

One Piece 441

Chapter 441 - 441: Volume 3 – Chapter 84: Don't Guess, Marines

In an instant, Sengoku and Kong had already come to a rough conclusion in their minds.

"So, Daren, what about the remaining locations? Do they share any common traits?"

Sengoku shifted the topic, clearly not wanting to delve deeper into the last discussion.

Daren smiled, understanding that Sengoku had already caught on. He didn't push further and simply replied,

"The other seven locations that were attacked are populated ports and neutral islands. These are hubs for massive information exchange, including connections to the underground black market..."

"I suspect Shiki attacked these places to gather intelligence."

Sengoku nodded thoughtfully at the response.

Then Kong suddenly spoke up.

"Since we can't determine Shiki's exact objective for now, let's focus on analyzing the combat strength of his fleet."

Sengoku immediately agreed.

"Right. On that front... Vice Admiral Daren, you're the most qualified to speak."

Everyone turned to Daren in unison, clearly in agreement.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, don't look at me like that... That kind of pressure is insane."

Daren sighed helplessly.

Those looks practically said, You've already wiped out Shiki's fleet once—what's stopping you from doing it again?

What a joke... Just because he could, doesn't mean he should do it alone again.

"Last time, I was incredibly lucky to destroy Shiki's flying fleet. Even if I had the exact same setup, pulling off that success a second time would be nearly impossible."

Daren knew exactly how narrow that victory had been.

That outcome came down to several very specific advantages aligning.

The unique environment of Coin Island amplified the powers of his Devil Fruit.

Shiki's arrogance had caused him to lower his fleet into range for ground-based attacks.

And most importantly... the information gap. They had blindsided Shiki.

Those three factors combined were what allowed Daren to win so decisively at Coin Island.

It was a one-time deal.

Shiki wasn't the kind of fool to fall into the same trap twice.

After last time, he'd definitely be cautious.

"Then... Vice Admiral Daren, what about the sword?"

A Rear Admiral in his early thirties asked carefully.

Daren shook his head again.

"Enma does have devastating wide-range destructive power, but it's useless against Shiki."

"Before I even have a chance to slash through his fleet, he'll intercept it himself."

"And besides, the sword's capabilities have already been exposed. Shiki's not going to be unprepared."

That made Kong go silent. Sengoku frowned. The other Marine officers all fell quiet, expressions heavy.

"This is ridiculous."

The hoarse, cold voice broke the silence like a blade through fog.

Everyone was stunned.

Sakazuki, who had been silent since the beginning of the meeting, finally lifted his head and swept his eyes across the room without any expression.

"We're the core commanders of the entire Marine headquarters, and yet we're dumping everything on Daren..."

A cold, mocking smile curled at the edge of his lips.

"If you don't even have the courage to fight and die on the battlefield, then maybe you should all submit your resignations."

That lit a fuse.

"Sakazuki! What the hell are you saying!?"

"We've been Vice Admirals way longer than you!"

"You just got promoted—who are you to talk like that!?"

"Shiki's fleet is supposed to be invincible! We can't even fly—how are we supposed to fight him?!"

...

Hostility and anger surged like a tidal wave.

"Enough!"

Kong rapped the table with annoyance.

"Now's not the time to turn on each other!"

The room immediately fell into a tense, uneasy silence. No one dared say another word.

Kong rubbed his temples, deep in thought.

"Sakazuki's words may sound extreme, but he's not wrong."

"Taking down the Flying Pirates is a mission for all of us in the Marines. It shouldn't fall solely on Vice Admiral Daren's shoulders."

"Sengoku..."

He turned toward Sengoku.

"Go ahead and tell them."

Sengoku nodded, his tone serious.

"While we still haven't confirmed Shiki's exact objective, our intelligence indicates that all the weapons supplying his fleet are coming from a single source."

He looked at Daren.

"The Beasts Pirates. Kaidou."

"Daren, give us a quick rundown on Kaidou and the Beasts Pirates."

Daren raised an eyebrow.

So that's why Doflamingo hadn't reacted—Shiki had been sourcing his arms from Kaidou this whole time. That explained it.

Normally, such a massive influx of weapons for a fleet rebuild would cause serious ripples in the black market. Doflamingo would've been the first to respond.

But now it was clear—Shiki had become Kaidou's biggest buyer.

After thinking for a moment, Daren gave a concise overview of Kaidou's situation in Wano Country.

"What!?"

"Kaidou has taken control of Wano Country!?"

"Damn it!"

"Are they planning to join forces again?"

...

The Marine officers were stunned by the revelation and quickly grew uneasy.

Just then, a sweating messenger burst into the room, saluting in a panic.

"Urgent report! We've received new intel!"

"Shiki... the Great Pirate... has once again led his fleet into the New World!"

"We intercepted a Den Den Mushi transmission... We're currently analyzing his next target!"

The outburst jolted everyone. All eyes turned to the massive tactical sand table before them.

Kong and Sengoku scanned the chart intently, minds racing.

Where would Shiki strike next?

"Brr brr... Brr brr..."

Suddenly, an urgent Den Den Mushi call broke the tense silence.

"Excuse me."

Sengoku frowned as he pulled a military Den Den Mushi from his coat and pressed the connect button.

A burst of chaos came through—shouts, explosions, panic.

"Help... Help us..."

"Requesting... backup..."

"Shiki... here... is..."

The voice on the line faded, drowned by screams and the thunder of explosions.

Sengoku stood frozen, clutching the Den Den Mushi.

The others looked on, confused.

"We've cracked the signal!"

Another messenger rushed in, face pale as a sheet.

"Shiki's target... it's... the G14 branch!"

Everyone froze like statues, thunderstruck.

It hit them all at once—they turned their eyes to the Den Den Mushi in Sengoku's hand.

Just then...

The Den Den Mushi's expression shifted, twisting into something wild and cruel.

A hoarse, arrogant laugh crackled through the speaker.

"Stop guessing, Marines... You'll never figure out what I'm up to."

"And stop trying to sneak spies into my crew. Think of this as a little punishment."

"Next time, I won't stop at a small branch."

"Oh, and this whole intimidation thing? Works pretty well... I gotta thank that little brat Daren for the idea."

"Jihahahaha!!"

"Click."

The transmission cut.

The conference room was plunged into absolute silence.

Chapter 442 - 442: Volume 3 – Chapter 85: Ancient Weapons

The atmosphere in the massive conference room was suffocating.

It was so quiet, you could hear a pin drop.

All the Marine officers stood frozen in place, pale and motionless like statues.

Their eyes were fixed on the military Den Den Mushi, now in a dormant state, expressions filled with horror. No one spoke a word.

Then, two seconds later, a lazy, drawn-out voice finally broke the silence.

"How terrifying... Shiki the Golden Lion actually discovered the spy we planted in his ranks."

Borsalino scratched his head with an exaggerated look of helplessness.

"Damn it!!"

Sengoku slammed his fist onto the table, fury blazing in his eyes.

That bastard Shiki... he destroyed an entire Marine base just to send them a message!

Sure, the G14 Branch was just a small outpost on the fringes of the New World—nothing compared to the larger Marine facilities—but it still had over 500 troops stationed there!

From the moment their spy sent out the encrypted warning to the time the signal was decoded, it hadn't even been a full minute before Shiki wiped out the entire branch!

His terrifying speed and destructive power were enough to send a chill down anyone's spine.

What made it worse was that this method—an abrupt strike to send a message—was exactly the same tactic the Marines themselves had just used days ago!

That realization made everyone instinctively glance at the calm Vice Admiral casually smoking a cigar.

"Hey now, staring at me isn't going to help..."

Daren raised both hands, cigar in his mouth, looking exasperated.

"This has nothing to do with me."

The others rolled their eyes but didn't argue.

They knew it wasn't Daren's fault.

Shiki's recklessness and unpredictability were just part of who he was. That was exactly why he was more feared—and harder to deal with—than any other pirate on the sea.

