

One Piece 691

Chapter 691: Saint Figarland Garling

Mary Geoise.

The streets bustled with traffic and throngs of people.

This sacred city was painted in shades of blue and white—white walls, blue tiles. The streets were spotless, the air perfumed with the scent of blooming flowers. Flower beds, fountains, street lamps, and greenery lined every corner.

Shops stood on either side of the streets, their displays overflowing with extravagant goods.

Finest cigars, rare and expensive liquors, delicately baked pastries and cakes, luxurious garments... The sheer refinement and opulence of what was sold here bordered on the surreal.

Celestial Dragons, dressed in ornate clothing and wearing their signature bubble hoods, strolled arrogantly through the streets. They were always flanked by entourages, many holding iron chains in hand. At the other end of those chains were often beautiful young women or muscular young men—faces pale with fear, crawling beside the Celestial Dragons like insects or stray dogs.

The Celestial Dragons shouted and barked orders, occasionally lashing their slaves with iron whips just to make them scream or stumble, drawing anxious, fearful glances from passersby—as though flaunting their "property."

Yet none of the shopkeepers or citizens batted an eye. They showed neither anger nor surprise, as if this cruelty was nothing new.

From the moment Daren stepped into Mary Geoise, he could feel several hidden eyes watching him in silence.

But he paid them no mind. Instead, he leisurely observed the surroundings, playing the part of a wide-eyed traveler stepping into the Holy Land of the Celestial Dragons for the first time, taking in its so-called majesty.

All the while, he quietly activated his Observation Haki.

With its release, a massive, invisible low-frequency magnetic field spread out from Daren like a ripple.

In an instant, nearly the entire environment of Mary Geoise fell within his perception.

Unlike conventional Observation Haki that simply detects living auras, Daren's ability—enhanced by the magnetic field sense of the Jiki Jiki no Mi—could not only track living beings with uncanny precision, but also perceive magnetic fluctuations from inanimate objects to a certain degree.

Which meant...

As streams of data poured into his mind, a vivid, three-dimensional map began to form in his head.

Like a virtual simulation, translucent models of buildings sprang up one after another. Every street, every shop—even the position of street lamps and small decorative fountains—appeared on this mental 3D map with perfect clarity.

Gradually, as Daren sharpened his magnetic sense further, tiny flickering dots began to appear across the map.

Shopkeepers, nervous pedestrians shrinking before Celestial Dragons, arrogant nobles, and CP agents lurking in the shadows... All lit up on the map in different hues.

"Interesting... So Mary Geoise runs on slave labor buried underground? How primitive."

Daren raised one sharply-angled black eyebrow, a cold smirk curling at his lips as something caught his attention.

He quickly pinpointed several key structures.

Massive armories. Lavish villas scattered along the outskirts of Mary Geoise.

The armories—and the Celestial Dragons' exclusive residential zone known as the "Land of the Gods."

After firmly imprinting the layout of the virtual map into his memory, Daren let out a slow breath.

He still didn't know what kind of deal the Five Elders were going to propose—but he knew better than to place any faith in the morality of those five scheming relics.

All the quiet moves he'd made over the years—back in North Blue, at Marine Headquarters, and within the Shichibukai system—had been cautious and precise, but even then, he couldn't be sure he'd kept everything hidden from those five undying ghosts.

For the World Government to hold dominance over the seas for 800 years, it had to be terrifyingly competent. And those Five Elders, said to wield the highest authority in the World Government, definitely weren't just figureheads.

Daren had no idea what kind of cards those ancient shadows were hiding.

After all, his knowledge of the "plot" was limited.

But he had to prepare—just in case those five old fools really tried something suicidal, he needed to be ready to respond.

The intel he had just gathered on Mary Geoise might very well come in handy someday.

After all, getting into Mary Geoise was a rare privilege. Even a Marine Admiral couldn't step foot in the Holy Land without the express approval of the World Government.

Now feeling an increasing number of hidden shadows quietly closing in on him, Daren knew—

His time was running short.

"Then..."

Daren narrowed his eyes as his Observation Haki silently expanded again.

His senses reached out sharply toward that distant, ancient, and towering fortress.

If what came before was just a light appetizer, then that colossal stronghold was the true main course.

Pangaea Castle.

The political heart of Mary Geoise, the nerve center of the World Government, home to the Five Elders—and even... the ruler of the Empty Throne, Imu.

But just as Daren's Observation Haki was about to touch Pangaea Castle, something strange happened. His pupils contracted slightly.

His perception... vanished.

Like a stone sinking into the ocean—his Haki melted away the moment it brushed against the castle, dissolving completely.

It felt like a terrifying black hole was lurking within, silently devouring everything.

"So, it really won't be that easy..."

Daren frowned.

"It's not exactly good manners to probe others' secrets with Haki, Vice Admiral Daren."

A calm, slightly amused voice suddenly spoke up behind him.

Daren's expression shifted. His muscles instinctively tensed.

Someone had appeared behind him—without making a sound.

And he was in the middle of using Observation Haki!

"No need to be on edge. I'm not here with hostile intent."

That teasing voice spoke again.

"While we see most people in this sea as little more than ants, Vice Admiral Daren... you're different. Your strength and talent have earned our respect."

"Oh really?"

Daren let out a cold chuckle, narrowing his eyes as he slowly turned around.

But the man before him made him pause.

Because... his face looked incredibly familiar.

He appeared to be in his thirties, cloaked in a lavish red mantle. His features were sharp and commanding, and though not physically imposing, he radiated an unshakable presence.

At his waist hung a Western-style sword, and his left hand rested casually on the hilt as he spoke.

What stood out the most was his hair.

Crimson red, styled in a crescent arc that curved upward like a blood moon.

If not for that strange hairstyle, this man could easily be mistaken for a future version of "Red-Haired" Shanks.

At some point, the pedestrians had completely vanished. The street was silent and empty.

Only the man with the blood-moon red hair remained, leaning casually against a white wall, smiling calmly at Daren.

"Pleasure to meet you, Vice Admiral Daren."

He stepped forward and extended a gloved hand.

"I am Saint Figarland Garling, Deputy Commander of the God's Knights."

Chapter 692: The King of North Blue Meets the Five Elders!

Deputy Commander of the God's Knights?

Daren narrowed his eyes, quietly weighing the meaning behind the title.

Given the "Saint" in his name, this man—who bore an uncanny resemblance to "Red-Haired" Shanks—was undoubtedly a Celestial Dragon.

The God's Knights... one of the most secretive and powerful factions within the World Government, composed entirely of elite Celestial Dragons. They wielded the authority to judge even their own kind, tasked with safeguarding the dignity and power of the royal lineage. Their primary duty was to protect the Celestial Dragons and uphold their rule.

And if the man standing before him was their deputy commander, then he had to be among the most formidable and high-ranking of all Celestial Dragons.

Saint Figarland Garling.

Daren had heard the name before.

The reigning champion of the God Valley War. The man who claimed victory in that legendary battle.

He hadn't expected to run into him here.

Was this a test?

Daren glanced at the hand extended toward him, noting the black leather glove—and sneered internally.

This man's tone and demeanor were gentle, approachable, completely lacking the overbearing arrogance so typical of World Nobles. He didn't seem like the kind of idiotic swine Daren had dealt with among the Celestial Dragons before.

But the fact that he hadn't even removed his glove said it all.

Behind that cordial front, his contempt and disdain for humans ran deeper—far worse than the rest of those pigs.

"Saint Figarland Garling-sama... sneaking up behind a battle-hardened Marine isn't exactly a good habit either."

Daren suddenly chuckled.

This guy came in with a veiled provocation. If he wanted to play games, Daren was more than happy to oblige.

Figarland Garling paused for a moment—then his smile slowly turned amused.

The two locked eyes.

Their hands clasped.

And in that instant—

Boom!!

At almost the exact same moment, a flash of crimson ignited in both their eyes as their fighting spirits exploded!

A torrent of black and red lightning erupted into the air, surging into a roaring storm that spread violently in all directions.

The sky darkened.

The ground around them groaned and cracked under the crushing pressure of their clashing Haki. The blue-tiled roofs and white walls trembled violently as flakes of dust rained down.

An oppressive force blanketed several city blocks. Even the CP agents hiding in the shadows were forced to one knee, eyes wide with dread.

"Vice Admiral Daren... impressive spirit."

Though Saint Figarland Garling still wore that lofty, elegant smile, his eyes had turned dark. His blood-moon-shaped hair rippled wildly in the wind.

This Marine—this young Marine—actually possessed Conqueror's Haki on par with his own!

No wonder the secret archives of the World Government called him the greatest Marine genius in 800 years.

"Likewise."

