

One Piece 481

Chapter 481 - 481: Volume 3 – Chapter 124: The Pirate's Forbidden Land - North Blue

Looking at the picture in the newspaper, everyone in Roger's pirate crew fell into a deep silence.

Especially Buggy and Shanks—the two kids were speechless, unable to say a word.

The legendary Great Pirate, a top fighter as famous as their captain, had died in the unknown North Blue.

He had died at the hands of the Marines.

The visually striking photo in the newspaper and the tall figure standing next to Shiki's body made them feel their hair stand on end and a chill run down their spines.

It was as if they were reliving the fear of their first encounter with that Marine... when they were almost killed.

And now, the most terrifying thing was that the Marine had become even stronger.

"Something doesn't feel right. We saw that Marine brat's strength in the Edd War Sea. Although he has become much stronger, he is definitely not strong enough to kill Shiki."

Gaban furrowed his brows and rubbed his stubble on his chin.

Rayleigh nodded in agreement.

Even if Roger gave it his all, he would not have been able to defeat Shiki.

No matter how he thought about it, it was impossible for Daren to kill Shiki.

"Roger, what do you think?"

No one answered his question.

Rayleigh paused, turned his gaze, and saw Roger sitting there quietly, clutching the newspaper in his hands, saying nothing.

"Are you okay, Roger?"

Rayleigh's gaze shifted slightly, and he patted Roger on the shoulder.

Roger was silent for a long time before shaking his head.

He exhaled a long breath.

"Shiki... he's dead..."

Seeing the complex expression on their captain's face, everyone fell silent.

Shiki was their enemy, and he had even forced them into a desperate situation during the Battle of Edd War.

If it weren't for that sudden storm, they would probably have been buried at sea.

But even so, they understood very well the mutual respect and admiration between their captain and Shiki, two powerful men.

"I'm fine."

After a long pause, Roger shook his head and smiled slightly.

"Shiki's journey has come to an end, but our voyage continues."

"Everyone has their own adventure."

"And Rayleigh..."

He pointed to the photo in the newspaper.

"No matter what happened here, no matter what tricks that Marine brat Daren used, I can say with certainty that Shiki had no regrets."

"See? He died with a smile on his face."

Roger paused for a moment and looked up at the endless blue sea in the distance.

A bold and carefree smile gradually appeared on his face.

"He must have had a thrilling battle."

When he said this, everyone was shocked.

A thrilling battle...

Could it be that the strength of that Marine had reached legendary levels?

"We should leave here too."

Before everyone could react, Roger wiped the oil stains from his mouth and stood up from the ground.

His broken front teeth had grown back, and he put on his bright red captain's coat and strode toward the Oro Jackson.

"Let's set sail."

"Our final adventure awaits us."

The sun was shining and the sea breeze was blowing.

His steps were firm, and the smile on his face was radiant.

The crew was stunned for a moment.

Boom!

A cannonball suddenly exploded on the coast, causing a wave to rise.

Roger was so scared that he rolled and crawled, rushing onto the pirate ship as if fleeing.

"Hurry up and get out of here! That bastard Garp is coming!"

He shouted.

Everyone: ...

...

Somewhere in the New World.

A massive pirate ship, resembling a white whale, crawled slowly across the sea.

The air was sharp with cold, and the skull-flag bearing a curved white mustache flapped fiercely in the wind.

Marco and the other members of the Whitebeard Pirates stared solemnly at the newspapers in their hands, wordless for a long time.

Kozuki Oden, missing one arm, slumped against the railing in despair. Empty bottles lay scattered around him, his face flushed red—completely drunk.

At the bow of the ship, Whitebeard held a jug of strong liquor and gazed out into the distant sea, his expression unreadable.

The sea breeze rustled his flowing white captain's coat.

At some point,

Whitebeard suddenly raised the bottle and downed it in one gulp.

"It's been a long voyage, Shiki..."

He murmured softly.

A complex blend of grief and remembrance flickered through his deep-set eyes.

...

Totto Land, Whole Cake Island.

At the Whole Cake Island headquarters—

"Mamamamama!! You really are the man I had my eyes on!! You actually took down that bastard Shiki!!!"

A sultry yet piercing laugh echoed through the cream-scented castle. The shrill soundwave made the guards of the Big Mom Pirates around the castle go pale, collapse in exhaustion, and fall to their knees with a thud.

...

Top floor of the Cake Castle.

Katakuri listened to his mother's unrestrained laughter, his brows deeply furrowed, his eyes boiling with fury and murderous intent.

He clenched his teeth, stepped forward, and suddenly hurled his trident, Mogura.

Whoosh!!

The trident screamed through the air, embedding itself deep into the wall of the castle. The shaft quivered from the impact.

It pinned a newspaper fluttering in the wind.

More precisely—it pinned a photo on the front page.

"Sooner or later, I'll kill you, Rogers Daren!!"

Katakuri growled, his eyes bloodshot.

...

Wano Country.

Kuri Region.

Research Facility.

"AAAAAHHHHH!!"

A wretched scream suddenly erupted from inside the lab—Only to be cut off moments later.

A few seconds passed.

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

Wearing suspenders, Queen stormed out of the research facility, livid with rage.

"I controlled the virus dosage perfectly! Why would it still fail!?"

Nearby members of the Beasts Pirates, seeing Queen's red, bloodshot eyes, scrambled backward in terror, shaking.

If Queen noticed them, they were as good as dead.

Behind the lab, the pile of corpses was already a small mountain.

Queen ignored them, climbed onto his motorcycle, and his massive body made it groan in protest. With a roar of the engine, he sped off.

Today was the Beasts Pirates officers' meeting.

He couldn't afford to be late again—or he'd be beaten to a pulp.

Soon, Queen arrived at the ceremonial hall of the Beasts Pirates in the Kuri District.

As he stepped into the Japanese-style palace, he immediately sensed something was off.

All the officers stood trembling, legs shaking like leaves.

"Uh... what happened?"

Queen quickly combed through his recent memory to confirm he hadn't done anything wrong. Only then did he cautiously step further in.

King, his face hidden beneath dark armor, glanced at him.

"See for yourself."

He tossed a newspaper into Queen's hands.

Queen blinked, puzzled, and opened it.

But the moment he saw the contents—

"What!?"

The fat man in suspenders nearly had his eyes pop out of his skull, his jaw hanging wide open.

"Shiki... was killed by that Daren guy!?"

Panic-stricken, he raised both hands in the air, drenched in cold sweat.

"Kaidou-sama! This has nothing to do with me!!"

"I know that!!"

Kaidou snapped, clearly angry. Sparks flashed in his eyes.

Hearing that, Queen finally let out a long sigh of relief and chuckled,

"Heh... well, I guess that's a good thing. That bastard Shiki was always a pain anyway. Better off dead."

"Still... how did that brat Daren manage to kill Shiki?"

"Something's not right here..."

Queen rubbed his chin, creating waves of fat.

"Wait a minute..."

Suddenly, a lightbulb seemed to go off in his head. He clapped his fist into his palm, eyes lit up.

"I got it!"

"Kaidou-sama, could it be that you purposely didn't tell Shiki about how strong that kid really is, and that's why he got blindsided!?"

At those words, King's eye twitched slightly.

But Queen, still oblivious, continued rambling.

"Could this be why that brat Daren got even stronger again?"

"If he comes back to Wano... we're in for it. Eh?"

Suddenly, a chill ran down his spine.

A massive, demonic shadow had fallen across his vision.

"W-Wait! Kaidou-sama—!"

Queen's expression changed drastically as he stumbled backward in fear.

Zzzzzzt...

Electric arcs crackled across the kanabō.

...

The eruption of the Battle of Edd War, and the death of Shiki, had thrown the world into even greater chaos.

Especially the death of Shiki—it created a massive power vacuum in the New World.

Countless pirates and factions, both big and small, surged across the seas like sharks scenting blood, hoping to carve out a piece of the pie.

But no matter how turbulent the world became...

There remained one sea that stayed absolutely peaceful.

The "Forbidden Sea"—North Blue.

Whether it was a nation of overwhelming military strength, a treacherous mafia, or a fearsome Great Pirate—

Once they set foot in North Blue, they had to obey that man's rules.

Otherwise, only destruction awaited them.

Of course... that might just be a myth.

