Haki +0.06!

Feeling his thoughts becoming clearer, his mind freer, and his mood euphorically calm, Daren didn't miss a beat.

He reached up and caught the silver spear that had been falling through the air.

Under the stunned, horrified gaze of the fleeing Celestial Dragons, the Vice Admiral stepped forward—like an ancient god of war—and hurled the spear with all his might.

BOOM!!

The silver spear burst forth with a sharp, deafening crack, whistling at such speed that it lit up with visible sparks.

It shot toward the blond Celestial Dragon who had started it all.

Thunk!

The spear punched straight through his heart, and without losing momentum, pierced through dozens of massive trees before vanishing into the distance.

"Hah... hah... hah..."

The blond Celestial Dragon collapsed to his knees with a dull thud, blood pouring from his nose and mouth. His face froze in a mask of utter terror, pupils rapidly dilating into lifelessness.

Even in death, he couldn't comprehend why those idiot Five Elders had pushed this demon so far.

"Hoo..."

Daren exhaled a long breath of white smoke, the cigar glowing at his lips. His eyes gleamed with a wild satisfaction, and it felt like a scorching current surged from deep within his chest, threatening to erupt in a primal howl toward the sky.

Conqueror's Haki +0.07!

This was the fastest, easiest increase he'd ever experienced in his entire life.

No life-or-death struggles.

No brutal brawls that left him bloodied and broken.

No stabbings, no clubbings.

No poison gas, no viruses, no freezing winds, no electricity, no searing heat.

Just the effortless slaughter of a pack of Celestial Dragon pigs who should've been struck down by divine judgment long ago—and his Conqueror's Haki kept rising and rising...

What kind of miserable life had he been living before this?

Eating nothing but garbage rations...

And he even had to pick a fight with Roger one-on-one!?

This damn Celestial Dragon sanctuary, Mary Geoise, was clearly the best power-leveling zone in the world!

"But... it's not too late now."

Daren murmured with a vicious grin.

His Conqueror's Haki had been stuck around 80 points for ages.

Even going head-to-head with Kaidou, Roger, or Whitebeard—taking hit after hit—never brought him a real breakthrough.

Which could only mean one thing:

Clashing with the likes of Roger, Whitebeard, or Kaidou no longer shook his spirit.

He'd already grown too used to their overwhelming presence.

He was getting closer to standing shoulder-to-shoulder with them.

But the World Government... was different.

This ancient leviathan that had ruled the seas for 800 years, this Mary Geoise-like behemoth, stood as the symbol of absolute authority over the entire world.

Especially for Marines, that cross-shaped banner of power was like a towering mountain of pressure—crushing down with suffocating weight.

In that, Saturn-sama hadn't been wrong.

At the end of the day, the Marines were nothing more than the World Government's violent enforcement arm.

A powerful, disciplined military force.

And a military didn't need wild ambition or free will.

It only needed total obedience.

Marines had been trained to obey the World Government for decades—even centuries.

Defying that order was unthinkable.

So whenever a "deviant" like Daren emerged, the World Government would force them to conform.

Force them to obey.

Force them to carry out vile, soul-crushing tasks.

Like guarding Celestial Dragons.

Like executing genocidal missions against the innocent.

It was a loyalty test.

A psychological manipulation.

A full-blown psychological manipulation tactic.

Break the will of strong Marines.

Numb their minds.

Mold them into elite killing tools wielded by the World Government.

But now?

Daren was done playing along.

He was done pretending.

He'd torn away the mask—exposing not just the ugly truth of the World Government, but the suffocating shadow that had haunted his own heart.

Now, the skies were clear.

Now, he could finally breathe.

His mind was free.

...

And as Daren turned his gaze toward the terrified Celestial Dragons, something subtle shifted in his expression.

Beyond the pure rage and loathing, something new had begun to rise—a raw, unfiltered hunger.

The look of a beast once caged... now unleashed.

And now, that beast was baring its fangs at the hunters who had tormented it for so long.

"The World Noble Hunting Tournament... That's right."

Daren let out a savage laugh.

Then vanished.

"This Philseque Island... is my hunting ground now."

And the prey... was the so-called gods of the sea—the Celestial Dragons.

Chapter 706 Eight Hundred Years of Heritage?

Just as Daren was about to shoot out at full speed, his body suddenly halted.

The air around him thickened, as if he'd plunged into sticky glue. The pressure binding him kept intensifying.

He immediately felt as though some invisible force had locked him in place, making it impossible to move!

It was as if he was being forcefully suppressed!

"I can't let you run wild any longer, slaughtering my kin."

A hoarse, chilling voice drifted through the icy winds of the North Blue, cold enough to pierce bone.

A towering shadow suddenly rose from the snow, climbing higher and higher.