Daren's smile remained calm. The cigar between his lips flickered faintly in the gusts of wind.

This Celestial Dragon was absurdly strong. In terms of controlling Conqueror's Haki, he was without a doubt on the level of an Admiral.

And the eerie way he had silently approached Daren from behind—it made him wary.

He had always been a bit lacking when it came to Observation Haki, a known weak spot compared to his physical strength and other attributes. But something like that had never happened before.

If this guy had wanted to attack... with Daren completely unaware, he could've been taken out in one strike.

Well—maybe not killed. But seriously injured? Absolutely.

Garling's eyes flickered with a flash of anger at Daren's indifferent response.

Arrogant, just as the rumors claimed.

He wasn't just some ordinary Celestial Dragon. He held real power and influence.

The God's Knights had the authority to judge—even execute—other Celestial Dragons.

Did this guy really think that awakening Conqueror's Haki was enough to challenge him?

A cold smirk curled on Garling's lips as he suddenly tightened his grip.

But the next moment—his smile froze.

Something was wrong.

The force, the density... it was off!

The instant he tried to crush Daren's hand, it felt like gripping solid diamond—completely immovable!

Even worse, the terrifying strength that began pulsing back through Daren's hand gave him the illusion...

That he was grappling with a battle-scarred warrior from the Giant Tribe!

Bit by bit, Figarland Garling's expression stiffened—until his face flushed bright red.

Tear!

The black leather glove suddenly burst apart, scattering into pieces as it fell.

Only then did Daren release his grip, reining in his aura as he offered a look of feigned "apology."

"My apologies, Saint Figarland Garling-sama."

"I accidentally ruined your glove. I'll do my best to compensate for it."

Saint Figarland Garling's eyelid twitched. His smile stiffened.

"No need. Vice Admiral Daren, your strength truly lives up to your reputation."

He took a deep breath and quietly hid his reddened, trembling hand behind his back, forcing a thin smile.

"It seems the upcoming escort mission will be in very capable hands."

Escort mission?

A flicker of confusion passed through Daren's eyes.

So the condition for becoming an Admiral... is to carry out an escort mission?

And the ones being escorted... are Celestial Dragons?

Seeing his expression, Figarland Garling's smile turned mocking, laced with amusement.

"Vice Admiral Daren probably hasn't been informed yet, has he?"

"The nobles of the Holy Land are about to host another hunting tournament—and they've prepared lavish prizes for it. Some of them even include powerful Devil Fruits."

"For an event this grand, naturally a strong Marine officer is needed to handle the escort..."

A World Noble hunting tournament?

Daren's heart sank.

Those damn Celestial Dragon fools really forgot the pain as soon as their wounds healed.

Wasn't the lesson from God Valley enough? Just twelve years later, and they're already strutting again, begging for disaster?

Having dealt multiple times with Dragon and Bartholomew Kuma, Daren knew very well that the true cause of the God Valley incident... was the Celestial Dragons' hunting tournament.

A massacre disguised as sport.

And now, the condition laid out by the Five Elders... was for him to escort another one of these "tournaments"?

A test of loyalty, then?

So the World Government played obedience games too...

A blazing fury began to rise in his chest, but Daren's eyes remained calm.

He looked at Figarland Garling and smiled.

"Such a grand occasion—it's truly worth celebrating."

"I won't let you down."

He turned and strode swiftly toward Pangaea Castle.

Watching the Marine's retreating back, Figarland Garling's cold smile deepened.

"I really am looking forward to it, Rogers Daren..."

"The look on your face when you find out where the hunt takes place... should be quite something."

...

Daren pressed forward.

The white buildings of the Holy Land receded behind him, replaced by an endless stretch of emerald plains.

Garling's mocking smile and smug words kept replaying in his mind, stirring a quiet sense of unease.

Before long, a towering white staircase began to emerge in the distance.

Its pristine steps stretched upward from the earth, climbing toward the clouds, where the faint silhouette of an ancient, weather-worn castle loomed.

Flanking the staircase stood rows of massive stone statues, godlike and imposing, gazing down with cold indifference on all who dared climb this "Stairway to the Heavens."

Daren suddenly stopped in his tracks.

It seemed he had guessed something. His fingers twitched slightly.

And just then—

Whoosh! Whoosh! Whoosh!

Pale, ghostlike figures silently materialized around him. Their presences interlocked, subtly sealing off every path of retreat.

"Vice Admiral Daren. The Five Elders request your presence."

The lead CP0 agent spoke in a raspy voice from beneath his mask, his tone laced with unspoken threat.

"So if I refuse... you'll attack me?"

Daren gave them a flat look.

"You're all that confident you can stop me?"

Swept by his icy gaze, the CP0 members instinctively stepped back, as if facing down a beast.

"Forget it..."

Daren suddenly let out a quiet chuckle.

He stepped forward.

With each step, his aura climbed higher.

By the time he reached the base of the majestic Celestial Stairway, the force radiating from his body surged like a storm. Thunder cracked. Wind howled.

The CP0 agents stared at the defiant figure, awe and fear surging in their hearts.

In the distance, Kong watched silently. His expression was dark. His fists clenched tightly.

The snow-white stairway stretched toward the heavens, sacred and solemn, stirring reverence in all who looked upon it.

And compared to this ancient staircase that had stood for 800 years—

The scarred body of the Vice Admiral seemed so small.

But his presence...

Was like a mountain. Immovable.

And then, his voice echoed across all of Mary Geoise—low, forceful, and filled with defiant pride.

"Vice Admiral Rogers Daren of Marine Headquarters, 'King of the North Blue'... requests an audience with the Five Elders!"

Chapter 693: Your Honor? What's That Worth?

The towering, sacred Celestial Stairway echoed with the Vice Admiral's sharp, commanding voice.

Though the words from his mouth were, "I greet the Five Elders," the overwhelming aura pouring from his body felt more like a declaration to raze the Holy Land of the Celestial Dragons.

The winds howled around him. His tall, scar-covered frame stood like an unyielding cliff—steep, solitary, and immovable.

One by one, the CP agents lurking around Pangaea Castle emerged, their expressions twisted in disbelief as they stared at the Vice Admiral.

Insane...

That Marine actually dared to challenge the Five Elders!

But before they could react—

Boom!!

An immense, abyssal pressure erupted from the top of the Celestial Stairway, like the weight of a collapsing fortress descending layer by layer from the sky.

Two colossal forces collided in midair, their clash unleashing a storm that ripped through the heavens.

Black and red lightning tore across the sky in every direction, swallowing the firmament in chaos.

All the CP agents dropped to one knee, arms raised to shield themselves from the violent shockwave, eyes wide with dread.

The Five Elders... had responded!

The confrontation lasted only a moment before all the warped distortions vanished without a trace.

Above Mary Geoise, the clouds split open, revealing a vast, bottomless gorge carved into the sky.

"Permission granted. Ascend the Celestial Stairway."

A raspy, aged voice echoed from its peak.

It was Saint Topman Warcury.

Daren narrowed his eyes... and smiled faintly.

He pulled out a fresh cigar, lit it with steady hands, and called out clearly,

"Thank you, Saint Warcury-sama."

His black, battle-worn boots stepped forward once more, rising steadily up the Celestial Stairway.

Still reeking of blood from his clash with the world's strongest man, the scarred Vice Admiral walked slowly through the solemn rows of towering statues.

The colossal effigies of the twenty kings who founded the World Government loomed overhead, their stone faces silently watching him ascend.

He climbed, step by step...

To the very top.

...

In less than three minutes, the Marine Vice Admiral stood before the ancient gates of the fortress.

Smoke curled from the cigar clenched in his teeth, veiling his sharp, cold features. The scent of blood clung to him even stronger now, making nearby guards avert their eyes in fear.

Daren stood motionless before the grand doors, his expression calm and unreadable.

Even without unleashing his Observation Haki, he could clearly feel five terrifying, deathly auras pulsing inside Pangaea Castle. They flickered like shadows from hell, coiled at the heart of this heavenly throne.

But strangely... there was no trace of Imu's presence.

"Come in, Daren."

With the summons granted, he drew in a deep breath, lifted his head, and pushed the door open.

The hall inside was broad and bright. Towering bookshelves lined the walls, filled with neatly ordered volumes. The air was scented with fresh tea, and beyond the windows lay a serene garden blooming with birdsong and flowers.

Far from the oppressive darkness he'd expected, golden sunlight streamed in, casting the room in warm brilliance.

Five elderly figures sat or stood in silence. Even without speaking, their mere presence radiated a crushing authority.

"Daren greets the Five Elders."

A faint smile touched Daren's lips as he spoke coolly.

Only then did the Five Elders slowly lift their heads, their eyes calmly settling on the Marine before them.