Chapter 482 - 482: Volume 4 – Chapter 1: The Admiral of the North Blue

As the New World continued to shift in chaos and uncertainty, Momonga had already arrived at Marine Headquarters aboard a warship.

The vessel, bearing the seagull insignia and the emblem of the North Blue, had just entered the oval-shaped military harbor when it immediately drew the attention of countless Marines and civilians.

"That's a North Blue warship!"

"That's the new North Blue Admiral, Momonga..."

"The North Blue forces seem extremely well-trained..."

"You didn't know? While Vice Admiral Daren served as North Blue Admiral, he launched sweeping reforms within the region's Navy—cracking down on discipline, enforcing strict military regulations, and rigorously training new recruits..."

"Now the North Blue Navy is even more elite than some branches on the Grand Line!"

"That's insane. These Marines... they carry themselves like the Headquarters' own elites."

"Vice Admiral Daren isn't just strong and brilliant—he even excels at training troops. He's a once-in-centuries prodigy in the Marines!"

"No wonder the legendary pirate, Shiki the Golden Lion, died by his hand..."

...

The Marines and civilians murmured among themselves, awed by the warship's soldiers and the sharp, imposing aura they gave off.

Their synchronized movements, unwavering eyes, and the steel-like pressure that radiated from them... one look was enough to tell this was a battle-hardened force.

Unbothered by the chatter around him, Momonga stood at the bow with his arms crossed, gazing at the fortress-like, awe-inspiring Marineford. His eyes narrowed slightly.

"So this is Marine Headquarters..."

It was the first time in his life he had seen the place revered by countless Marines around the world as the "Holy Land of Justice."

The word "Marineford" symbolized a place of unmatched power, prestige, and strength. For Marines across all four seas, serving here was the ultimate dream—a recognition of their ability, and the greatest honor imaginable.

Unfortunately, Momonga hadn't come today for a promotion.

He was here to report.

Daren, still in a deep coma from the injuries he sustained in that battle, had long been transferred to the highest-level ward in the headquarters' military district, receiving care from the best doctors.

But Headquarters wasn't willing to wait for him to recover. They urgently wanted to uncover the truth about that battle.

Fleet Admiral Sengoku had personally ordered Momonga to report in.

This was going to be a delicate situation.

According to Daren's plans, the true strength of the North Blue Fleet must never be exposed. That's why the warship Momonga arrived on was just a standard model.

Moreover, Daren's ties with Doflamingo had to be kept hidden at all costs.

And that made covering everything up perfectly a huge challenge.

Sengoku, the famed "Resourceful General," was no one to fool lightly.

But to Momonga, the truly daunting presence was Kong—the man who'd sat as Fleet Admiral for decades.

At that thought, Momonga let out a long breath and clenched his fists.

In that moment, all the curious, shocked, and respectful gazes from Marines and civilians alike, along with the towering, majestic fortress in the distance, seemed like a flood of beasts bearing down on him.

This line of work... really is like walking on thin ice.

"Everyone else, stay here and wait."

Momonga gave the order in a calm, flat tone.

"Yes, Base Commander Momonga!"

Behind him, hundreds of Marines saluted in unison before returning to their respective posts.

Momonga stepped off the warship and set foot on the dock.

"Captain Momonga!"

A familiar voice called out just then.

The Marines on guard instinctively parted, making way as a confident, striking figure strode forward.

When he saw who it was, a faint smile appeared on Momonga's face.

"Commodore Gion, long time no see."

The woman approaching was indeed Gion.

She smiled and said, "It's been a while. Coming all the way from the North Blue must've been exhausting."

She extended her hand.

Momonga shook it politely, smiling. "It's nothing. All for justice."

"By the way, congratulations on your promotion to Commodore. That was quick."

His tone carried a hint of emotion.

Back when Gion and Tokikake had come to the North Blue as part of the inspection team to evaluate Daren, their ranks were the same as his—Lieutenant Commanders at Marine Headquarters.

In less than two years, Gion had soared through three promotions, going straight from Lieutenant Commander to Commodore like she was riding a rocket.

And him?

He'd been grinding nonstop in the North Blue—endless meetings, military affairs, and training—and still only made it to Captain.

Though to be fair, Daren was already a Vice Admiral now... and after this, he might rise even further.

When it came to promotions, that guy was in a league of his own.

Gion shook her head and said, "Compared to the duties and burdens you carry as the North Blue Admiral, what I do as a Commodore here at HQ isn't worth mentioning."

As she spoke, a trace of guilt flickered across her face.

After everything that had happened, she had finally come to understand just how naïve and short-sighted she'd been back in the North Blue.

She now realized how much patience Daren and Momonga had shown her and Tokikake at the time.

People grow up eventually.

As they mature, they come to understand that not everything is black and white.

Maybe the methods weren't always clean, but it was undeniable—Daren and Momonga had protected the North Blue's peace and stability in their own way.

Isn't that what being a Marine Admiral is all about?

Hearing Gion's words, Momonga paused for a moment.

She's really matured...

"Let's get going. I'm sure Admiral Sengoku and the others have been waiting."

He smiled.

Gion nodded.

The two walked toward the Fleet Admiral's residence, chatting casually as they went.

Having worked together in the past—and even gone through the Celestial Dragons incident in the North Blue—their relationship was closer than that of regular colleagues.

As they talked, Momonga's tense mood began to ease.

"By the way, Captain Momonga,"

Gion suddenly stopped and asked out of the blue,

"Daren often returns to the North Blue... has he ever mentioned me?"

Momonga froze.

He looked over to find her eyes filled with anticipation.

The corner of his mouth twitched.

Seeing her slightly shy, hopeful expression, he came to a quick conclusion:

Daren's already got her wrapped around his finger...

But after going through countless shady "meetings" in the North Blue, Momonga was no longer the green rookie he once was.

He gave a small cough and replied with a serious look,

"Of course he has!"

"Really?"

Gion's eyes lit up.

She trusted Momonga—he had always been serious and straightforward, never one to lie or keep things hidden.

Momonga nodded solemnly and sighed.

"He told me... 'The time I spent with Gion was the happiest in my life.' When I heard that, I honestly thought he'd lost his mind."

With a look of disbelief, he perfectly fulfilled his role as a loyal wingman, delivering that line with heartfelt exaggeration.

"I've worked with him for years, and I've never seen him like that."

A lovely blush instantly spread across Gion's face.

She bit her lip gently and whispered,

"Thank you, Captain Momonga."

Momonga's eye twitched again.

Seeing her look like an innocent girl being sweet-talked... he almost felt bad about it.

Chapter 483 - 483: Volume 4 – Chapter 2: Resolve, Courage, Willpower, and the Color of a Conqueror

"That's as far as I go, Captain Momonga."

In front of the Fleet Admiral's conference room, Gion stopped and spoke softly.

The corners of her lips curled slightly, carrying a youthful sweetness. Her mood had clearly lifted, and her tone had softened from its usual coolness.

"Thanks for the trouble, Commodore Gion."

Momonga gave a small nod.

Once Gion turned around and disappeared at the end of the corridor, he took a deep breath, lifted his gaze to the door before him, and his expression turned sharp and serious.

He had no idea what kind of challenge awaited him behind that door.

But...

Clenching his fists, his eyes were resolute.

This would be the moment of truth.

After a quick mental prep, he raised his hand and knocked.

Knock knock knock...

"Come in."

A low, deep voice echoed from within the room.

Momonga drew a breath and pushed open the door.

...

Marineford.

Senior Ward, Military District.

A world of darkness slowly brightened as a soft light peeked through.

The quiet hum of a fan, IV bottles hanging overhead, the stark white ceiling, and the pungent mix of disinfectant and blood in the air...

Daren slowly forced his eyes open.

Yeah, the scene was familiar.

Suddenly, a poorly groomed face leaned in close, taking up his entire field of vision. The pockmarks were crystal clear.

And in the guy's mouth—half a banana, the peel dangling.

"Yo, you're awake!"

The corner of Daren's mouth twitched.

Yep. That face again.

"Seriously... is there ever gonna be a time I wake up from a coma with heavy injuries and not see your ugly mug first thing?"

Daren sighed, totally exasperated.

Tokikake gulped down the rest of the banana and grumbled, "Oi oi oi, Daren, what's that supposed to mean!?"

"I came to check on you out of the kindness of my heart, and this is what I get!?"

"I know what this is—you're just jealous of my insanely good-looking face, aren't you?"