"Daren... do you have any way to restrain Shiki?"

Kong rubbed his temples, his brow deeply furrowed as he looked at him.

Daren shook his head.

"Sorry, Fleet Admiral Kong."

"Shiki doesn't have a fixed territory or any clearly defined sphere of influence. His airborne fleet comes and goes like a ghost. Standard tactics just don't work on someone like him."

Upon hearing this, everyone's expressions darkened.

They were completely at a loss.

Kong fell silent for a moment. Then, rising to his feet, he slowly gave his order.

"In that case, pass this down... For now, pull back our surveillance net, reduce intelligence and espionage activities. We can't afford to provoke Shiki any further."

"This meeting is adjourned. Sengoku, Tsuru, Daren, Sakazuki, Borsalino, Garp... and Kuzan, you all stay."

He waved his hand tiredly.

"Yes, Fleet Admiral Kong!"

All the other officers stood up at once, saluted sharply, and left the room with heavy expressions.

Worry was etched into every face as they exited. No one could hide the cloud hanging over them.

Even the Marines had no clear countermeasure against a lunatic like Shiki.

Once the room had cleared and the doors shut behind them, Kong turned back to Daren, who was still calmly smoking.

His gaze was intense.

"Daren, you said standard methods don't work... What about unconventional ones?"

At those words, the others widened their eyes.

Was Daren really implying he had another way?

Sengoku, in particular, looked visibly stirred, his eyes fixed firmly on Daren.

"You guys are putting a lot of pressure on me here..."

Daren scratched his head, looking troubled.

"Shiki's strength is undeniable. The world is vast, and he moves through it freely. As long as he's not actively seeking death, who could really stop him?"

"I'm just a Vice Admiral. How could someone like me possibly restrain Shiki?"

Kong gave him a glance, then said suddenly,

"I'll offer you a candidate seat for Admiral."

Daren's expression shifted, turning serious.

"But even so, as a Marine, no matter what position I hold, I must uphold justice. Only then can I live up to the trust placed in me by the people and my fellow Marines."

Sengoku: ...

Tsuru: ...

Borsalino's lips curved into a smile.

Sakazuki narrowed his eyes.

Kuzan's jaw dropped in disbelief.

Garp burst out laughing.

Kong's face twitched as he snapped,

"If you've got an idea, spit it out already!"

Daren cleared his throat and, after a few seconds of thought, began slowly,

"Going head-to-head with Shiki won't work. That guy's taken hits from us before—he's bound to be more cautious now. That's exactly why he attacked the G14 Branch—to issue a warning to the Marines."

"But what he doesn't realize is that this action... exposed him."

"Oh? How so?" Sengoku asked, clearly intrigued.

The others fell silent, listening closely.

Daren continued confidently,

"Shiki clearly doesn't want to start an all-out war with the Marines. That's why he used this kind of indirect pressure to force us to stop infiltrating his crew."

"That means he's after something he considers far more important... or rather, some thing."

"So that brings us back to the key question."

He pointed to the large tactical sand table on the desk.

"What exactly is he targeting with these attacks?"

Then he turned toward Kong with a knowing look, half-smiling.

"Maybe you, Fleet Admiral Kong, can help answer that?"

At that, Sengoku, Garp, and Tsuru's expressions all subtly changed.

Kong narrowed his eyes at Daren. After a long pause, he finally said,

"There are some things that aren't beneficial for you to know too much about."

His gaze swept over Daren, Sakazuki, Borsalino, and Kuzan in turn, then he let out a long sigh.

"But with your abilities and potential, it's only a matter of time before you're pulled into these secrets anyway..."

Kong took a deep breath, the weight in his old eyes heavier than ever before.

"Shiki is searching for the Poneglyphs scattered across the world."

"More precisely, he's looking for clues within them... about the three ancient weapons."

So it really was that...

Daren's heart sank.

From the moment he recognized the pattern in Shiki's strikes, he had suspected that Shiki was after the Poneglyphs.

"Ancient... weapons?" Sakazuki frowned.

"Do things that vague and mystical really exist?"

Kong nodded solemnly.

"Yes. The ancient weapons do exist."

"They are three weapons from an age long past, each bearing the name of a 'god,' and said to have the power to destroy the world: Pluton, Poseidon, and Uranus..."

"It's said that these three ancient weapons possess the power to lay waste to everything. Among them, Pluton is a massive warship, and a single shot from it is rumored to be enough to annihilate an entire island."

Chapter 443 - 443: Volume 3 – Chapter 86: Who's the Unlucky One?

At this point, Kong paused deliberately, his expression serious, as if waiting for a reaction.

However...

The others simply looked at him quietly, seemingly waiting for him to continue.

Kong: ...

Right, I almost forgot—these brats are all monsters far beyond ordinary.

If it had been those Marine officers from earlier, they'd probably be gasping in shock by now.

Shouldn't have kicked them out so early...

Kong couldn't help but grumble to himself. Still, the secrets of the Ancient Weapons were far too critical—ordinary officers really had no business knowing too much.

"I didn't expect the legendary Ancient Weapons to actually exist. That being the case, it's highly likely that this is Shiki's real goal," Sakazuki said thoughtfully.

Kuzan scratched his head.

"But this Ancient Weapon doesn't sound that special. Destroying an island in one strike... Daren's Enma can do that too, can't it?"

Daren shook his head.

"It's not the same. Even with Enma's full power, amplified a hundredfold, the best it could do is wipe out a small or medium-sized island. And after one attack, it needs a long cooldown before it can be used again."

"But an Ancient Weapon... I get the feeling its power far exceeds Enma's."

In his mind, he pictured the ability of the Mermaid Princess Shirahoshi from the original timeline—summoning and commanding gargantuan Sea Kings, each thousands of meters long, to fight at her will. If that kind of power could be controlled... forget destroying an island—it could reshape an entire sea.

If Poseidon was already that strong, then Pluton wouldn't fall far behind.

A single blast destroying an island... that might just be a casual shot.

Kong nodded solemnly.

"In any case, although the three Ancient Weapons have long disappeared—perhaps even lost to the flow of history—there's still a chance they exist..."

"If Shiki ever gets his hands on that kind of world-ending power, nothing on this sea will be able to stop his ambition."

At those words, a terrifying image rose unbidden in everyone's mind:

A massive warship—Pluton—suspended silently in the sky by Shiki's Devil Fruit power, hovering far above Marine Headquarters. Then...

Boom—one shot.

Kuzan shivered.

Sakazuki's face darkened.

Cold sweat trickled down Sengoku's back.

We absolutely cannot let Shiki get any lead on the Ancient Weapons!!

That same thought struck everyone at once.

With a lunatic like that... who knew what chaos he'd unleash?

"So, Daren, what do you think?"

Sengoku was visibly tense now, glancing at Daren with growing anticipation.

If Shiki got his hands on an Ancient Weapon, Sengoku couldn't say what would happen to Sakazuki and the other Logia-types—but as a Mythical Zoan who couldn't fly, he'd be blown to bits for sure.

Daren fell into thought as he casually pulled out a cigar.

Kuzan immediately grinned and offered a lighter.

After lighting it and taking a deep drag, Daren spoke slowly.

"Shiki's approach to tracking down the Ancient Weapons may be crude, but there's no denying it works."

"It takes time, yes... but eventually, he's bound to find something."

"And the worst part is—we can't stop him. We can only stand by and watch it all unfold."

Everyone nodded grimly, a heavy weight settling in their chests.

It was a cruel reality.

And it explained why Shiki had no hesitation making such bold threats.

Even with all the power the Marines had... they were helpless against the wild, ruthless madness that was Shiki.

"But that doesn't mean we can't do anything."

Daren's sudden shift in tone lit a spark of hope in everyone's hearts.

"You have an idea?" Sengoku asked eagerly.

"I'm not sure how well it'll work, but I do have an interesting plan." A mischievous smile tugged at Daren's lips.

Seeing that grin, Sengoku's mouth twitched. He couldn't help but feel something bad was coming.

