

One Piece 761

Chapter 761: Volume 4 – Chapter 280: Extreme Haki Training!

He had been right all along!

As Daren felt the roar of strain erupting from his muscles, nerves, and even his very cells under the immense pressure of the world's three strongest Logia users, his outstretched fingers trembled uncontrollably.

This was the feeling!

That constant, spine-chilling sense of danger—as if death could come at any moment, his life dancing on the edge of a blade!

Only this kind of external pressure could force his Armament Haki to evolve—could drive it to the brink of transformation!

Because only overwhelming, overcharged Haki could resist the powers of a Devil Fruit!

Heat billowed from Daren's breath, and his gaze burned with intensity.

Ever since the battle on Philseque Island, ever since facing the Five Elders and their bizarre, unnatural "Immortal Body" abilities, he had been searching for a countermeasure.

Physically speaking, he was already at the pinnacle of the sea.

Even natural-born monsters like Kaidou and Big Mom couldn't match him in raw strength or durability.

And yet, even with power strong enough to “tear apart” a member of the Five Elders, he still hadn't managed to inflict any real damage on that so-called immortal body.

Which raised the obvious question:

Was it because his Haki wasn't strong enough?

Even with his knowledge as a transmigrator, Daren had little concrete information on the Five Elders' combat prowess.

If he truly wanted to find a way to deal with those five demons, he'd have to test bold theories—then confirm them through battle.

If brute strength wasn't enough... what about Haki pushed to its absolute limit?

His Armament Haki wasn't weak, but compared to his freakish body and strength, it still lagged behind.

And when it came to forging stronger Haki through combat, there was only one group that came to mind—the three strongest Logia users in the world: the future Admirals of Marine Headquarters.

After all, he'd already squeezed all the "experience" he could out of Kaidou and Whitebeard, and he'd beaten most of the major pirates into the ground.

But the Marines... this batch of "crops" was still thriving.

A thousand thoughts flashed through Daren's mind as he threw himself forward again, body covered in wounds, charging straight at Sakazuki and the others!

"Still going, huh..."

Borsalino let out a helpless sigh. His body blurred into light particles as he swiftly retreated, narrowly dodging Daren's ferocious dragon claw strike before raising his hand and firing a blazing laser beam.

Daren narrowed his eyes. With a flick of his finger, a cluster of floating metal fragments twisted violently and rose into the air.

The world fell silent.

Zzzzzzt...

Within the raging magnetic field, the metal shards morphed into a concentrated beam, wrapped in spiraling arcs of blue lightning.

Roar!

Super Railgun!

The two beams collided high in the sky, erupting in a massive explosion of light. A searing white flash overwhelmed everyone's vision.

Boom!!

Scattered light particles rained down on Daren's body, detonating on impact and igniting searing flames across his form.

Armament Haki +0.187!

Amid the surging blaze, the Vice Admiral stomped the ground and charged forward like a madman, tearing through the smoke as he closed in on Sakazuki once again!

“He’s lost it!”

Seeing the madness blazing in Daren’s eyes, Sakazuki frowned, his right arm swelling before erupting into molten magma like a volcanic blast.

The strongest punch of searing magma...

“Bring it on, Sakazuki!!”

Daren let out a wild laugh as the two closed in.

They struck at the same time!

“Dai Funka!”

“Genkotsu Meteor!”

Boom!

A massive shockwave exploded between them. Both men grunted from the impact, sliding backward dozens of meters across the scorched ground.

Armament Haki +0.211!

The moment Daren regained his footing, he slammed his foot down hard.

The blood-soaked ground beneath him shattered violently, as if a swarm of dragons were writhing beneath the surface.

The encroaching frost instantly cracked and crumbled. With a sweep of his arm, four radiant, spiraling Haki-infused sword slashes howled toward Kuzan like specters of destruction.

The air boomed with pressure—it was clear he wasn't holding back at all!

"Oi oi oi, Daren! You trying to kill us here?!"

Kuzan cursed as he launched a counterattack.

Ice crystals surged across his arm, instantly forming into a massive ice bird that spread its wings wide and barreled toward the incoming slashes.

“Pheasant Beak!”

But against four Meito blades wrapped in Haki and moving at their peak speed, even an ice construct capable of freezing anything only held for a split second before being shredded into shards, erupting into a blizzard of ice fragments.

Mist surged through the air—and Kuzan’s figure vanished.

A chill swept in from behind. A shadow loomed.

Frost surged upward behind Daren, swiftly forming Kuzan’s silhouette. He threw his arms open and lunged to embrace him!

“Dahahaha! You’re not slipping away this time!”

“This move—I crafted it just for this showdown!”