The monster, shrouded in black smoke, crushed the ground beneath it with creaking groans and toppled the surrounding coniferous trees.

An eerie, malevolent aura spread out, like a demon from hell descending upon the world—so overwhelming, it felt suffocating.

Daren raised an eyebrow and turned to look. What met his gaze was a colossal black beast, dozens of meters tall—like a skyscraper.

Saturn's appearance had transformed dramatically.

He now had spider-like black segmented legs and massive, sharp horns—no longer resembling anything that belonged to this world!

He looked strikingly similar to the mythical creature known as the "Gyūki"!

"A Mythical Zoan?"

Even as the immense, wicked aura from the beast made his body tremble, Daren's eyes glinted with anticipation.

"Feels way too strong... and it's highly likely the fruit has awakened."

Transformed into a towering Gyūki, Saturn looked down coldly and contemptuously at the Vice Admiral standing below, no bigger than an insect.

"Daren, you little pest... you have no idea what kind of terrifying power you're up against."

Suddenly, he raised one of his sharp spider legs and thrust it forward like a spear, aiming straight for Daren's chest!

The force was so great, white shockwaves exploded around the leg as it sliced through the air!

"The World Government's rule over these seas for the past eight hundred years... is far beyond your comprehension!"

The next instant—

Boom!!

A thunderous explosion rang out.

At the point of impact, the ground within a hundred-meter radius shattered, as if countless earthen dragons were twisting beneath the surface, turning the whole area into a hellish landscape.

Saturn's pupils suddenly shrank.

Amid the swirling dust and howling winds, the Marine Vice Admiral—small as a bug—was still standing exactly where he had been, unshaken like solid rock.

His defined knuckles were clamped tightly around the tip of the ox-demon's spider leg, and the muscles on his arms bulged so fiercely they looked ready to tear through his uniform.

His blood-speckled cape whipped violently in the wind and snow. The spider leg had only managed to pierce his skin, unable to move any further under the crushing force.

A thin trail of blood slowly spread.

"A mysterious suppression force... and the power of a Mythical Zoan..."

Daren's black hair fluttered over his eyes, but Saturn could clearly see the wild smirk curling at the corner of his mouth.

"Not a bad combo."

He casually ripped open his uniform, wiped the blood from his pierced chest, then brought his hand to his mouth and gave it a light lick.

Then, under Saturn's stunned gaze, the Vice Admiral's eyes flared with a terrifying, predatory gleam.

"This heart-pounding tension... now this is a fight worth looking forward to!"

Saturn was momentarily stunned.

A ridiculous and unfamiliar thought suddenly surged into his mind.

Could it be... this brat didn't dodge on purpose... just to test my strength!?

For some reason, the look in Daren's unrestrained eyes stirred a sense of unease deep in Saturn's chest.

He instinctively tried to pull back his spider leg—only to be shocked when he couldn't.

The strength radiating from that ant-like arm...

Before he could react, black lightning burst across Daren's body.

With a violent surge of Armament Haki, the Vice Admiral instantly broke free from Saturn's mysterious suppression.

Gripping the spider leg tightly with his left hand, Daren stepped forward—and in the blink of an eye, his right hand transformed into a fierce three-fingered dragon claw.

The black Armament Haki surged around it like flowing water, coating the claw in darkness...

"This move is just right for you!"

Daren grinned and thrust out his dragon claw.

"This is the tyrannical claw that crushes all oppressive power!!"

Ryusoken: Dragon Claw!

He grabbed onto one of Saturn's spider leg joints and gave it a brutal yank!

Crack—Rip!!

Amid Saturn's muffled groan, the giant spider leg of Gyūki was violently torn in half by the Vice Admiral!

A torrent of green blood sprayed out like a burst dam. Gyūki staggered back, triggering a series of heavy tremors across the ground.

As green blood splattered everywhere, Daren laughed wildly. His body dropped low as an overwhelming, inhuman power exploded from his legs.

"Eight hundred years of legacy... What a joke."

"You have any idea how long I've trained?"

Boom!

The terrifying shockwave caused the ground for hundreds of meters behind him to collapse, massive pillars of mud and water erupting skyward.

"Real training... only two and a half years!!"

The instant his words dropped, Daren stomped the ground with a savage grin.

Boom!!

His figure blasted out like a meteor, like a streaking star.

His pitch-black claws tore through the sky.

The fleeing Celestial Dragons turned to look—eyes widening in horror.

A dragon's roar echoed through the void.

The Marine Vice Admiral shot high into the air, laughing boldly as he dove down.

His speed instantly reached its peak.

The black dragon claws even ignited roaring flames from sheer friction.

Saturn's expression shifted. Two sharp spider legs swept in again with a sharp whistle.

Clang!

Clang!

The dragon claws struck fiercely, deflecting every leg cleanly.

