

One Piece 71

Chapter 71: Why Should I Submit?

"In the North Blue... the greatest darkness wears the flag of justice!"

The man's crazed laughter echoed through the domed conference hall.

"We, the so-called giants of the underworld, the heads of the dark forces... were all just tools for you, Rogers Daren, to control the North Blue!"

His facial muscles twisted grotesquely as he roared,

"You, parading around in the name of justice... are darker and more evil than any of us!"

Daren stood silent, calmly watching the man gasp for breath. His expression didn't waver in the slightest.

A stream of smoke curled from his lips like a dragon as he replied flatly,

"This world has always been like this."

This is the world of One Piece.

The anime makes it look beautiful—full of freedom, dreams, passion, friendship, youth, and kindness. The adventures of the main characters are something to envy. It all seems so happy.

But in truth?

Beneath the surface of that so-called passionate world lies brutal cruelty and cold indifference.

Slaves live lives worse than death. Civilians are left homeless. Pirates pillage without restraint. The mafia runs wild.

The Celestial Dragons—the world's Nobles—stand above all, wielding godlike power, executing civilians at will.

Pirates glorify freedom and dreams, and rising bounties are something to celebrate.

The government is rotten and greedy, the Noble politicians drunk on excess.

The World Government has ruled for eight hundred years, holding terrifying trump cards no one can imagine.

And the Marines?

Though they're said to defend peace, in the eyes of many, they're nothing but the government's dogs.

So-called justice is hollow and powerless.

Step outside the protagonists' perspective, and this world is nothing but dark, bloody, and rotten to the core.

Daren had long since seen through its true nature.

He couldn't change the world—not yet.

So he had to be darker and more ruthless than anyone else.

Hearing the Marine Captain's blunt reply, the man was momentarily stunned.

He stayed silent for a while, slowly regaining his composure, then asked suddenly,

"Out of respect for the years we've worked together, will you answer one question for me?"

Daren nodded.

"Sure."

The man took a deep breath, locked eyes with Daren, and asked in a low voice,

"After you deal with us old-timers... who do you plan to hand the North Blue underworld over to?"

Daren looked up, eyes fixed on the chandelier above, and said flatly,

"Donquixote Doflamingo."

The man froze for a second, then burst into laughter.

He let out a long exhale.

"So that's how it is... I see now..."

He slowly straightened his posture, buttoned his cuffs one by one, neatened his slightly disheveled suit, and swept his slicked-back hair into place.

"Go ahead," he said with a smile.

...

Why should I submit?

Hiss!!

Razor-sharp threads sliced through the air. In an instant, the three mafia members charging with long blades were cut clean in half at the waist.

Their intestines and blood splattered across the ground, hot and steaming, while expressions of disbelief remained frozen on their faces. Their pupils quickly faded into lifelessness.

Doflamigo flicked his fingers, blood speckling his sunglasses.

He kept walking.

The Donquixote family members surged behind him, blades drawn. Like wolves among sheep, they tore through the street, painting it red with blood.

Why should I submit?

Doflamigo glanced at the hellish street soaked in gore, watched members of the Rodriguez family fall one by one at his feet. A restless energy stirred beneath his sunglasses.

Five more attackers leapt down from the rooftop on the left, giant axes raised high as they brought them crashing down toward him.

With a simple twitch of his fingers, Doflamigo stopped them cold.

It was as if their bodies had been bound by invisible strings—they couldn't move.

"What... what is this?!"

"I can't move—my body!"

"My hand... it's not listening to me!"

"What are you doing?!"

"I'm sorry! I didn't mean to—! I can't control it!!"

Their horrified screams rang out as their bodies turned against them, moving on their own, bringing their weapons down on their own comrades.

Hiss!!

All five axes struck at once, slicing open skulls in a grotesque spray of blood.

They convulsed, then collapsed.

The blood thickened, staining everything around.

I have the power to control the fate of all.

Doflamingo walked forward with a cold, unfeeling gaze. The full might of the Ito Ito no Mi erupted. Everything before him—shredded and crushed beneath those deadly threads.

I was born a king.

I am a noble Celestial Dragon, a descendant of the Creator.

Everyone must kneel before me.

This is the treatment I deserve.

Every glance thrown my way should be filled with fear.

Yes, that's how it should be.

Why should I submit?

Hiss!!

With a forceful wave of his hand, dozens of threads shot forward, twisting into a whip tens of meters long. It lashed through a nearby armory belonging to the Rodriguez family, tearing it to shreds.

Boom!!

A massive explosion shook the sky. A dark mushroom cloud surged upward. Under the raging fire, those who hadn't escaped in time were engulfed in flames, reduced to burning husks, screaming in agony.

He said the North Blue underworld belonged to me... But even without him, I could've taken it all just as easily.

I was destined to be the king of darkness.

Why should I submit?

Figures kept collapsing around him, while the sinister laughter of Trebol and the others echoed through the chaos. The world had become a purgatory.

Maybe Trebol was right all along.

Doflamingo kept walking toward the grand estate, leaving a trail of destruction and suffering behind.

A cruel smile crept across his lips.

There's nothing more satisfying than watching others in pain.

His body trembled uncontrollably.

A surge of power exploded from within him, wild and uncontrollable. It sent his flamingo feathers fluttering into the wind.

Dozens of gangsters rolled their eyes back and fainted on the spot.

Step by step, amid screams of agony and maniacal laughter,

Doflamingo advanced, and with each step, his Conqueror's Haki surged, growing more violent, more uncontrollable.

The wind howled, the skies churned.

Why should I submit?

The Rodriguez family is just the beginning. I won't stay confined in the North Blue forever.

The Grand Line. The New World. That's where Donquixote Doflamingo truly belongs.

A sea ruled by heroes, tyrants, and kings.

The cries of battle and death began to fade.

Doflamingo came to a stop.

He stood before a lavish, opulent mansion.

The villa of Rodriguez Michael—head of the Rodriguez family, kingpin of the North Blue underworld.

Before he realized it, Trebol and the others—bodies soaked in blood—along with hundreds of Donquixote family members, had gathered behind him.

Their eyes burned with fervent admiration as they stared at Doflamingo's back.

That proud, unyielding back.

Doflamingo looked up at the domed entrance of the villa, his twisted smile deepening.

Yes.

No one can stop my rise.

No one.

So... why should I submit?

The thought echoed in Doflamingo's heart.

Then, he took a deep breath, eyes cold and merciless, stepped forward, and pushed the doors open.

Creak...

The heavy bronze doors swung wide with a grinding groan.

And the smile on Doflamingo's face froze.

Chapter 72: Thank You, Godfather

Creak...

The grand doors of the classical-style villa slowly opened.

A biting wind rushed out from behind the heavy bronze doors, slamming into Doflamingo and swallowing him in an instant, sending his pink feathered coat billowing behind him.

For a moment, the entire world seemed to stop.

It was as if something invisible in the air had just snapped.

Silence fell, sudden and absolute.

The four men of the Trebol group, who had just moments ago exuded menace, along with the hundreds of Donquixote Family members behind them—each gripping bloodstained blades—froze in place, holding their breath.

They stared blankly at the scene inside the villa's hall, throats tightening as they swallowed hard. Cold sweat began to bead on their foreheads.

The once chaotic world had fallen utterly silent.