Then Daren said casually,

"We just tell him where the Ancient Weapon is."

The conference room instantly fell silent.

Sengoku: ???

Tsuru: ???

Garp: ???

Kong: ???

Everyone stared at Daren in shock and confusion.

We don't even know where the Ancient Weapon is—how are we supposed to tell him?

And even if we did have a clue, we'd never hand it over to Shiki!

Sengoku quickly came to his senses. Swallowing hard, he rasped,

"You mean... feed him false intel?"

"And ambush him at the target location?"

The moment those words left his mouth, everyone's eyes lit up.

"No. A fake lead won't fool someone as cunning and paranoid as Shiki," Daren said, shaking his head with a grin as he exhaled a stream of smoke that curled like a dragon.

"Besides, if ambushes worked on Shiki, the Marines would've caught him long ago—we wouldn't be here racking our brains."

Sengoku fell silent. That was true. Someone like Shiki wouldn't be easy to deceive.

Even if they got lucky, set up a trap, and got him to take the bait, there was no guarantee it would work. Shiki's Observation Haki was no joke.

"Then what are you suggesting?" Kong asked, frowning.

Daren's smile deepened.

"We leak a bit of info through the underworld. Keep it simple: a Great Pirate has gotten hold of a clue about the Ancient Weapons."

"That way, we don't need to lift a finger—Shiki will go after that unlucky bastard himself."

As the words sank in, Sengoku shot to his feet, eyes blazing.

"Yes!!"

He couldn't stop himself from letting out a low shout.

The others were also beginning to grasp Daren's plan.

If the rumor claimed the clue was in some fixed location, Shiki would be on guard. And once he found out it was fake, he'd just resume raiding islands and towns, searching for the next clue.

It wouldn't stop him at all.

But if the rumor said the clue was in the hands of a Great Pirate? That changed everything.

Shiki would throw himself into a drawn-out battle with that pirate—and with luck, the conflict might even weaken the pirate forces in the New World.

"But Daren, how can you be sure Shiki won't just confront the target and get them to clear things up?"
Tsuru pointed out the biggest flaw in the plan.

Everyone paused and started to think.

That's right. If Shiki tracked down the pirate, and they talked it out, the truth could come out. Then all their scheming would go to waste.

Daren replied calmly,

"That's why we can't pick someone like Kaidou or Big Mom. They still have a decent relationship with Shiki."

Sengoku's eyes widened.

No way...

At that moment, Borsalino grinned and said,

"So, who's the unlucky one this time?"

Daren glanced at him, then answered with a smile,

"Gol D. Roger."

Everyone froze.

Daren's words hit like a thunderclap.

Gol D. Roger!

Of course—he was the perfect target.

Everyone knew about Roger and Shiki's bitter rivalry. Their grudge went all the way back to the Battle of God Valley.

And the most critical point—Roger's oddball personality guaranteed one thing: if Shiki came knocking, Roger wouldn't explain or clarify anything.

The moment those two met, it would explode into a full-scale war—no doubt about it!

Garp was the first to react. Laughing heartily, he threw an arm around Daren's shoulders.

"Bwahaha!! Daren, kid, I like you more and more!"

Sengoku, meanwhile, cast a wary glance at Daren.

This guy... is dangerously crafty.

He was calling Shiki sneaky earlier, but clearly the dirtiest mind here is his!

Seeing all the different expressions on their faces, Daren just smiled.

He knew this plan was going to work.

Because the intel he leaked... wasn't fake at all.

Roger really did hold some clues about the Ancient Weapons.

With this move, Shiki and Roger were bound to clash in an earth-shattering battle.

As for the location...

Daren narrowed his eyes, sweeping over the massive sand table until they locked on a specific spot.

That location had a name clearly marked on it.

...Edd War Sea.

Chapter 444 - 444: Volume 3 – Chapter 87: How Do You Train an Indestructible Body?

And just like that, a secret Marine operation targeting Shiki was finalized at the end of the meeting.

An hour later, in a black market intel hub somewhere in the New World, a highly classified and incredibly expensive piece of information... was purchased by a pirate operating in those seas.

The gears of fate had begun to turn.

...

Fleet Admiral's Office – Conference Room

Sakazuki and the others had already left, moving swiftly to prepare for the coming conflict.

Garp, especially, had completely dropped his usual laziness. Ever since he found out that Roger was Daren's chosen target, he'd been buzzing with excitement. He didn't even bother finishing the senbei he'd stolen from Sengoku.

"Well then, if there's nothing else, I'll be heading out."

Daren took the final drag from his cigar, nodding slightly toward Kong and Sengoku.

"Wait, Daren."

Sengoku suddenly called after him.

"What is it, Admiral Sengoku?"

Daren turned with a hint of confusion.

Sengoku exchanged a glance with Kong, then asked seriously,

"Daren, if a war does break out between Roger and Shiki... how likely do you think it is that Kaidou will get involved?"

He paused, then added,

"Shiki's Flying Pirates get most of their weapons from Kaidou. There's a real possibility those two might form an alliance."

Daren thought for a few seconds, then grinned.

"Don't worry, Admiral Sengoku."

"I'll make sure Kaidou's too busy to join in."

Kong and Sengoku looked at each other, uncertain, their expressions skeptical.

Then, as if something clicked, both men's faces changed. Their eyes locked onto Daren in shock.

"You little brat... don't tell me..."

As if to confirm his suspicion, Kong suddenly shot up from his seat, his overwhelming presence surging. In an instant, he was in front of Daren.

His muscles bulged with power as he launched a punch—nothing fancy, no tricks, just raw force.

The punch wasn't fast. In fact, Daren could clearly see the rough, callused knuckles of Kong's fist.

With a grin, Daren met the strike with one of his own.

Neither man used Armament Haki.

This was pure physical strength—a clash of raw, unadulterated power.

Boom!!

Their fists collided midair with a deafening thud. Shockwaves burst out in rippling rings, blasting their cloaks into the air.

The entire Fleet Admiral's office seemed to tremble from the impact.

Both men remained perfectly still.

Crack... crack...

Long, thin fractures split across the floor and crept up the walls.

The crystal chandelier above them swayed and creaked, casting flickering light over Daren's chiseled face, now full of depth and intensity.

Kong stared at Daren, his gaze stern.

Daren simply responded with a radiant smile.

Sengoku stood frozen, eyes wide in disbelief.

"K-Kon... Kong..."

He stammered, looking like he'd just seen a ghost.

"An Indestructible Body... I can't believe you actually managed to train yourself to that level."

Kong took over for him, slowly lowering his fist, eyes filled with complex emotion as he looked at Daren.

He glanced at the faint, metallic gleam lingering on Daren's knuckles, then shook his head and sighed.

"You really are something else..."

With their experience, it only took a glance.

There was no mistaking it—Daren had trained his body to the level of the Indestructible Body!

Until now, only Kaidou had ever reached that point.

It was that very power that earned Kaidou the title of Immortal Monster. Not even Marine capture, torture, or any kind of execution could pierce his defenses.

And now... Daren had done it too.

What was even more shocking—just from that brief exchange, Kong could tell Daren's physical power was now fully on par with his own!

Even without charging up or bracing for the hit, Daren could unleash the overwhelming force of a giant warrior.

And Kong... had once ruled the seas on brute strength alone, with almost no one able to match him.

"How the hell did you train, kid? Back at Marineford, your body wasn't anywhere near this tough..."

Sengoku walked over, eyes gleaming with curiosity. He looked at Daren like he'd found a national treasure, poking and prodding at his body with sparkling eyes.

His muscles and skin felt springy, no different from a normal person at first glance.

But only when applying pressure could one feel the terrifying resilience hidden beneath the surface—the hardness in his flesh, the explosive strength coiled in every fiber of muscle.

Daren took a quiet step back to dodge Sengoku's overly eager hands, smiling calmly.

"I made a trip to Wano. The fight with Kaidou gave me quite a bit of inspiration."