Saint Topman Warcury, bald with a goatee, was the first to speak, his gaze carrying layered meaning.

"How do you feel?"

Daren replied,

"Quite good."

It was his first time stepping into this chamber—this hall that symbolized the highest authority in the world.

Saint Topman Warcury glanced at the injuries on Daren's body and gave a faint smile.

"We've already reviewed the battle report on your interception of the Whitebeard Pirates... You did well, Daren. You didn't let us down."

"To serve the Government and the Marines is my honor," Daren answered.

Saint Shepherd Ju Peter, the blond elder, spoke calmly.

"That sense of duty is commendable. We are pleased."

"In that case, let's not waste time."

"I assume Saint Figarland Garling has already mentioned it to you? About the Holy Land's decision to restart the World Noble Hunting Tournament?"

Daren narrowed his eyes slightly and nodded with a polite smile.

"Yes. Saint Figarland Garling-sama and I had a very... engaging conversation."

"Good."

Saint Saturn, clad in black and leaning on an ancient cane, spoke flatly.

"Just before the battle on Miracle Island, Kong came to us and made a very reasonable proposal."

He cast a cold, condescending gaze at the Marine Vice Admiral.

"To promote you—outside the standard protocol—to Admiral of Marine Headquarters... we agreed."

"But on one condition."

Saint Saturn's lips curled into a cold sneer.

"You'll be tasked with escorting the upcoming World Noble Hunting Tournament."

"And the tournament... will be held on Philseque Island, in the North Blue."

His tone was calm—so calm it made the decision sound like idle chatter, as if wiping out the population of that island was of no real consequence.

But in Daren's ears, it thundered like an explosion.

His face remained composed, but deep inside, he sighed.

He'd already pieced together the possibility from Figarland Garling's words and demeanor. But hearing the actual confirmation—that the location was indeed the North Blue—left him momentarily silent.

He had expected the Celestial Dragons to overstep.

He hadn't expected them to leap off a cliff.

He had expected the Five Elders to test him.

He hadn't expected them to spit in his face.

A low-burning fury began to rise in his chest.

After a long pause...

"So... this is the reward you're offering me?"

Daren's eyes turned ice cold. He stared directly at the five supreme powers of the World Government, his expression flat and unreadable.

"From Byrnni World, the 'Destroyer of the World,' to Shiki the Golden Lion, and just recently the interception of Whitebeard's fleet... I came here with my wounds still healing."

"And what I get in return is to stand by and watch civilians—people I once protected—get slaughtered in cold blood?"

He suddenly stepped forward, the corner of his mouth twisting into a mocking grin.

"The North Blue is where I rose. If the hunting tournament is held there, and the islanders are massacred... what happens to my honor?"

As soon as the words left his mouth, the Five Elders' faces darkened with fury.

"Watch your tone, Daren!"

"This is not the place for your insolence!"

"We've already tolerated your little Haki outburst!"

"Your honor? What's that worth?!"

"You Marines are nothing more than the outer mask of the Government—what honor do you think you have?!"

"Ridiculous!"

"You have no choice in this matter!"

The air in the chamber instantly changed—five icy, oppressive auras erupted, and a suffocating killing intent flooded the entire room.

It pressed down so hard that even Daren's breath hitched for a moment.

Behind the Five Elders, distorted shadows began to writhe and shift, giving off a sense of unnatural terror that chilled the spine.

Daren let out a bitter laugh.

So now he was getting the Akainu treatment, too.

His fingers trembled slightly, his eyes narrowed.

His mind raced—calculating how likely he was to take out at least one or two of them if he struck first.

But before he could entertain the thought any further, an indescribable chill washed over him.

It came without warning.

Bone-deep. Paralyzing.

As if he had been dropped into an abyss of ice.

Daren silently loosened his fists.

His gaze drifted—seemingly casually—toward the far end of the garden beyond the window.

His eyes flickered with a rare, unmistakable fear.

That... was a killing intent powerful enough to end his life.

Chapter 694: The Future Never Will Be

At that moment, Daren seemed to see a pair of mysterious eyes slowly opening in the deepest darkness among the flowers, staring at him with cold indifference.

Under that gaze, a chilling cold crept up from the soles of his feet, climbing his spine and reaching his brain. His muscles tensed instinctively.

Up to now, Daren had crossed blades with many of the most powerful figures on this sea.

Byrнди World, the "World Destroyer" who could level the world with his might;

Shiki the Golden Lion, whose twin blades and overwhelming presence had stormed Marineford alone;

Edward Newgate, known as the "Strongest Man in the World," Whitebeard;

Kaidou of the Beasts, the monstrous "Strongest Creature on Land, Sea, and Air" with an Indestructible Body;

Charlotte Linlin, the "Natural Calamity" who ruled Totto Land—Big Mom;

"Dark King" Rayleigh, and even the future Pirate King, Gol D. Roger...

Yet never before had he felt a threat like this!

It was as if a silent, venomous snake had its eyes on him... or like a god above was watching, making his scalp tingle.

Was that... the master of the Empty Throne?

Daren quietly let out a breath, the shadows in his eyes growing heavier, and slowly loosened his clenched fists.

Saint Saturn rested his wrinkled hands on a worn cane, a mocking sneer spreading across his face.

"Daren, this is our final test for you."

Saint Warcury added coldly,

"Your talent, strength, and potential are unmatched—even by global standards. According to the World Government's CP department's classified records, you're considered the 'Marine's greatest genius in 800 years.'"

"We don't want someone like you taking the wrong path."

Daren remained silent.

He gradually composed himself, facing the five highest authorities of the World Government.

"What if I refuse this mission?"

"I'll give up my promotion to Admiral."

The Five Elders appeared calm, but Daren could clearly sense the thick layer of threat flashing in their eyes.

With his strength, he could go toe-to-toe with Whitebeard or Roger, but even he didn't dare claim he could handle all five of these unfathomable old men at once.

He didn't know their true capabilities. Acting rashly would be reckless.

Let alone the mysterious Imu, still silently watching from deep within the flower garden.

"So you still don't understand..."

Saint Ethanbaron V. Nusjuro, gripping his katana, shook his head with a cold smirk.

"This isn't a negotiation. This is a direct order."

Daren's eyes narrowed instinctively.

Seeing this, Warcury sighed.

"Daren, I had high hopes for you. But you've truly let me down."

"You think... we don't know what you've been doing in secret?"

His gaze turned icy.

Daren froze.

Before he could speak, Warcury—the Warrior God of Justice who commanded all of the CP forces—suddenly pulled an image Den Den Mushi from his robes and pressed a button.

Under Daren's stunned gaze, a projection slowly lit up.

The world fell into dead silence.

The atmosphere in the council chamber became suffocating, like a vise clamping down.

On the Den Den Mushi's screen was a sealed, blood-soaked room.

Dark red stains smeared across the grayish-white walls.

Two figures lay there, barely clinging to life, chained by heavy shackles.

A man and a little girl—strikingly alike.

The man was still in a gardener's uniform, dirt smeared across it.

The girl's white dress had been dyed red with blood, her tiny hands tightly clinging to her father's sleeve.

Their eye sockets were hollow, gaping with fresh blood. Their eyeballs had been brutally gouged out, the blood trailing down their faces like frozen tears.

Daren stood frozen in place, his fingers trembling slightly.

He knew this father and daughter.

The man had once knelt before him, sobbing, begging him to save his child.

The little girl had once bravely tried to end her own life, afraid she would drag him down.

They had once been alive and well.

Now, the two of them huddled together in a corner, clinging to each other for warmth.

Waiting for death to come...

Just like their life had always been.

"Don't worry, they're still alive."

Saint Saturn looked at the expressionless Marine Vice Admiral and smiled.

"As Warcury said, you truly are a capable man. Even we were fooled by you in the beginning."

Warcury spoke calmly.

"Even with the government's intelligence network and the CP department's investigative power, there wasn't a single trace."

The blond Saint Peter added,

"You did so well that even Saint Xildes' own father couldn't be bothered to keep pursuing the truth about how his son died in the North Blue."

Saint Mars, his long gray beard swaying, sneered coldly.

"But there's no such thing as a perfect crime in this world. All we needed was to find someone capable of killing Saint Xildes without leaving a trace."

Saint Saturn's smile carried a trace of mockery.

"What we didn't expect... was your motive."

"Stupid," Warcury finished for him.

He raised his head, looking at the motionless Marine Vice Admiral with visible disappointment in his eyes.

"We thought you were different."

"You're greedy, lustful, power-hungry, self-serving..."

"You'll do anything to achieve your goals—even twist facts and manipulate truth..."

"With your exceptional talent, your brilliance, your lack of principles..."