"It's fine, you can admit it... I get it. I mean, I am ridiculously handsome."

He let out a dramatic sigh and ran a hand over his slick, overly greased hair.

Yeah... devastatingly handsome indeed.

If I weren't flat on my back, wrapped in casts and braces with no strength left, I probably would've jumped up in shock the second I saw that face.

Daren silently grumbled to himself.

"You just came to steal from my fruit basket, didn't you."

Tokikake's face turned red on the spot. "I did not steal!"

"I was helping lighten your load, okay?!"

But faced with Daren's look of disbelief, he jumped to his feet indignantly.

"I swear I didn't take anything except the fruit basket—"

Clatter—

As Tokikake stood up too quickly, a cascade of items tumbled out from under his Marine cloak.

Fancy cigars, miniature bottles of premium liquor, various cigarettes, and nutritional supplements... all clattered to the floor.

Daren: ...

Tokikake: ...

"Whatever. If you want it, take it."

Daren didn't even bother arguing and muttered with annoyance.

Though honestly, as shameless as this bastard Tokikake was—always coming in here to mooch and raid his stuff...

At least, without fail, every time he woke up from a serious injury, that dumb face was there to greet him.

"Really? That's great."

Tokikake grinned and pointed to the mountain of gifts piled on the hospital room's sofa.

"Then I won't hold back. I'll haul everything back with me later."

"I mean, with our relationship... Daren, hehehe, it'd be rude not to, right?"

As he spoke, he eagerly adjusted the bed for Daren, looking like the very picture of helpfulness.

Now sitting upright with the bed slightly raised, Daren was finally able to assess his condition.

His body was almost entirely wrapped in bandages. The wound in his abdomen was still oozing blood, sending sharp waves of pain through him. Just the simple act of sitting up had brought cold sweat to his forehead, and his face turned even paler.

"That was way too close..."

Looking over his battered, barely-holding-together body, a bitter smile crept onto Daren's lips.

All he felt now was regret.

"The lion's final roar should never go unheard..." Sure, that line sounded cool—but in reality, the only audience he had was Momonga!

Putting on a show like that... the price had been way too steep.

But just as that thought crossed his mind, Daren instinctively checked his physical stats.

What he saw next stopped him cold.

Physique: 91.728 (Indestructible Body)

Strength: 82.191 (Giant's Strength)

Speed: 82.431 (Soru's Godspeed)

Fruit Ability Development: 85.886 (Island-Wide Coverage)

Armament Haki: 70.715 (Internal Destruction)

Observation Haki: 74.119 (Magnetic Field Induction)

Conqueror's Haki: 75.317

The numbers on his Personal Panel stunned him.

Physique, strength, speed—those were expected. After breaking through in his fight with Kaidou, progress had stalled out. Even after a brutal pursuit and clash with Shiki, each stat had increased by less than a point.

Armament Haki and Observation Haki had done slightly better, ticking up by just over a point each.

But Conqueror's Haki—that was something else entirely.

Five points.

A full five-point increase!

Unbelievable.

He clearly remembered that in the final clash with Shiki, both his Armament Haki and Conqueror's Haki had broken past the 70 mark. His Armament Haki had even awakened the "Internal Destruction" technique.

But now, his Conqueror's Haki had jumped another five points above that threshold!

What the hell?

Daren had never figured out a reliable way to increase Conqueror's Haki.

Physique, strength, speed, Armament, Observation... all of those followed a path. You could train, spar, or learn from masters. It might be slow, but at least there was progress.

But Conqueror's Haki? That came from sheer willpower and spirit.

Since he awakened it after killing Saint Xildes, Daren hadn't found any effective method to train it.

The only thing that seemed to work was clashing with other powerful users of Conqueror's Haki—and even then, the growth was minimal.

But five points in one go?

That had never happened before.

Could it really be because he made the choice to stand his ground and not dodge Shiki's final slash?

That didn't feel right...

Wait.

Daren's eyes flickered as something clicked in his memory.

He suddenly remembered the words Shiki had said right before his death.

"This... is your resolve!"

Chapter 484 - 484: Volume 4 – Chapter 3: The Secret of Conqueror's Haki

Resolve.

Maybe that's the key to the sudden surge in his Conqueror's Haki.

Shiki's last words, spoken with laughter before his death, had exploded in Daren's mind like a bolt of lightning across a dry plain.

"The lion's final song must not go unheard."

On the surface, it sounded like one of those grand declarations people make before others just to show off—but it wasn't empty, baseless boasting.

Because Daren had actually lived up to that promise.

Faced with the strongest blow from Shiki—the world's greatest dual swordsman—and the awe-inspiring swan song of the flying lion, Daren didn't choose to dodge or retreat, even though he had the chance.

Instead, knowing full well the risk of death, he stood his ground, determined to witness the brilliance of that overwhelming strike.

That, in itself, was a true display of will and spirit.

The strength of Conqueror's Haki is directly tied to the strength of one's resolve.

But resolve isn't just about talking big, making bold claims, or throwing around empty bravado. That kind of superficial bluster does nothing to strengthen one's Conqueror's Haki.

To truly grow stronger, your resolve and your actions must be completely aligned.

Take a simple example.

Straw Hat Luffy has dreamed of becoming the Pirate King. From the moment he first set sail, he's shouted day in and day out,

"I'm going to become the Pirate King!"

But in the beginning, that dream was just an empty slogan. To others, it sounded like childish nonsense—nothing more than bravado.

Because without the actions to back it up, without the resolve to match, such slogans are meaningless when it comes to awakening or strengthening Conqueror's Haki.

At that point, he still didn't fully understand the weight of that goal.

But as Luffy continued his journey, clashing with powerful enemies, surviving life-and-death situations, and growing stronger, he gradually came to grasp the true cost and danger behind the words,

"I will become the Pirate King."

And even then, he stayed true to that dream, never wavering.

That is what it means to have complete unity between resolve and action.

When your life hangs by a thread, when death looms, when you're staring down overwhelming foes—and still, you remain steadfast...

That's what leads to the growth of Conqueror's Haki.

In other words, talking big isn't enough. You need the actions to match—and the strength to carry them through.

Maybe... that's the real path to strengthening Conqueror's Haki.

With that thought, clarity struck Daren like a breath of fresh air.

Still, even understanding the principle, putting it into practice was another story entirely.

He'd need to give it more thought.

"Hey, hey, hey... What's going through that head of yours? I only took a few supplies and a couple of cigars—no need to go mute over it. Or did your injuries scramble your brain?"

It was only then that Daren noticed Tokikake waving his hand in front of his face, looking confused.

Snapping back to reality, Daren gave a slight shake of his head.

"How long was I out?"

He looked around the room. Judging by the signs of use and the pile of gifts stacked on the sofa, it was clear he'd been here for quite a while...

Tokikake scratched his head and said,

"Counting today, you've been unconscious for more than five days."

He started counting on his fingers.

"Fleet Admiral Kong came twice, Admiral Sengoku came four times, that gloomy guy Sakazuki came five times, Kuzan came six times—making a whole scene every time—Borsalino came three times, and... hmm... the others from the officer training camp dropped by once or twice each."

"Oh, and Toki-san from your family has been coming twice a day."

When he said that, Tokikake's tone was noticeably tinged with jealousy.

Daren was momentarily stunned, then a faint smile appeared on his face.

"Everyone's been so thoughtful."

A warm feeling welled up inside him, softening the look in his eyes.

Tokikake, seeing the smug look on Daren's face, couldn't help muttering,

"Bunch of bastards. When I was injured and in the hospital, they sure didn't come running like this."

"Even Gion has been coming to see you every single day. Damn it!!"

He suddenly clenched his fists, cursing through gritted teeth.

"No, wait, Gion must've come to see me. After all, I'm here every day. Yeah, that's gotta be it!"

Daren watched Tokikake crouched there, his expression shifting as he mumbled to himself, clearly caught up in some internal drama. Shaking his head helplessly, Daren sighed.

"It seems that you are recovering well, Vice Admiral Daren..."

A slow, annoyingly familiar voice echoed through the room just as countless photons gathered in the air, forming a tall human figure.

It was a man in his thirties, though he looked more like a sleazy middle-aged guy, dressed in a white suit with a yellow-and-white hat perched on his head.

Borsalino rubbed his chin stubble with one hand, eyeing Daren sitting on the hospital bed with a look of amusement and mockery.