“Ice Time!”

Kuzan’s arms locked tightly around Daren from behind.

In an instant, an overwhelming wave of cold surged forth.

Ice crystals bloomed from Kuzan's arms, visible to the naked eye, creeping over Daren's devil form and slowly eroding the black Haki that wrapped his body—like white ink bleeding through dark oil, the frost spread rapidly.

“Got him!”

A glint of fanatic glee flickered in Kuzan's eyes.

As the user of the Hie Hie no Mi, he could freeze anything he touched, transform any part of his body into ice, and shape pale-blue ice into any form to create weapons and launch attacks.

“Ice Age” was without question his most powerful large-scale technique. At full strength, it could freeze an entire small island solid for days without melting.

But “Ice Age” was a wide-range control move—effective in battlefield control and suppression, but less so against top-tier opponents.

After all, the wider the range, the more the freezing effect diluted.

But “Ice Time” was different.

An ultra-concentrated blast of cold air, fired point-blank without dispersing even a trace—focused entirely on one target.

In terms of raw freezing potential, its power far surpassed Ice Age.

This was Kuzan’s ace technique—developed specifically for close-quarters combat.

The frost spread relentlessly. Under the relentless cold, the Vice Admiral’s body locked up where he stood.

Bit by bit, a crystal-clear layer of ice encased him completely, finally forming into a gleaming iceberg nearly ten meters tall.

The ice sparkled under the faint sunlight, casting radiant beams. Inside, Daren’s terrifying, demon-god-like figure remained perfectly preserved—like a frozen sculpture of war.

“He did it!”

“Vice Admiral Kuzan landed the hit!”

“That was insane!”

“...”

Kuzan peeled himself away from the iceberg and staggered to the ground, gasping for breath.

Hearing the cheers and admiration erupting around him, he blinked in surprise—then scratched his head awkwardly and chuckled.

“Aw, come on... I won’t let it get to my head even if you flatter me like that.”

Still, he quietly puffed out his chest, his face tinged with a faint blush.

Then suddenly, all the noise stopped.

Kuzan froze.

Why did they go silent?

He looked up—only to find the Marine officers staring behind him, every face frozen in horror.

They were locked onto something behind him—something terrifying.

And then—

Kuzan heard it.

The sound of ice cracking.

Crack!

Chapter 762: Volume 4 – Chapter 281: Good Luck in Battle!

Crack!

Crack!

Crack!

The sharp sound of shattering ice echoed one after another, sending chills down Kuzan's spine and making his scalp prickle with dread.

"No way..."

He stood there, frozen, watching the stunned, terrified faces of the Marines in the distance. The corner of his eye twitched involuntarily.

Crack!

The sound of something breaking came from behind—the iceberg.

A bitter smile crept across Kuzan's lips as he turned around stiffly.

Zzzzzzt...!

Arcs of black and red lightning surged from the cracks in the ice, growing more intense with every burst, tearing fissures wider and wider until they wove together into a storm of lightning.

And then—

He wasn't sure if it was just his imagination, but in that instant, Kuzan saw it—

Daren, frozen solid inside the iceberg, moved his eyes slightly...and grinned at him.

A savage, feral grin.

Hiss...

Kuzan sucked in a sharp breath.

And in the next moment—

The storm of black and red Haki exploded to its peak, and the entire iceberg detonated in a burst of crystal shrapnel.

The frost shattered into dust. The Vice Admiral stepped forward through the haze, wrapped in a raging aura so intense it was visible to the naked eye—his presence overwhelming.

Armament Haki +0.418!

Armament Haki +0.333!

Armament Haki +0.403!

...

Armament Haki strength... 83.477!

At the same time, Daren could feel a faint, monstrous power slowly awakening in his arms.

That surging sense of dominance—of complete control, as if he could obliterate anything in his path—nearly made him want to howl in triumph.

“What... is happening...?”

As Daren’s body unleashed wave after wave of black-red lightning, wrapping around him in spiraling chaos, the distant Marines suddenly felt like they couldn’t breathe—an invisible pressure choking the air from their lungs.

Despite the severe burns and frostbite marring his flesh, with parts of his skin scorched and rotting away, Daren’s body pulsed with power, muscles rippling and twitching as if giant serpents coiled beneath his skin.

With that blackened, deathly form wrapped in pure Armament Haki, Daren now looked like a true demon god risen from the pits of hell.

Several Marine commanders gulped nervously.

“Am I... seeing this right?”

“Vice Admiral Daren—no, Rogers Daren—his Haki is still growing stronger.”

“What’s going on here?”

“Has he been hiding his strength this whole time?”

“Don’t be ridiculous! If Daren was holding back, why didn’t he just storm Mary Geoise and flatten it?”