"You're nothing like Zephyr or Garp, with their rigid ideals..."

"It's because of those exact traits that we chose to place our hopes in you!"

"For someone as profit-driven and cunning as you, we really don't understand why you'd make such a foolish move."

"Did you really think we were so ignorant, so incompetent, that we would never uncover your secret?"

Warcury let out a quiet sigh.

"What disappoints me the most... is that you let them live in the end."

Saint Saturn taunted with a smirk,

"If not, we might never have found your weakness."

Warcury said calmly,

"You should've finished them off cleanly."

"Someone like you shouldn't have any weaknesses."

Daren remained silent, his expression slightly blank.

Warcury shook his head and continued.

"However, Daren, we've decided to give you one more chance."

"A man like you deserves it."

"As long as you successfully escort the World Noble Hunting Tournament, we will overlook everything that happened."

He slowly opened his arms.

"This is the greatest mercy we can offer to humanity—because you have the potential to surpass mortals."

"Broaden your vision. Don't waste your energy or time on mere ants. Serving the gods is your destiny."

"All these years of effort... all those years of climbing... do you really intend to throw away the power and position you fought so hard to gain, Daren?"

"If you carry out this escort mission, you'll have everything you've ever wanted."

"Power, status, wealth, fame... You'll become a high-ranking Admiral of the Marines. Whatever it is... we can grant it to you."

"You like making deals, don't you? This one should be very profitable."

"You're a smart man. I trust you'll make the smart choice."

As his words ended, the Five Elders fixed their gaze on the Marine Vice Admiral, a faint but unmistakable killing intent gradually filling the air.

One second.

Two seconds.

Three seconds.

The tension in the council chamber was like a bowstring stretched to its limit—ready to snap at any moment.

Then, finally—

"I understand."

The Marine Vice Admiral suddenly smiled.

On that cold, indifferent face, a genuine smile slowly bloomed.

"I will do everything I can to complete the mission entrusted to me by you all."

Upon hearing this, the Five Elders all revealed satisfied smiles.

"We look forward to your performance... future Admiral of the Marines."

Daren said nothing more and turned to leave.

Just as he stepped out of the council chamber, a hoarse voice called out from behind.

"Ah, one more thing."

Daren paused in his step.

"Just a reminder..."

Saint Saturn stared meaningfully at the broad back of the Marine Vice Admiral, sneering.

"The North Blue was never your North Blue. And you were never the 'King of the North Blue.'"

He seemed to savor the sight of the Vice Admiral's somber back, his tone full of supreme confidence.

"It wasn't true in the past. And in the future... it never will be."

As his words fell, the solemn council chamber doors slowly shut, sealing off the Five Elders' cold, smirking faces one by one.

Chapter 695: It's Always Been This Way

The heavy, ancient doors of the council chamber slowly closed.

The room fell silent once again.

Only the gentle bubbling of tea could be heard, a soft sound that, under the bright sunlight outside the window, felt warm and serene.

But the words of the Five Elders were chilling to the bone.

"Warcury... in your opinion, what will he do?"

The usually composed Saint Mars suddenly turned to the somber-faced Saint Warcury.

As his voice faded, the other Elders also turned their eyes toward their colleague—the Warrior God of Justice who held the judiciary power of the World Government.

They all knew well that Warcury held a special kind of expectation for Daren, that defiant Marine upstart.

Perhaps in him, he saw a reflection of his own younger self from countless years ago.

Or maybe he simply admired Daren's talents, his character, and the way he did things.

Warcury had always appreciated that boy.

That was exactly why he had entrusted him with the investigation of the "North Blue Celestial Dragon Murder Case."

No one had expected that even the renowned strategist Topman Warcury could misjudge so badly.

Letting the killer investigate his own crime... in hindsight, it was absurd.

Warcury remained silent for a long while, his aged eyes quietly watching the steam rising from the tea before him.

"He's a smart man. I hope he'll make the smart choice."

Hearing this, the other Elders silently shook their heads.

So even you aren't sure?

"But either way, we must act... that brat is growing far too quickly."

Saint Saturn's expression darkened, his voice cold.

"According to the latest intel, while his strength still falls short of Roger and Whitebeard, he's already stepped solidly into their realm."

"With that kind of combat power, with those methods, with that ambition—and now the growing reputation he holds within the Marines... if we let him ascend easily to Admiral, with that brat's personality, he'll only become more arrogant and uncontrollable."

The others all nodded in agreement.

Saint Peter, blond and calm, said flatly,

"Rogers Daren is not Garp."

"Garp could afford to reject the promotion to Admiral and turn down the test we offered him, but that boy can't."

"They're simply too different."

Despite their shared strength and fame, Garp, unlike the ambitious Daren, posed no real threat to the World Government.

Everyone knew he looked down on the Celestial Dragons and the government, but the Five Elders could still tolerate Garp's unruly behavior—because he had no desire for power.

Besides, his deeds during the God Valley Incident had earned him that much leeway.

"In any case, let's just wait and see."

Saint Nussjuro, as he polished his dark, sinister katana, rasped out,

"If he's truly rational and knows what's best for him, then fine. It means he's still of use to us."

"But if he proves otherwise... Warcury."

Warcury inhaled deeply, his eyes brimming with a terrifying killing intent.

"Don't worry. I'll deal with him myself."

The rest of the Elders nodded and closed their eyes.

"What if he really bows his head and completes the escort mission?"

Saint Mars, as if suddenly remembering something, gestured at the image still projected on the gray wall.

"These two civilians—should we let them live?"

"No."

Saint Saturn's smile was icy.

"They'll be killed."

He paused. A cold light gleamed in his aged eyes.

"They'll be killed by the very Marine who once saved them... with his own hands."

"That's the only way he can atone for his sins."

"That's the only way he can truly prove his loyalty to the government, and to us..."

Saint Saturn adjusted the black flat cap on his head and smiled deeply.

"...his submission."

...

They walked in silence the entire way.

The Marine Vice Admiral descended the sacred Celestial Stairway step by step, his face expressionless, cigar smoke curling around his composed features.

The world around him was quiet and vast. Sunlight poured down brilliantly, but the air was chillingly cold.

Bone-deep cold.

Ghostly figures from CP0 flickered in and out of sight around him, each maintaining a safe distance from the Vice Admiral, whose presence radiated danger.

Behind those eerie masks, their faces were unreadable, yet mocking chuckles leaked out as if they were watching an enthralling play unfold.

Daren appeared unaware of it all, walking forward with unshaken calm.

"Daren..."

A hoarse voice echoed nearby.

Kong, who had been waiting anxiously, quickly approached upon seeing Daren descend from the Celestial Stairway.

"The Five Elders' trials are standard procedure," he said. "They're used to select those they deem trustworthy."

"Only those who pass may truly enter the core decision-making circle of the government."

"These trials have been tradition for centuries... always this way..."

He had just opened his mouth to say something more, perhaps to comfort Daren, when the latter cut him off.

"Fleet Admiral Kong, I want to ask you something."

Kong froze.

The Vice Admiral slowly turned to face him. His expression revealed no joy, anger, or sorrow—only a quiet trace of confusion.

"Go ahead..." Kong paused, then sighed.

Daren looked steadily at Kong's weathered, steadfast face, then suddenly smiled.

"It's always been like this, huh?"

Kong's body trembled.

He clenched his jaw, wanting to respond.

But Daren spoke again.

"So... you—and Admiral Sengoku—you both went through this too?"

"Back in God Valley... Sengoku was the one in charge of the escort mission?"

Kong said nothing.

And that silence, in this moment, was answer enough.

"I see. That explains everything."

Daren smiled faintly.

"Don't worry. I'll handle it."

With that, he didn't spare Kong another glance and strode off toward the distant port of Mary Geoise.

The Five Elders hadn't left him any choice—or any time.

From the moment he stepped out of Pangaea Castle, he was to head straight to the port.

The government's official vessel was already waiting, along with the Celestial Dragons participating in the upcoming "Hunting Tournament."

As the designated escort, he was not to leave that ship until it reached the North Blue.

"So cautious, huh... Seems like you're afraid of me too, aren't you?"

With long strides, a smirk gradually tugged at Daren's lips.

"Buru buru..."

Just then, a military Den Den Mushi buzzed from inside his coat.

Unfazed, Daren took it out, glanced around to ensure no one was near, and answered.

"It's me."

His voice was cold as steel.

Momonga's grave tone came through the line.

"Daren, fifteen minutes ago... a fleet entered the North Blue."

"The fleet's commanding officer is..."

Daren could clearly hear Momonga swallowing nervously.

"...Admiral Sengoku of Marine Headquarters."