"You really live up to your reputation as a 'monster.' With such severe injuries, you woke up this quickly. Are you sure you don't want to let me study your body, Daren?"

Seeing Borsalino's face—like he'd just found an interesting new toy—Daren broke into a cold sweat.

"I'm not interested in being a guinea pig, Borsalino."

Sure, those times he'd been experimented on had given him noticeable power boosts—especially that hellish experience under Queen—but who knew what Borsalino had in mind?

"That's too bad. Dr. Vegapunk got quite interested in you after seeing your file..."

Watching Daren's clear resistance, Borsalino raised both hands in a helpless surrender gesture.

Vegapunk?

Daren's eyes narrowed.

Vegapunk—the scientist said to be five hundred years ahead of his time—was paying attention to him now?

On second thought, that made perfect sense.

From what Daren knew, Kaidou had been captured by the World Government in his youth, giving Vegapunk the opportunity to conduct a range of experiments on him.

And now, Daren had achieved something similar to Kaidou's "Indestructible Body." It was only natural Vegapunk would be intrigued.

Wait... there was still that faulty artificial "Uo Uo no Mi, Model: Seiryu" sitting in Punk Hazard, wasn't there?

Not that Daren had any real interest in it. A knock-off was still a knock-off. Its power and potential were leagues below Kaidou's original.

Still, if it were for training future subordinates, it might be worth the trip to go and retrieve it.

"But seeing you awake, I'm sure Admiral Sengoku will be very pleased..."

Borsalino added casually,

"He's been checking in on your condition a lot lately. He's been eager to get the details of your final battle with Shiki in the North Blue directly from you."

"But since you've been in a coma, Admiral Sengoku and Fleet Admiral Kong couldn't wait any longer. They already summoned Captain Momonga to report back to headquarters..."

Before he could finish, Daren's expression had already begun to shift.

Chapter 485 - 485: Volume 4 – Chapter 4: Is Daren in Trouble?

Sengoku and Kong ordered Momonga to report to headquarters from North Blue!?

Daren's heart suddenly skipped a beat. A fleeting change flashed across his face before he quickly masked it.

Outwardly calm, his mind was racing at lightning speed.

The most likely reason Sengoku had summoned Momonga was to uncover the truth about the battle in the North Blue.

With his insight, there was no way Sengoku wouldn't realize that, by strength alone, Daren couldn't have taken down Shiki—a legendary-level pirate—all by himself.

Was it suspicion? Or had Sengoku discovered something?

Daren's thoughts turned rapidly.

The secret of the North Blue Fleet could never be exposed. It was his greatest trump card—his foundation for survival in this vast sea.

A flying fleet with long-term development potential and overwhelming battlefield and military dominance was practically unstoppable in these waters.

Especially now—thanks to further technological upgrades from Germa 66—the North Blue Fleet had been freed from its dependence on Daren's Jiki Jiki no Mi. It now floated using an engine system.

Though the engine's power source was derived from Momonga's Goro Goro no Mi, at the very least, it no longer needed Daren's direct control. That alone had drastically improved the fleet's mobility and operational freedom.

Most crucially, it meant Daren and the North Blue Fleet could operate independently.

This was clearly proven during the operation to hunt down Shiki—the devastating efficiency of this military tactic had been undeniable.

Coupled with the fleet's heavy artillery and advanced technology, the North Blue Fleet remained a force to be reckoned with—even in Daren's absence. It could significantly shift the balance of power on the seas.

With the ability to move through the air and launch cross-regional surprise assaults, it posed a terrifying strategic threat to every faction in the world.

Now that Shiki was dead, that also meant the fleet Daren had created was the only flying fleet in existence.

It wasn't that Daren didn't trust Sengoku.

He didn't trust the Marines.

After all, the Marines still served under the World Government—that immovable, absolute behemoth.

Even now, standing at the peak of Marine command with unmatched prestige, who could predict what the future held?

One slip, and the truth about him killing a Celestial Dragon might be revealed.

And deep down, Daren had a hunch—knowing himself—he'd likely kill more Celestial Dragons down the line. A clash with the World Government felt inevitable.

When that day came, no matter how much merit he'd earned or how high his rank, the consequences would spiral out of control.

Just look at Zephyr. Despite his legendary record, he still ended up dying at the hands of his own prized student.

So no matter what, the North Blue Fleet could never be exposed.

It was his last resort.

His path to survival when everything else failed.

No... Sengoku probably doesn't mean any harm by having Momonga report in.

Daren silently shook his head and came to that conclusion.

For now, at least, his importance to the Marines' strategic future was undeniable.

This was likely just a formality.

Even so, he couldn't let Momonga face the pressure from Sengoku and Kong alone.

Though Momonga had grown considerably in both political and interpersonal savvy since taking up the role of North Blue admiral, that still wasn't enough to stand up to two Marine veterans like Sengoku and Kong.

He had to shift their attention immediately!

Daren quickly made up his mind.

All these thoughts passed through his head in an instant.

A relaxed smile appeared on his face as he shook his head.

"Admiral Sengoku could've just asked me directly about this. Why make Momonga travel all that way..."

Just as the last word left his lips, his expression suddenly changed.

His face went deathly pale, as if his wounds had suddenly flared up. His eyes flew wide open as he coughed up a massive gush of blood.

The thick, crimson liquid instantly soaked through the white hospital sheets. Daren's aura visibly plummeted, his body weakening so rapidly it was terrifying to behold.

"Hey! Daren, what's wrong with you!? Doctor!! Someone get a doctor in here, now!!"

"The patient's coughing up blood! I think he's dying!!"

Tokikake screamed in shock, panic plastered across his face as he shouted in a frenzy, looking completely unhinged.

"If he dies, I won't be able to use my VIP card anymore!!"

The alarm bell on the hospital bed blared sharply.

Within seconds, a swarm of doctors and nurses rushed in with tense expressions.

"Vital signs are dropping!"

"Start an IV, now!"

"Vice Admiral Daren's wound has reopened! His blood pressure's spiking! Damn it—suture the wound immediately!"

"What!? The needle won't go in!?"

"..."

The medical staff bustled around Daren as he coughed up mouthfuls of blood, frantically scrambling to stabilize him.

"What's happening!? This kind of case... we've never seen anything like this!"

A military doctor stared wide-eyed, as if he'd seen a ghost, frozen in disbelief as he locked onto the readings on the life monitor.

All the devices beside the bed were flashing nonstop. The ECG monitor was drawing curves that swung violently—rising and plunging like a roller coaster, completely erratic.

"This is unbelievable!"

All the doctors gasped in unison, struggling to believe what they were seeing.

In all their decades of medical experience, none of them had ever encountered such a bizarre pattern on an ECG.

But there was no time to process the shock. Gritting their teeth, they pressed on with the emergency treatment.

Daren's eyelids and lips twitched unconsciously. His pupils began to lose focus. Blood poured from his mouth. He looked like he was on the brink.

"Vice Admiral Borsalino, please step back. Vice Admiral Daren's condition is critical—we need to focus everything on saving him,"

the attending doctor said sternly.

"No problem..."

Borsalino gave Daren a meaningful glance, smiling slightly as he stepped aside.

Then, as if something had just occurred to him, he turned to Tokikake—who was pacing around in a complete panic—and said casually,

"Commodore Tokikake, you'd better hurry up and notify Admiral Sengoku and the others."

Tokikake froze for a moment, then snapped to attention and nodded like crazy, blurting out,

"Right, right! Notify Admiral Sengoku... Vice Admiral Borsalino, you've gotta vouch for me—I didn't do anything!"

"I just came here to steal some fruit, that's all! Whatever's going on with Daren has nothing to do with me!"

With that, he bolted out of the room like a shot, racing toward the Fleet Admiral's residence.

As he ran, he shouted at the top of his lungs,

"Daren's not gonna make it!!"

Chapter 486 - 486: Volume 4 – Chapter 5: Invitation to the Training Camp

Fleet Admiral's Office.

As Momonga pushed open the door to the conference room, a solemn and oppressive atmosphere immediately swept over him.

One by one, the high-ranking officers of Marine Headquarters sat around the round table with stern expressions. Some were silently smoking cigars, while others gave him curt nods, their faces unreadable.

Numerous serious gazes fell on him, carrying a silent pressure that made Momonga's chest tighten involuntarily.