"What kind of inspiration?" Sengoku asked, his eyes lighting up.

So fighting Kaidou came with perks like that? Why hadn't he known?

If Daren's training method could be replicated, maybe it could be introduced across the Marine ranks.

As an Admiral—and likely future Fleet Admiral—Sengoku instantly recognized the massive potential.

Not that he was jealous himself.

Sure, such a body was incredibly powerful. Once achieved, it meant not having to worry about sneak attacks or stray shots in the chaos of a battlefield. Even under a storm of cannon fire or bullets, one could charge ahead without flinching.

But when it came to clashes between top-tier powerhouses, an Indestructible Body alone wouldn't decide the victor.

Too many other factors came into play—Haki strength, physique, raw power, Devil Fruit mastery, the terrain, the weather, stamina, physical condition...

There were just too many variables.

Even Kong was getting curious now.

The Indestructible Body was something of a legend. They'd tried special training to achieve it in the past—and every attempt had ended in failure.

Eventually, they'd all reached the same conclusion:

It wasn't something you could train. You were either born with it or you weren't.

But now, Daren had shattered that belief.

"It's actually pretty simple," Daren said, a flicker of pride slipping into his voice as he puffed out his chest.

"Just take dozens of hits from Kaidou head-on, without using Haki."

Sengoku: ...

Kong: ...

Take dozens of hits from Kaidou, head-on?

Even they wouldn't survive that!

You'd be dead before the training even started!

Chapter 445 - 445: Volume 3 – Chapter 88: Don't Tell Zephyr

Alright.

Kong and Sengoku immediately deflated, staring resentfully at the freak standing before them. Only a lunatic could come up with something like this.

The core idea behind the training method wasn't wrong. Through intense "striking" training, the body's resistance to physical blows would improve.

No flaw there—except that it was borderline suicidal.

Still, the two quickly recovered and couldn't help but smile. Daren had mastered the "Indestructible Body," and his strength and aura had both seen a noticeable boost. What did that mean?

It meant the Marines had gained another admiral-level combatant!

For the Navy, on the brink of an all-out war, this was undoubtedly great news.

"In that case, I'll leave Kaidou to you, Daren... Carry the extra weight," Sengoku said, clapping Daren on the shoulder with enthusiasm and a satisfied smile.

They'd been short on candidates for a while, but that was no longer the case.

After the battle at Marineford, both Sakazuki and Borsalino had advanced to admiral-level strength. Now, with the steady rise of the "Golden Age," the Navy could finally claim it was brimming with talent.

Even though military support from allied nations remained limited, it had temporarily eased the Navy's short-term funding crisis.

Manpower, troops, funds, equipment... everything was in place. Sengoku was more than ready to roll up his sleeves for war!

As for Kaidou in Wano Country—he might be a nightmare for most, but for a monster like Daren, stirring up trouble and keeping Kaidou too busy to meddle in the coming conflict shouldn't be too hard.

Daren smiled.

"No problem, Admiral Sengoku."

"I was planning to 'visit' Kaidou again soon anyway."

The strange inflection in the word "visit" made both Sengoku and Kong twitch at the corners of their mouths, black lines forming across their faces.

Right then, they were truly thankful that Daren was a Marine and not a pirate. If he were, with his devious mind and relentless nature, the Navy would've been in serious trouble.

After briefly mourning Kaidou's impending misfortune in silence, Sengoku suddenly seemed to recall something and added,

"By the way, you better make sure that bastard Zephyr doesn't find out how you powered up."

"He might just start questioning his entire life."

...

The New World, Wano Country.

"Achoo!!"

Kaidou, who was overseeing the reconstruction of the military factory in the Kuri region, suddenly sneezed. A faint chill ran down his spine.

"Am I coming down with something?"

He picked up a jug of hot sake and took a swig, then quickly shook his head.

What a joke.

With a body that tough, forget catching a cold—even those engineered viruses from that bastard Queen wouldn't do a thing to him.

Speaking of that bastard...

A surge of anger suddenly flared in Kaidou's chest. He turned to King, who was busy nearby.

"Arber, where the hell is Queen?"

"We're busting our asses rebuilding this place, and that guy's nowhere to be found!"

Watching the countless Beasts Pirates members hard at work around him only made Kaidou angrier.

That damned Marine brat, Daren, had actually invaded Wano Country and destroyed nearly a third of their military factory production lines!

And to top it off, the bastard had the nerve to say he'd be "visiting" again?

What did he think this place was?

The Pleasure District?

This is Wano! The territory of Kaidou of the Beasts! It's not some theme park you can stroll in and out of at will!

Damn it!

Kaidou clenched his fists, veins popping and eyes reddening with rage.

And the root of all this... was Queen, that damned fool!

If he hadn't been messing around, injecting that Marine brat with all sorts of strange viruses, how could Daren have gotten so strong so quickly?

He should've been crushed with a single blow!

King immediately sensed the murderous aura and fury radiating from Kaidou. He pressed his lips together and answered in a low voice,

"Kaidou-san, Queen's been locked in his lab these past few days. He said he's running some kind of experiment."

"Damn it! What the hell is he up to now!?"

Kaidou grabbed his massive black kanabō and stormed off toward the lab.

King's eyelid twitched violently, but he didn't dare stop him and quickly followed.

Along the way, every Beasts Pirates member they passed instinctively shuddered at Kaidou's furious aura and scattered like frightened animals.

Before long, the two reached the entrance to Queen's enormous lab.

Even before they got close, they could hear agonized screams pouring out from inside.

"AAHHH!! Queen-sama, no!! Don't come any closer!!"

"Don't move! Once you're injected with my virus, you'll get stronger!!"

"That's insane!! This stuff could kill me!! Queen-sama, I'm sorry! I shouldn't have stolen your red bean soup..."

"What!? You actually stole my red bean soup!? Damn you! That's my favorite!! Increase the dosage by 20%!!"

"AAAAAGHHHH!!"

The wails were sharp and brutal, like the shrieking of a devil. Just from the sound, it was clear the poor guy inside was suffering unimaginably.

But after three seconds, the screaming stopped dead.

Then—

Bang! The lab doors burst open with a thunderous kick.

Two workers in full hazmat gear rushed out, pale-faced, carrying a stretcher.

On it lay a Beasts Pirates grunt, mangled and soaked in blood, his skin tinted with a strange bluish hue. He was clearly dead.

"Damn it! Another failure!!"

"This can't be happening!"

Out stormed a furious Queen, his bloated body stretching his lab coat to its limit, face wild with frustration.

"Daren pulled it off—why can't anyone else?!"

He roared, "Next!"

But as soon as the words left his mouth, a chill ran down his spine. He turned around abruptly.

"K-Kaidou-sama!?"

Reflected in his pupils was a massive kanabō, rapidly closing in.

Boom!!

Queen flew backward like a cannonball, slamming into a distant hillside with a deafening crash, sending rocks tumbling as the mountain cracked and crumbled.

"You bastard... We're already short on manpower, and this is what you're doing!?"

Kaidou growled, panting, kanabō in hand.

He stared at the mountain of corpses piled behind the lab, rage burning in his eyes.

Chapter 446 - 446: Volume 3 – Chapter 89: Sorry to Disappoint You, Bullet

That bastard Queen... actually used that many people for his experiments!?

Kaidou glared furiously, panting heavily.

"Ow, ow, ow..."

From the collapsed hillside, Queen crawled out battered and bruised, face swollen, grimacing in pain.

When he saw Kaidou storming toward him with his kanabō in hand, rage boiling over, his fat body trembled uncontrollably.

"K-Kaidou-sama... I was just trying to help them get stronger," he stammered.

"If Daren and Bullet could get stronger through virus injections... I figured others could too, right?"

"If the experiment worked, we could mass-produce powerful warriors!"

"Shut it!!"

Kaidou roared, lifting his kanabō high.

Before Queen's horrified eyes, the weapon began crackling with dense purple lightning.