“Shh! Quiet! You trying to get yourself killed?”

...

“He... got stronger again!?”

Kuzan’s eyes widened in disbelief.

In the blink of an eye—Daren vanished from view!

Bang!!

Agonizing pain erupted in Kuzan’s gut. A fist wreathed in black lightning slammed into his abdomen, a shockwave rippling out from his back in a flash of white force.

His eyes bulged, body folding like a boiled shrimp. He gagged violently, mouth hanging open.

“Thanks, Kuzan.”

Daren’s voice came from beside him, low and quiet.

The Vice Admiral appeared at Kuzan’s side as if from thin air.

Kuzan bit back the blood in his throat, rolled his eyes.

That's your idea of gratitude!?

Before he could even retort, a military boot drove into his chest with crushing force, sending him flying.

And just then—

A flash of deep, dangerous crimson filled Daren's pupils, expanding rapidly, filling his vision.

"Meigo!"

The Magma Fist roared out at an unimaginable speed, like a rabid dog lunging for the kill.

This was... Sakazuki's strongest strike!

Hiss!

A stream of molten flame grazed the Vice Admiral's side, scorching away flesh and instantly carbonizing the tissue!

He missed!?

Sakazuki's pupils shrank sharply.

A large, knuckled hand clamped down firmly on his arm.

“The explosive force of the Magu Magu no Mi really is insane. Even with the boost from my Devil Form, my Indestructible Body can barely hold up.”

Daren panted lightly, blood dripping from the torn ends of his hair.

Sakazuki froze.

Before he could react, Daren's other bloodstained, calloused hand suddenly shot forward and clamped around his head.

Darkness immediately swallowed his vision. As Daren's fingers tightened, a dull, crushing pain spread through Sakazuki's forehead—his skull felt like it could shatter under the pressure of that inhuman grip.

Then Daren's feet slammed into the ground like twin hammers, launching him into the air with a thunderous blast.

The sudden rush of weightlessness overwhelmed Sakazuki. He gritted his teeth and tried to break free, but Daren's arms were like iron poured into a mold—utterly immovable. At this range, he couldn't do a thing!

Faced with that overwhelming, brute-force strength, the power he had once taken pride in felt no stronger than cotton.

Then, through the roaring wind, came the thick stench of blood and a low, menacing voice.

“Don't die so easily, Sakazuki.”

As the words landed, a wave of dizziness hit him like a hammer to the skull.

With the nearby Marines frozen in stunned silence, Daren raised Sakazuki high with one hand and, under the pull of gravity, began to plummet like a meteor...

Like a dragon's dive, black lightning erupted around Daren's body, flaring outward like a black dragon's wings.

Still gripping Sakazuki's head, he drove him down like a blazing meteorite.

“Devil Form: Dragon’s Dive!”

BOOM!

The ground screamed under the pressure, groaning into a wail as it buckled beneath the impact.

Towers of dust surged into the sky. The shockwave shredded Sakazuki’s cap and uniform into fluttering scraps.

His pupils lost focus, blood pouring from his mouth and nose in steady streams.

His flesh tore apart and burst into molten chunks, flung into the air and scattered across his own savage, battle-worn face.

A massive chasm split the ground at the point of impact and tore through the land, stretching several kilometers into the distance, its end nowhere in sight.

The deafening noise of destruction echoed endlessly as the widening rift devoured buildings on either side, launching clouds of debris skyward.

And then—

BOOM!!

A colossal pillar of magma erupted with a deafening roar, its searing red torrent staining the sky.

The scorching wind swept outward with terrifying force. Countless Marines were thrown like sand into the raging sea, hurled away by the blast.

“Vice Admiral Sakazuki... was smashed straight into the ground!”

“This is insane!”

“If Marineford weren’t built with such a solid structure... If this were just an ordinary island...”

“That one blow could’ve shattered the whole landmass!”

“...”

The Marine officers were forced to retreat another three kilometers, only stopping once they had reached a safe distance. From there, they stared in shock at the center of the fiery storm.

From within the torrent of lava, the battered figure of the Vice Admiral emerged, staggering forward with smoke billowing off his body.

Under Sakazuki's desperate counterattack, the Armament Haki armor covering him began to crack inch by inch, before shattering like glass and falling away in glittering dust.

He stood there, drenched in blood, with large portions of his skin sloughing off—some areas even looked partially melted.

"This lunatic..."

After several flashes, Sengoku finally returned to the battlefield, his face darkening as he looked at Daren's bloody, broken form, barely able to believe what he was seeing.

"Well then... Thank you all for the guidance."

The Marine Vice Admiral forced a grin, baring bloodstained teeth.