Sparks burst through the air, illuminating the devilishly handsome face of the Vice Admiral, wild and unruly.

He accelerated his descent.

One claw, wrapped in immense power, came crashing down!

Saturn lunged forward, ramming with his sharp horns!

Boom!!

The explosive shockwave erupted, laced with bolts of lightning.

But in the next moment, Saturn froze.

Daren vanished in a flash, slipping past Gyūki's sluggish horns.

That hand, with its sharp, defined knuckles, slammed down directly onto Gyūki's massive head.

Saturn's pupils shrank.

Time seemed to freeze in that instant.

Then—

The Vice Admiral's mocking voice boomed out:

"Eight hundred years to reach this level? You're not even embarrassed to say that?!"

A furious shout followed.

"Ryusoken: Dragon's Breath!!"

Boom!!

A surge of force burst from the dragon claw, slamming Gyūki's enormous head down into the earth!

The Vice Admiral leapt up fluidly, every move showcasing perfect combat technique. His right leg, coated in Haki, lifted high above his head.

Like a battle axe—

"After all this time, even a dog would've turned out stronger than you!"

Smash!!

BOOM—!!

An unimaginable force exploded downward. His black boot stomped straight onto Gyūki's head, crushing it just as it tried to rise again!

Rumble...

The ground let out a tortured wail under the impact. Lightning tore across the sky, and the winds howled like a storm from hell.

Gyūki was swallowed by humiliation and agony like never before. It let out a deafening screech, thrashing madly.

Compared to its towering, hundred-meter frame, the Vice Admiral, covered in splashes of red and green blood, looked like nothing more than a bug.

Yet he stood tall atop its head,

Like a mountain no force could ever surpass...

Chapter 707 Water His Spirit!

The earth rumbled without end, dust swirling into the air.

For a moment, it felt like the entire world had come to a halt.

"Saint Saturn..."

"Saint Saturn was defeated..."

"This... how is this possible..."

"That monster... he's terrifying..."

...

The Celestial Dragons who had fled to the distance stared blankly at the unbelievable scene. Their eyes widened to the point of nearly falling out of their sockets, and their bodies trembled uncontrollably in fear.

They had believed that as long as Saturn—one of the Five Elders, known as the 'Warrior God of Science and Defense'—personally stepped in, he would effortlessly take down that reckless Marine brat.

Some of them had even dared to stop running and turned around with mocking grins, ready to enjoy the show.

They expected to watch that defiant Marine get crushed under the might of the World Government's highest authority.

But no matter how they tried to make sense of it, the outcome was completely the opposite of what they imagined!

What the hell was going on!?

"What are you thinking about?"

A cold voice suddenly rang out behind them.

Two of the Celestial Dragons jolted in terror, realizing with horror that the figure who had just been standing atop the massive Gyūki was now gone.

A dark shadow silently rose behind them.

They instinctively turned their heads.

There stood the Marine Vice Admiral, his face drenched in blood, appearing beside them like a demon from the abyss.

An icy chill surged straight to their brains, paralyzing their bodies. Their pupils shrank to needlepoints—they couldn't move a muscle.

Then they felt two strong, rough hands press lightly down on their heads.

Bang!

Bang!

With a sickening crunch, fingers with defined joints crushed their skulls. The two heads exploded like smashed watermelons.

Their headless corpses wobbled, then collapsed.

Conqueror's Haki +0.07!

Conqueror's Haki +0.05!

"This feeling..."

Daren felt another surge in his Conqueror's Haki. The ferocity and satisfaction in his eyes deepened.

But just then, the enormous Gyūki—its head still sunken into the ground—suddenly began to change.

"It seems I truly underestimated you, Daren."

A strange cloud of black smoke burst upward, flames blazing from within as Gyūki's massive body rapidly shrank before their eyes.

In less than two seconds, Saturn stepped calmly out of the swirling black smoke.

His upper body retained a human form, surrounded by a wreath of black flames. His wrinkled, age-marked hands gripped an ancient cane.

But his lower body remained that of a spider, standing around six meters tall, exuding a chilling presence.

A human-beast hybrid form.

The most unsettling part—his head, which had been nearly shattered by Daren's earlier attack, was now completely restored. Other than the bloodstains, there wasn't a single trace of damage.

Even the severed spider leg had regrown.

Watching this, Daren's eyes instinctively narrowed.

"Enhanced regeneration from a Zoan awakening, huh?"

No... it doesn't feel that simple...

The thought flashed through his mind, but Daren quickly dismissed it.

While awakened Zoan-type users do possess unmatched durability and recovery compared to other Devil Fruit users, there was no way it could reach the absurd level Saturn was displaying right now.

"Unfortunately for you, that's all you amount to."

Saturn's eyes regained their earlier coldness and arrogance as he spoke flatly.

