

Chapter 48

3rd of April Alabasta

Capone Bege strode through the East Wing of Alabasta's palace, a wry smirk tugging at his lips. His Prince had summoned him. Ah! A Warlord, a Prince! Moria was truly a genius.

As he walked, Bege thought back to the media coverage of Moria's coronation. In just ten days, Moria had graced the cover of the most widely read journal three times. The first headline had declared, "The Benevolent Shadow King: Moria Crowned Prince of Alabasta." The article was a blend of praise and admiration, celebrating Moria's rise to royalty and his promising future as a leader. The second headline was even more sensational: "Alabasta's Savior: Moria Summons Life-Giving Rain." It detailed the miraculous event when Moria brought rain to the parched lands, cementing his status as a hero. But the third article had truly astounded Bege: "From Darkness to Royalty: The Inspiring Journey of Moria." This piece completely rewrote Moria's origin, portraying him as a moral and virtuous leader. The transformation from a man unjustly seen as a Pirate to revered prince was depicted with glowing falsehoods, painting a picture of unwavering integrity and benevolence. Bege smirked, wondering how Moria had convinced Morgans to create such a glowing narrative. Big Brain move.

Each step he took echoed softly against the polished marble floors, their surface a shimmering expanse of gold-veined stone. The walls were adorned with intricate mosaics depicting scenes of ancient battles and celestial constellations, their vibrant colors undimmed by time. The air, exuding a faint hint of jasmine, carried on the soft whisper of the breeze that filtered through the lattice windows. Ornate lamps hung from the vaulted ceilings. Statues of mythical beasts and forgotten deities lined the corridors. He recognized Lyra's works. Anyone foolish enough to attack the palace would find themselves in for a big surprise.

As Bege moved through the corridors, he encountered Pell, the stoic guardian. The two exchanged a curt nod. Chaka, once Pell's counterpart, had already been assassinated by a shadow soldier in secret.

Bege continued his journey to the East Wing. Silk tapestries hung from golden rods, their rich fabrics embroidered with scenes of lush gardens, flowing rivers, and grand palaces, evoking a sense of otherworldly luxury. Intricately carved wooden screens separated the corridors, their designs so delicate they seemed almost ethereal.

Once the offices of the palace eunuchs, the East Wing, along with the South Wing's abandoned seraglio, had been revitalized in a few days only since Moria's arrival. He had basically taken over half of the Palace for himself. Though Vivi still resided in the princely chambers at the palace's center, the future held an air of uncertainty. Already, men, except for Moria, were forbidden to enter the seraglio, now bustling with shadow maids. Bege knew for sure that the orange-haired witch had taken over an entire siheyuan of the seraglio, and even Selena had started to sleep there when in Alabasta.

Moria truly was more of a Pirate than a Prince.

Entering the main aisle of the East Wing, Bege noted the palace scribes at work. They nodded respectfully as he passed, recognizing him as the unofficial Chief of Staff and advisor to their new Prince.

The door to Moria's office was guarded by a visible shadow soldier—an explicit signal that Moria didn't want unauthorized visitors. There were people inside whom he others weren't meant to see.

He pushed open the heavy door and stepped into the lavish reunion room. The floor was covered with plush, embroidered carpets. A low table, inlaid with mother-of-pearl and semi-precious stones, dominated the center of the room, surrounded by silk-cushioned chairs.

Moria looked up as Bege entered, a knowing smile playing on his lips. In his towering seven-meter form, Moria was a grotesque giant, a living nightmare. His skin was a ghastly pale, almost translucent, stretched taut over his elongated limbs and torso. His eyes were large and bulbous, not quite aligned, giving him a perpetually disorienting gaze. His mouth, filled with jagged teeth, seemed too wide for his face, and each breath he took sounded like a low growl.

Around the table sat Isabella, her expression sour and brooding. Bege immediately understood why. At Moria's right sat Nico Robin. She wore a fitted, knee-length black dress that hugged her curves, with a corset-style bodice that emphasized her waist and a flowing skirt made from a stretchable fabric that clung sensuously to her form. Paired with this were black leather ankle boots with reinforced soles and silver buckles, adding a touch of femininity. A black lace choker adorned her neck, while fingerless lace gloves added an edge to her clothing.

In other words, Nico Robin was dressed in the uniform of Thriller Bark's Pirates. This meant she had officially joined them, and she would now be a direct rival to Isabella...and himself. Until now, not including Moria, they had been the two members of the crew handling all the political, logistic, and economic maneuvering. Absalom was dedicated, but he was more of a fighter. Now, with Nico Robin, their positions were more precarious. He knew her competence from their meeting to absorb Baroque Works.