Tick,

tick...

The sound of liquid dripping onto the floor echoed in the stillness, tightening every nerve in the room.

What they saw was—

In the vaulted dome hall, flames crackled in an ancient fireplace.

Light and shadow danced across the room, sketching its shape in flickers of brightness and gloom.

An aged, weathered oval conference table stood at the center. Intricately carved stained glass windows lined both walls, glowing dimly, while religious oil paintings adorned the ceiling overhead.

On the black wall above the fireplace, a body hung.

More precisely—a corpse.

His slicked-back hair was neat, and he wore a Mafia-style suit with a blood-red rose tucked into his breast pocket. His head drooped lifelessly.

A long, gleaming metal spear was driven deep into his chest, piercing through and nailing him to the wall.

Blood seeped from the wound, trailing down his suit, his pants, his shoes... and dripping onto the floor.

...That was the source of the ticking sound.

And in that instant, they recognized him.

Their mission's final target.

—Rodriguez Michael, head of the Rodriguez family, a crime boss who ruled over a third of the North Blue's illegal trade.

Now, he was dead.

Hung on the wall like some grim religious icon.

His lowered head, his hollow eyes, were locked directly on them.

The corners of his mouth were faintly raised—as if mocking them with a smile.

Trebol and the others shuddered, a chill crawling over their skin.

Their gazes stiffly shifted toward another spot in the hall.

...

In the flickering firelight of the dim hall, at the head seat of the roundtable, sat a man.

The flames could chase away the dark—but not from his face.

It remained hidden in the shadows, as if veiled by darkness itself.

So long as he didn't wish to be seen, no one could ever find him.

Trebol and the others could barely make out his silhouette.

A tailored black suit, a crisp white shirt, a somber black tie, and black military boots.

He sat with one leg crossed over the other, casually tapping the table with the hand holding his cigar. His sharp, unreadable gaze drifted lazily through the darkness toward them.

He was smiling.

They couldn't see his face clearly.

But all of them, in that moment, had the same thought—he was smiling.

"Right on time."

Daren's calm voice broke the silence.

As the firelight shifted, it finally lit up his face.

He was indeed smiling.

"Well done."

He cast a look of praise toward the young Doflamingo.

Doflamingo said nothing.

Not a word.

Trebol and the others clearly saw his fists clenching tighter, trembling as he held them firm.

They could only see his back, but they knew—without a doubt—the expression on their young master's face was anything but pleasant.

Then, the shrill ring of a Den Den Mushi suddenly echoed.

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

Daren reached into his coat and pulled out a military Den Den Mushi, connecting the call.

"This is Daren."

A low voice came through the line.

"Reporting to Base Commander Daren. As of five minutes ago, all operations have been completed."

"...All seventeen major underworld forces, including Snoke, Vincent, and the Rockefeller family, have been purged under the light of justice."

The entire Donquixote family gasped.

The entire North Blue underworld... crushed by the Marines!?

A wave of fear surged into their minds, draining the color from their faces.

The North Blue Marines had carried out a brutal purge of the underground world—and now the very man at the top of that command was standing before them, alongside the corpse of the Rodriguez family head...

Everyone shivered.

Could it be... the Donquixote family was next?

"Understood. Well done. I'm very pleased," Daren replied.

"Head back for now. I still have a bit of business to finish up here. I'll return shortly."

"Yes, Base Commander."

The call ended.

Daren tucked away the Den Den Mushi, took a slow drag from his cigar, and rose from the seat.

With that one simple movement, thousands of Donquixote family members instinctively stepped back in unison.

All but one.

Doflamingo remained where he stood, silent.

His trembling fists clenched even harder, barely containing something wild and violent inside.

Daren walked toward him, one step at a time.

Trebol and the others tensed, about to react, but a casual glance from the Marine Captain froze them cold. They didn't dare move.

The sound of Daren's boots scraping across the floor echoed through the hall as he finally came to stand before Doflamingo.

He looked down at the blond youth, whose jaw was clenched tight and expression unreadable.

With a faint smile, he said,

"This is my gift to you, Doflamingo."

His tone was gentle, like an elder doting on a beloved junior.

"From this moment on, the underworld of the North Blue... belongs to you."

He narrowed his eyes, smiled faintly, and extended his hand—waiting quietly for a response.

"Do you like it?"

One second.

Two seconds.

Three seconds.

Trebol and the others stared at their young master's unmoving back, hearts racing, sweat pouring down.

Why submit...

Why... should I submit?

Then, in that moment—

Doflamingo's clenched fists stopped trembling.

He let them fall open.

Trebol and the others swore they heard a silent sigh.

Their eyes widened.

They saw—

Their once-proud young master slowly smile, take a step forward, gently take the Marine's hand, bow his head slightly, and kiss the back of it with solemn respect.

"Thank you, my godfather."

Chapter 73: North Blue, Only Black and White

What's the most important thing when raising a wild wolf?

Is it fueling its hatred for the Celestial Dragons and the World Government, and nurturing its thirst for blood?

Letting it kill recklessly to keep its savage nature intact?

Or giving it a clear enough goal to sharpen its hunting skills?

All of these—yes, but not entirely.

The most important thing is to completely dominate it. To torment it again and again until submission becomes second nature—an instinct carved deep into its mind like a brand.

So it will never, ever forget who its true master is.

That is what matters most.

...

As the Celestial Dragon boy knelt and kissed the back of his hand, Daren smiled with satisfaction.

"Very good. Truly worthy of being my godson."

He affectionately ruffled Doflamingo's short blond hair, then had him stand by his side, holding his hand as they walked step by step out of the blood-soaked domed hall.

...

Outside the ancient villa.

Watching their once proud and defiant young master being led out like a child by that dark-haired Marine, the once-fearsome members of the Donquixote family froze in place, faces full of shock, as if caught in a waking dream.

"Doffy... are these your men?"

Daren smiled, casually glancing over the thousand mafia members gathered.

Doflamingo lowered his head and replied,

"Yes, Godfather."

Daren nodded with a grin.

"Not bad. In the North Blue, they could be considered elite."

"But there's just one problem..."

Doflamingo asked quietly,

"What do you mean, Godfather?"

Daren's lips curled into a cold smile.

"You're my godson. A king by birth. So remember this..."

His eyes sharpened.

"Anyone who lays eyes on you—other than me—must kneel!"

The moment those words fell, a surge of overwhelming presence erupted from the Marine Captain's body, sweeping out indiscriminately in every direction like a crashing tide.

The world seemed to fall silent. All color drained away, leaving only black and white.

A roaring wind tore through the air, sweeping away everything in its path.

The full force of the Haki struck the Donquixote family like a tidal wave. Trebol, Diamante, Vergo, and Pica—along with every other member—trembled violently under the weight of that monstrous aura.

They felt their strength drain without warning, minds going blank. Their knees buckled. One by one, they collapsed to the ground.

Clatter...

Countless weapons slipped from their hands, crashing to the floor like heavy rain, the sound sharp and continuous.

Trebol and the others knelt on one knee, teeth clenched, faces deathly pale.

They stared in horror at the North Blue Admiral radiating that overwhelming dominance, a single thought flooding their minds in unison—

This can't be real...

...

This intense, soul-piercing pressure felt like facing a roaring sea or a thousand charging soldiers...