"No! Kaidou-sama!!"

"You think everyone's like that Marine brat?!"

Grinding his teeth, Kaidou charged.

"Raimei Hakke!!"

Boom!!

A towering column of dust exploded into the sky.

With every thunderous blow that followed, Queen's shrill, pig-like screams echoed endlessly across the valley, reverberating again and again.

King turned away, expression helpless. He stared off toward the distant sunset and let out a long sigh.

It took ten full minutes for the screaming to fade.

By then, the once-rolling valley terrain had been utterly transformed. The hills were replaced by massive craters, densely packed and jagged, like the pockmarked surface of the moon.

Dust swirled, and fierce winds howled through the air.

Kaidou finally emerged from the smoke, kanabō Hassaikai in one hand, and in the other, he dragged the unconscious Queen by the foot like a slaughtered hog.

Queen's face was grotesquely swollen, head covered in welts, eyes spinning in dizzy circles. He was completely out cold.

After venting his fury, Kaidou sat down with a heavy grunt, took a long swig from the sake flask at his waist, and let out a cold snort. His rage had mostly passed.

Seeing that Kaidou's mood seemed to have eased, King seized the moment and said in a low voice,

"Kaidou-san, the final shipment of weapons ordered by Shiki has just been sent out."

Kaidou wiped his mouth and gave a low grunt in response.

"That lunatic Shiki's been going off the rails lately, launching attacks on towns and ports like he's gone mad. Doesn't he care that he'll provoke the Marines or the World Government?"

He frowned.

"Normally, Shiki's not the impulsive type. If he's acting like this, he's definitely up to something."

King fell into thought as well, frowning.

"He's bought such a massive arsenal from us... It really feels like he's preparing for some kind of large-scale war."

"But Kaidou-san, why didn't you warn him about that Marine?"

Kaidou let out a cold snort.

"What's there to say?"

"That bastard dragged me into the Marineford invasion, and when the war ended, he just disappeared like nothing happened. Meanwhile, I got stuck with that damned Marine brat breathing down my neck!"

He ground his teeth hard enough to creak.

"Back when we were with the Rocks Pirates, Linlin already warned me—aside from our captain, Shiki is never to be trusted."

"I'd be happy to see him take a hit from that brat Daren!"

Among pirates, so-called alliances and cooperation were all just transactions of mutual benefit.

In this vast sea, aside from Linlin, Kaidou didn't trust a single soul.

King fell silent.

Kaidou's logic was sound—but for some reason, he had a feeling things were going to spiral in a direction none of them could predict.

...

At the same time...

Somewhere in the Grand Line.

On a deserted island, a bonfire crackled along the shoreline.

Members of the Roger Pirates were gathered around it, cheerfully eating grilled meat, singing songs, and bursting into carefree laughter.

Not far from the fire, behind a massive rock, Roger sat in the shade, leaning against the stone. His eyes were fixed blankly on the ground.

"Cough, cough..."

His face was gaunt, hair disheveled, and he looked as if he were recovering from a hangover, letting out hoarse coughs from time to time.

Rayleigh and Gaban stood nearby with arms crossed, silent and clearly worried.

"Oi, don't look at me like that. It's not like I'm dying today," Roger said with a grin, glancing at them.

He flexed his arm in a mock show of strength, and despite the pallor in his face, his smile was bright.

"At least, not until we finish our journey."

Rayleigh pressed his lips together and muttered, "Just shut up already."

Gaban sighed and shook his head.

Still, Roger's easygoing attitude seemed to lift some of the gloom from their expressions.

Roger, your life is nearing its end... but we'll see it through with you, all the way to the finish.

Both men clenched their fists quietly, their eyes firm with resolve.

"Captain, time for your medicine."

A voice called out from the side.

The man had a distinctive hairstyle like a blooming saffron flower, frameless glasses, a floral shirt, and beach shorts. In his hands was a bowl of pitch-black medicine.

He was the newest ship doctor aboard the Roger Pirates. Before joining, he had been the lighthouse keeper at Twin Cape, the entrance to the Grand Line. When the Roger Pirates recently decided to circle the world again via the Twin Capes, he finally accepted Roger's invitation to come aboard.

"Doctor Crocus, this stuff is way too bitter. Can I skip it? It's not like I'm dying right this second, right?"

Roger's face instantly scrunched up when he saw the bowl, and he waved it off like a child.

"You've got to drink it. Otherwise, you won't make it through your journey around the world."

Crocus looked helpless.

Before joining the crew, he never would've imagined that the legendary pirate Gol D. Roger—known across the seas—had the personality of a spoiled kid.

"I added sugar this time. Shouldn't be so bad."

He held the bowl out as if coaxing a child.

"Really?"

Roger eyed him suspiciously.

Crocus nodded solemnly.

"You're not lying, right?"

Roger turned to Rayleigh and Gaban.

They froze, then caught sight of Crocus frantically signaling with his eyes and quickly nodded.

"Definitely not bitter!"

"Alright then..."

Grumbling, Roger took the bowl and—with a grimace—tilted his head back and chugged the whole thing.

Then—

PFFF!!

The black liquid shot out of Roger's mouth like a fountain.

Crocus: ...

Rayleigh: ...

Gaban: ...

"So bitter!!"

Roger's face twisted in agony—not a drop had gone down.

"...I'll go make another batch," Crocus muttered and turned around.

"Thanks for the trouble, Doctor Crocus!" Rayleigh and Gaban bowed deeply.

But just as Crocus walked off, steady, heavy footsteps approached.

Rayleigh and Gaban stiffened, their expressions shifting.

Turning their heads, they saw a tall, broad-shouldered blond figure standing not far away, staring darkly at Roger, who was still lying on the ground.

"So it's true... you don't have much time left, do you?"

Bullet's eyes were full of complex emotion—regret, sorrow, frustration... but most of all, disbelief.

"...Captain Roger."

Roger stopped rolling, got to his feet, and casually brushed the dirt off his pants.

He chuckled.

"Caught me, huh..."

Hearing it confirmed, Bullet stood frozen like he'd been struck by lightning.

He stared at Roger in silence before turning away.

"If you're not the strongest anymore, then I have no reason to stay on this crew."

His tone was cold, back turned.

Rayleigh and Gaban's eyes widened.

"What are you talking about? We're about to finish our journey through the Grand Line!"

"Bullet, how can you leave now!?"

They glared at his tall, broad back—unyielding, distant.

Bullet took a step, voice laced with scorn.

"A dying man has no right to be the captain of Douglas Bullet."

"You bastard!!" Rayleigh and Gaban shouted, fury in their eyes.

"It's fine."

Roger raised a hand, cutting them off with a calm smile.

"Let him go."

He watched Bullet's silhouette growing smaller, then suddenly called out with a grin,

"Sorry to disappoint you... Bullet."

Bullet froze mid-step.

Head lowered, teeth clenched, his eyes—hidden beneath a curtain of blond hair—had turned blood-red.

He gritted his fists and let out a strained, wild laugh.

"Don't talk crap, Roger!!"

"I never expected anything from you!!"

With that, he quickened his pace, making a beeline for the small submarine moored at the coast, like he was fleeing.

"Bullet... go on! I believe you'll become the strongest in the world!!"

Roger's bold, carefree laughter echoed behind him.

Bullet stumbled briefly, then clenched his fists and dove into the submarine.

It wasn't until he had fled far out to sea that he finally cut the engine.

Inside the empty, silent cabin...

Bang!

He slammed his fists into the controls, roaring in rage.

"Damn it!!"

"Damn it!!"

"Damn it!!"

"..."

Under that mess of golden hair, his face was already drenched in tears.

Chapter 447 - 447: Volume 3 – Chapter 90: Listen to My Excuses

The setting sun burned like blood, casting ripples of crimson light across the distant sea.

Roger pinched his nose and forced down the freshly brewed medicine. He sat lazily beneath a large rock, absentmindedly polishing a gleaming silver longsword with an oilcloth.