He gave a slight bow—and then, brilliant black lightning surged from his body like a blooming lotus, wild and magnificent!

Armament Haki Strength: 85,000!

“May fortune favor you in battle!”

With those words, his figure shot into the air.

Driven by a magnetic field, he broke the sound barrier in an instant and vanished into the distant sky.

Chapter 763: Volume 4 – Chapter 282: An Unprecedented Enemy

As that fearsome, demonic figure vanished into the distant sea of clouds, every Marine present finally exhaled in relief.

Some collapsed to the ground, as if their strength had drained away entirely, panting heavily in the aftermath. The usual discipline and dignity of a Marine were nowhere to be seen.

Their pale faces turned toward the devastated landscape before them—nothing but wreckage and ruin in sight.

Within several kilometers, every street and building had been obliterated. The ground had caved in, smoke and dust swirling in every direction.

And then there was that massive, seemingly bottomless chasm—lava and flames still bursting and sputtering from within—enough to make anyone’s heart race with dread.

“So this is the power of Vice Admiral Daren... no, Rogers Daren...”

“Not even the three ‘monsters’ of Marine Headquarters, who stand shoulder-to-shoulder with him, could stop him!”

“It’s terrifying...”

“If he hadn’t been holding back, he could’ve easily leveled all of Marineford in that one battle...”

“ ... ”

The Marines murmured among themselves, still shaken. As their eyes met, they all wore the same bitter, speechless expression.

Back on Philseque Island, when they had witnessed the earth-shattering clash between Daren and the Five Elders, their focus had mostly been on the strangeness of the Five Elders and Daren’s madness and overwhelming strength...

But this time, the brutal battle in the heart of Marineford made the Navy’s core elite experience, for the first time, a suffocating sense of true oppression.

The despair of standing face-to-face with Rogers Daren!

The same man they once admired, respected, and worshipped—the Vice Admiral who had achieved countless glorious feats for the Navy and for justice—had now become their enemy.

The comrade and general who used to bring them a sense of absolute safety, the one they believed could turn the tide of any crisis just by showing up... had now become a nightmare.

And this was with Daren clearly holding back.

If he had really intended to destroy Marine Headquarters without restraint, then Marineford would already have been reduced to ashes by that cursed blade, Enma.

He had shown restraint this time.

But next time?

This war won't end just because of today's clash.

As long as the World Government—or more precisely, the Five Elders—refuse to issue a ceasefire order, the war will continue.

So the next time they meet... will it come down to close-quarters combat? To fighting like mortal enemies until the last drop of blood is spilled?

If it really comes to that, will Vice Admiral Daren still hold back?

Or will he embrace the same ruthless methods he once used against his enemies and unleash a strike so devastating it crushes all hope?

If that happens...

It would mean Marine Headquarters will be facing a threat unlike any before.

Someone with the monstrous physique and defense of Kaidou of the Beasts, hailed as the strongest creature on land, sea, and air...

The brutal strength and savage might of Charlotte Linlin, Big Mom, the Evil Spirit...

The strategic mobility and ferocity of Shiki, the Flying Pirate...

And commanding the most powerful airborne fleet the seas have ever seen...

An unprecedented enemy!

When that man once again casts his gaze down upon this Holy Land of Justice...

When that peerless flying fleet, the one that tore through most of Mary Geoise, emerges from the clouds above Marine Headquarters...

When the thunder crashes and thousands of cannons fire in unison...

What kind of despair will the Marines face?

Just imagining the scene sent chills down the spines of every Marine present, plunging them into a long, stunned silence.

...

Sengoku stood still, wiping the blood from the corner of his mouth. His expression shifted uncertainly as he stared in the direction where Daren had vanished, fists clenched tight.

“Shall I go after him, Admiral Sengoku?”

Golden photons flickered rapidly at his side, gathering into a tall figure who asked with a lazy smile.

Sengoku shot an annoyed glance at Borsalino, whose uniform was only slightly rumpled, and whose demeanor remained annoyingly relaxed. The corner of Sengoku’s mouth twitched as he let out a deep breath and shook his head.

“Forget it. Even if you catch up to him, it won’t change a thing.”

Borsalino was powerful—Sengoku would be the first to admit that even he couldn’t fully grasp the extent of his adjutant’s strength.

But no matter how strong this brat was, could he really take on Daren?

“You sure? Daren’s seriously wounded. If I go now, I could probably finish him off, Admiral Sengoku...”

Borsalino stroked the stubble on his chin, smirking slightly as he looked at the admiral. Behind his sunglasses, a strange gleam flashed.

Sengoku was silent for a moment. Then his tone dropped, cold and sharp.