This man's presence—was even stronger than last time!

The winds and clouds shifted violently, as if the entire North Blue was about to be swept away.

At that moment, only two people remained standing in the world.

Standing beside Daren, Doflamingo clenched his teeth hard. His bloodshot eyes pulsed with suppressed ferocity, and his expression shifted constantly, as if trying to hold something back.

The Conqueror's Haki within him was stirring, but it was clearly being forced down.

"Doffy, I'll be waiting for you at the Grand Line."

Daren turned and looked at his godson with a smile, narrowing his eyes.

The flawless white cloak behind him billowed wildly, casting a shadow that completely engulfed the blond teenager.

Doflamingo lowered his head. Deep within his bloodshot eyes, ambition and cold determination were being forcefully suppressed.

"Yes, Godfather."

...

In September of Sea Circle Calendar year 1492, under the orders of Rogers Daren, the supreme commander and admiral of the North Blue Marines, the North Blue fleet launched a bloody crackdown and purge against over twenty notorious Mafia families across the region.

This operation brought an end to the chaotic and rampant underground forces that had plagued the North Blue for decades, even centuries.

Within a week, the Donquixote family, led by Doflamingo, effortlessly absorbed the entire underworld of the North Blue. Their power expanded rapidly, and they quickly grew into a formidable giant.

Their reach spanned arms smuggling, brothels, gambling, espionage, intelligence trafficking, and more—stretching not only across the seas but even into the Grand Line.

Since then, a saying began to spread across the North Blue:

"The world is full of color, but in the North Blue, there is only black and white."

From that point on, what the world once called the "chaotic North Blue" entered a new era of stability and order.

...

"You're seriously insane. Letting him off the leash like that... Aren't you worried that one day Doflamigo's ambition will spiral out of control, and he'll stab you in the back?"

North Blue 321 Marine Branch, Base Commander's Office.

Momonga flipped through the intelligence report in his hands with a helpless expression, glancing toward his superior, who was sitting back comfortably, puffing on a cigar.

The report detailed the recent commotion caused by the Donquixote family's takeover of several Mafia industries.

Industry scale, personnel, nations and towns involved... Every detail was laid out clearly.

"He wouldn't dare."

Daren replied casually, his eyes gazing out across the sea through the floor-to-ceiling windows.

Momonga frowned.

"You sure? That kid doesn't exactly seem the obedient type."

Daren slowly turned back to face him, smiling.

"It's precisely because I know he's not obedient that I feel at ease."

"The truly dangerous enemies aren't these ambitious brats. It's the ones who hide everything inside, the ones who look harmless."

"Doflamigo's a talented guy. I need him to help stabilize the North Blue. The stronger his influence, the more it benefits us."

"With his 'Celestial Dragons' identity as a shield, not even Marine Headquarters—no, even the World Government would hesitate to meddle in North Blue affairs."

Momonga paused in thought.

"I get that logic, sure. But I've met him, and I can tell by the way he looks at you... it's not right."

"What I'm worried about is once you leave the North Blue, will he..."

Daren cut him off with a wave of his hand and asked an unrelated question instead.

"Do you know what it means to have a king's spirit?"

"The legendary force that only appears once in millions... Conqueror's Haki?"

"Exactly."

Daren smiled.

"Doflamingo is someone who's awakened Conqueror's Haki. That's why I chose him."

There was a hint of deeper meaning in his eyes.

"Strength, speed, power, status... those are all secondary."

"On this sea, what truly decides everything... is spirit."

"As long as my Conqueror's Haki is stronger than his, he'll never dare rebel against me."

Chapter 74: A Shortcut to Awakening Conqueror's Haki

"Conqueror's Haki..."

Momonga muttered under his breath, but quickly snapped out of it. He stared at his boss in disbelief, watching as Daren sat there, legs crossed, casually puffing on a cigarette.

"Wait! You've awakened Conqueror's Haki!?"

Daren glanced at him and chuckled.

"That's right."

During the battle on Rubeck Island with Doflamingo, Daren had ordered Momonga to lead the Marines in locking down the island, evacuating civilians, and setting up a security perimeter.

When Daren clashed with Doflamingo using Conqueror's Haki, Momonga had been too occupied issuing commands to notice.

"When did that happen!?"

Momonga drew in a sharp breath, completely stunned.

He'd heard how rare Conqueror's Haki was. In the entire North Blue, even the previous admiral—Sakazuki, known as a "monster"—had never awakened it.

Maybe in the Grand Line or the New World, plenty of powerful individuals had awakened it, but those were almost all legendary pirates.

Like the great pirate Whitebeard.

Or the mysterious Roger.

But in the Marines, those who could awaken Conqueror's Haki were exceedingly few.

As a military force under the World Government, the Marines emphasized strict discipline and hierarchy. There simply wasn't enough room for free will to flourish—especially with the Celestial Dragons lording over everything.

In such an environment, for a Marine to awaken the "spirit of a king" was practically impossible.

As far as Momonga knew, the only Marines known to have awakened Conqueror's Haki were the current Fleet Admiral Kong, Marine Headquarters Admiral Sengoku, and Vice Admiral Garp—the strongest Marine, hailed as a "hero."

And now Daren was telling him he'd awakened Conqueror's Haki too?

Did that mean... this guy's talent actually surpassed "monsters" like Sakazuki and Borsalino?

If he didn't know Daren so well, Momonga would've thought he was full of it.

"If you want to know when..."

Daren exhaled a puff of smoke, grinning faintly.

"I'd say it was probably around the time Saint Xildes was attacked by Sea Kings and met an unfortunate end... something like that."

"Well, if you're interested in awakening your own Conqueror's Haki, I actually have a pretty good method."

Momonga felt a wave of unease rise in his chest, but he still forced himself to ask,

"What is it?"

Daren flipped a coin into the air.

Mid-flight, the coin suddenly melted and twisted into a dagger, its cold blade gleaming sharply.

The tip pointed straight up at the sky.

"Kill a Celestial Dragon."

He said it casually.

...

Momonga's face twitched uncontrollably, several dark lines forming on his forehead.

"Are you serious?"

Daren shrugged.

"Who knows? Just a theory. But I'd say it's probably effective."

"This method might not work that well on pirates—they're already lawless by nature. But for Marines, it would cause a drastic impact on their will."

"Conqueror's Haki, in my understanding, is ultimately an external manifestation of a person's will and spirit. It usually awakens under extreme conditions."

"And I don't mean physical danger. We're Marines—every mission puts our lives on the line. I'm talking about mental extremes."

"As Marines, from the moment we put on this uniform, we're trained and educated to follow orders, to uphold peace and justice. But deep down, we all know... that's a lie."

"Sure, we might be protecting justice, but in truth, our missions and actions are more often about preserving the rule of the World Government."

"And at the very top of that government, sitting high in the clouds, are the self-proclaimed 'gods'—the Celestial Dragons."

Daren's voice gradually lowered. His deep eyes shimmered with an unreadable light, and he smiled.

"For a Marine, what could be more thrilling than killing the almighty 'gods' who order us around?"

"So? Want to try it? Want to feel what it's like to slay a god? To see the grotesque faces of the Celestial Dragons howling in pain before you, to watch them kneel and beg for mercy, stripped of their dignity, their pride as descendants of the so-called Creator..."

"Aren't you even a little curious what that would feel like?"