"Are you really just going to let him go, Roger...? I know how much you liked that kid, Bullet."

Rayleigh stood nearby, arms crossed and leaning against the rock, his eyes drifting toward the endless horizon with a trace of melancholy.

Roger paused mid-wipe, gaze dropping slightly.

"That kid has a path of his own to walk."

Then he smiled.

"Rayleigh, everyone has their moment to step onto the stage."

"For me, the perfect ending is at the close of this journey."

"But Bullet... his life is still just beginning."

"The climax of his story shouldn't be now."

Rayleigh silently watched the side of Roger's face, where that familiar smile lingered. After a moment, he too cracked a faint smile.

"You always manage to see things so clearly."

His tone carried a tinge of quiet admiration.

Roger burst into hearty laughter. His two tufts of black facial hair—almost like they were sprouting from his nostrils—quivered with every chuckle, as if Rayleigh's recognition was the highest praise in the world.

"Ahh, youth... it's a beautiful thing."

He raised his arms high, stretching with satisfaction as a broad grin spread across his face.

"Captain Roger, bad news!!"

Just then, several Roger Pirates crew members came running, faces pale with panic.

Buggy, his red nose even redder from stress, rushed forward waving a piece of paper, his teeth chattering as he shouted,

"Somehow... news has gotten out in the New World... they're saying we have a lead on the ancient weapon capable of destroying the world!!"

"Now tons of pirate crews and major powers have their eyes on us!!"

Shanks, gripping the brim of his straw hat, growled through gritted teeth,

"This is slander! A setup! It's all fake news!!"

"Fake news!!" echoed others around them, faces tense.

None of them had the faintest clue about any ancient weapon.

All they ever did was drink, feast, and throw parties every day!

They barely even did any actual pirate work like looting or pillaging!

"What!?"

Roger jolted upright, startled.

"How did they find out I had a lead on the ancient weapons!?"

The air froze for a second.

Then—

"HUH!?"

Every crew member stared at their captain in stunned silence, jaws hanging slack.

Wait... it's not fake?

It's real!?

...

The New World.

An underground black market port.

BOOM!!

A thunderous explosion erupted at the heart of the trade hub. Flames surged violently, swallowing the massive facility in an instant. The resulting shockwave shattered windows across several kilometers.

Pirates, civilians, merchants, nobles... everyone stood frozen in fear, staring at the lone figure rising slowly from the inferno.

Wild golden hair whipped in the air like a lion's mane. His gaze burned with a savage grin. The pressure he gave off was monstrous—divine and demonic all at once—enough to make anyone despair.

"G-Golden Lion..."

"Shiki the Golden Lion!!"

"What's he doing here?!"

...

The crowd went pale and broke into a frenzy, people trampling over one another in a desperate attempt to flee.

"Jihahahaha... So, tell me."

Shiki curled a finger.

From the burning wreckage, molten debris floated up and reformed into a towering wall of pitch-black stone.

At the center of that wall, a middle-aged man dressed like a merchant was pinned, his entire body encased in compressed, levitating earth—only his terrified face left exposed as he stared at the infamous pirate looming before him.

Shiki floated forward, stopping in front of the man. His wild eyes, one larger than the other, gleamed with mockery as he sneered,

"That intel... the clue to the ancient weapon—who has it?"

As he spoke, his clenched fist began to tighten.

The massive wall behind the man, shaped from rubble and debris, started compressing under some unseen force.

The man's body cracked with the sickening sound of bones snapping. Blood poured from his mouth and nose, and the unbearable pain forced a desperate scream from his throat.

"It's Roger! Gol D. Roger! That's what the intel said! Roger holds the clue to the ancient weapon!"

"Please! Let me go!!"

"Roger, huh?"

Shiki's pupils narrowed. Then he let out a hoarse, maniacal laugh.

"Jihahahaha!! So it's you! Roger!!"

"Well, isn't that a surprise..."

He licked his parched lips slowly.

"In that case, I guess it's time we settle our old scores... all at once."

Still laughing, Shiki rose into the air.

"Wait! I gave you what you wanted! Let me go!!"

The man screamed after him in terror, but it was already too late.

A massive shadow loomed overhead.

The earth rumbled. It roared. It rose.

A colossal lion made entirely of stone emerged, its gaping maw like a tidal wave in the sky. With a roar, it crashed down and devoured the entire town.

As the city crumbled beneath it, Shiki's crazed laughter echoed through the heavens.

"Jihahahaha! Daren, you brat... just wait!"

"When I get my hands on the ancient weapon... I'll sink Marineford into the sea and show you what a real pirate's terror looks like!"

...

Marine Headquarters, Marineford.

"Achoo!"

On his way home, Daren suddenly sneezed, feeling a chill creep up his spine.

"Did I catch a cold?"

He rubbed his nose, puzzled for a moment.

Then he shook his head and chuckled.

"No way. An Indestructible Body can't catch a cold... right?"

"Probably just someone out there thinking about me..."

Daren laughed at himself.

He had so many enemies, he'd lost count.

Twilight faded, and night began to fall.

The moon shone high, stars sparse, the evening wind crisp and cool.

Daren adjusted his military coat and turned a corner—only to stop dead in his tracks.

Standing at the end of the street was a tall, graceful figure, her silhouette framed in moonlight.

The corner of his eye twitched.

Now he understood where that chill had come from.

"So... the Pleasure District was fun?"

Gion stood under the moon, her cold gaze fixed on Daren. Her slender, pale hand rested calmly on the hilt of the blade at her waist.

"Gion, wait—let me explain..."

Chapter 448 - 448: Volume 3 – Chapter 91: Familiar Lines

Marine Headquarters, Marineford.

Gion's residence.

"So, the Pleasure District was fun?"

Gion stood with her arms crossed, a half-smile on her lips, but her eyes shimmered with a chilling killing intent as she looked at the Vice Admiral before her.

Well... it was pretty fun, to be honest.

Mainly the casinos and arenas—that's what made it interesting. It had absolutely nothing to do with the Queen of the Pleasure District... really.

Daren muttered to himself internally.

But the moment he saw Gion slowly place her hand on the hilt of her Meito, a cold shiver ran down his spine. He quickly forced a grin.

"Gion, let me... plead my case—no, I mean, explain!"

Gion's beautiful eyes narrowed into a dangerous slit as she eyed him coldly.

"I'm listening."

Oh? There's still hope!

Daren's eyes lit up slightly.

Judging by her reaction, it seemed she still didn't know exactly what he'd done—or who he'd met—in the Pleasure District.

After a brief pause, a hint of sorrow appeared in his gaze. He let out a long sigh and said helplessly,

"The truth is... me ending up in the Pleasure District to recover wasn't something I planned. It was an accident."

As he spoke, he slowly unbuttoned his military uniform, revealing a physique marked with shocking visual impact.

Countless intersecting scars crisscrossed his torso. Some of the newer ones were still pink and raw.

One particularly horrifying wound—where broken ribs had pierced through his chest—remained vivid and frighteningly clear.

Gion's eyes widened, and she gasped unconsciously.

"Your injuries..."

Daren gave a bitter smile and nodded.

"After the successful raid on Totto Land, I received a secret order from Admiral Sengoku... He said there were signs of the Beasts Pirates and asked me to investigate."

He didn't hesitate to throw Sengoku under the bus.

"Admiral Sengoku lives up to his title as the 'Resourceful General' of the Marines. Just as he predicted... I found traces of the Beasts Pirates in Wano Country. Kaidou had already moved in, and he'd secretly seized control of the nation, turning it into his stronghold."

"Kaidou built a massive network of military factories there. Out of a sense of duty, I chose to act. I tried to destroy their production lines..."

"You fought Kaidou?" Gion's eyes flashed with shock.

Daren nodded with difficulty.

"Kaidou was too powerful. I barely escaped from him and the rest of the Beasts Pirates."

"My wounds were critical, and I was completely exhausted... I lost consciousness while flying."

"When I came to, I was already in the Pleasure District."