"As I said before, you have no idea what you're up against."

"The World Government's eight centuries of founda—"

Boom!!

Saturn raised his staff just in time to block the roaring, tyrannical dragon claw.

A violent shockwave exploded outward, making the ground ripple like ocean waves.

In the blink of an eye, the Marine Vice Admiral surged forward. His three-clawed hand clamped down on the staff, a wild grin spreading across his face.

"Save the speeches for after you've killed me!"

With those words, Daren lunged forward again.

He blocked the stabbing spider legs one after another, then unleashed a powerful side kick.

Bang!!

His Haki-coated military boot struck Saturn's chest like a meteor, unleashing a sickening chorus of bone-cracking sounds.

Crack, crack—!

With a second burst of Haki, Saturn was blasted back like a rag doll, spiraling through the air in a blast of white shockwaves.

He crashed into the distant, snow-covered mountains like a falling star, instantly leveling the jagged peaks.

The surrounding terrain collapsed along with the ice and snow, sinking several hundred meters deep.

Snow erupted skyward. The mountains continued to crumble.

But barely three seconds had passed before Saturn's cold, mocking voice echoed out from the collapsed rubble.

"You still don't get it, do you?"

"You never had a chance against me."

Dark smoke surged as Saturn once again crawled out, completely unscathed.

But in the next instant, his expression darkened sharply.

Daren suddenly let out a cold laugh. Without sparing Saturn another glance, he turned on his heel and dashed straight toward the motionless Celestial Dragons in the distance—his movements utterly decisive.

He was like a starving wolf loose in a pen of sheep, tearing into them with savage fury!

No Celestial Dragon could stop him.

Before those tyrannical black dragon claws, even defenses imbued with Armament Haki shattered instantly. One strike—dead.

The results of years of brutal combat and relentless training were on full display.

His killing efficiency exceeded even the most elite CP0 assassins!

Conqueror's Haki +0.07!

Conqueror's Haki +0.06!

Conqueror's Haki +0.05!

With the Celestial Dragons' screams echoing across the island as they fled in terror, Daren could clearly feel his Conqueror's Haki growing—at a rate visible to the naked eye!

"That damned brat!!"

Rage exploded in Saturn's eyes. His six spider legs moved with blinding speed as he chased after him, face twisted in fury.

This bastard was treating the sealed island like his personal Celestial Dragon hunting ground!

A creeping urgency clawed at his heart, swelling into dread.

Because Saturn could feel it—undeniably.

With each Celestial Dragon Daren struck down, his presence was steadily, methodically rising!

That bastard... he was using the blood of gods to water his spirit!

...

At the same time...

Philseque Island—Coastal Blockade.

Rows of Marine warships stood at the ready, sealing off every possible exit from the island in a tight formation.

"Ahhh!!"

"Don't kill me!"

"I'll give you anything!"

"Dammit!!"

...

A chorus of desperate screams echoed from deep within the island, laced with frantic footsteps and wails that tugged at the hearts of the Marines.

On the decks, thousands of Marines could hear the distant cries growing clearer. Their expressions grew increasingly grim.

They weren't fools.

A large number of slaves had been transported onto the island, and elite Celestial Dragons in hunting garb had followed... Everything pointed toward a single, horrifying truth.

On that barren but once peaceful winter island—a brutal, inhumane massacre was unfolding!

Just imagining the high probability was enough to make many young Marines grit their teeth, clench their fists, and feel their eyes burn red with fury.

Civilians were being slaughtered like animals, and all they could do was stand there, block the sea, and help cover it up... cleaning up the Celestial Dragons' mess.

"Admiral Sengoku, there might be a massacre happening on the island! Should we go ashore?"

One officer, with a warm yet upright presence, finally cracked under the weight of his conscience. He stepped up behind Sengoku, clenching his jaw and speaking through his teeth.

"Didn't I already tell you?"

Sengoku's voice was devoid of emotion, yet it trembled slightly.

"No matter what you hear... pretend you didn't."

He turned slowly. Bloodshot eyes locked onto the young, earnest officer in front of him.

"Arthur. As a Marine... your only duty is to follow orders."

It sounded like he was convincing Arthur.

But maybe, more than anyone, he was trying to convince himself.

Each word felt forced out between clenched teeth—cold as ice.

Chapter 708 The Blockaded Island

Snow weighed heavy on the rooftops. From the overcast sky, mournful flakes drifted down.

The courtyard was deathly silent.

Saint Hilde, a Celestial Dragon, stood at the doorway gripping a bloodstained blade. He placed one hand on the frame, exhaling hot white breath into the cold air.

The thrill of the kill sent shivers through his body. The scent of blood wafting from inside the house only sharpened his senses, twisting his face into a crazed, sadistic grin.

"Don't bother struggling. No one in this world can save you."