His eyes quickly and discreetly swept across the room, taking in the figures of each officer. The golden epaulettes gleaming on their wide Marine cloaks clearly marked their ranks.

"All headquarters-level officers?"

The thought flashed through Momonga's mind, but he kept a steady demeanor. Stepping forward, he raised his hand in a crisp salute and declared loudly,

"Admiral of the North Blue, Base Commander of the North Blue Navy 321st Branch, Captain of Marine Headquarters—Momonga, reporting in!"

Momonga was no longer the brash rookie he once was in the North Blue.

From the time he served as Daren's adjutant, he'd witnessed more high-level operations and major events than he could count. And since taking over as the North Blue admiral, both his administrative and political capabilities had been honed to a sharp edge.

Even after Daren's departure, Momonga had kept the North Blue firmly under control. The North Blue Fleet had continued to expand under his command, and he skillfully balanced the interests of both the Member Nations and non-Member Nations in the region—a testament to his leadership.

In handling affairs, he had long surpassed many officers of the same rank, growing into someone fully capable of standing on his own.

So even now, facing the collective scrutiny of so many senior Marine officials, he didn't show the slightest hesitation. Instead, he carried himself with calm assurance.

Of course, the greatest source of that confidence lay in his strength.

The acquisition and development of the Goro Goro no Mi had given Momonga the power and composure to meet the intense pressure from these top brass head-on.

While Momonga quietly observed the Marine leaders around the table, those very officers were also watching him in turn.

The name of the new North Blue admiral had long since reached their ears, sparking considerable interest and curiosity.

Among the four seas—East Blue, West Blue, South Blue, and North Blue—the North Blue was currently the Marine Headquarters' highest priority.

Especially after Daren, the so-called uncrowned king of the North Blue, had taken command and turned the once-chaotic sea into a tightly controlled region. The number of pirates and even civilian crime rates had plummeted to unheard-of levels.

And now, even after Daren had stepped down, his successor hadn't let those achievements slip away. On the contrary, Momonga had brought even greater stability to the North Blue.

Everyone present understood exactly what that meant.

"Don't be so tense, Captain Momonga."

At that moment, Sengoku spoke with a smile.

"Everyone here is a fellow Marine. We summoned you from the North Blue not for any official disciplinary inquiry, but just to hear about the events during Daren's battle with Shiki—get a sense of what happened and gather relevant intel."

"Please, have a seat. This isn't a formal debriefing. It won't affect your rank or your record. We're simply here to chat a bit and check in on how Daren is doing."

Sengoku gave him an encouraging look, his tone relaxed, as if it truly were just a casual conversation.

But Momonga didn't let his guard down.

A slightly restrained smile tugged at his lips as he sat in an empty chair.

"Yes, Admiral Sengoku."

"Captain Momonga, how long have you been with the Marines?" Sengoku asked with a smile.

"Including my time as a recruit, it's been six years, Admiral Sengoku," Momonga replied.

"Oh? That's quite some time..."

Sengoku continued with a light smile.

"Your record is outstanding. Since your days as a recruit, you've completed over 300 missions and taken down more than 2,600 pirates. During your time as the North Blue Admiral, you've shown exceptional administrative capabilities and military leadership."

He paused, looking at Momonga with interest.

"With talent like yours, staying in the North Blue might be holding you back."

"The next Officer Training Camp at headquarters is about to begin. Would you be interested in coming to headquarters for training?"

The moment he said that, several of the officers present exchanged surprised glances.

Normally, selection for the Marine Officer Training Camp involved a very strict screening and vetting process. Even if a candidate passed the initial talent and ability assessment, they still had to undergo political review at headquarters.

After all, the training camp was the breeding ground for the Marine Headquarters' future core personnel. Ever since Daren's "Golden Generation" graduated, it had become widely recognized as the "cradle of stars."

There was no exaggeration in saying that officers who graduated from the training camp would eventually become the backbone of the Marines.

That's why political vetting was so crucial—candidates had to show alignment with the Marines' ideals of justice, personal discipline, and character.

Yet Sengoku's offer now seemed to bypass all of that. No screening, no vetting. As long as Momonga said yes, he'd be given a direct spot in the camp.

A full green light.

Something like this had never happened before.

Even "monsters" like Sakazuki, Borsalino, and Daren had to go through the full review before being accepted.

Daren, in particular, had to clear an unprecedented extra step—an "internal hearing" introduced specifically for his case.

Hearing Sengoku's offer, Momonga was momentarily stunned.

A little something to smooth things over, huh...

He immediately understood Sengoku's intent.

If this had been the old him, he might've accepted with teary-eyed gratitude on the spot.

And truthfully, who wouldn't be tempted? The training camp carried enormous prestige. If he entered, Momonga was certain his strength would grow by leaps and bounds.

Beyond that, it was a brilliant résumé booster.

He could connect with high-potential peers, expand his personal network, and build relationships that would greatly benefit his military career.

Not to mention the fast track to promotion...

But—

Momonga was no longer the naive hothead he once was.

He'd gone through countless "officer trials" from nobles and high-ranking officials across the North Blue.

Now, when someone extended a hand, his first instinct wasn't gratitude—but vigilance.

"Thank you for your generous offer, Admiral Sengoku. Joining the training camp has always been my greatest dream and honor."

"However, the current situation in the North Blue remains unpredictable. The death of the great pirate Shiki the Golden Lion may have come at the hands of Vice Admiral Daren, but the news of Shiki's presence in the region has still caused considerable panic among both Member and non-Member Nations."

"Until the situation there is fully stabilized, I cannot give a definite answer. I ask for your understanding, Admiral Sengoku."

Momonga's tone was calm and measured.

Of course, the "instability" of the North Blue was just a cover.

What he was truly concerned about was that if he left for headquarters, the development of the North Blue Fleet would stall.

If HQ sent someone new to take over the North Blue Admiral position, the fleet's secrets might be exposed.

And that... would turn the entire situation on its head.

Chapter 487 - 487: Volume 4 – Chapter 6: The Perfect Lie

Momonga couldn't accept the potential consequences.

Even though entering the Officer Training Camp would bring immense benefits to his personal future and military career—as Gion's rise had clearly demonstrated—he couldn't ignore the bigger picture.

He was certain that if he joined the camp and completed the training, he'd be promoted from Captain to Commodore without question. With the Goro Goro no Mi in his arsenal, he might even reach higher.

But compared to personal advancement, Momonga believed the North Blue Fleet was vastly more important.

He and Daren had poured their hearts, minds, and resources into building that flying fleet. It was something they simply could not afford to lose.

If he ever considered joining the training camp, it would only be after thoroughly discussing it with Daren and properly arranging everything concerning the North Blue Fleet.

He actually refused?

Hearing Momonga's response, the generals present were visibly surprised.

None of them had expected Momonga to turn down such a golden opportunity.

If it had been any other Marine stationed in one of the Four Seas, they'd probably be speechless with excitement if offered something like this by Admiral Sengoku.

Seeing Momonga's calm, composed demeanor, their expressions shifted slightly. They looked at him with a newfound sense of respect.

Even Sengoku was caught off guard for a moment, though he quickly smiled and nodded.

"Careful consideration is always a good thing. As I said, my offer stands. The doors of the Officer Training Camp remain open to you anytime, Captain Momonga."

"Thank you for your recognition and trust, Admiral Sengoku."

Momonga responded with a steady tone.

"Then let's move on to the main matter."

Sengoku's expression turned serious.

"I've reviewed the intelligence report you submitted on Daren's battle with Shiki."

"But a report is just a report. I want a clearer understanding of how that battle actually unfolded."

"You're likely aware that Daren is still in a coma, his injuries critical. If we can get more specific details about his fight with Shiki, it might offer some clues to the doctors at the military hospital and help them in treating him."

Momonga nodded.

"Yes, Admiral Sengoku."

"What kind of details are you looking for? I'll do my best to answer whatever you need."

Sengoku opened a file on the table, speaking slowly.

"From what I understand, Vice Admiral Daren's strength has already reached the level of an Admiral. That much is accurate, correct?"

"It is."

"Good. Now, here's the issue."

"While Vice Admiral Daren may have reached top-tier strength, there's still a significant gap between him and someone like Shiki. What I mean is—it's simply not possible that Daren defeated Shiki alone."

"What's your take on this, Captain Momonga?"