“Borsalino, don’t test me. My patience has limits.”

“Of course, of course. I’ll follow orders,”

Borsalino said with a mock-surrender, raising his hands. But behind the sunglasses, his grin only deepened.

Sengoku gave him a sideways glance.

“Don’t overthink it. Daren is now a world-class criminal, wanted by both the World Government and the Marines. There’s no chance I’d ever cover for him.”

“It’s just... that kid always has more tricks than you expect. If you go alone, I’m worried something might happen.”

Borsalino nodded repeatedly.

“Yes, yes... I hear you.”

His tone was teasing.

Sengoku ignored the shameless man and turned his head, suddenly sensing something.

From the massive rift in the earth nearby, a scorched figure slowly dragged itself out of the splattering magma, staggering, panting.

Sakazuki's injuries were horrific. His entire face was streaked with blood, his upper body torn and raw, skin peeling in large patches.

The sight of him in such a state only made him look more terrifying than ever.

"Vice Admiral Sakazuki!"

A few Marines saw the state he was in and rushed forward to support him, trying to help with treatment.

Sakazuki waved them off and stumbled out of the boiling magma. Blood streamed from his mouth and nose, hissing into vapor the moment it hit the searing ground, leaving only dark red stains behind.

"I'm fine," he rasped, then turned his gaze toward Sengoku.

Sengoku gave a small shake of his head.

Meanwhile...

Kuzan lay amidst a field of frozen wreckage, face bruised and swollen, staring dazedly up at the gray sky.

The ice slowly evaporated, black smoke rolling upward.

Silence fell over the battlefield.

The world felt deathly still.

Until suddenly—

“Huh? Is that... a News Coo?”

A Marine seemed to notice something and called out softly.

Everyone froze, as if remembering something terrible. Their expressions shifted in unison.

They all looked up at the gloomy sky.

Flocks of News Coos swooped down from above, like a sweeping curtain of white, dropping rolled-up newspapers by the dozens.

Newspapers scattered like snow, filling the sky and blanketing the ground.

They fluttered down like white feathers—eerie, beautiful, dreamlike.

Plap.

The papers hit the earth one after another.

A strong hand reached out and picked one up.

Sengoku stared at the fresh-off-the-press newspaper in his hands, his fingers trembling uncontrollably.

He stood in silence for a long moment.

Under the cautious gazes of the surrounding Marines, he slowly unfolded the paper.

The headline splashed across the front page made him freeze in place.

Chapter 764: Volume 4 – Chapter 283: The World's Most Dangerous Criminal! A Shocking Bounty!

The moment Sengoku unfolded the newspaper, his pupils shrank into needlepoints.

Those powerful hands of his—capable of crushing mountains and cleaving cliffs—began to tremble uncontrollably.

“He's lost his mind!!”

The words burst from his mouth before he could stop them, all color draining from his face.

“That damned bird, Morgans... He's completely insane!”

“How dare he put something like this in print!?”

“Does he have a death wish!?”

Seeing Sengoku's drastic change in expression, the other Marine officers tensed instantly.

They scrambled to pick up the scattered newspapers, flipping them open—only to collectively gasp as their eyes swept across the headlines.

Sakazuki frowned, taking a paper from a trembling Marine beside him. He flipped it open and began to read.

There, in bold letters across the front page of the World Economy News, was a headline that couldn't be missed:

“‘King of the North Blue’ Rogers Daren Declares War on the World Government—The Holy Land Reduced to Ashes!”

Beneath the headline was a photograph, shocking enough to steal anyone's breath.

It captured a scene straight from hell:

The most sacred and exalted place in the world—Mary Geoise, the Holy Land of the Celestial Dragons—lay in ruins, consumed by roaring flames. The once-magnificent city was now a burning wasteland.

Collapsed buildings. World Nobles set ablaze. The very air in the photo seemed to writhe from the heat.

And in the smoke-choked skies above, vague silhouettes of massive metal warships could just be seen. Though blurred, they were unmistakably arranged in perfect formation, unleashing wave after wave of brilliant explosions and fire.

Suspended high in the sky, wreathed in crackling blue lightning, a lone figure loomed—like a thunder god looking down upon the world with cold indifference.

Beneath the photo, the subheading read clearly:

“The Flying Fleet Returns—Possibly the Most Powerful Weapon of Mass Destruction in the World Today!”

“North Blue Admiral ‘Raichu’ Momonga, claiming to act under orders from ‘King of the North Blue’ Rogers Daren, led the North Blue Fleet to the Holy Land for what was supposed to be a ceremonial military inspection by the World Government!”

Both the headline and the accompanying article were densely packed with text—an exhaustive breakdown of the North Blue Fleet’s air raid on Mary Geoise.