His violent gaze swept over the three trembling figures inside.

The middle-aged man was covered in blood, a deep, bone-revealing gash slashed across his chest. Yet despite the injury, his calloused hands clung tightly to a hammer, shielding his wife and child behind him.

"No... the Marines... they'll come to save us," the woman said, her voice trembling with fear.

At her words, a flicker of despair crossed Will's face.

"The Marines? Hahaha!!"

Saint Hilde let out a peal of mocking laughter, as though he'd heard the world's most absurd joke.

"The Marines you're praying for? They've already sealed the island!"

"They're nothing but dogs to us Celestial Dragons! Even if I drag you to the Fleet Admiral and butcher you alive in front of him—he wouldn't dare say a word!"

Will and his family were struck as if by lightning.

His wife turned to him with a pale, pleading face, begging silently for him to deny it.

But all Will could do was grit his teeth. Tears welled up at the corners of his eyes.

He had no words to refute it.

"No..."

The light in his wife's eyes faded. Her last bit of hope crumbled as she collapsed helplessly to the ground.

"Vice Admiral Daren... he promised he'd protect us..."

She was on the verge of fainting, her eyes rolling back.

If they were facing pirates or the mafia, maybe they'd still have the courage to fight. But against the gods of the sea—the Celestial Dragons—they couldn't even muster a plea for mercy.

Saint Hilde sneered.

"He can't protect anyone."

His gaze shifted greedily to the child—barely five or six years old.

"Come here."

He crooked a finger and licked his lips.

Of course, you start the meal with the finest dish... right?

The boy was frozen in terror, mind blank. Under his parents' horrified, numb gazes, he slowly raised one foot and took a step toward the Celestial Dragon.

Then, everything stopped.

A tall, blood-soaked figure suddenly appeared in the silent courtyard—like a demon descending from the snow.

The boy felt a warm, steady hand press gently on his shoulder, stopping him in place.

He looked up in a daze.

Through the falling snow, he saw a defiant face streaked with blood.

Will and his wife stood frozen, disbelief written across their faces.

"D-Daren..."

"Vice Admiral Daren!!"

They cried out, their voices shaking.

They had never seen the legendary man in person, but that didn't matter. Every civilian in the North Blue knew his name. They followed his stories in the papers like gospel.

They recognized him in an instant!

"Hide. It'll all be over soon."

"I was paid to do a job."

The blood-drenched figure spoke calmly.

"And I always follow my rules."

With that, his figure vanished from where he stood.

Before Will's family could even react, they saw it happen...

The head of the arrogant Celestial Dragon suddenly burst apart!

Blood and snow fell together.

Red and white mingled, like cherry blossoms swirling through the air.

It was a terrifyingly beautiful sight.

...

Just as Daren was slaughtering the Celestial Dragons with a speed beyond imagination, the others quickly sensed that something was very wrong.

The situation spiraled downward at an astonishing pace.

Before long, a terrifying piece of news spread among them:

Vice Admiral Rogers Daren—the Marine supposedly assigned to "escort" the Celestial Dragons during the hunting tournament—had turned on them. He was now hunting them down like prey across the island in a mad frenzy!

Rage surged, but it was quickly drowned out by fear.

To hell with the hunting tournament. To hell with the God's Knights...

All that mattered now was staying alive!

They were the noblest beings on the seas. How could they possibly die here—on this wretched, barren island in the North Blue?

Without hesitation, the Celestial Dragons abandoned the tournament and bolted.

But how could they outrun Daren?

As they fled in terror toward the coast, hoping to reach the Marines stationed at the blockade for help, they were horrified to discover...

That very same Vice Admiral had already cut them off completely.

Had someone looked down from the sky, they'd have seen a crimson blur streaking across the island. Daren alone, weaving through the terrain like a phantom, had sealed off every escape route with sheer speed and precision.

The only direction left to run was deeper inland—toward the snow-covered mountains.

Any attempt to flee toward the coast?

Certain death.

"Dammit! That Marine's lost his mind!!"

The Celestial Dragons scrambled toward the mountains, gasping for breath, many of them dropping their weapons in panic.

In their desperation, they grabbed their personal Den Den Mushi and frantically tried to place calls—either to the Holy Land or to the Marine forces.

But what they discovered made their blood run cold.

Every single Den Den Mushi was unresponsive. Asleep.

Not just their personal ones—even the surveillance units spread across the island had gone completely dark. All communication had been severed.

"What the hell is happening?!"

"Why is there no signal?!"

"Where are the Marines? Why aren't they helping?!"

"That useless Sengoku! What the hell is he doing?!"

"He's finished! Once we're back in the Holy Land, I'll see him stripped of his rank and put on trial!!"

"Aaahhh!!"

Screams of agony rang out across the island, as divine blood soaked this desolate, frozen land.