Chapter 696: Then Let's Play

Daren's footsteps suddenly halted.

A fierce wind swept past, lifting red-brown dust from the land like a wave of blood-colored mist.

He silently stared at the military Den Den Mushi in his hand, its surface vividly displaying Momonga's grim expression.

A faint smirk began to form at the corner of Daren's mouth, slowly stretching until it warped into a manic grin.

"Heh... hahaha... hahahahaha!!"

He suddenly threw his head back and burst into laughter, shaking with it, until tears welled up in his eyes.

"Didn't they say my honor was worth nothing?"

"And now they've mobilized the entire main force of the Marines—what a grand gesture!"

Daren laughed freely, uncontrollably, with an absurd sense of satisfaction.

He had single-handedly intercepted the Whitebeard Pirates outside Miracle Island, while Sengoku's elite force had achieved nothing.

And before he'd even had a chance to settle things with Sengoku, the Five Elders had turned around and let him lead a fleet—fresh from that war—straight into Daren's territory?

Even if it was just a warning not to make any "irrational" decisions, the whole thing was ludicrous.

So ludicrous, in fact, that Daren didn't even have the strength to be angry—only to laugh.

"Obstacles at every turn..."

His laughter slowly died down. Shaking his head, he sighed.

"So... what exactly is going on?"

Momonga, sensing something was off, spoke hoarsely,

"This isn't normal."

The Marine Headquarters fleet had entered the North Blue in full force without even notifying him, the Admiral of the region.

Instead of answering, Daren asked,

"Besides the Marine warships, were there any other unusual vessels entering the North Blue?"

Momonga paused, as if searching for information. After a few seconds, his voice grew heavier.

"There were a few secret ships... but they're flying the World Government flag. Initial assessment says they're slave transport vessels."

"Makes sense..."

Daren lit another cigar and slowly exhaled a puff of smoke.

There was no way the native population of Philseque Island alone could satisfy the "refined tastes" of those elite Celestial Dragons.

To make this grand tournament exciting, enjoyable, and sufficiently "challenging," the government would have to bring in high-quality slaves from across the world to Philseque Island—as prey.

That was the real event.

Hearing this, Momonga grew increasingly anxious over the Den Den Mushi.

"Daren, what's really going on!?"

Daren gave a faint smile.

"Remember the God Valley Incident I mentioned before?"

"I do. But that war happened twelve years ago."

Momonga answered without hesitation.

"The Celestial Dragons took heavy losses back then and swore never to hold such events again—"

His voice cut off.

As if something clicked, Momonga's pupils shrank into pinpoints. His hand gripping the Den Den Mushi began to tremble uncontrollably.

"Daren... don't tell me..."

Daren slowly exhaled.

"I'm in Mary Geoise right now. Just finished meeting with the Five Elders. I'm about to board the World Government's official ship to the North Blue."

"And along with me... is a whole group of 'noble' Celestial Dragons."

Momonga felt as if he'd been struck by lightning.

In that moment, he understood everything.

That pack of idiotic Celestial Dragons—those fools—were really planning to restart that horrific racial extermination tournament!?

And they had chosen the North Blue as their battleground!

"But... why!?"

He stared at the Den Den Mushi in disbelief.

"Because this is the test they've given me for my promotion to Admiral."

Daren's smile twisted into mockery.

"I've been made the official escort for the mission. I'm responsible for the safety of this... slaughterfest."

Momonga drew in a sharp breath.

The Five Elders' arrangement—was a death sentence for Daren.

They were using the most absurd, tyrannical, and irrefutable form of authority... to force Daren to bow that proud head of his in humiliation.

A long silence followed.

Then, after a few seconds, Momonga's voice returned—now hoarse and strained.

"There's no room to negotiate? Or are you refusing the promotion to Admiral?"

Daren shook his head, a cold smile curling at the corner of his lips.

"No. The government has already begun to fear me... and suspect me."

"Why?"

"Because they know I killed Saint Xildes."

Another silence fell—longer this time. Heavy and oppressive.

After a long pause...

"I understand."

From the Den Den Mushi came the sound of Momonga taking a deep breath.

Daren noticed it immediately—his voice no longer carried the slightest tremor or hesitation.

He smiled, satisfied.

"Are you ready, my comrade?"

He asked.

A calm, firm, and unwavering response followed:

"Just waiting for your command."

"Good..."

With a quiet murmur, the Marine Vice Admiral exhaled a stream of smoke like a dragon's breath and ended the call.

Then, without delay, he dialed another signal.

Within seconds, the Den Den Mushi connected.

Before the other party could speak, Daren smiled and asked,

"Wanna kill some Celestial Dragons?"

"This time, I'll lead."

The breath on the other end caught audibly—clearly stunned for a few seconds—then came a hesitant question.

"You want me to take action?"

"No."

Daren shook his head.

"This time, I'm leading the team."

He stated the time and location, then ended the transmission and began making several more calls.

Raising his head, the Vice Admiral took in a long breath.

A breath that seemed to expel all the humiliation he'd been forced to swallow.

His battered, scarred body straightened, spine snapping upright.

He turned around and looked once more at the distant, towering city of grandeur—ancient and oppressive.

In his mind, the sneering, mocking, indifferent smiles of the Five Elders kept flashing.

And then it came...

That uncontrollable rage.

That long-suppressed fury.

That volcanic wrath brewing deep in his chest.

It all surged upward—unstoppable.

A savage, twisted grin slowly spread across his face.

"...Then I'll play along."

...

At the same time...

North Blue.

A massive steel shipyard loomed like a monstrous iron beast—colossal and suffocating.

Thick high-voltage cables snaked into the hulls of massive warships, crackling with blue electricity.

Atop a steel platform dozens of meters high, a rough hand rested firmly on the railing.

Momonga exhaled a long breath, tucked away the Den Den Mushi, and stared sternly down at the vast, disciplined formation below.

Over ten thousand elite North Blue Marines packed the dock to its limits.

Armed and alert, they stood straight and resolute, murderous intent surging skyward.

"An unprecedented war is about to begin."

Momonga spoke coldly.

His voice wasn't loud, but it rang out through the air like a steel anchor dropped into the sea—sharp and heavy.

His eyes swept across every Marine below.

"I can't tell you the time, the location, the objective, or even the target of this mission."

"Your only duty... is to follow orders."

"But I will say this—after this battle, we may face consequences beyond imagination. Total annihilation is a real possibility."

"If anyone wants out, you can leave now. I swear on my life... there will be no repercussions."

One second.

Two seconds.

Three seconds.

Not a single figure moved.

Each soldier stood like an immovable stone, unwavering and silent.

"Very good."

Momonga raised his arm, eyes narrowing as he snapped a solemn salute.

"Fleet... launch!!"

In the next instant—

Over ten thousand Marines raised their swords in unison.

Countless blades gleamed coldly in the light, ringing with deadly resolve.

All of them raised their weapons skyward, unleashing a thunderous roar that shook the heavens.

"North Blue Fleet... Victory!!"

No one needed orders. No one needed direction. Every soldier moved with practiced speed and purpose, boarding the warships in an instant.

Boom...

The hum of floating engines began to swell, growing louder and more deafening with each second.

Above, streamlined warships—bristling with the menace of war—ripped through the sky, breaking free from the dock one after another and soaring into the heavens.

Watching them rise, Momonga's eyes turned bloodshot. His fists clenched unconsciously.

The ace hidden for so many years... was finally stepping into the light.

And what awaited them was a titan that had ruled the top of the world for eight hundred years.

The thought of going up against that flag sent a strange, electric thrill through him.

His entire body trembled slightly. His Goro Goro no Mi sparked and crackled with restless lightning, barely held back.

"Bring it on."

His figure blurred into a streak of lightning and vanished into the sky.

"This is... the North Blue!!"

Chapter 697: A Beauty That Could Bring Down a Country

North Blue.

A massive slave ship cruised steadily across the sea.

The expansive deck was packed tight with black iron cages, each imprisoning one or more slaves. After a long voyage and without any sanitation, the slaves' bodies were smeared with blood and filth. The entire

deck reeked—a rancid mix of excrement, sweat, and the stench of blood. Even the icy winds of the North Blue couldn't drive it away.

But unlike many slaves across the world, these weren't emaciated or withered. On the contrary, they were healthy and strong. The men had thick, knotted muscles, and the women possessed striking beauty.

Even shackled in cages with their wrists bound in iron, they bared their teeth in fury, hurling curses as they violently struggled. The sound of chains clanged sharply in the air.

"Bastards!"

"Let us out!!"

"When I get out of here, I'll slaughter every one of you!!"

"I'll rip your heads clean off!!"

...

The deck echoed with angry, hoarse, even venom-laced howls.