Momonga paused for a moment in thought, then nodded.

"Yes, Vice Admiral Daren was indeed no match for Shiki."

Sengoku's eyes sharpened slightly as he pressed further.

"So someone else intervened at the time?"

Momonga fell silent for a few seconds.

"Yes."

Sengoku narrowed his gaze. "Who?"

"Me," Momonga replied.

Sengoku froze.

So did everyone else.

You?

Their mouths opened, but for a moment, no one knew what to say.

"Captain Momonga, I have great respect for your talents," Sengoku said with a frown, "but with your current strength... you shouldn't be capable of joining a battle at that level, right?"

Momonga slowly exhaled and replied in a deep voice,

"Because of this."

Under the stunned eyes of everyone present, he slowly raised his hand. Blue electric arcs began to spark from his fingertips, bubbling and surging until his entire arm seemed to melt into blazing plasma.

The temperature in the air visibly rose.

"What is that...?"

"Logia!"

"Lightning... could it be—"

"There's no mistake! The Goro Goro no Mi!"

"The strongest Logia-type Devil Fruit!"

The room echoed with gasps as the Marine officers stared wide-eyed at Momonga's arm, their expressions filled with shock.

The Goro Goro no Mi.

The strongest Logia, thought to have vanished from the seas years ago—was now in Momonga's hands?

Their shock quickly gave way to envy.

This was the most coveted of all Devil Fruits. Its overwhelming destructive power and incredible speed made it arguably the most desired ability in existence.

Even Sengoku's pupils contracted.

After a long pause, he drew in a deep breath, eyes narrowing with a complicated expression.

"So that's it. You became the wielder of the Goro Goro no Mi. No wonder you were able to get involved in the battle between Daren and Shiki... But even that wouldn't be enough, would it?"

"As expected of you, Admiral Sengoku. Sharp as ever."

Momonga nodded.

"I could offer some support, but the power gap was too great. Even with the Goro Goro no Mi, there wasn't much I could do."

"So..." Sengoku raised an eyebrow.

At that, Momonga reached into his pocket and pulled out a small wooden box, no bigger than his palm.

"What's this?" Sengoku and the others turned their eyes toward it.

"Shiki's body was recovered. If the forensic team at headquarters examines it, they'll likely discover that aside from the fatal wound through the heart, his body is also riddled with damage from cannon fire and bullets."

Momonga's tone was calm and steady.

The most perfect lie is one that's laced with the truth.

It was a phrase Daren used often—and one Momonga remembered well.

He had clearly come prepared for this "debriefing."

Opening the small wooden box slowly, he revealed a single, black metal bullet.

"A Seastone bullet!?"

Sengoku's eyes widened as he recognized it instantly.

"Yes," Momonga confirmed. "Vice Admiral Daren, despite his severe injuries, forcibly engaged Shiki and endured five full minutes of concentrated fire from ten North Blue warships."

He paused, then added deliberately,

"For five minutes."

The weight of his words fell like a thunderclap.

Five minutes of continuous bombardment?

The officers could barely believe what they were hearing.

Sengoku's face showed undisguised shock.

"Mixed within that bombardment were numerous Seastone rounds. Once embedded in Shiki's flesh, they severely weakened his abilities."

Momonga's voice lowered, firm and steady.

"It was only under those conditions that Vice Admiral Daren was able to strike Shiki down."

The generals around the room finally understood.

"So that's what happened..."

"No wonder..."

"That explains everything..."

"Right. No matter how strong Shiki is, he's still a Devil Fruit user. Against Seastone, his power would be crippled..."

But was that really the whole truth?

Sengoku restrained his inner doubts, though his brows remained tightly knit.

It sounded plausible—but something still felt off.

Like a puzzle missing its most vital piece.

Just as he opened his mouth to ask more—

BOOM!

The doors to the conference room burst open.

Tokikake came charging in like a madman, drenched in sweat and gasping for breath.

"D-Daren is awake!!"

At those words, everyone—including Sengoku—leapt to their feet, eyes blazing with hope.

But Tokikake's next sentence sent them plummeting.

"But he's dying!!"

"What!?"

Sengoku's expression changed in an instant.

Without another word, he rushed out of the room, urgency written all over his face. He had no time left for questions.

If something really happened to Daren, it would be a loss the Marines could not afford.

The others hurriedly followed, panic breaking out across the ranks.

Only Momonga remained in place.

His brows furrowed briefly—then slowly relaxed.

As if something had just become clear.

Chapter 488 - 488: Volume 4 – Chapter 7: I Want to Report Privately

"The patient's vital signs are rapidly declining!"

"Damn it, is the bleeding still not under control!?"

"What's going on? Wasn't his condition stable just a moment ago?"

"Did something trigger him earlier?"

"..."

In the high-priority ward of the military hospital, more than a dozen top-tier medical personnel scrambled around Vice Admiral Daren's bedside. He lay there on the brink of death, barely clinging to life.

Beads of cold sweat formed on their foreheads as they stared at the erratic, unreadable data flashing across the monitors.

This was Vice Admiral Daren—currently the most powerful and influential figure in the Marines. If anything were to happen to him, they, the medical team, would be held responsible in the worst possible way.

Bang!

The door to the ward was suddenly flung open.

The attending physician, frustrated and anxious, turned with a scowl and snapped without even looking.

"Damn it! Can't you see we're in the middle of an emergency? Get the hell—wait, Admiral Sengoku?!"

His voice cracked mid-sentence as a bead of sweat slid down his forehead. His face flushed with embarrassment.

Sengoku strode in urgently, waving a hand.

"What's Daren's condition?"

His eyes locked on the bedridden Vice Admiral, who continued to cough up blood. Daren's face had gone so pale and lifeless, he looked like a corpse.

The other Marine officers poured in behind him, tension filling the room.

Seeing the sheer number of high-ranking brass present, the attending physician felt a mountain of pressure crashing down on him. Swallowing hard, he replied nervously,

"Vice Admiral Daren's condition had stabilized earlier, but just a few minutes ago his vitals took a sudden turn for the worse. It's become extremely critical... We're doing everything we can."

A heavy shadow passed over Sengoku's eyes. He clenched his jaw and growled,

"Whatever it takes, Daren must not die!"

He paused, then turned to the crowd peeking in from the doorway.

"All of you—out. Give the doctors some space. It's too crowded in here."

"Yes, Admiral Sengoku!"

The group of Marine officers flinched, then quickly filed out of the room.

Sengoku glanced at Borsalino, who stood leaned against the wall with his hands in his pockets. He hesitated but didn't say anything to make him leave.

Then, without a word, Sengoku sat on the sofa in the room, arms folded, face grim.

The doctors were sweating even more under his intense presence and unconsciously sped up their movements.

...

Moments later—

Beep, beep, beep!

The chaotic, erratic beeping from the monitors suddenly leveled out into a steady rhythm.

The ECG line gradually smoothed into a consistent wave pattern.

"It's working!"

"Thank goodness! The bleeding's finally stopping!"

"Looks like the oral medication is kicking in!"

Cries of relief burst from the medical team. The tension in the air eased slightly as they saw Daren's face slowly regaining color, his breathing and heartbeat evening out.

"Vice Admiral Daren is stabilizing..."

"His vitals are improving..."

"This is a miracle..."

Still leaning against the wall, Borsalino watched the scene unfold, a faint, knowing smile tugging at his lips.

Sengoku stood up from the sofa and walked briskly over.

"Let me take a look."

As if responding to Sengoku's voice, Daren slowly opened his eyes.

"...Sengoku... Admiral?"

Seeing him awake, Sengoku finally exhaled in relief. He chuckled and said,

"You little brat... you almost gave me a heart attack."

...

Outside the hospital room.

"So, what's Daren's current condition?"

Sengoku fixed a stern gaze on the group of doctors before him, his tone cold.

"He was in a coma, but his injuries had stabilized. How did things suddenly deteriorate like this?"

Under Sengoku's imposing presence and scrutinizing eyes, the doctors barely dared to breathe. They exchanged nervous glances until the attending physician finally spoke up.

"Reporting to Admiral Sengoku, Vice Admiral Daren's situation is unprecedented. For an ordinary person, survival with such severe injuries would be impossible."

"It's only because of Vice Admiral Daren's exceptional physique that the injuries were suppressed."

"Based on our assessment, this sudden crisis was likely due to the previously suppressed injuries erupting all at once, leading to the critical condition."