One by one, the Celestial Dragons fell, their corpses piling up.

Not even two minutes had passed, and already, a quarter of the Celestial Dragons scattered across the island were dead.

At the same time, Daren's aura grew increasingly unstable, teetering on the edge of uncontrollable rage.

Conqueror's Haki +0.01!

Conqueror's Haki +0.02!

Conqueror's Haki +0.008!

Even as the "returns" diminished, his Conqueror's Haki continued to surge!

"You damn brat!"

Suddenly, the massive form of Gyūki came crashing through the snow-laden jungle.

Saint Saturn's fury had reached its limit. His eyes blazed with murderous intent.

"Don't push your luck!"

His swollen, black-furred abdomen pulsed, and in the next instant, it unleashed a barrage of over a dozen purple-black venomous orbs at Daren!

This was his most insidious, most terrifying ability.

The venom was a vile blend of corrosive toxins, weakening agents, and deadly viruses. Even an awakened Zoan user struck by it would be instantly incapacitated—trapped, helpless in the web of the Gyūki.

But what happened next...

Made Saturn's eyes nearly pop out of his skull.

Chapter 709 Don't Just Stand There, You Old Fossil!

Daren's steps came to an abrupt halt, catching everyone off guard. As Saturn's deadly poison spheres flew toward him, a gleam lit up in his eyes—like he'd just discovered buried treasure.

With a wide grin, he suddenly opened his mouth.

He took a deep breath, and the powerful draw of his lungs stirred the air into visible spirals.

To everyone's shock, the dozen or so purple-black venom orbs Saturn had fired were all sucked in—swallowed whole!

Saturn stared in disbelief at the absurd sight before him. A ludicrous thought flickered through his mind.

Did that little brat realize he was going to die and decide to just give up... commit suicide?

But before he could react—

The Marine Vice Admiral's bloodstained face darkened with a tinge of purple and black. His body wobbled slightly... but then the effect faded just as quickly.

Daren's eyes lit up. He let out a satisfied burp and exhaled a puff of deep violet mist with an expression of sheer bliss.

Physique +0.339!

Physique: 96.083 → 96.422 (Indestructible Body)

Strength +0.123!

Strength: 90.087 → 90.210 (Giant's Body)

He could feel it—his physical functions and immune system had surged to life, not only neutralizing the venom but also rapidly healing and reinforcing his internal organs and muscle fibers.

The boost was so exhilarating that Daren almost howled with joy.

Now that was worthy of a Five Elder!

Now that was a Mythical Zoan!

He hadn't feasted like this in ages!

Just a few venom orbs had jolted his long-stagnant physique stat upward by over 0.3.

And under that intense toxic stimulation, even his strength was rising!

Daren had never felt anything like it.

If this kept up, wouldn't his body evolve into something on par with a Mythical Zoan hybrid form?

Good thing he'd gone through hellish poison-resistance training with that fat guy in suspenders and Magellan. Without that, even he wouldn't have survived a hit like that. An ordinary person? They'd be face-down and foaming by now.

Grinning like he was drunk, Daren turned to Saturn and flashed a row of bloodstained teeth, eyes burning.

"Hm... bit bland. Got any more?"

Saturn stumbled back two steps, eyes wide with disbelief.

He was one of the Five Elders—supreme authority of the World Government. For 800 years, he'd ruled this sea like a god. What scene hadn't he witnessed?

—But this?! He had never seen anything like this.

His most vicious, insidious, and deadly technique... completely useless against this brat?

Impossible.

Saturn stared blankly at Daren's unrestrained smile, his entire body prickling with humiliation. His old, bloodshot eyes narrowed, and he roared through gritted teeth,

"This can't be real!!"

Furious, he launched another barrage—more venomous spheres blasting from his abdomen in rapid succession.

A rain of purple-black poison flooded the air, blanketing the area. It even blotted out the falling snow, covering a full twenty-meter radius in toxic death.

Daren's eyes lit up—but then his expression turned annoyed.

Tch. You old fossil—can you not spray it all over the place?

You're gonna waste it all!

Without hesitation, he acted.

Soru: Godspeed!

Daren's figure blurred into motion, flickering left and right like a bolt of lightning. His speed was so intense, afterimages streaked through the air.

Under Saturn's stunned gaze, the Marine turned into a moving bullseye—deliberately colliding with the venomous orbs as they rained down!

Direct hits!

Physique +0.221! Strength +0.422!

Physique +0.188! Strength +0.411!

Physique +0.166! Strength +0.379!

Physique +0.152! Strength +0.315!

...

As more and more venom invaded his body, Daren's skin and even his entire frame took on a deep, sickly purple hue.

Yet the grin at the corner of his mouth only grew wider—disturbingly so—making Saturn's brow furrow and his eyelid twitch uncontrollably.