Momonga met Daren's smirking gaze and instinctively shivered, taking a step back.

"Hahahahaha!!"

Seeing that reaction, Daren burst into laughter.

Momonga rolled his eyes in irritation.

"You bastard, stop trying to tempt me... You really are a devil."

"No wonder that brat Doflamingo is completely under your thumb. Honestly, sometimes I wonder if your Devil Fruit has some kind of brainwashing ability..."

He had to admit—even he had felt a flicker of temptation at Daren's words.

But the moment that thought surfaced, a chill swept over him, his skin crawling.

The floating dagger reverted into a coin midair, its markings, numbers, and design exactly the same as before—flawlessly precise.

Daren caught the coin and gently placed it on the desk, smiling.

"Maybe such an ability does exist. But in the end, human nature is really quite simple."

"Everyone—whether they're in power or just a commoner—has weaknesses. They all have desires."

"Money, wealth, power, status, fame, beauty, gambling, cigarettes, wine... There are countless ways to kill a person. Violence is just the most direct."

"But if you want to break someone's will, you have to find their weakness."

"The desire to destroy—that's a weakness most people share."

"Don't act surprised. Our duty as Marines is to protect, sure. But we're human too. And humans have desires."

"When faced with something magnificent or breathtakingly beautiful, your first instinct might be to protect it, to admire it. But deep down, there's another impulse—a twisted urge to destroy."

"If I destroyed something this beautiful with my own hands, what would it feel like...' Thoughts like that creep in more often than we care to admit."

"That's why the world is full of twisted love stories—people killing out of cruel obsession when they can't have what they desire."

"And what's the most sacred, most beautiful, most noble, and most revered thing in this world?"

"Of course—it's the World Government. The Celestial Dragons."

"Maybe, one day... when the people of this world look at the monstrous regime that's ruled for 800 years, and the fear in their eyes begins to shift into something else... just imagine what a sight that would be."

Chapter 75: Encirclement

"You really are a lunatic..."

Momonga couldn't help but give a wry smile as he listened to Daren's outrageous words.

"Are you sure this is something I'm even supposed to be hearing?"

Daren chuckled.

"Why not? From the day you said you wanted to follow me, I knew you had the potential."

"The World Government's long history of indoctrination has split this sea into rigid classes. The Celestial Dragons sit high above, controlling everything. But as times change and new heroes rise, those entrenched ideas are bound to collapse."

He slowly leaned back in his chair, raised his glass, and took a refined sip.

"Of course, that's just my theory. I'll need more examples and data before I can say anything for certain."

Momonga looked at Daren's half-smiling eyes and felt increasingly uneasy. His mouth twitched.

"So you're planning to use me as a guinea pig, huh?"

Daren grinned.

"Your name is Momonga, isn't it?"

Momonga: ...

Daren burst into louder laughter as he caught the expression on Momonga's face—like he'd just swallowed something foul.

After a while, he finally calmed down a bit and spoke more seriously.

"Not entirely a joke. I don't trust anyone else to handle the North Blue."

"Once I leave for Marineford, you'll be in charge here, Momonga."

His expression hardened.

"Doflamingo may act obedient now after being knocked into line, but he's still ambitious at heart."

"We can keep using the Germa card. Stir up some friction between the two sides. Our North Blue Marines will just stay in the middle as mediators. No need for the house to jump into the game too often—otherwise, the players all fold."

"But strategy and politics are just one part of it. What matters most is strength."

Momonga nodded firmly.

"Don't worry. I haven't slacked off in my training for even a single day."

Daren gave a satisfied nod.

At that moment, a sharp, urgent ringing came from the Den Den Mushi.

"Brurururu... Brurururu..."

Daren and Momonga both paused, turning their eyes to the military Den Den Mushi on the desk.

"This is Daren," he said calmly, reaching to pick it up.

"Daren, it's me."

The solemn voice of Admiral Sengoku came through, filled with a heavy tone.

"Admiral Sengoku. What happened?"

Daren frowned and exchanged a glance with Momonga.

From the intel they had, Sengoku was currently working alongside the World Government's CP agents on a mission to hunt down and eliminate the 'World Destroyer,' Byrnni World.

"There's been a problem with the operation to capture Byrnndi World. Due to the increased bounty, he's grown more cautious. Reinforcements from Headquarters have already sealed off the only sea route from the North Blue to the Grand Line... but Byrnndi World and his men are still hiding somewhere in North Blue waters."

On the other end, Sengoku's brows were furrowed as if someone had painted them thick with black ink.

"Daren, I know you've been running things in the North Blue for years. You've got influence and connections here... This time, I need you to tap into those networks and help us locate Byrnndi World's hideout."

Hearing that, Daren raised an eyebrow.

Ever since he took the fall for Saint Xildes, the Marines had doubled Byrnndi World's bounty from 200 million to 400 million Berry.

But he hadn't expected the man to become this cautious and alert as a result.

Daren paused in thought for a moment before speaking slowly.

"Admiral Sengoku, mobilizing the North Blue fleet and tapping into my network... that won't be a problem."

"But what I'd like to know is—have you already engaged Byrnndi World again?"

"—You're trying to gauge how far he might retaliate?"

Sengoku truly lived up to his title as the 'The Resourceful General.' He immediately grasped the intent behind Daren's question.

"Yes, Admiral. If Byrnndi World is injured, there's a high chance he'll respond with excessive violence."

Daren's voice grew a touch heavier.

"I'm not just talking about retaliation against the Marines—but also against civilians."

Sengoku fell silent for a moment, then said quietly,

"I've indeed clashed with him a few times recently... and yes, he's been injured."

Daren smiled, satisfied.

"Understood, Admiral Sengoku. I'll arrange for my men to begin tracking Byrnndi World's whereabouts immediately."

An opportunity for merit like this... I can't let it slip away.

With the North Blue already sealed off, and given the sailing technology of this era, it's impossible for Byrnndi World to cross the Calm Belt and reach the New World.

Which means—this is a game of catch with the lid sealed.

A legendary pirate, a man who once stood shoulder to shoulder with Whitebeard and Roger... Of course Daren wanted to see for himself just how far he still was from that level.

...

Meanwhile.

North Blue.

Rubeck Island, Harbor.

A battered pirate ship, scorched and torn from battle, slowly drifted into the harbor.

At its bow stood a towering figure with arms crossed, exuding an overwhelming presence.

He wore a horned helmet and had a grayish-green beard. His pale green eyes gleamed with a murky, ruthless glint.

Byrnndi World.

A blood-soaked bandage was tightly wrapped around his chest.

"Damn... ambushed in the gutter by that damned yellow monkey..."

Byrnndi World pressed a hand against his wound. Though the bleeding had stopped, the spot where the laser beam struck still ached with a dull throb.

No one had expected that tall Marine Rear Admiral to be even more despicable than he looked—launching a sneak attack right in the middle of Byrnndi's fight with Sengoku.

"World... are you alright?"

An old, frail man approached with effort. An IV hung from his arm, his expression fatigued, his skin etched with age.

Byojack—First Mate of the World Pirates. Their strategist, and more than that, a brother figure to Byrnndi World.

"Don't worry, Brother. I'm fine."

In front of Byojack, Byrndi actually gave a somewhat goofy smile.