Bege's eyes scanned the rest of the people around the table. Trafalgar Law sat there, his expression unreadable. Bege took his seat, his mind already calculating the implications of Robin's new position. Moria watched him, his smile never faltering.

"Now that everyone is here," Moria began, his voice a low, rumbling growl that filled the room, "we can begin."

Moria leaned forward, his enormous form casting an imposing shadow over the table. "I've received some crucial information," he began. "Portgas D. Ace has been captured by the Marines. He is set to be executed in a little over two weeks."

A collective gasp echoed around the room. Bege felt a surge of adrenaline, his mind racing to grasp the full implications. Isabella's eyes widened in shock, her previous irritation forgotten. Trafalgar Law's expression remained stoic, but Bege could see the flicker of calculation behind his calm facade, while Nico Robin's gaze sharpened.

"The Marines intend to make a public spectacle of this," Moria continued. "They aim to draw out Whitebeard and provoke a confrontation. This is not just an execution; it is a declaration of war."

Moria paused, letting his words sink in before continuing. "Therefore, we must take decisive action. First and foremost, I have been summoned to participate in the war as a Warlord. However, I have no intention of going. Instead, we will render that summons null and void by assassinating Ace before the execution can take place."

Bege felt a thrill of both terror and excitement coursing through him. He had made the right choice in following Moria. Isabella, on the other hand, looked positively aroused by the political power she now wielded. Who would have thought she would one day be partaking in a meeting where such audacious plans were discussed?

"However," Moria continued, his voice commanding the room, "we must have contingencies in place. First, my alliance with the Vinsmoke family will be made public tomorrow."

Another wave of shock rippled through the room. Bege saw the impressed looks on the faces around the table. This was a bold move, one that would undoubtedly shift the balance of power.

"With the support of two of the royal families of the World Government," Moria went on, "I will be able to relinquish my title as Warlord and transition to being a Prince. Of course," he added with a sinister smile, "I will remain a pirate at heart, continuing our legacy of burning and pillaging."

The room was silent, the gravity of Moria's plans sinking in. "Then," Moria said, his eyes gleaming with ambition, "we will take on Kaido. And after that, we will set our sights on the One Piece. I will become the Pirate King."

Bege's heart pounded in his chest. The audacity of Moria's vision was breathtaking.

"That is for the long-term plan," Moria continued. "For the short-term, we need to focus on two key objectives. First, the assassination of Ace—this will be my responsibility. Second, we must take down the Heavenly Demon, Doflamingo, and conquer Dressrosa."

Trafalgar Law straightened in his seat, his focus intensifying at the mention of Doflamingo.

Moria summoned a shadow, and from the darkness emerged a figure of striking beauty and formidable presence. It was Boa Hancock, or rather, a shadowy, ethereal version of her. Her once vibrant eyes were now hollow voids, her movements fluid and ghostly. The silhouette of her long, flowing hair and regal posture remained, and even her beauty had not been marred by her transition.

Bege's eyes widened in recognition. "Is that...Boa Hancock?"

Moria's smile was chilling. "Indeed. I killed her and wiped out Amazon Lily. Now, we have their ship covered in seastone, enabling us to navigate the Calm Belt with ease. And I left a naughty surprise for the Marines that will come to draft her in the war..."

The shockwaves from this revelation were palpable. Moria continued, "There are now only three Warlords left, not including myself: Doflamingo, Kuma, and Mihawk. Our immediate target is Doflamingo. However, we must approach this intelligently to ensure we gain control of Dressrosa."

Moria turned to Law. "In a few moments, Law will explain the plan we discussed."

Before Law could speak, Moria raised a massive hand. "But first, we must discuss internal matters."

Moria stood, towering over the table. He placed one of his enormous hands on Isabella's shoulder and the other on Robin's. "As a Prince, I must take care of my kingdom," he said. "And a prince needs wise and loyal counselors."

At these words, Bege and Isabella exchanged a wary glance. Could it be?

Moria reached into his belt and drew out two contracts. Bege's heart skipped a beat as he recognized the meticulous handiwork of Nami.

Moria placed the contracts in front of Isabella and Bege. "Capone Bege," he began, his voice laden with significance, "I propose that you become the Minister of Trade and Commerce for the Kingdom of Alabasta...and for the future Moria Empire. And Isabella," Moria continued, his smile widening, "I propose that you become the Minister of the Interior and the Court Chancellor."