He sighed deeply, then raised his eyes to Gion's, filled with sincerity.

"With injuries like these... do you really think I could've done anything inappropriate in a place like that?"

Gion pursed her lips and fell silent.

"So... I misunderstood you?" she murmured after a long pause.

Watching her expression soften, Daren's lips curled into a faint smile.

Still too young...

"Really, you weren't wrong. It's my fault... I shouldn't have made you worry."

His voice was full of remorse.

As he spoke, a coin seemed to appear from nowhere in his hand—like magic.

It was shaped like an old copper coin, with a rustic, antique finish.

"This is currency from Wano Country—spoils from my latest mission."

"I told you before, I'd bring you a coin from every place I visit."

Daren smiled as faint arcs of electricity flickered between his fingers.

The copper coin in his hand began to melt, stretch, and twist as if it were alive. Under the control of his fingertips, it rippled and reformed like it was being crafted by a master artisan, gradually shaping into a delicate, thorned rose of breathtaking beauty.

It bloomed brilliantly in his hand.

"A gift for you, Gion."

Thanks to his ever-deepening mastery of his Devil Fruit ability and the refined control granted by Observation Haki, the golden rose he created this time was clearly more detailed and lifelike than the last.

Gion stared silently at the rose in his palm, speechless.

He really... remembered.

She reached out, took the rose, and carefully placed it in a vase. There, it complemented the previous rose beautifully.

Under the moonlight, both shimmered with a soft glow.

"Do you like it?" Daren asked with a smile.

"Mm."

Gion gave a gentle nod.

Yes! Pulled it off!

Seeing her this calm and sweet, Daren couldn't help but grin.

"As long as you like it, I'll always do my best to make it happen—"

"But how do you explain the Queen of the Pleasure District?"

"...Eh?"

Daren froze as if struck by lightning.

He looked up, the smile on his face stiffening instantly.

Gion gave a sly, half-smile.

"How was she?"

"Huh?"

Daren instinctively took a step back, sensing the sudden shift in air pressure.

She... knew!?

Dammit!!

Her acting had completely fooled him!

Icy anger began to cloud Gion's expression. She sneered.

"I heard Stussy—the Queen of the Pleasure District—is the most skilled courtesan on the seas. She must've taken excellent care of you, huh?"

"Uhh..."

Daren gave an awkward chuckle.

But before he could say another word, Gion lunged.

In a flash, she pinned him to the ground, a fierce expression on her face.

Her sharp eyes flared with competitive fire.

"So... how many times?"

"WHAT!?"

Daren was completely stunned.

A terrible premonition crept into his heart.

That line...

This setup...

Why does this feel so familiar!?

No way—

...

Three hours later.

Daren hobbled out of Gion's residence, one hand clutching his lower back, the other bracing against the wall.

Two dark circles hung under his eyes.

"Women... when they get competitive... they're downright terrifying..."

He shivered and instinctively glanced back at the cozy little house within the mansion grounds.

Bathed in warm light, it now looked like a bottomless beast's gaping maw—and Daren felt his scalp tingle.

It was clear now:

Even an "indestructible body" had its limits.

Thinking about Amatsuki Toki, who was probably still waiting at home...

A smile more bitter than tears crept across Daren's face.

He sighed, shook his head, and limped toward home.

"Yeah... I'm seriously doomed."

Chapter 449 - 449: Volume 3 – Chapter 92: The Battle of Edd War

Night deepened.

Walking through the streets of Marine Headquarters, Daren smoked several cigarettes before he finally started to feel like himself again.

Along the way, small patrol squads of Marines occasionally stopped to salute him, their eyes filled with admiration. Daren responded with a listless wave.

"But seriously, how did Gion find out about Stussy?"

He puffed on his cigarette, frowning in thought. Logically, there shouldn't be many people who knew about the Pleasure District.

Could Tokikake have sold me out?

No, that didn't add up... I bribed him with a VIP card, didn't I?

Daren shook his head, unable to find a solid lead. He decided to stop thinking about it. With Gion's position, it wouldn't be surprising if she had access to some special intel within the Marines.

Before long, he arrived at the gate of his new residence.

After Shiki's invasion of Marineford, his original family quarters had been destroyed in the conflict. Thanks to his promotion to Vice Admiral and his outstanding performance in the war, headquarters had granted him a mansion of the highest rank.

Compared to his former modest courtyard, the traditional Japanese-style estate before him was more than five times the size. It came with a private hot spring and a scenic garden—elegant and imposing all at once.

Daren gave himself a quick once-over, then carefully pushed open the front door, moving quietly through the cherry blossom-filled courtyard and into the house.

The interior was quiet, lit only by a small oil lamp, casting a warm and tranquil glow.

He cautiously turned on the light.

"Husband, you're back?"

A soft voice behind him made his hand pause mid-motion.

"Uh, Toki... it's late, I thought you'd be asleep already."

Daren's eyelid twitched. Forcing a casual smile, he turned around.

Amatsuki Toki stood there in a loose pink kimono, her expression serene and calm.

Meeting her gentle gaze, Daren inexplicably grew flustered. He coughed lightly and offered an excuse.

"The meeting with the top brass ran late. Sorry about that."

Toki smiled and shook her head.

"It's fine. You've had a long day."

She stepped forward like a perfect wife, gently helping him remove his Marine cloak and hanging it on the rack.

Seeing that she didn't seem to have caught on to anything, Daren secretly exhaled in relief and chuckled.

"Couldn't help it. Sengoku kept me tied up discussing military affairs. That's why I got home so late."

Toki smiled sweetly.

"I understand."

She looked up at him, tilting her head slightly.

"So, did you smooth things over with Gion?"

Daren's smile froze instantly.

What the hell? Why are all my women so good at sniffing things out!?

Seeing the awkward look on his face, Toki chuckled behind her hand and teased him playfully.

"Whatever happened between you and the Queen of the Pleasure District... I imagine Gion must've been furious."

Daren: ...

Damn it!!

Tokikake, you bastard!!

I'm gonna kill you!!

Don't even dream of ever getting another VIP card from me again!!

Furious thoughts raced through Daren's mind as he clenched and unclenched his fists.

"Uh... Toki..."

He opened his mouth, but nothing came out. He genuinely didn't know what to say.

Gion, though fiery and jealous, was surprisingly easier to appease. But Toki—gentle and soft on the outside—was firm underneath. Even when she was upset, she smiled, making it impossible to get a read on her.

Toki gave a mischievous smile.

"So, whatever treatment Gion got, I expect the same."

Daren blinked.

Before he could react, Toki reached up and pulled the sash at her waist.

Her wide kimono slipped off her smooth figure like flowing silk, pooling at her feet.

Daren's mouth twitched uncontrollably.

Wait a sec... Why does this feel so familiar!?

But at this point, like it or not, he had to go along with it!

...

Two hours later...

The tatami bed was a complete mess, clothes strewn all over the floor.

Amatsuki Toki clung to Daren like a kitten, fast asleep with a peaceful, blissful smile on her face.

Daren lay there, frozen in place, staring blankly at the ceiling.

He couldn't help but feel that even a physique rated at 90 just wasn't cutting it.

A pained expression crossed his face as he subconsciously rubbed his temples.

"So this is what Tokikake has to deal with..."

With a sigh, Daren closed his eyes and quickly drifted off to sleep.

...

A moment later, Amatsuki Toki's long eyelashes twitched slightly, and she slowly opened her spring-tinted eyes.

She gazed at Daren's profile with love, the corners of her lips curling into a sly and proud smile.

"It's fine. In the end, I still won."

Her hand gently stroked her lower abdomen.

...

The next day.

At the family quarters of a Marine Headquarters Commodore.

"AAAAAAHHH!! I didn't mean to, Daren! I was wrong!!"

"Not the face—!"

Boom!!

A massive cloud of dust shot into the sky.

With a deafening crash, the luxurious mansion collapsed entirely. The ground beneath it even gave way, sinking in!