The two had relied on each other since childhood, bound by a shared dream: to sail around the world on the greatest adventure of all.

Byojack looked at him with concern, lips parted, but said nothing in the end.

"So, Brother... you're sure the biggest underworld broker in North Blue is on this island? That guy named Doflamingo?"

Byrndi World narrowed his eyes, scanning the bustling island and its harbor, his tone laced with menace.

Byojack nodded weakly.

"Yes. The Donquixote family is already the dominant Mafia force in the North Blue. Based on the intel we've gathered, their reach is vast, their methods—ruthless. Even the North Blue Marines keep their distance."

"But World... are you sure about this?"

"We can still turn back."

Byrndi World let out a booming laugh.

"Brother, our dream of sailing the world—it's still unfinished!"

"The great voyage of the World Pirates... how can it end in the North Blue!?"

With a sweeping gesture, his presence surged.

"Go. Find that brat named Doflamigo... From him, we'll seize the power to crush the Marines!"

Chapter 76: King of the Underworld?

Rubeck Island.

The Donquixote Family residence.

In the opulent hall of the estate, a cool breeze stirred the curtains on the windowsill, rippling them gently.

The open glass windows creaked in the wind, while dust danced in the sunlight.

On a wide, plush leather sofa, Doflamigo lounged in a white shirt, leaning back with his head tilted and a book covering his face.

"No... no... no!!"

Suddenly, Doflamigo began to tremble violently in his sleep. His eyes snapped open as he shot upright, gasping for air, cold sweat beading on his forehead.

He panted heavily, eyes bloodshot behind his sunglasses. Without hesitation, he grabbed the glass of red wine from the coffee table and downed it in one gulp.

Glug, glug...

The wine, red as blood, trickled down his neck and soaked into his shirt, staining it heavily—he didn't even flinch.

"Doffy..."

At some point, Trebol and the others had entered the room. Watching Doflamingo shakily light a cigar, their eyes were filled with concern.

"I'm fine..."

After taking a few hard drags, Doflamingo finally managed to compose himself and waved a hand dismissively.

The same dream again.

Burning city walls. The scornful curses of the pariahs. His father's anguished cries. And that searing pain...

"How's business been lately?"

Compared to the arrogance and naivety he had when first arriving in North Blue, there was now a sharper edge to Doflamingo—less bluster, more calculated ruthlessness.

He'd grown ten centimeters taller, his expression colder. His short blond hair had grown out and was slicked back neatly, giving him the chilling air of an underworld king.

At the mention of business, Trebol animatedly swung his cane, snot dangling beneath his nose as he gestured excitedly.

"I say... I say... after all our recent cleanups, the Donquixote Family now controls nearly all of North Blue's underground industries!"

"We're now the undisputed kings of the North Blue underworld!!"

Diamante chimed in enthusiastically,

"It's all been so easy! No one's been able to stop our rise! At this rate, our influence and operations will reach the Grand Line in under a year!"

Pica let out a shrill laugh.

"The arrogant kings and nobles of North Blue are groveling like lapdogs! Doffy... you've got to see their pathetic faces—hahahahaha! You'd love it!"

Seeing the smiles and confidence on the faces of his core officers—those he considered family—Doflamingo felt much of the gloom in his heart begin to lift.

He licked his dry, cracked lips and grinned menacingly.

"The North Blue is just the first step in our conquest of the seas. Once we've built up enough of a foundation, we're leaving this place."

"I've got a feeling... a new era is just around the corner."

As he spoke, Doflamingo clenched his fists. A cold gleam flickered behind his dark sunglasses.

A powerful, almost imperceptible aura surged from his body, making his pink feathered coat ripple despite the still air.

Trebol and the others watched in awe, unable to hide the worship and fanaticism in their eyes.

At first, they had feared that after submitting to the Marines, their young master would lose his commanding presence.

But now, it was clear—the great young master hadn't faltered at all! If anything, his aura was even stronger than before!

"But young master, isn't the tax we're paying to the North Blue Marines a bit much?"

Vergo, who had been silent all this time, finally spoke up in a low voice.

"We've raised so many people here in the North Blue, and we're running such a massive operation, yet more than half of the profits are being handed over to the Marines—"

Before he could finish, Doflamingo cut him off with a cold glare.

"There's money we just can't touch. Without the Marines' protection, our business wouldn't be running nearly this smooth."

Smoke curled around his face from his cigar, casting shadows across his expression.

"Just wait. That guy Daren won't stay in the North Blue forever..."

A cold, defiant smirk tugged at the corner of Doflamingo's lips.

"He thinks he's got me completely under control. But everyone slips up eventually."

Trebol and the others grinned wickedly at their young master's words.

This was the sharp, untouchable young master they revered.

He would never bow to anyone.

But right then—everything changed.

Boom!!

The family council hall suddenly shook as if a meteor had crashed down from the sky.

With a thunderous roar, the solid walls shattered and collapsed.

Dust and rubble whipped into a storm, and the powerful shockwave sent Trebol and the others flying through the air.

They crashed into the debris, blood spurting from their mouths.

"Barorororo! Where's that little punk Doflamingo?! Get out here and face me!!"

A wild, hoarse laugh echoed through the hall.

Trebol and the others, faces covered in dust and disbelief, stared wide-eyed at the hulking figure stepping through the smoke—a man in a horned helmet, moving with terrifying calm.

"Who the hell are you?!"

"You've got some nerve barging into the Donquixote Family's stronghold!"

"You must have a death wish!"

"..."

Furious shouts erupted as Trebol's group sprang into action, each unleashing their own attacks toward the intruder.

But in the next instant, they couldn't even see how he moved—

A blur flashed before their eyes, and it felt like they'd been hit by a speeding train.

Their bodies were sent flying like cannonballs.

Rumble...

Thick stone walls crumbled as they slammed through them, clouds of dust billowing into the air.

Whoosh!

Suddenly, a sharp, ear-splitting blast ripped through the air.

Ssst!

Threads shot from Doflamingo's hand, razor-sharp and gleaming, slicing clean through stone and earth as they slashed toward the intruder.

It was Doflamingo's attack!

But what happened next was unbelievable—

Clang!

A metallic clang rang out as the threads struck the man's chest, sparks flaring on impact.

Doflamingo's eyes narrowed in shock.

He clearly saw it—The man's upper body was coated in a sleek, jet-black armor, radiating a chilling sheen.

"Armament Haki!"

Before he could react further, the man vanished from sight.

BAM!!

A heavy fist crashed into Doflamingo's stomach.

His body doubled over, eyes bulging from their sockets as his mouth flew open.

A massive hand grabbed his blond hair and yanked his head up.

A rough, cold, and merciless face stared him down.

"So, you're Doflamingo?"

Byrnni World looked down at the bloodied blond punk and sneered.

"I hear you're the one running the entire arms smuggling trade in North Blue?"

Chapter 77: You Trying to Blow the World to Hell?

"So what if I am!?"

Doflamingo's blonde hair was nearly torn from his scalp, and the searing pain only brought out his feral rage. Bloodshot eyes blazed with unrelenting hostility.

His right hand clawed upward like a talon. With a sharp flick, razor-thin threads sliced through the ground with a hiss, streaking toward Byrnndi World's crotch!