Once every last drop of the toxic mist had been absorbed—nothing wasted—Daren suddenly froze, his whole body shaking violently.

Thick clouds of purple smoke poured from his pores. His muscles spasmed and writhed beneath the skin.

His fists clenched tight. The veins and muscle cords on his arms bulged and coiled like writhing dragons.

It was as if a dragon's heart beat inside his chest—thundering like war drums. A volcano churned in his throat and lungs, ready to erupt at any second.

Then—

He stomped forward, eyes glowing a feral, blood-red hue, like he'd been consumed by madness.

BOOM!!

A torrential burst of energy and blood exploded from his body in a visible shockwave, sending cracks spidering through the ground.

A low growl, like that of a wild beast, burst out of his throat—deep and booming like thunder—and rippled through the air, scattering the falling snow in all directions.

In that instant...

Every beast and bird across Philseque Island reacted in terror. As if sensing the overwhelming presence of a superior predator, they scattered in every direction. Flocks of birds took to the sky like a great black net sweeping upward.

"Hahahaha!! This feels incredible!"

Daren let out a wild, unrestrained laugh, the surging blood and power within him setting every cell in his body ablaze with exhilaration.

A rush of unprecedented strength and vitality coursed through him, burning in his veins like wildfire.

He had to let it out.

Seeing this Marine Vice Admiral erupt with such frenzied energy, Saturn's expression finally twisted.

What the hell was going on with this brat!?

Why weren't his attacks having any effect at all?

"Then... let's go another round!"

Daren hunched low like a beast ready to strike, a ribbon of hot vapor curling from his lips.

The moment he dropped his stance, a terrifying force detonated beneath him.

BOOOOM...

Everything within a hundred meters—trees, rocks, and soil—shattered in an instant.

Using the sheer blast as momentum, the blood-soaked Vice Admiral launched from the rubble like a man possessed.

No!

Saturn's heart lurched.

His body ballooned once again, transforming into the towering Gyūki form—dozens of meters tall.

Two razor-sharp spider legs shot out like massive lances, piercing through the air.

Shhk!

Shhk!

Saturn's pupils shrank to pinpricks.

Did he land a hit?

Blood exploded as the two spider legs stabbed deep into Daren's abdomen... but they stopped.

It was like trying to push through solid steel—his ultra-compressed muscles locked them in place, refusing to let them go even an inch deeper.

Saturn's eyes went wide.

This brat's physique... it's gotten even stronger!

Physique: 98.267!

"Yo, old fossil... Don't just stand there!"

The Vice Admiral's wild grin filled his vision.

Before Saturn could react, Daren clamped both hands around the embedded legs. His arms bulged with muscle like coiled pythons—and then he pulled.

With a violent rip, he tore both spider legs clean from Gyūki's enormous body!

Strength: 94.315!

Bathed in jets of thick, green blood, Daren—eyes blazing red—charged forward again.

Rip!

More green blood sprayed into the air.

Another leg was torn off with brute force!

Gyūki's titanic frame staggered. It lost balance... and crashed to the ground.

The overwhelming pain left Saturn's vision swimming.

Confusion and disbelief swirled in the depths of his eyes.

"What... what the hell is going on...?"

That brat had clearly been hit by his poison...

So how—how had his body and strength only grown stronger!?

Was this... even possible?

Chapter 710 You Call Yourself a Five Elder?!

What the hell is going on with this brat's body, defense, and strength!?

I'm the one who awakened a Mythical Zoan-type ability!

So why is it that, in pure close-quarters combat... he's even more savage, more brutal than me!?

This completely unrestrained fighting style ignores all forms, techniques, or strategy—he's turned every part of his body into a lethal weapon.

"This can't be..."

A glint of crimson flared in Saturn's eyes. His black spider legs whipped forward like venomous serpents, stabbing viciously at Daren's throat.

"Don't underestimate the Five Elders!"

A strange red gleam flashed in Daren's eyes. In that instant, he perfectly tracked the strike's trajectory.

"Your movements are getting slower."

Without warning, he tilted his head, narrowly dodging the blow—then slashed down with his hand like a blade, grinning wickedly.

Shhhk!

A spider leg, bristling with coarse black hair, was cleaved off clean. Green venom sprayed into the air. Now down to four legs, the Gyūki form finally lost its footing and collapsed with a thunderous crash.

Blood rained from the sky. Daren—soaked in gore—strode forward like a war god, then slammed his foot brutally onto Gyūki's swollen spider abdomen. Thick splashes of blood burst out in all directions.

"The Five Elders... is this all you've got?"

Another punch came down, blasting out a fresh fountain of green blood.

Like a rabid beast, Daren went wild—arms and legs hammering away, frantically dismembering the mythical monster as if determined to tear it apart with his bare hands.