Bege gulped. It was a position of immense power and responsibility. Isabella's eyes widened in shock and then filled with a fervent light. This was beyond anything she had ever dreamed.

But what were the costs ?

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3rd of April Amazon Lily

Vice Admiral Momonga stood on the deck of his ship, his eyes fixed on the distant silhouette of Amazon Lily. The island loomed like a dark specter from the sea, its lush forests and towering cliffs shrouded in a sinister twilight. The usual channels of communication had failed; Boa Hancock had not responded to the summons delivered through Den Den Mushi. So here he came, to draft her into the impending war or eliminate her if she refused—those were his orders. He knew he could call for Kizaru, who could join him in mere seconds if she choose to fight him, but the inexplicable silence from Amazon Lily still left him profoundly uneasy.

He disembarked alone, leaving his men aboard the ship. The forest at the island's edge was oppressively silent, the usual cacophony of wildlife replaced by an eerie stillness. As he approached the heart of the city, a chill ran down his spine. He coughed. Strange. The streets were deserted, the vibrant marketplace and

bustling plazas devoid of life. Buildings stood like silent tombs, their windows dark and hollow. An unsettling feeling gnawed at him—where were the people?

His apprehension grew into a gnawing dread. The oppressive silence pressed in on him, and a primal instinct urged him to return to his ship. He leaped into the air, using Geppo to traverse the distance swiftly.

The sight that greeted him confirmed his worst fears. The Pirate Empress's ship was docked beside his own, and the metallic scent of blood filled the air. Sounds of combat echoed across the water, distorted and ghostly. As he landed on his ship, he saw the assailants—warriors made of shadows, their forms dark and amorphous. What? Moria's Warriors? Had...Moria taken over Amazon Lily?

Momonga's hand flew to his Den Den Mushi, his mind racing to signal HQ about Moria's betrayal. But a flicker of movement caught his eye. He had felt nothing through his Haki! He dodged instinctively, narrowly avoiding a blade aimed at his throat, only to feel the searing pain of a Shigan piercing his side. Fuck. Of course Haki wasn't working on dead's people Shadows.

Before him stood a shadowy samurai he didn't recognize and, to his astonishment, Rob Lucci. The realization hit him like a physical blow—Moria was behind the disappearance of CP9's boogeyman.

"I must contact HQ," Momonga thought desperately, hurling himself towards the Den Den Mushi. But his path was blocked by an enormous shadowy dragon, its jaws snapping inches from his face. Survival instinct took over. Momonga drew his sword, its blade gleaming with a deadly purpose. The dragon lunged again, and he sidestepped, slashing at its smoky form. The shadows parted but did not dissipate, swirling back into shape. He needed to keep moving, to find a way to outmaneuver his attackers and send his warning. With a swift series of strikes, he forced his way through the shadowy warriors, every move precise and lethal. But the odds were against him. His eyes darted to the Den Den Mushi, tantalizingly close yet impossibly far. The dragon roared, its massive tail sweeping towards him. He leaped into the air, using Geppo to evade, his breath coming in sharp, controlled bursts.

As he landed, a searing pain shot through his side where the Shigan had struck. Blood trickled down, staining his uniform. He grit his teeth against the pain, eyes scanning for an opening. Momonga's mind raced. He had to outthink his enemies. The dragon lunged again, and he feigned left before darting right, the creature's jaws snapping shut on empty air. Finally, he reached the Den Den Mushi. With a desperate lunge, he grasped it, dialing HQ with shaking hands. But as the call connected, a massive force struck him from behind, sending him sprawling. The Den Den Mushi skittered across the deck, just out of reach.

He turned to see the samurai and Lucci advancing, the dragon looming behind them. His vision blurred with pain and exhaustion, but his resolve hardened. He would not go down without a fight.

Momonga rose to his feet, his grip on his sword tightening.

3rd of April Alabasta

Moria smiled, as he felt the Shadow of the Vice-Admiral being absorbed through the Shadow Dragon. Between him, the Amazones, Jinbe and all the other he had had to absorb, it had taken time, but finally...

You have absorbed enough Fate

Potential S → SS

[Gecko Moria]

Class: Duke of Twilight

Job: Warlord of the Seas

Fruit: Kage Kage no Mi

Dourikis: 8,745/16,000

Potential: SS

Fate: S

Physique : 3,001

Will : 2,829

Soul : 2,915