If looks could kill, those bloodshot eyes filled with pure hatred and bloodlust would have torn the slave trader standing at the bow into pieces a hundred times over.

"Tsk, tsk... They're in perfect shape... Yes, yes, that vicious glare—that's exactly what the nobles enjoy the most."

The slave trader was a middle-aged man with thinning gray hair and gray eyes.

He wore extravagant robes of silk, a purple formal hat perched on his head, and both hands weighed down with rings set with flashy gemstones.

Flanked by a dozen guards, he looked on with satisfaction at the slaves caged before him, lips curled in smug delight.

He strolled slowly toward the towering wall of cages, carefully avoiding the dirt and blood on the floor to keep his boots clean. His nose twitched slightly as the cold North Blue wind tugged at his robe, making it ripple. He chuckled.

"Wash them all down. We can't have their stench offending the noble noses of our masters."

"And keep the food rations steady. Every meal should include plenty of meat and fruit. We're almost at the destination, and I don't want them looking weak or sick."

"Did you hear me?"

He barked commands with a smug air of authority.

"Yes, sir!"

The guards surrounding him bowed respectfully and rushed to carry out his orders.

Only then did the slave trader turn back to the caged slaves, grinning wide.

"See how well I treat you?"

"Meat and fruit—better meals than what peasants in most countries ever get to eat on this sea...
Hahahaha!!"

His laugh once again sparked a flood of fury and hate-filled curses.

Surrounded by a wave of murderous threats, the slave trader strolled leisurely into the interior of the ship.

In stark contrast to the squalid, foul-smelling deck outside, the ship's hold was like a completely different world.

Inside, it was as warm as spring. Premium wood crackled and burned in the fireplace.

Soft brown carpets lined the floor, ornate reliefs and murals decorated the walls, and fine oil lamps flickered with golden light. Even the air was perfumed, sweet and intoxicating.

At the far end of the carpet, near the fireplace, sat a spacious cage lined with animal fur rugs.

Inside it, three slender figures huddled close, eyes alert and wary as they watched the slave trader enter.

"Good afternoon, my beautiful girls."

The man stepped in front of the cage, bowed with an exaggerated and mocking noble flourish, and smiled.

"Do you like the private suite I've prepared just for you?"

He gazed at the three young girls—each breathtaking in appearance, eyes full of fear—and in them, he saw his grand future. A future of riches, status, and indulgence.

"We are all crew members of the Kuja Pirates... How dare you capture us? The Kujas will never let you get away with this!"

Unlike her younger sisters, who trembled in fear, the black-haired girl with a princess-cut hairstyle clenched her teeth and stepped protectively in front of them. Her eyes burned with defiance as she glared at the man reeking of greed and gold.

"Let you go?"

The slave trader laughed as if he'd just heard the most absurd joke, clutching his belly in mirth.

"You think that worthless Kuja Pirates dare to come after me?"

His eyes gleamed with mockery as he pointed toward the flag hanging above the fireplace.

"See that flag?"

"That's the World Government's banner!"

"I'm an officially sanctioned slave trader, authorized by the World Government itself. Don't talk to me about some trashy Kuja Pirates... even that underworld puppet Doflamingo of the Shichibukai wouldn't dare threaten me!"

"Doflamingo is nothing but garbage!"

The moment he uttered that fearsome name, a twitch crossed his face. Clearly, he had suffered under that man's hand before. His expression twisted between fear and fury as he muttered darkly,

"He's just like me, a vulture scavenging in the underworld... but he parades around banning slave trading? He's nothing but a loyal mutt of the World Government, acting all righteous!"

"Just wait till I secure ties with the Nobles. I'll deal with him then."

His fists clenched tight, his eyes cold.

Then, his gaze drifted back to the black-haired girl—and the smile returned.

What luck.

No—what divine luck. It was as if fate itself had chosen to favor him.

Women from Amazon Lily were worth fortunes on the slave market.

That nation was fiercely isolationist, its location nearly impenetrable, defended by a warrior society. Even powerful slave-hunting groups from the New World didn't dare encroach upon its shores.

Their rarity alone made them priceless.

And on top of that, the Empire of Amazon Lily was a land of women—making its people even more exotic and coveted.

Now, before him stood three young girls, all under ten years old. Naturally beautiful, graceful in build.

Especially the older sister with the black hair—her face was twisted with fury and hatred, yet her beauty was breathtaking, almost ethereal. It left him speechless, his vision momentarily hazy.

He pinched himself hard and snapped out of it, scolding his own wandering thoughts.

She's not even ten...

And yet already such a stunning beauty.

What would she become once she grew up? The kind of woman who could topple kingdoms.

A gift like this—surely the nobles would be thrilled.

His mind spun with fantasies. He could already see wealth and power stretching out before him, beckoning. His grin widened, his face flushed with excitement.

Though part of him hated the idea of giving her up—he'd even considered keeping her as his personal plaything—he forced himself to let go.

With enough money and power, he could have any woman he desired.

If the Celestial Dragons were pleased enough to grant him a noble title, then one day, he too could become like the so-called "King of the North Blue"... and claim his own territory.

Chapter 698: Blockade the Island!

North Blue.

Philseque Island.

Philseque Island is a winter island, locked in snow year-round. Villages surround the island, and generations of families have lived quietly and peacefully here.

It was already close to dusk, but the cold wind still howled across the island, and the sunlight was dim and weak. Thick snowflakes fell from the sky like goose feathers, blanketing the island in a coat of silver.

Laughter echoed through the quiet village as children bundled in cotton coats played in the snow-covered streets, their boots sinking deep into the soft snow. They were so caught up in their games they forgot to head home.

As chimney smoke rose from the houses, adults' voices began to ring out through the streets.

"Time for dinner!"

"Stop playing!"

"..."

Parents chased their mischievous children through the snow, faces flushed from the cold and the running, finally pulling their reluctant kids back toward their homes.

Will, a well-known blacksmith on Philseque Island, held the hand of his eight-year-old child, exchanging greetings with neighbors as he made his way home.

"Will, my pot broke. When can you come take a look at it?"

"No problem. Tomorrow's fine, Aunt Lilith."

"Will... the fish haven't been biting lately. Can I pay you next month for the kitchen tools you fixed?"

"Hahaha, you still owe me money? I completely forgot. Don't worry about it—just pay me when you can."

"..."

Will responded to everyone with a cheerful smile, his good-naturedness warming the chilly air.

Philseque Island was poor. The winter climate made farming nearly impossible, and life here wasn't easy for anyone. But even if it was hard, at least it was peaceful.

They were poor, yes—but there were no wars, no blood feuds, no hatred, and no pirates coming to steal the food they relied on to survive.

But Will still remembered a time when Philseque Island wasn't like this.

Back then, thugs roamed freely, bandits ran wild, the mafia extorted them, and pirates raided the coasts... Just like the North Blue's reputation—chaotic to the core.

When did it all change?

Will was a rough man, never the type to remember things clearly. He even forgot who owed him money half the time.

But that day—he remembered it perfectly.

It was four years and four months ago.

A warship claiming to be from the North Blue 321 Branch sailed into Philseque Island.

"By order of the new North Blue Admiral Rogers Daren, starting today, the North Blue Marines will collect a fixed military security tax of 10% to protect Philseque Island from unlawful attacks and pirate raids."

That was what they said.

The villagers were stunned, like they'd been struck by lightning.

Ten percent didn't sound like much on paper, but for them—people who'd already been squeezed dry by the mafia and pirates—it was a devastating blow.

It was enough to shatter their already miserable lives.

But what could they do?

Faced with cold-eyed, armed Marines, these weak villagers had no choice but to agree.

One day at a time, they thought.

That's the way normal people live, isn't it?

They weren't Celestial Dragons—those godlike nobles born with everything. Why would luck ever be on their side?

Face reality, Will.

That's what he told himself, holding his child's hand tightly.

But then...

Just when they had finally scraped together enough to pay the tax to the North Blue Marines, something unimaginable happened.

All the thugs, bandits, and mafia scum who'd plagued them for years disappeared overnight.

No one knew what had happened.

The villagers didn't dare leave their homes. They locked their doors, huddled under blankets, and listened in fear to the screams that echoed outside.

The howls and cries went on all night.

When dawn broke and the sun began to melt the snow, they cautiously stepped outside—trembling.

Corpses lay stacked at the port, soaked in blood.

The faces of those who had once terrorized them—their twisted, cruel expressions—were gone. What remained were stiff, pale faces frozen in fear and despair.

As for the Marines...

They were still cold and unflinching, their uniforms soaked in blood, swords at their waists dripping red. Torches in hand, they incinerated the mountain of corpses without a word.