But Byrnndi World just sneered. Without dodging, he dropped his weight and raised one knee. His calf, wrapped in jet-black Armament Haki, slammed straight into the invisible threads midair.

Sparks burst violently.

Without a hint of hesitation, Byrnndi World charged forward like an arrow loosed from a bow. His massive, blackened fist crashed brutally into Doflamingo's throat.

"Gah!"

Doflamingo's throat crumpled under the impact. Blood spurted from his mouth, two broken teeth spinning into the air.

"Damn it! I'm Doflamingo!!"

His voice was raw, throat seared with pain. Yet his eyes still burned with fury, defiant and wild, filled with an inexplicable wrath.

Veins bulged along his bent fingers as he whipped his arm out.

The five forked wires of Goshikito shot out at point-blank range, aiming straight for Byrnndi World's throat.

"Fulbright!!"

This brat's reflexes... not bad!

Byrnndi World's eyes narrowed. A flicker of sinister red flashed deep in his pupils.

Almost by instinct, he tilted his head slightly. The transparent thread—sharp enough to pierce steel—barely grazed his cheek, carving a shallow cut from cheek to neck.

Doflamingo froze for a split second.

And in that instant, the burly figure before him vanished!

"You're interesting, kid. You've got what it takes to be king of the North Blue underworld."

A booming, savage laugh echoed behind him. The sharp whistle of something cutting through air closed in fast.

Boom!!

Crackle—snap—

A fist like a falling meteor smashed into Doflamingo's chest, sending out a wave of bone-cracking echoes that made even Trebol and the others wince.

Byrnni World roared.

BOOM!!

With a second eruption of Armament Haki, a storm of unstoppable force exploded onto Doflamingo's body. Gouts of blood erupted across his skin, dying his fine white shirt a deep crimson.

The ground beneath them shattered within a hundred-meter radius, fracturing with a deafening roar. The Donquixote Family base collapsed under the force of the blow!

Amid the swirling dust, Doflamingo groaned. His pupils trembled, shrinking in shock. Legs gave out, and he dropped to his knees, completely limp.

Clutching his abdomen, he gasped for breath like a fish out of water.

A darkness like never before clouded his vision.

The difference in strength... was crushing. This guy was terrifyingly powerful—so strong it was hopeless!

"...Alright, that was enough fun."

Byrnni World glanced lazily at the shattered ruins. He picked up an unbroken bottle of wine from the debris of a shattered table.

He popped the cork, took two long swigs, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and grinned.

"Kid... you've probably heard the name Byrnni World. I came here to talk business."

"Business? This is your idea of business?"

Doflamingo gasped for breath, finally lifting his pale face.

He wiped the blood from his lips, eyes locked coldly on the fearsome pirate before him.

"Barorororo! What did you expect? I'm a pirate! Not one of you spoiled blond brats playing house!"

Byrnni World roared with laughter.

"What, did you think I'd knock politely, shake hands, and chat over tea?"

"Listen up, kid... I'll be straight with you. Since your Donquixote Family controls the North Blue's underground arms smuggling network, I'll cut to the chase."

He pressed a hand to the bloodied bandages on his chest. A cruel grin slowly spread across his face.

"I need weapons. A whole lot of them. And... I want a cannon—something bigger than the world's ever seen!"

A giant cannon!?

Doflamingo's pupils shrank.

Details about this madman raced through his mind.

"World Destroyer" Byrnni World. Latest bounty: 400 million Berries. A legendary pirate. User of the Moa Moa no Mi.

With his Devil Fruit powers, he could multiply the size and speed of any object dozens or even hundreds of times. Even a basic flintlock could unleash devastating power in his hands—greater than a Marine warship's heavy artillery!

He'd blown up town after town, ship after ship, destroying everything in his path with terrifying ease.

And now... he wanted to build the largest cannon in history?

A cannon of that size... if enhanced by the Moa Moa no Mi...

It could wipe an entire island off the map in seconds!

"Are you planning to blow up Marineford? Or Mary Geoise?"

Staring at Byrnni World's twisted grin, Doflamingo felt a chill creep up his spine.

"That's none of your business, brat."

Byrnni World snorted coldly.

"You just focus on building it. As for the rest, I suggest you stay out of it."

Doflamingo raised his eyebrows, just about to respond.

BANG!

Byrnni World slammed a boot onto his head, crushing his face into the ground.

The floor shattered instantly, cracks spiderwebbing outward.

Doflamingo's eyes flooded with blood as he clenched his teeth.

"You understand, don't you, kid..."

Byrnni World sneered, grinding his boot down harder, smashing the floor further.

"Of course, I know how business works. You won't be doing this for free."

"Your life—that's your payment."

He scoffed.

"You have three days."

As soon as the words fell, the pressure lifted from Doflamingo's skull.

He jolted up.

Byrnni World was gone.

All that remained was the ruined Donquixote estate...

...and the blood dripping into his eyes from his own forehead.

"Damn it!!"

Doflamingo froze for a long moment before roaring like a wild beast.

His hands clawed into the earth, face contorted with fury.

Thick veins twisted across his forehead like worms, grotesque and bulging.

"Doffy..."

Trebol and the others, dragging their battered bodies, approached cautiously.

Seeing Doflamingo's unstable expression, none of them dared breathe loudly.

"Fufufufu..."

Suddenly, Doflamingo burst into crazed laughter.

His body shook, eyes streaming with tears as he laughed uncontrollably.

"Interesting! This is getting interesting!!"

He slowly pulled a Den Den Mushi from his coat, its reflection dancing coldly in his sunglasses.

A military-grade Den Den Mushi.

He thought he'd never use it in his life.

He was wrong.

"Brru brru... brru brru..."

Its harsh call echoed through the wreckage.

Sunlight poured through the broken ceiling. Dust swirled around the bloodied, golden-haired Celestial Dragon.

"Brru!"

"...It's me."

A low voice answered.

Doflamingo knelt there silently for a long time.

"Godfather... Byrnni World came to see me," he said quietly, head bowed.

Chapter 78: Baptism Ceremony

"Godfather, Byrnni World came to me."

Daren listened in surprise to the voice coming through the military Den Den Mushi, his expression growing stranger as he puffed on his cigar.

He had just received orders from Sengoku to track down Byrnni World, and not even two minutes later, the guy had "volunteered" himself—by going straight to his godson?

Across the desk, Momonga looked just as baffled, mouth twitching in disbelief. He nearly burned his lips on his cigar before snapping back to his senses.

Daren and Momonga exchanged a glance. It felt almost too easy.

"What does he want?"

Daren exhaled slowly, mind already turning.

"He wants arms. A massive stockpile of them," Doflamingo growled through clenched teeth. "The lunatic almost razed the garrison on Rubeck Island to the ground. He gave me three days to build him a super-heavy cannon."

A super-heavy cannon!?

Daren's eyes narrowed, a glint of sharp light flashing deep in his pupils.

"Looks like that old man Sengoku really backed him into a corner..."

He muttered, frowning slightly. Then he asked, "Is he injured?"

On the other end, Doflamingo, supporting himself with bloodied hands, forced himself upright and rasped, "Yeah."

He hesitated for a moment, then gritted his teeth. "Godfather, what should I do? If Byrnni World gets his hands on a weapon like that, with his Devil Fruit powers..."

"—Then give it to him."

Daren suddenly cut him off with a smile.