"However, after the recent treatment, we believe Vice Admiral Daren is now out of danger."

Sengoku exhaled slowly.

"That's good."

"He's awake now. May I go in to see him?"

The doctors exchanged wry smiles.

Who would dare say no?

They all nodded.

"Of course, just keep the visit brief so as not to disturb Vice Admiral Daren's rest."

Sengoku nodded and pushed open the door to the ward. But the scene that greeted him made him momentarily dizzy, nearly knocking the wind out of him.

Daren was already sitting up with the help of a nurse, a cigar clenched between his teeth. That rascal Tokikake sat beside him, grinning as he lit the cigar.

Sengoku: ...

He scolded.

"You little brat, are you trying to get yourself killed?"

Daren chuckled nonchalantly.

"Just felt my heart racing a bit. Thought a cigar might help me calm down."

As he spoke, twin streams of smoke curled from his nostrils like dragons.

Sengoku's mouth twitched.

But since the doctors had confirmed Daren was out of danger, he didn't intervene.

Behind Sengoku, Momonga and several other headquarters officers entered the room.

"Vice Admiral Daren!"

They greeted him with smiles.

Daren returned the smile and gestured toward the pile of gifts beside the sofa.

"Thank you all for coming to visit. You're too kind."

"There's fruit, cigars, and wine over there. Help yourselves. I can't exactly play host right now."

He winked playfully.

The officers burst into hearty laughter at Daren's humor.

They didn't stand on ceremony, each grabbing a cigar and lighting up right there in the hospital room.

As they chatted, Daren casually exchanged a glance with Momonga.

The latter gave a subtle nod.

With every Marine puffing away, the room quickly filled with thick smoke, so dense it was hard to see a hand in front of one's face. To an outsider, it might have looked like the place was on fire.

Outside the door, the doctors and nurses stood frozen, their expressions stiff.

"Daren, I've heard about your battle with Shiki from Captain Momonga, but there's still one thing I want to ask you."

Sengoku accepted the hot tea Tokikake handed him, took a sip, and spoke in a deep voice.

"Please, Admiral Sengoku."

Daren nodded, his expression sincere.

Sengoku's eyes suddenly sharpened, locking onto Daren.

"Given Shiki's personality, if he sensed his life was in danger, he would have fled without hesitation."

"How did you manage to trap him?"

At these words, Daren's expression remained unchanged, but Momonga, standing behind Sengoku, narrowed his eyes slightly.

So, it was noticed after all...

Momonga clenched his fists.

The room fell into a tense silence, the kind where a pin drop would be deafening.

Daren pondered for a moment before speaking.

"Admiral Sengoku, regarding this matter, I'd like to report to you privately."

He glanced at the other Marine officers present.

Sengoku frowned, displeased.

"Everyone here is a core Marine officer. There's nothing to hide!"

Hearing this, the officers puffed out their chests proudly, eyes gleaming.

"Very well."

Daren shrugged.

"Actually, besides Captain Momonga, there were others who assisted."

Others got involved?

Sengoku raised an eyebrow, a smug smile playing on his lips.

Just as I thought!

His speculation was spot on!

The other officers perked up, curiosity written all over their faces.

In that battle, aside from Momonga, others had intervened?

Who could it be?

There were only so many powerful figures in these seas, and those capable of intervening in a clash between Daren and Shiki were few and far between.

Moreover, this likely touched on Vice Admiral Daren's personal connections, making them all the more intrigued.

Daren continued.

"Admiral Sengoku, you've probably seen this person in the Edd War Sea. It was..."

"Wait!"

Sengoku seemed to realize something. His expression shifted slightly as he raised a hand to interrupt, then turned to the officers.

"Since Vice Admiral Daren wishes to report this matter privately, I must respect his request. Please step outside for now."

The officers: ???

What happened to being core officers?

Didn't you just say there was nothing to hide?

Chapter 489 - 489: Volume 4 – Chapter 8: This Is the Truth of History

"Daren, can you tell us now?"

The Marine officers stormed out of the hospital room, swearing under their breath. In the spacious, high-class ward, only Daren, Sengoku, Momonga, and Borsalino remained.

Sengoku kept a wary eye on the Vice Admiral leaning back in the bed, smoke curling from his lips, his brows tightly furrowed.

"The person you're talking about... it couldn't be..."

"That's right. It's Dragon."

A trace of helplessness crossed Daren's face as he sighed.

"I had planned to keep this secret, afraid it would cause unnecessary trouble. But in the end, I couldn't hide it from your sharp insight, Admiral Sengoku."

Sengoku fell silent.

Dragon's identity was a sensitive matter. He was a wanted criminal with a high bounty, pursued by both the World Government and the Marines.

If he really had intervened in the battle between Daren and Shiki, then hiding this information made sense—especially considering Dragon was Garp's biological son. That alone made it all the more crucial to keep the matter from the other officers.

"I see..."

Sengoku's eyes narrowed slightly as he turned to Momonga.

"Captain Momonga, is that why you deliberately left it out of the intelligence report?"

Momonga quickly caught on and nodded with a serious expression.

"Yes, Admiral Sengoku."

"Dragon is, after all, a publicly wanted criminal. Meanwhile, Daren is our brightest Marine star. If word got out that he was in contact with someone like Dragon, it would have a serious political impact on him."

With a regretful look, he bowed deeply.

"This was my negligence. Please punish me!"

Sengoku waved a hand.

"You did the right thing, Momonga."

He glanced at Daren and spoke slowly.

"Daren represents the righteous force of the Marines. His image carries strong symbolic weight. In this situation, it's true that close ties to Dragon would be highly inappropriate."

"I understand your concerns—but I'm not happy with how you handled it!"

Sengoku's tone turned sharp.

"You kept contact with Dragon in secret and even let him take part in the Battle of Edd War and the final operation to hunt down Shiki... If anything had gone wrong, who would take responsibility?!"

"If you had consulted me beforehand—"

"If I had consulted you beforehand, the plan never would've gone through, right? You wouldn't have agreed, would you, Admiral Sengoku?"

Daren cut him off with a smile.

Sengoku's expression froze. He opened his mouth but couldn't find a retort.

Daren was right.

If he'd known about the plan in advance, there was no way he would've approved it.

Dragon's status was too volatile—he had killed a Celestial Dragon.

If the World Government found out that a "fugitive" like Dragon had been involved in a Marine operation—and that he, a Marine Admiral, had known about it and approved—it would mean the end of his career.

The more Sengoku thought about it, the more uneasy he felt.

So... that brat Daren kept it from me for my own sake?

To shield me from the fallout of this operation?

Even someone as seasoned and shrewd as Sengoku couldn't help feeling a little awkward at the realization.

"That's exactly why I chose to go my own way. I'm sorry, Admiral Sengoku..."

Daren let out a sigh.

"I understand better than anyone the political consequences of working with Dragon. But I had no other choice."

"Shiki was too great a threat—to the world and to us. We poured countless resources into the Battle of Edd War to finally set up this one shot. If we missed the chance to eliminate him completely, I doubt we'd ever get another."

"If he had survived, he would've come back with a vengeance... and I'm sure you wouldn't want to wake up one night to find an island falling out of the sky onto Marineford, would you?"

Sengoku: ...

He didn't respond.

Because Daren was right.

With Shiki's ruthless and vengeful nature, if this operation had failed, he would've gotten more cautious than ever—and come back with a vengeance. After that, the Marines' chances of beating him would've been next to none.

That kind of terrifying threat was exactly what made Shiki the most feared pirate by the Marines—hands down.

"What about Dragon..."

Sengoku stayed quiet for a moment, then asked slowly.

Daren smiled.

"Don't worry, Admiral Sengoku. Nothing will go wrong in the North Blue—I'm confident about that. What worries me more is the Battle of Edd War..."

"Even with the extreme weather at the time, I'm sure plenty of accompanying Marines saw Dragon take action, didn't they?"

Sengoku nodded.

"They did. But I've already issued a gag order—no one is allowed to speak of it."

"The only part that's hard to explain is that massive sea storm."

His expression tightened slightly.

"What's there to explain..."

Daren chuckled dismissively.

"The New World's always been unpredictable—shifting seas, wild skies, chaotic weather... If Shiki doesn't check the forecast, who's that on?"

"And besides, history? History's just a call girl dressed however the client wants. Pay enough, and you can make her wear whatever costume you like."