There were speculations and detailed analysis on every aspect of the fleet: its size, firepower, manpower, construction costs, and time of assembly. Even more damning was the assessment of the utter failure of the World Government’s defenders—their sacred guard units, multiple CP departments, and even the fabled “God’s Knights” were described as incompetent, cowardly, and utterly crushed.

In its usual flashy style, the World Economy News delivered the account using plain, gripping language designed to shock and hook readers across the globe.

In the margins, every available space was filled with commentary and opinions from so-called “current affairs experts”:

Some speculated that the World Government still had hidden cards yet to play, urging the public to remain calm.

Others dismissed it as fake news, insisting the photo was doctored.

Some declared Rogers Daren had pushed himself into a corner—claiming the North Blue Fleet’s actions were tantamount to suicide.

And then there were those asking the real questions—how had the North Blue Fleet managed to amass such vast resources? How had it stayed hidden from both the Marines and the Government?

Sakazuki read every single word, not even skipping over the punctuation. His expression darkened, shifting as he processed it all.

Clenching his jaw, he abruptly flipped the page to the next story.

A second, equally disturbing report awaited him.

“Rogers Daren engages in a fierce battle with the Five Elders—the highest authority in the World Government!”

“Now stripped of all power and position, where will he go next?”

“The World Government and Marine Headquarters face an enemy unlike any before!”

“Since Monkey D. Dragon, no world-class criminal has ever defected from the Marines!”

“...”

Hiss!

Magma surged from Sakazuki’s hand, instantly incinerating the newspaper into ash.

He let out a slow, heavy breath, then suddenly stepped forward and stopped in front of Sengoku, eyes dark and brooding as they locked onto the admiral.

“So... this is the outcome the Five Elders wanted?”

Sengoku gave him a glance, his voice calm.

“We are not in a position to speculate on the will of the Five Elders.”

“As Marines, our duty is to follow the orders of the Government and complete our missions.”

“The Five Elders have lived for countless years. Their wisdom and depth go far beyond what we can comprehend.”

But even as he spoke, he visibly hesitated for a moment.

Sakazuki was silent, then suddenly let out a cold, stiff smile.

“Let’s hope so. After all, Daren is our enemy now.”

“But Admiral Sengoku, I served alongside him in the North Blue. In some ways, I understand his personality better than anyone else in the Marines.”

He looked at Sengoku with a blank expression, but the weight behind his words and the oppressive chill in his eyes sent an involuntary shiver down the admiral’s spine.

“When Daren commits to something—or targets someone—it means he’s already prepared for the absolute worst.”

“And that version of Rogers Daren... is the most terrifying one.”

“You have no idea what he’s capable of, Admiral Sengoku. And I’m not just talking about combat. I mean everything else, too.”

Sakazuki’s tone turned ice-cold.

“He’ll use anything—everything—you can’t even imagine... to utterly destroy his enemies.”

With that, he turned and strode away without waiting for a reply.

His military boots crunched against the scorched and broken earth, leaving behind smeared trails of blackened blood.

Maybe it was just an illusion, but as Sengoku watched that tattoo-covered, steely back recede into the distance, a cold chill stirred in his chest.

Sakazuki’s presence had grown even darker, sharper... like he was cloaked in the stench of blood.

“So then, Admiral Sengoku... how should we handle this?”

Borsalino casually raised the newspaper in his hand, his tone light and amused.

Sengoku was quiet for a moment.

Faced with the gazes of countless Marine officers and soldiers, he exhaled deeply—as if reaching a decision that weighed heavily on his soul. His eyes reddened, and his fists clenched tight.

“Issue the bounty.”

“Former Marine Headquarters Vice Admiral Rogers Daren has openly slaughtered Celestial Dragons and challenged the rule of the World Government, bringing about catastrophic consequences. His crimes are unforgivable...”

“From this moment on, Marine Headquarters hereby strips Rogers Daren of all military rank and honors and declares him one of the world’s most dangerous criminals!”

“The bounty...”

His voice was like the chill of winter itself, making everyone's hearts freeze.

"...5 Billion Belly!"

Chapter 765: Volume 4 – Chapter 284: Oden – I Have the Strength to Fight

New World, a certain island.

A vast canopy of pitch-black clouds loomed over the land like a suffocating hood, pressing down with an oppressive weight.

Howling winds whipped the sea into towering waves, each surge crashing like a raging dragon roaring from the deep.

Rain poured in torrents, pounding the massive forest like a barrage of bullets.

A full-blown storm had arrived, sweeping through every corner of the island.