By now, Daren had figured it out.

This so-called Warrior God of Science and Defense—Saturn—was all about Devil Fruit development, not Haki, physical combat, or raw endurance.

By digging into the powers of the mythical Gyūki, he'd crafted several nightmarish abilities: Explosive Gaze, Suppression, and that insidious venom. In terms of versatility and danger, he was top-tier.

With suppression to control the battlefield, Explosive Gaze for ranged pressure, and poison to weaken or outright kill his foes—plus the natural resilience of a Mythical Zoan—Saturn could dominate anyone below Admiral level with ease.

Even against full-fledged Admirals, that mysterious "immortality" of his could drag them into a war of attrition.

Make no mistake: Saturn Saint absolutely wielded combat power on par with an Admiral.

His regeneration made him a nightmare to face.

But the person he ran into... was Daren.

Saturn never dreamed anyone on this sea could forge their body into something so monstrous.

The unbreakable toughness of Indestructible Body. Poison resistance that defied logic. Brute strength surpassing even the giants. A savage, domineering fighting style—and a beast-like instinct for bloodshed.

In that moment, as Saturn stared at the crazed, grinning Marine in front of him, his mind hazed. Behind Daren, he seemed to glimpse a blur of legendary figures...

Kaidou. Big Mom. Roger. Whitebeard. Shiki...

All those unruly faces flickered behind him—until they merged into one firm, unwavering expression.

"Iron Fist" Garp!

The whirling shockwaves gathered into a single black fist, crackling with dark lightning.

And in Saturn's aged, constricted pupils... it was getting bigger and bigger.

"Y-you bastard..."

Saturn let out a strangled roar.

Daren's black hair whipped wildly as he hurled his punch.

"You call yourself a Five Elder?!"

Genkotsu: Blue Hole!

A fist like a meteor—powerful enough to shake the sea itself—slammed into Saturn's chest like a supermassive cannon.

Crack!

The sound of bones shattering echoed in rapid bursts.

Saturn spewed a torrent of blood. His chest caved in and his body curled like a boiled shrimp.

The sheer force of the impact made his pupils tremble uncontrollably. He could no longer maintain his beast form. In the blink of an eye, he reverted to his human shape—then shot backward like a rag doll.

He hurtled through the air like a falling star—straight toward the icebound mountain range in the distance.

BOOM!!

The earth shook as a deafening crash split the air. The roaring shockwave tore across the landscape, blasting snow high into the sky.

From afar, the majestic mountain looked as though it had been smashed clean through the center, triggering a chain reaction of avalanches.

A wave of snow burst upward. Blizzards cascaded down like rolling titanic wheels—as if a colossal fortress wall were crumbling.

The sheer scale of the explosion drew instant attention.

At the far edge of the island...

On the warships stationed offshore, every Marine jolted as if struck by lightning. They stared, slack-jawed, at the distant peaks deep within the island.

Amid the sweeping storm, a massive rift had opened in the very heart of the mountains.

"What... what exactly is happening?"

"These shockwaves from battle..."

"What kind of twisted game are the Celestial Dragons playing?"

...

The thought that the Celestial Dragons might actually be using weapons of mass destruction to "hunt" slaves and civilians on that island made the Marines' eyes redden. They clenched their jaws tightly, seething with anger—but not one dared to speak out.

"Fleet Admiral Sengoku! Are we really just going to stand here and watch!?"

"Fleet Admiral Sengoku! I recommend we go ashore!"

"Fleet Admiral Sengoku...!"

A few Marines finally couldn't hold back and shouted out—but Sengoku, face dark as iron, snapped coldly in return:

"Our orders are to blockade the island and allow no one in or out! That is our mission!"

"If additional forces are needed, we'll receive word through official Den Den Mushi channels!"

His bloodshot eyes glared at them, chest rising and falling with rough breaths.

"Have you received any communication from military Den Den Mushi?"

"No orders have come down. If we land without authorization... that's a direct violation of the World Government's command!"

"Can you bear that responsibility?"

His furious roar hit like ice water poured over their heads, sending chills down every Marine's spine.

The will of the World Government...

That iron-cross flag of supreme authority...

Many Marines gulped nervously. Their mouths opened... then closed again. In the end, silence fell like a shroud.

The authority of the World Government could not be questioned. No matter how strong the Marine Headquarters became, at its core, it remained the sword and shield of the World Government.

Eight centuries of entrenched power and dominance had already imprinted itself into the hearts of every Marine present.

"Hold your positions. Keep the coastline sealed... I'll take full responsibility!" Sengoku bellowed, rage boiling in his voice.

But just then—

A sudden cry cut through the air.

It came from a Marine stationed in the lookout post atop one of the warships. His face had gone pale as chalk as he pointed shakily toward the distance.

"Th-that's...!"