Watching the flames rise and the blood soak into the snow, Will realized—for the first time—just how sacred and commanding that white seagull flag truly was.

Then, they saw him.

A young commander, soaked in blood, striding toward them.

Will remembered him clearly—an absurdly young Marine commander, with two neatly trimmed moustaches that made him look far older than he really was.

He seemed a little unaccustomed to smiling and forced a stiff smile.

"Starting today, peace will reign in the North Blue."

"Everyone, please trust the new North Blue Admiral, Daren Rogers. He took your money, so he will do his job."

He took the money, so he will do his job.

Will heard those strange, out-of-place words—words no Marine should ever say—and, for a moment, he almost laughed.

But it was fine.

This new North Blue Admiral really was something else.

At least he wasn't like the crooked Marines before, who pocketed money while colluding with pirates to keep squeezing the people dry.

It didn't matter if they were poor or backward—as long as they could live in peace, that was enough.

Wasn't it?

What they hoped for wasn't much at all.

As the corpses burned and the flames rose,

As the sea wind howled and snowflakes scattered,

As the snow-white seagull flag flew high above the cold and barren Philseque Island—that vague, intangible thing called justice felt real for once.

That day was the most secure the people of Philseque Island had ever felt.

"Vice Admiral Daren, what a good Marine..."

Lost in his memories, Will's eyes flickered as he muttered with a smile.

Compared to the tiny amount they paid in taxes, this hard-earned peace and quiet was far too precious.

They said Vice Admiral Rogers Daren, the "King of the North Blue," was the shrewdest, most business-savvy man in the seas.

But no matter how you looked at it, he seemed to be the one getting the short end of the stick.

Will smiled so hard that his rough eyelids narrowed. His hands, toughened from years at the forge, squeezed his child's hand a little tighter.

And it wasn't just him—every native of Philseque Island believed the same thing.

As long as Vice Admiral Daren was around, no one would dare to shatter their little slice of happiness.

Even if they had never once seen the legendary Marine who had protected them all.

"Hmm, what's that?"

Just as Will was about to step into his yard, he suddenly saw something and stopped, puzzled.

His house wasn't far from the coast, and from here he could see everything happening on the sea.

What he saw were massive warships cutting through the waves, slowly approaching the island.

"It's the Marines... Could it be the North Blue Marines?"

He spotted the seagull flags soaring high, and a wave of excitement surged through him.

He rushed into the house, ignoring his wife's calls, ran down to the basement, and dug out a jar of strong liquor that had gathered dust for years, along with some freshly pickled salted meat. Grabbing his child's hand, he quickly ran out the door.

Philseque Island didn't have much to offer. He only hoped the Marines from the North Blue branch wouldn't look down on his wine and meat.

Will was a little anxious at the thought.

When he got to the shore, he waved eagerly at the approaching warships, smiling from ear to ear.

"Marines, over here!"

He cheered, his heart full of joy.

At last, he could thank them in person.

Looking at the fleet lined up neatly before him, so imposing and majestic, Will's face flushed with excitement.

This was the Navy that had always protected them!

This was the justice they had hoped for and admired!

But unexpectedly...

The warships, as if they didn't even see him, began to slow and come to a halt.

Then—

Will watched, stunned, as a tall, broad-shouldered figure stepped forward from the lead ship.

He was a Marine officer with an odd hairstyle—looked to be around forty, with a black afro and braided beard.

Will didn't know Marine ranks, so he had no idea who the man was, but the powerful aura he radiated made it clear—this was a big name in the Navy.

The world suddenly went quiet.

Snow fell from the sky.

For some reason, as Will looked at the Marines aboard the warships—at the heavy, complex expressions on their faces—an overwhelming sense of dread rose in his chest.

And then, he heard a voice.

Colder than the snow itself.

An order.

Issued by that imposing Marine leader.

"Seal off the island. No one gets in or out."

The man's tone was calm and indifferent.

"Anyone who tries to leave by sea... kill on sight!!"

Clang!

The wine jar slipped from Will's hand, shattering on the ground. Aged liquor spilled everywhere.

The fatty, salty pork fell messily into the snow.

Will collapsed to the ground, eyes filled with terror.

The strong, calloused hands of the blacksmith were shaking uncontrollably.

In that Marine's eyes, he saw pity, sympathy, and sorrow.

And he understood what that look meant.

It was the look someone gives the dying.

Chapter 699: The Red-Haired Guy Is Really Annoying

The World Government's flag, shaped like a cross, fluttered proudly in the cold winds of the North Blue, crackling sharply like the sound of war drums.

The wind was bitter.

Daren had never seen so many Celestial Dragons in his life.

Aboard one of the Government's official vessels, he stood in a brand-new uniform, leaning against the damp railing.

Cold sea winds howled over the water, rippling across his large white cloak.

He lit a cigar, his expression indifferent as he watched the impeccably dressed Celestial Dragons on the deck, eyes half-closed.

They were unlike the usual Celestial Dragons he'd seen—those grotesque, pig-like degenerates.

These hundred or so Celestial Dragons carried themselves with striking poise. They stood tall and refined, their features sharp, their bearing that of the elite. It was obvious they had received an advanced education.

They weren't clad in those ridiculous astronaut suits and air helmets either. Instead, they wore hunting gear—practical and suited for combat.

Black military boots polished to a mirror shine, wrinkle-free waterproof pants, and light armor plating over their vital spots—all glinting with a metallic sheen.

In their hands were costly weapons: longswords, chain hammers, battle axes, rapiers—each one an exquisite piece of craftsmanship.

If one ignored the fact that they were Celestial Dragons, they might've passed for dignified, even heroic figures. Their appearance had flair and presence.

They sat around an ornate, oversized brazier, laughing heartily and clinking glasses as they discussed the upcoming "hunting expedition."

They looked excited, eager to begin.

Beneath them lay soft pelts, carefully laid out in advance. Behind them, a retinue of servants brought out rare delicacies and expensive liquor.

Not even the freezing North Blue wind could dissipate the thick scent of cologne and alcohol hanging in the air.

To an outsider unaware of the truth, this scene might've looked like a group of aristocrats preparing for a casual hunting trip—not the prelude to a brutal, inhuman massacre.

Then again, maybe to these nobles born in the clouds, that's exactly what it was.

"The Celestial Dragons' coming-of-age ceremony... heh."

Smoke drifted from Daren's deep-set eyes as he watched the group he was supposed to "protect."

A faint, mocking smile tugged at the corner of his lips.

"Hey, Vice Admiral—come have a drink with us!"

A red-haired youth from the group suddenly raised his glass and called out enthusiastically to Daren.

"No need, sir. Thank you for the invitation."

Daren declined flatly.

The red-haired youth was strikingly handsome and exuded a carefully crafted air of confidence and sharpness. He seemed to be the unofficial leader of the group.

But Daren could see the arrogance and domineering pride in his eyes—

well concealed, but unmistakable.

"Before we left, my uncle told me—Vice Admiral Rogers Daren of Marine Headquarters is a living legend on these seas.

Surely you'll have just one drink with me?"

The redhead slowly stood, smiling at Daren.

At his words, the other Celestial Dragons—clearly following his lead—went quiet, turning to watch the exchange with smirks and amused eyes.

Daren frowned and replied with a question.

"May I ask who your uncle is, sir?"

The red-haired Celestial Dragon straightened proudly.

"Haven't you met him already?"

"My uncle is Saint Figarland Garling, current Deputy Commander of the God's Knights."

"My name is Saint Figarland Barbo."

Ah. That explained it.

No wonder he spoke in the same tone—sharp, sarcastic, and full of veiled superiority.

Barbo poured himself another glass and strolled over. The sea breeze reddened his already flushed face, and his steps were slow and heavy with drink.

"So, what do you think? My uncle speaks very highly of you. Told me I should learn from you..."

Standing before Daren, he exhaled wine-soaked breath.

"But this is a real problem for me, you know... I'm supposed to inherit the 'crown' of the Grand Hunt, just like my uncle did. One day I'll even lead the God's Knights.

So tell me—what exactly should I learn from you?"

Daren's eyes narrowed.

"Barbo-sama, you're drunk."

He glanced at the wine glass in Barbo's hand.

"I'm on duty and cannot drink. Please understand."

As for what to learn—Saint Garling was simply being polite. You don't need to take it seriously."

Barbo's smile suddenly turned cold.

"So what you're saying is... you're not going to show me any respect?"

Respect. Always respect.

Daren found it absurd.

Why were red-haired guys always so obsessed with "respect"?

Still—he had to admit—red-haired guys really were just... irritating.

As the drunken arrogance spilled from Barbo unchecked, Daren let out a quiet sigh.