Then, in a mock-serious tone, like a historian recording an epic or a reporter filing a grand story, the Vice Admiral began:

"Sea Circle Calendar, year 1494, late in the year. The legendary great pirate Shiki the Golden Lion attempted to join forces with Gol D. Roger to conquer the world. After Roger refused, tensions erupted into a violent clash between their two crews—what history would later call the Battle of Edd War, a conflict that reshaped the world."

"Shiki's Flying Pirates, armed with overwhelming numbers and firepower, pushed the Roger Pirates to the brink... until a sudden ocean storm tore across the battlefield."

"The Roger Pirates, moments from annihilation, were saved by the storm. Most of the Flying Pirates' massive fleet sank beneath the waves. In the chaos, a ship's steering wheel lodged into Shiki's head, seriously injuring him."

"Seizing the moment, the Marine fleet—waiting and ready—struck with full force. Under the banner of 'justice,' they utterly crushed the Flying Pirates."

"Shiki, gravely wounded, fled... only to be brought down in the North Blue by Marine Headquarters Vice Admiral Rogers Daren, marking the end of his grand ambitions and his storied, fearsome life."

Finishing the tale, Daren exhaled a long plume of smoke that curled like a dragon and grinned.

"That's how it'll be written in the history books, Admiral Sengoku."

Sengoku stared blankly at the Vice Admiral before him.

This brat... he really can spin a story!!

Chapter 490 - 490: Volume 4 – Chapter 9: Your Master Is Ready, Momonga

Not just Sengoku—even Momonga couldn't help twitching at the corners of his mouth.

He already knew Daren could be outrageous, but this was next level.

Then again, thinking it through, it didn't seem impossible. With the Marines' influence, issuing a gag order and scrubbing Dragon's presence from the Battle of Edd War wouldn't be difficult at all.

The battlefield was already cloaked in a violent storm, and Dragon had struck fast and left even faster, without leaving a single trace... Under those conditions, covering it up was practically effortless.

After the initial shock, Sengoku quickly came to his senses and started grasping the deeper meaning behind Daren's words.

On one hand, this would sever all ties between the Marines and Dragon. On the other, the credit and glory for defeating Shiki would go entirely to the Marines—something that would significantly boost their global prestige and influence.

Sengoku gave Daren, who was calmly smoking, a deep, thoughtful look.

This kid's political maneuvers were downright filthy...

But he liked it.

A satisfied smile crept onto Sengoku's face as he chuckled.

"You really are the face of the Marines. I knew I didn't misjudge you, Daren."

Daren offered a modest smile.

"You flatter me, Admiral Sengoku. I'm just trying to fulfill my duty as a Marine."

"Mm." Sengoku nodded, the corners of his mouth lifting slightly.

He liked Daren more by the minute. Strong, reliable, resourceful, and—most importantly—someone who knew when to push and when to pull back. A subordinate like that was gold for any leader.

Even though the plan to hunt the great pirate Shiki had been completely orchestrated by Daren, Sengoku had still benefited plenty from the victory. It would no doubt shine brightly on his path toward becoming Fleet Admiral.

Still, Daren was a little too reckless. If something had gone wrong...

Sengoku gave it some thought and decided to give him a gentle warning.

"That said, Daren, if something like this comes up again, I hope you'll consult me beforehand."

"You're no longer just representing yourself. Every word and action of yours reflects directly on the image of the Marines. Especially when dealing with someone as dangerous as Shiki, you can't just act first and report later."

"If you inform HQ ahead of time, we can coordinate support and backup more efficiently."

Daren nodded.

"Thank you for your concern, Admiral Sengoku. I was indeed too rash this time."

"You're right—if I had spoken with you beforehand, the operation might not have been as risky."

Of course, he wasn't going to argue. The key was to stay respectful and make sure Sengoku felt heard.

Next time? He'd do it the same way anyway.

With a sigh, Daren feigned a deeply emotional look.

"I just want to keep improving, Admiral Sengoku."

Momonga: ...

Sengoku: ...

Watching Daren's utterly composed face, Sengoku rolled his eyes in exasperation.

He stood up, patted Daren on the shoulder.

"Get some rest and heal up. I'll be waiting for your return."

With that, he turned and walked toward the door.

Just as he was about to step out, he suddenly paused.

"Oh, and Daren—earlier I invited Captain Momonga to join the training camp at HQ. If you've got time, try to talk him into it. Someone with his talent is wasted in the North Blue."

Sengoku looked back as he spoke.

Daren's eyes flickered, but he kept a calm smile.

"Is that so? That's great news."

He exchanged a glance with Momonga, then nodded.

"I'll talk to him, Admiral Sengoku."

Sengoku nodded and stepped out of the ward.

"Well, I'll be going too. Looks like you two probably have a lot to talk about," Borsalino said with a grin, before suddenly dissolving into countless golden particles of light, vanishing on the spot.

The room fell quiet, leaving only Daren and Momonga.

"We actually pulled it off..."

Momonga looked at Daren, a relieved smile spreading across his face.

"But are you sure pinning it on Dragon won't backfire?"

His expression was a little uneasy.

"Of course it won't. Sengoku's not about to track down Dragon to verify anything. He's in the middle of a crucial promotion to Fleet Admiral. Dragon is the last person he wants to deal with—he's avoiding him like the plague."

Daren grinned, completely at ease.

"And if things really get messy, we just throw another billion or so his way."

Momonga twitched.

Honestly, at their level, a billion or two didn't mean much anymore.

But then he remembered the look on Dragon's face when he came to the North Blue asking for 3 billion Belly—grinning from ear to ear—and decided to let it go.

"But are you really sure you're not coming to headquarters for training?"

Daren shook his head and looked at Momonga seriously.

Momonga gave a wry smile.

"I'd be lying if I said I wasn't tempted. North Blue's just too small. When it comes to training resources or chances for promotion, headquarters definitely has the edge."

Daren nodded in agreement.

That much was true.

Now that Momonga had taken over as Admiral of the North Blue, he was already sitting at the peak of power in that sea. If he wanted to move forward, joining the training camp at headquarters was the fastest—and really, the only—way.

"But right now, there's no one else who can take command of the North Blue fleet. Honestly, I don't feel comfortable handing it over to anyone else. Let's hold off until this matter is settled."

Momonga paused in thought.

"Besides, the Goro Goro no Mi still has a lot of potential left to unlock. At least for now, I'm not hitting any kind of ceiling."

Daren took a slow puff of his cigar.

"If it really comes to it, I can train you myself."

"The training camp's not bad, sure, but it's still just that. I can always make more trips to the North Blue."

"You?" Momonga looked at him, surprised.

Daren grinned.

"What's wrong with that? You're talking to the 'King of the North Blue' here—the guy who took down Shiki. You've no idea how many people would kill to be trained by me..."

Momonga smirked.

"Training and teaching are two different beasts. Your kind of reckless training? I wouldn't survive it."

Daren chuckled with a knowing look.

"Relax. I don't plan on doing it myself. I've already lined up a few masters just for you."

The moment he caught the glint in Daren's eyes, a wave of dread washed over Momonga. His instincts screamed that something wasn't right.

Just then—

"Husband!"

The hospital room door burst open.

Momonga turned and saw a petite figure standing at the entrance, panting slightly.

It was a young woman, about twenty or so, stunningly beautiful. Her long, pale green hair cascaded like a waterfall, damp with sweat, the ends clinging to her forehead. She wore a delicately tailored pink kimono and radiated a gentle, lovely aura.

But her eyes were red-rimmed, and worry clouded her expression.

"Lady Toki."

Momonga immediately recognized her and quickly stood, greeting her with a hint of formality.

"Toki? You're here?"

Daren was surprised as well.

Amatsuki Toki didn't respond. Her reddened eyes locked onto Daren, and the next second, she rushed forward and threw herself into his arms, holding him tightly.

"Thank goodness... thank goodness you're okay..."

Tears glistened at the corners of her eyes and slid down her cheeks—enough to tug at anyone's heart.

Daren froze for a second, then smiled gently and patted her head.

"Me? How could anything happen to me? I'm a monster of Marine Headquarters, remember..."

"Really?"

Toki looked up at him like a frightened kitten, her voice barely above a whisper.

"But... Commodore Tokikake said you were already dying..."

Daren: ...

Momonga: ...

...