The earth split apart, and the main structure tilted and crumbled.

The commotion was so dramatic it instantly drew the attention of nearby civilians and Marines alike.

"What happened!?"

"Wait, isn't that... Commodore Tokikake's residence!?"

"Why did it collapse!?"

"Was it a pirate attack?!"

"Prepare for combat!"

"Protect Commodore Tokikake!"

"..."

Hundreds of Marines stood at the ready, weapons in hand, eyes locked on the dust-filled ruins.

Soon, a tall figure emerged from the debris.

Everyone stared.

"That's... Vice Admiral Daren?"

"It's Vice Admiral Daren!"

"Oh—then it's fine."

"..."

One by one, the Marines turned their heads and pretended they hadn't seen a thing.

Daren dragged Tokikake out by the foot like a dead pig, dropped him on the ground with his face swollen beyond recognition, and sat down squarely on his chest.

Another round of pig-like screams erupted on the spot.

"Quit screaming. Scream again and I'll really kill you."

Daren shot him a cold glare.

Tokikake, his head covered in welts, immediately clamped both hands over his mouth in terror.

"Let Admiral Sengoku know I'll pay double for the damages."

Daren told a nearby Marine.

"Buru buru... buru buru..."

Suddenly, the urgent ring of a Den Den Mushi cut through the air.

Daren frowned, pulled out his military Den Den Mushi, and answered the call.

"This is Daren."

Sengoku's grave voice came through the receiver, bringing an instant chill to the air.

"Daren, report to the Fleet Admiral's office immediately."

"Shiki's on the move."

"He's already led his fleet out—they're about to ambush the Roger Pirates in the New World!"

Daren's eyes lit up at the words.

It's finally happening!

At the end of Sea Circle Calendar 1494—about six months earlier than in the original timeline...

The Battle of Edd War!

Chapter 450 - 450: Volume 3 – Chapter 93: The Sniping Spot

Responding to Sengoku's summons, Daren didn't waste any time. He reached out and gave Tokikake's swollen, pig-like face a pat.

"Hey, wake up. Time to fight."

Tokikake's eyes were still spinning as he mumbled in a daze,

"Fight? Fight what..."

Suddenly, he trembled, his sausage-like lips quivering.

"Didn't you already finish fighting...?"

Two murky streams of tears leaked from his swollen eyes, making him look pitiful beyond words.

Daren: ...

"Forget it."

He turned to the nearby Marines.

"Get this guy to the military hospital. Sorry for the trouble."

"Yes, Vice Admiral Daren! Leave it to us!"

The Marines reacted like they'd just received a top-secret directive, snapping to attention with excitement.

Daren gave a brief nod and headed straight for the Fleet Admiral's office.

On the way, he passed many Marines moving at a fast pace, their faces grim. The closer he got to the heart of headquarters, the heavier the atmosphere became. Everything screamed preparation for battle.

"Looks like Headquarters is going all in this time. I'm guessing Fleet Admiral Kong and Admiral Sengoku are facing serious political pressure."

That thought crossed Daren's mind.

In his quest for clues to the ancient weapons, Shiki had been wreaking havoc across the seas, laying waste to countless towns and ports.

Each place he destroyed piled more pressure on the Marines.

The chaos and destruction he left in his wake stirred panic among civilians and nations alike—panic that quickly turned into pressure on the World Government and the Navy from leaders and nobles.

The more Shiki rampaged, the more the Marines—symbols of "justice"—appeared powerless.

That kind of pressure on Kong and Sengoku... must be overwhelming.

Now that they finally had a shot, they weren't about to let it slip away.

A showdown between Shiki and Roger was sure to be earth-shattering.

The largest pirate crew of the era against its most elite rival... If the Marines could play this right, they might just have a chance to take down both legendary pirates in one strike!

"I wonder if this battle will break out in the Edd War Sea like in the original timeline..."

Daren lit a cigarette, brows knitting in thought.

Before long, he arrived at the Fleet Admiral's office, located in the central military fortress.

Even before reaching the door, he heard Sengoku's furious roar from inside.

"Damn it, Garp... I wasn't finished talking!"

Bam!

The door flew open with a bang.

"Wahaha! Old man Kong, maybe you weren't finished, but I already heard everything I needed!"

Garp stormed out, laughing loudly, exuding a fierce energy.

"Roger's about to enter the target sea zone. If I don't go now, he'll slip away!"

Every time Roger's name came up, Garp—usually lazy as hell—got fired up like he was on a stimulant, overflowing with fighting spirit.

"Yo, Daren! You're finally here... Bwahahaha, Sengoku and the others are waiting for you inside."

Spotting Daren in the hallway, Garp greeted him with a laugh.

Daren smiled.

"Vice Admiral Garp, you're as energetic as ever."

Just as he finished speaking, an excited voice called out from behind...

"You really are a hero of the Marines, Vice Admiral Garp! To flat-out refuse Fleet Admiral Kong's orders—so cool!"

Daren didn't even need to look. Just from that hot-blooded, over-the-top line, he knew Kuzan had arrived.

"Yo, Kuzan!"

Garp waved casually at Kuzan as he came up the stairs, then his eyes sparkled mischievously as he grinned.

"You want to come aboard my ship? If this turns into a sea battle, your powers will be pretty handy."

Kuzan's eyes lit up instantly, his whole face flushing with excitement.

"Really, Vice Admiral Garp!? I can really board your ship!?"

"Dahaha, Daren, did you hear that? Garp-san just acknowledged me!!"

Daren smiled.

"Then you'd better give it your all, Kuzan."

Pumped up by Daren's encouragement, Kuzan trembled with excitement and raised his fist high.

"Of course!! I'll catch up to you one day, Daren!!"

"Wait up, Garp-san!"

He turned around and saw Garp had already walked off, so he hurried to catch up, leaning forward eagerly.

"By the way, Garp-san, is it true you turned down the Admiral promotion again?"

"That's just... insanely cool!!"

Watching those two energetic figures vanish around the corner—and spotting Bogard silently waiting in the stairwell shadows with his sword in hand—Daren couldn't help but chuckle.

Garp and Kuzan... those two always managed to completely wreck any serious mood.

"Damn it! Garp, you bastard!!"

At that moment, the Fleet Admiral's office door slammed open again as Sengoku stormed out, fuming.

But seeing that Garp was long gone, he could only grit his teeth in frustration.

"Admiral Sengoku," Daren greeted.

"Hmph. You're here. Hurry in already."

Sengoku took a deep breath to rein in his anger, then turned and led Daren inside.

...

The office was thick with smoke.

All the top brass of Marine Headquarters were gathered, brows furrowed, silently puffing on cigarettes. Their eyes were locked on the sand table before them, clearly stuck in a deadlock.

"Daren, you came at the right time."

Kong looked up with a solemn expression.

"Tsuru, bring him up to speed."

Staff Officer Tsuru nodded, her voice clear and methodical.

"According to the latest intel, five hours ago, the Roger Pirates officially entered the New World."

"Meanwhile, two days ago, the flying pirate fleet led by Shiki landed on a commercial island in the New World to resupply... He didn't even bother hiding his movements."

Sengoku's face darkened as he clenched his jaw.

"He's gone completely reckless. Does he really think a few threats are enough to make the Navy back down!?"

Borsalino smirked from the side.

"If not for Vice Admiral Daren's strategic input, we really would've been stuck."

Sengoku: ...

"Vice Admiral Borsalino, once this battle starts, your assignment is to cut off Shiki's escape route."

Sengoku snarled through gritted teeth, turning and glaring daggers at Borsalino.

Borsalino raised both hands in mock surrender.

"That's quite the tough mission, Admiral Sengoku."

"I don't care!"

Sengoku's eyes were bloodshot.

"Alright, alright..."

Borsalino responded with a helpless smile.

Watching the exchange, Tsuru shook her head slightly before continuing.

"The key issue now is figuring out where Shiki plans to ambush the Roger Pirates."

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