His gaze turned sharp in an instant.

The howling wind on the sea came to a sudden halt.

Barbo's hand began to tremble violently, the liquid in his glass rippling like disturbed water.

To him, Daren seemed to transform into a monstrous force—his eyes radiating a killing intent so fierce, it felt like an invisible hand was wrapped tightly around his throat.

His windpipe constricted. Barbo sobered instantly.

With rising panic, he realized—he couldn't breathe.

His muscles clenched uncontrollably, and his face flushed bright red.

"Ha... ha... ha..."

Barbo's mouth opened reflexively under the crushing sensation of suffocation, like a fish out of water gasping for air—but not a single breath made it in. All he could produce were strained, meaningless sounds.

The sheer terror gripped him, his eyes reddening as blood vessels burst. Every part of him screamed to flee.

But his body, under the weight of that overwhelming aura, was locked in place—frozen and immobile.

At that moment, the other Celestial Dragons finally realized something was wrong.

They shot up from their seats in a panic.

"What are you doing!?"

"Damn it!"

"Let go of Barbo!"

"..."

They shouted in alarm, but none of them dared to step forward.

Ironically, the Vice Admiral's hands were still resting naturally at his sides—he hadn't even touched Barbo.

"Since Saint Garling holds me in such high esteem, I'll shamelessly offer you a little lesson, Barbo-sama..."

The towering Marine Vice Admiral, standing three meters tall, looked down at the Celestial Dragon before him and suddenly grinned.

"Respect isn't something others give you—it's something you respect."

"Isn't that right, Saturn-sama?"

Daren turned his head toward the cabin, where an old man in a black flat hat was slowly emerging, leaning on an ancient cane.

He smiled as he asked the question.

Chapter 700: Passing Each Other

"Am I right, Saturn-sama?"

The voice of the Vice Admiral, tinged with a faint smile, echoed across the deathly silent deck of the official ship.

Saturn gave him a cold glance and replied flatly,

"Put away your presence, Daren... if you value your life."

Daren turned to face him.

Their eyes met.

Three seconds later, he suddenly smiled, shrugged, and said,

"As you wish."

Without any visible movement from him, Saint Barbo suddenly felt control of his body return.

The suffocating killing intent that had locked onto him faded like a retreating tide. With a thud, he collapsed to his knees, gasping for breath, his face drained of color.

Several seconds passed before he finally caught his breath. He glared at Daren, eyes filled with hatred.

"You bastard!!

You dared to lay a hand on me!?"

Barbo's eyes were bloodshot, veins bulging with fury. He struggled to his feet, his expression unhinged.

"You've got a death wish!!"

Daren's smile deepened.

"How could I? I wouldn't dare lift a finger against you, Barbo-sama."

"As you can see, I'm simply carrying out my escort duty."

Seeing the Marine still acting so unbothered, a wave of uncontrollable rage surged in Barbo's chest.

He was a god by birth!

A being born above all humans!

Even among the Celestial Dragons, thanks to the Figarland family's revered status in the Holy Land and his uncle Saint Garling's power and influence, he stood among the most feared and respected.

And yet, this lowly commoner dared to strike him!

To make him show such disgrace!

It was beyond unforgivable.

Worse yet, the strange glances from the surrounding Celestial Dragons burned against his skin like fire.

His dignity... utterly shattered.

Barbo glared at Daren, seething, teeth clenched. Just as he opened his mouth to speak—

Saturn-sama's aged, emotionless voice slowly rang out.

"This farce ends now. We're nearing our destination."

"The other three official ships will arrive shortly."

He shifted his gaze toward the red-haired Celestial Dragon, whose face was twisted with resentment, and said softly,

"Barbo... if you still harbor any grudges, feel free to vent them during the upcoming hunting tournament."

"I look forward to your performance."

Barbo froze at those words.

Daren also frowned slightly.

As expected, Barbo immediately understood what Saturn-sama meant.

A twisted grin of glee crept onto his face.

His venomous gaze flickered, then gave way to mocking amusement.

Unexpectedly, he didn't lash out again. Instead, he flashed Daren a saccharine smile.

"Thank you for the guidance, Vice Admiral Daren. Don't worry—this lesson... I'll never forget it."

Daren narrowed his eyes, his fingers twitching slightly.

But just then, an eerie red glow flared in Saturn-sama's deep-set eyes at the front of the cabin.

Daren raised an eyebrow, let out a slow breath, and relaxed his hand.

Noticing the Vice Admiral's subtle movement, the red-haired Celestial Dragon sneered even harder...

He leaned close to Daren and whispered,

"It's hard to endure, isn't it?"

"You want to kill me so badly, but you don't dare to move..."

"You're as powerful as a monster, but you can only beg for mercy from the Nobles of our world."

He smiled and took half a step back.

Under the calm expression of the Vice Admiral, he raised his hand and straightened his slightly messy tie.

"Pour me another glass of wine."

He called out casually.

Soon, a servant crawled over on the ground and handed him a glass of wine with both hands.

Barbo took the glass, smiled, and raised it to Daren.

Then, he turned the glass upside down.

The mellow and fragrant liquor poured out, splashing all over the floor.

"No matter what, I have to toast you."

Barbo laughed heartily.

"Thank you, Vice Admiral Daren, for escorting us here."

With that, he turned around and returned to the group of Celestial Dragons surrounding him.

Daren stood quietly in place, facing the mocking glances of the Celestial Dragons, and suddenly smiled.

He turned toward the bow of the ship, his expression calm, and politely asked a trembling World Government official,

"Hello, when will the other three official ships arrive?"

The official, who had witnessed the entire scene, replied tremblingly,

"Vice Admiral Daren, they are expected to arrive in fifteen minutes."

"Our ship, the Falcon, was the first to depart, carrying only 120 nobles."

"The other three official ships are carrying more nobles than ours, with an average of 150 people on each ship, so there has been a slight delay."

The four official ships of the World Government, carrying more than 500 young Celestial Dragons, were all the participants in the World Noble Hunting Tournament.

Daren nodded and smiled slightly.

"Fifteen minutes, you say?"

"All right, thank you."

His eyes flashed, and a few faint bloodshot veins appeared around his pupils, his smile becoming even more intense.

I really can't wait...

Immediately afterwards, a series of low, solemn military bugle calls suddenly rang out from the distant sea.

Everyone on the official ship was startled and looked in the direction of the sound.

The group of young Celestial Dragons couldn't help but stand up abruptly, revealing an eager look on their faces.

They saw the outline of a snow-covered island gradually appear on the sea in the distance.

We're here!

Philseque Island... The venue for this year's World Noble Hunting Tournament!

Looking at the island getting closer and closer, Daren's eyes became slightly dazed.

But soon, something else quickly caught his attention.

Three nautical miles off the coast, a line of warships was arrayed in a grim formation surrounding the island.

The familiar warships, the familiar flags, and even the familiar faces that could be vaguely seen...

At this moment, however, they seemed somewhat unfamiliar.

Daren stood frozen for several seconds before gradually coming to his senses.

He saw the snow-white seagull flags of freedom and peace gradually opening a gap in the blockade.

Like a blooming iron-blooded military flower, they gently welcomed the arrival of the authoritative "cross" flag.

The sea breeze was bitterly cold, and the world was frigid.

Heavy snowflakes fell from the gloomy gray sky.

On those warships, familiar figures stood there in a daze, looking with mixed expressions at the Vice Admiral of the Marines at the bow of the official ship.

Some gritted their teeth, some were numb, some clenched their fists...

But the Vice Admiral did not look at any of them.

He just stood at the bow of the World Government's official ship with his hands in his pockets and a cigar in his mouth.

He stood there proudly.

Smoke and white robes fluttered, and under his black hair, his eyes were indifferent.

The magnificent official ship and the battle-scarred warships

passed each other.

In front of the ship's cabin, Saturn held his mottled cane in his hand and watched the scene with a smile.

On the ship, an official of the World Government shouted in a stern voice,

"One of the Five Elders, Saint Jaygarcia Saturn, has arrived... All personnel below Commodore rank must avoid Saint Saturn's 'true form'!"

"Anyone who shows disrespect will be killed on the spot!"

As soon as he finished speaking, the world fell silent for two seconds.

Then...

Bang!

Bang!

Bang!

On the decks of several warships, the heads of more than a dozen curious Marines exploded like watermelons, splattering red and white all over the ground, and then they fell to the ground with a loud bang.

Everyone stared at the scene in fear, the soldiers trembling with fear and keeping their heads down.

The Marine generals above the rank of Commodore looked at the old figure in disbelief, their hearts trembling.

The old man wearing a black flat cap had blood-red light emanating from his eyes.

It was as if a true deity had descended...