"Give him whatever he wants—arms, weapons, cannons—the more the better. If he can take it, we'll supply it."

Doflamingo froze.

Before he could respond, Daren continued, "That's how we'll handle it. Doflamingo, I'm glad you contacted me and let me know."

A cold smirk curved his lips.

"You don't need to interfere with Byrnni World."

"If he wants weapons, give them to him."

"As for the damage to the Rubeck Island garrison... I'll make him pay."

"Doflamingo, remember this. In this world, people are often subjected to sudden, humiliating insults—and that's something you have to endure. Don't let hatred cloud your judgment."

"But I can promise you one thing..."

The Supreme Commander of the North Blue rose slowly, reached for the cloak of justice on the coat rack, and draped it over his shoulders.

"Byrnndi World... won't leave the North Blue alive."

...

Night had fallen.

Waves rolled beneath a pitch-black sky, the stars barely visible.

But across the military fortresses of Germa 66, lights blazed and music soared.

Today was the baptism of the Vinsmoke family's eldest daughter—the royal princess of the Germa Kingdom in the North Blue.

To celebrate her birth, Vinsmoke Judge, King of Germa and commander-in-chief of Germa 66, hosted a lavish banquet and invited representatives from many of the North Blue's allied nations.

"This is so boring... Do we really have to attend this so-called baptism?" Tokikake yawned as the warship slowly docked.

"This sea isn't just about fighting. It's also about diplomacy," Daren replied with a smile. "Besides, the Germa Kingdom is one of our long-standing allies."

Gion and Tokikake both rolled their eyes in perfect sync.

If they hadn't known better, they might've believed Daren's smooth talk.

"Admiral Daren, my lord is waiting for you in the banquet hall."

A man dressed like a proper butler in a black tuxedo stepped forward and bowed as Daren disembarked.

"King Judge is too kind. It's my honor to witness Princess Vinsmoke's baptism," Daren replied with a graceful nod.

Following the butler's lead, the group soon entered the grand banquet hall of Germa.

The hall was opulent, its ceiling adorned with gleaming crystal chandeliers. Waiters in suits moved through the crowd with trays, offering drinks and delicacies to the guests.

Tokikake noticed several prominent North Blue figures among the crowd—rich merchants in ornate robes, nobles dripping in gold and silver, royal envoys, ministers, and influential power players from across the region.

If you listened closely, you could hear them whispering about politics, trade profits, shipping routes, land deals, noble titles, high society gossip, and shifts in power.

These weren't just partygoers. Their every word and action shaped the North Blue's political heartbeat.

But the moment Daren and his entourage stepped inside, all the laughter and clinking glasses halted. Conversations stopped mid-sentence. Every gaze in the hall shifted toward the dark-haired Marine at the front.

The lively atmosphere turned eerily quiet. The silence was so heavy, it pressed down on Tokikake's shoulders, forcing him to swallow hard.

Unlike the other guests in formal suits and robes, Daren wore his usual sharp black suit. His black tie was loosely knotted, and a pristine white cloak billowed behind him.

With deep-set eyes, a sharp nose, and slicked-back hair, he exuded a wild elegance that drew every eye in the room.

Behind him were twenty elite Marines, grim and imposing, marching into the banquet like they owned the place. It felt less like a ceremony, and more like a tiger prowling its domain.

The men looked at him with awe and fear.

The women... with undisguised desire.

"Tch, show-off. You're just here to witness the ceremony, you know..." Tokikake muttered sourly.

But even he had to admit—Daren shone in this moment.

Men wanted to be him. Women wanted to be on him.

"Hahaha! Admiral Daren, welcome to Germa!"

A booming laugh broke the silence.

Vinsmoke Judge, clad in royal regalia, strode forward from the crowd with a wide grin, extending his hand.

"To have you here for my daughter's baptism is an honor."

Daren took his hand with a smile.

"I wouldn't miss such an important occasion."

Chapter 79: Do You Have Seastone?

Click, click!

As the two most prominent figures of the evening shook hands with polite smiles, the journalists on-site instantly raised their cameras. Flashes flickered non-stop as they captured shot after shot.

To the nobles, politicians, distinguished guests, and wealthy merchants from across the North Blue, it was clear—they weren't the stars of today's baptism ceremony.

Germa's presence spoke for itself.

A militant nation where every citizen was a soldier, Germa possessed terrifying military strength and an aggressive ambition to dominate the North Blue. It was the living nightmare of many North Blue countries, keeping royals, ministers, and nobles awake at night.

If not for the North Blue Marines' earlier mediation, Vinsmoke Judge would have likely plunged half the sea into endless warfare.

As for Rogers Daren, the Supreme Commander of the North Blue Marines, the guests viewed him with nothing short of awe.

Everyone knew—this young man, not even twenty years old, was the true authority in the North Blue.

His fleet was undefeated. His own strength was unfathomable. He held absolute sway over this sea.

"Admiral Daren, I've heard the situation in the North Blue has changed quite a bit lately..."

Vinsmoke Judge took a glass of red wine from a passing server and handed it to Daren, speaking casually.

Daren accepted the glass, took a light sip, and replied with a faint smile.

"Oh? And what changes might King Judge be referring to?"

Vinsmoke Judge frowned slightly.

A scientist by training, he had little patience—or interest—for political games.

What he excelled at was overwhelming his enemies with science and military power, crushing nations with an army so strong it left no room for resistance.

Daren's vague, roundabout political tone only made him more irritated.

"Admiral Daren, I believe you know exactly what I'm talking about..."

He took a deep breath, forcing down his growing annoyance.

"Your Marines turned the entire North Blue underworld on its head. Then, within just two weeks, a brat named Doflamingo swept in with his family and took control of the region's black market."

"I'm just curious—are the rumors true?"

"Is Doflamingo working with you?"

"You do realize the rise of the Donquixote Family is disrupting Germa 66's expansion."

Daren gently swirled the wine in his glass, the blood-red liquid rippling against the crystal.

"King Judge, you should already know my stance on the so-called underworld."

He smiled.

"As long as there's peace and things are handled by the rules, I turn a blind eye."

"Doflamingo may be young, but he's capable. That's something I respect."

"As for Germa's expansion..."

He tapped his glass lightly against Judge's.

"If I remember correctly, the North Blue Marines are Germa's biggest trade partner now, aren't they?"

In the original timeline, the Donquixote Family's rise in the North Blue also disrupted Germa 66's plans for dominance. Left with no choice, Vinsmoke Judge had turned to exporting warfare, operating worldwide as mercenaries to continue his expansion through force.

Now, hearing the Marine's words, Vinsmoke Judge fell silent.

A few seconds later, a slow smile returned to his face.

"You're right. Stability and peace in the North Blue are what truly matter."

At that moment, the butler softly rang a ceremonial bell, cutting short the conversation.

"Now presenting the eldest daughter of the Vinsmoke family... The baptism ceremony will now begin!"

The crowd turned their attention toward the entrance.

A pale but gentle-looking woman entered, pushing a baby stroller, escorted by several Germa guards. Her white royal gown was simple and elegant, without excessive jewelry or embellishment. Lightly made up, she carried a delicate, graceful presence.

Queen Sora of the Vinsmoke royal family.

'So this is Sanji's mother... she really does seem gentle.'

The thought flickered through Daren's mind.