Inside a cave nestled in the jungle, the Roger Pirates gathered around a crackling campfire, sheltering from the rain and taking a break.

"This rain... it's not normal."

Rayleigh leaned against the damp stone wall, holding a bottle of strong liquor, his eyes narrowed as he watched the chaos outside. The storm tugged at his nerves, and he couldn't help but frown.

Crack!

A blinding white light suddenly ripped through the gloom.

A thunderclap split the sky, the deafening sound nearly shaking the cave. In the distance, the rumble of landslides and collapsing boulders echoed across the island, and even the cave's walls trembled faintly as pebbles rained down from above.

"Wahahaha! Isn't that just New World weather for you?"

Roger threw an arm around Rayleigh's shoulders, laughing heartily.

One hand lifted a bottle high into the air, the other clutching a slab of greasy, aromatic roast meat. His face was flushed red from drink, and even the two wiry hairs on his upper lip twitched with joy.

"We've been through plenty of storms before! Stop worrying, Rayleigh!"

"Let's just enjoy the break. That meddling bastard Garp's stuck out there in the wind—this is the perfect time to relax!"

Roger grinned, taking a big bite of meat.

The rich, sizzling juices burst in his mouth, mingling with the harsh burn of cheap whiskey. The sharp flavor hit him hard, making him narrow his eyes in satisfaction.

“Right, fellas?”

He raised his bottle toward the rest of the crew with a wide grin.

“Hahahaha! Damn right!”

“Party! Party! Isn’t this what sailing’s all about—throwing a party anytime, anywhere?”

“Strike up the music!”

“...”

Gaban and the rest of the crew burst into laughter, raising their drinks in celebration.

Since boarding Roger's ship, their lives had been anything but stable. Sometimes they feasted, sometimes they went hungry.

And when there was wine today, why wait for tomorrow?

A storm like this? The perfect excuse for a party!

That was what it meant to live like a pirate.

Rayleigh watched the lot of them—drinking, laughing, tearing into meat like wild animals.

The corner of his mouth twitched. He rubbed his temples instinctively.

He could still remember—when this crew first came aboard, they weren't like this at all...

When had they become so carefree? So reckless?

He couldn't recall anymore...

Rayleigh's eyes softened as he stared at their smiling faces, lost in a moment of quiet daze.

"Alright..."

Rayleigh suddenly smiled, discreetly dodging Roger's greasy hand as it reached over to mess with him.

"But really, when it comes to Garp, you never seem worried at all, do you, Roger?"

Roger chuckled, saying nothing.

Rayleigh rolled his eyes and shook his head, though deep down, he let out a quiet sigh of relief.

The Roger Pirates had been under heavy pressure lately.

Ever since the World Government learned they had collected all four Road Poneglyphs and were close to locating the "final island," the Navy's pursuit had intensified dramatically.

Especially that stubborn old bastard Garp—his offensives had come wave after wave without pause, doggedly hounding the Oro Jackson, giving them barely a moment to breathe.

If it hadn't been for the sudden storm interrupting Garp's advance, they'd probably still be dodging shells and cannonfire right now.

"What the—!? A News Coo actually made it through this storm?"

A surprised voice rang out.

Everyone turned to see a one-armed figure in samurai garb flash through the wind and rain before quickly returning, holding a newspaper sealed in a clear waterproof pouch.

"Oden's gotten even faster," Rayleigh said with a smile to Kozuki Oden.

He was full of admiration for the samurai's incredible swordsmanship. No matter the training or advice given, Oden picked it up instantly—something Rayleigh had rarely seen in his life.

Kozuki Oden humbly shook his head.

"You flatter me, Rayleigh-san. It's only thanks to your guidance and Captain Roger's help that I've improved so quickly."

He raised his head, unfolding the newspaper with one hand as a determined smile formed on his lips.

“If I faced that Marine again now—even if I couldn’t win—I’d still have the strength to stand and fight!”

“I’m actually looking forward to our next encounter. I want to test my sword against his ‘Indestructible Body’ and see just how far I’ve come... Hmm?”

Oden’s confident smile suddenly froze.

His eyes widened. He stared at the front page of the paper in utter shock, pupils narrowing to pinpoints.

“This... this can’t be real!”

He staggered back two steps, disbelief written all over his face as the color drained from his skin.

The rest of the crew noticed his reaction and quickly gathered around, curious about the sudden shift.

“What happened?”

“Some kind of major headline?”

“Hahaha! Don’t tell me the World Government got blown up or something?”

“Damn it... it actually did!!”

“Whoa! No way!”

“Rogers Daren—that Marine kid—he really went after the Five Elders!?”

“The Flying Fleet... bombed Mary Geoise!?”

“...”