"Admiral Daren, a pleasure to meet you."

Queen Sora approached, pushing the stroller, and offered a graceful noble's curtsy.

Daren gently took her hand, gave a polite bow, and placed a chivalrous kiss on her fingers.

"I've heard much about Queen Sora's elegance. Seeing you today, it's clearly well deserved."

He glanced down at the rosy-cheeked baby girl in the stroller and smiled.

"This must be Reiju, the Vinsmoke family's eldest daughter? Congratulations to you both."

"I've prepared a small gift for little Reiju, just a personal token. I hope you won't refuse."

He signaled to Momonga, who quickly stepped forward and handed a list to the butler standing behind Vinsmoke Judge.

The writing was dense and detailed—even from a glance, it was clear this wasn't just any ordinary gift.

"I sincerely thank Admiral Daren for his generosity. May the friendship between Germa and the North Blue Marines last forever."

Queen Sora smiled and raised her glass with elegant composure.

Daren clinked his glass against hers and drank it all in one go.

Soon, the baptism began.

Little Reiju, delicate as a porcelain doll, was gently placed into a warm wooden basin by the butler. Before all the gathered guests, she received the ceremonial blessing.

Applause followed, and with that, the banquet officially commenced.

"May I hold her?"

Daren asked, smiling at Queen Sora, who now held baby Reiju in her arms.

She hesitated slightly, then replied softly.

"Of course."

With care, she handed Reiju over.

Daren held the baby girl—pink hair, curled eyebrows, sucking on her tiny fingers—and for a moment, felt a rare sense of disorientation.

This was Sanji's biological sister. The future "Poison Pink," Vinsmoke Reiju.

He gently pinched her soft cheek, already forming a judgment in his heart.

Vinsmoke Judge had clearly begun modifying the lineage factors in his bloodline.

"She'll be the pride of Germa 66."

Judge walked over and said in a deep voice.

Daren glanced at him and smiled slightly.

"I believe she will."

He carefully returned Reiju to the soft crib, gently adjusting her hair and tucking her in.

Then, almost casually, he asked,

"King Judge, there's something new I'd like to discuss."

"Germa 66... do you have any seastone?"

Chapter 80: I Will Lead the North Blue Fleet Into Battle

Three days passed in a flash.

"Admiral Sengoku, everything is ready."

"In three hours, the target—Byrnni World—will land on an uninhabited island in the northern waters of Rubeck Island. I recommend initiating the operation there."

Inside the warship's cabin, Sengoku listened to the calm voice coming from the military Den Den Mushi. His brows slowly knitted into a frown.

"Daren, are you sure this intel is accurate?"

"For the past three days, Byrnni World's movements have been erratic. Even the government's intelligence network has failed to track a single trace of the World Pirates. If the intel is wrong and our Marine forces are exposed, all the efforts we've put into this operation will go to waste."

As he spoke, Sengoku shot a glare at Borsalino, who was casually clicking his nails nearby.

"Please rest assured, Admiral Sengoku—there won't be any mistakes."

"The intel comes from a reliable source. As far as I know, Byrnni World has been purchasing a large number of smuggled weapons through North Blue's underworld channels. The confirmed exchange site is the island in question."

Daren's composed voice echoed from the Den Den Mushi.

Hearing Daren's confident tone, Sengoku's expression softened, a faint smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

"Good. I knew I wasn't wrong about you."

He paused briefly, then asked, "Do you have any recommendations for the operation to take down Byrnni World?"

On the other end, Daren sounded deliberately hesitant.

"Admiral Sengoku, I'm only a headquarters Captain. It might be inappropriate for me to offer strategic advice on a major operation against a pirate of Byrnni World's caliber, no?"

Sengoku snorted.

"Cut the crap, kid!"

"If you've got something to say, say it. Once the mission's a success, you'll get your share of the credit!"

"Besides, I've already submitted your promotion paperwork. As long as it clears the formal review, your appointment as Commodore will go through. A position like that is more than qualified to participate in an operation of this level."

Sengoku wasn't naive.

As the Marine's famed "Resourceful General," his political savvy and strategic brilliance were among the best on the seas.

Ever since the Saint Xildes incident, the World Pirates had become increasingly cautious and slippery. Neither the Marine nor CP intelligence networks could pinpoint Byrnni World's location.

Sengoku had even reached out through personal connections to the leaders of various North Blue kingdoms in hopes of picking up a trail—only to come up empty-handed.

And yet, under these conditions, Daren—North Blue's Admiral—managed to deliver pinpoint intel with an exact time and location within just two days.

That fact alone said plenty.

As Sengoku mulled this over, a sudden, absurd thought crossed his mind.

Could it be...

"Daren! Did you arrange this arms deal yourself!?"

His tone sharpened, voice turning stern.

The Den Den Mushi fell silent for a second before Daren's amused voice calmly replied.

"As expected of Admiral Sengoku. Your insight is as sharp as ever—nothing gets past you."

"Yes. I arranged it."

"Over the past few days, Byrnni World has been frantically recruiting troops, stockpiling weapons, and building a massive cannon—one with the potential to wipe out your entire fleet."

BANG!!

Sengoku's fist slammed into the desk in front of him. His face darkened like a stormcloud.

"Damn that Byrnni World!"

"Is he trying to blow up Marineford!?"

Having clashed with Byrnni World multiple times, Sengoku knew better than anyone how terrifying the Moa Moa no Mi could be.

If the man got his hands on a weapon of that scale... Forget the fleet. With his deranged, violent personality, Byrnni World wouldn't hesitate to turn Marine Headquarters into a crater.

Still, knowing this ahead of time gave them a fighting chance.

That thought helped settle Sengoku's rising panic.

"You didn't actually give him that cannon, right? Daren... I trust you. You wouldn't be foolish enough to—"

"No, Admiral Sengoku," Daren interrupted smoothly. "I did give it to him. A cannon unlike anything the world has ever seen."

Sengoku: ...

One second later—

"WHAT DID YOU SAY!?"

Sengoku shot up from his seat, voice thundering so loudly it nearly blew the roof off the cabin. Even Borsalino rubbed his ear, wincing.

"Have you lost your mind?!"

Sengoku growled, glaring at the Den Den Mushi as if Daren's calm face was right in front of him, nostrils flaring with steam.

"Please, Admiral Sengoku—don't panic. I had my reasons."

Daren's unhurried tone came through again.

"Byrnni World may seem insane, but he's extremely difficult to deal with."

"Despite his ambition to destroy the world, he's not some reckless idiot."

"Without offering a big enough incentive, we'd never lure him out for a decisive strike."

"If he didn't receive the cannon, he wouldn't risk going to war with us—especially not while injured."

"Right now, we have him boxed into the North Blue. This is our best chance. We can't let it slip."

"Because if he escapes into the Grand Line—or worse, the New World—it'll be exponentially harder to take him down."

Sengoku rubbed his temple as he listened to Daren's calm, logical breakdown, still visibly troubled.

"But Daren... you're taking a hell of a risk."

"No, Admiral. Please trust me."

Daren's voice carried the weight of conviction.

"If I dared to give him that cannon, it's because I'm confident I can handle him."

"As for this operation—there's something I want to request."

He paused, then said clearly and firmly:

"I want to lead this mission."

"I will command the North Blue Fleet... and go into battle!"