A wave of gasps erupted as the Roger Pirates crowded around Oden, eyes glued to the newspaper in stunned silence.

One earth-shattering headline after another blasted off the page like bombs, blowing their minds wide open.

They stood frozen, jaws practically hitting the cave floor.

The legendary Marine prodigy, once celebrated across the seas, had openly defied the World Government—going so far as to clash directly with the Five Elders, the supreme rulers themselves?

The once-invincible airborne fleet had reemerged, descending on Mary Geoise with overwhelming firepower, leaving the Celestial Dragons' holy land in ruins?

What in the world was going on?

They'd only been evading Garp's pursuit for a couple of weeks—it wasn't even the first time they'd been chased like this. So how had everything outside changed so drastically?

That Marine brat—whose strength had once driven even the Roger Pirates into a corner—was now labeled a “traitor to the Marines” and “enemy of the World Government”? Just like that?

Chapter 766: Volume 4 – Chapter 285: Roger – I'm Going to Kill My Way to Mary Geoise

“What the hell is going on?”

“Has that Marine brat Daren lost his mind?”

“Or is it the World Government that's gone insane?”

“Still... it doesn't feel real. With that kid's personality, he's not the type to act on impulse. And yet, he's openly declared war on the World Government...?”

Outside the damp, shadowy cave, rain poured in sheets and the howling wind tore through like a blade.

Inside, the Roger Pirates sat in stunned silence, staring at the fresh newspaper in disbelief.

“That brat Daren was never the type to just blindly follow orders.”

At that moment, Roger, bottle in hand, suddenly grinned.

“Philseque Island, out in the frozen wastes of the North Blue. And the Five Elders show up there of all places? If I’m right...”

A flash of clarity cut through his drunken eyes.

“...Then what happened back then is happening all over again.”

Everyone froze—then their expressions shifted.

What happened back then... The God Valley Incident!

As witnesses to that infamous battle, the Roger Pirates knew the truth all too well:

It had been a genocidal massacre, orchestrated by the World Government against the inhabitants of God Valley.

After that bloodbath, the Government had ceased all similar “hunting tournaments,” especially given how many Celestial Dragons were lost.

But none of them had expected that, twelve years later, they’d actually revive that same monstrous game.

“Wait a minute... Don’t tell me the Government held this so-called hunt in the North Blue just to target Daren?”

Gaban, who had been silent in thought, suddenly looked up, a hint of disbelief in his voice.

“It’s very possible,” Rayleigh said, sighing with a complicated look in his eyes. “Daren’s growth has been far too fast.”

Silence fell.

Rogers Daren’s meteoric rise through the Marines had been so extreme it even made hardened pirates like them feel a chill.

Each of them could vividly recall their first encounter with the young Marine.

It had been when Daren left his post as North Blue Admiral and was heading to Marine Headquarters for advanced training.

Back then, he was just a young Captain with a Devil Fruit power that, while cunning, barely earned him a place in their memories—though it did make Roger switch to plastic belt buckles afterward.

But the truth was, at the time, Daren couldn't even take a single casual blow from Roger. He was nearly killed on the spot.

And now—less than three years later...

That same Marine captain had grown strong enough to threaten the entire Roger Pirates crew, wielding significant authority in the Marines, and had once even pushed them to the brink.

That kind of growth speed... was monstrous.

It wouldn't be surprising if even the World Government had grown fearful.

So they used the situation as a pretext—to crush his will, to break his spirit.

But no one had expected the “Marine upstart” to be hiding this much.

His strength, his talent, his cunning, and the forces behind him...

“Pfft—!”

A sudden laugh shattered the silence. Roger burst out laughing, clutching his stomach, his shoulders shaking.

“Wahahahaha! The World Government really did it to themselves this time!”

“I can’t even begin to imagine the looks on those five old fossils’ faces!”

“They actually backed Daren into a corner and made him rebel! Wahahaha!”

Roger laughed so hard he nearly fell over, his face turning bright red as he wheezed for breath.

The others blinked—then quickly realized.

He was right!

That dangerous little Marine had been forced into open rebellion by the World Government. And for them, the Roger Pirates...

That was good news.

At least now, among the enemies they feared in the Navy, one had been removed from the board.

“I wonder how much bounty the World Government and the Marines will put on his head?”

Gaban chuckled and shook his head.

Roger snorted.

“Whatever it is, it sure as hell won’t be higher than mine!”

He puffed out his chest with pride, and even the two long nose hairs on his face twitched smugly.

“I’m the man who’s worth 75 million more than Newgate and 140 million more than Shiki!”

Everyone stared at him, deadpan, as their captain stood hands on hips, laughing like a fool. Several of them rubbed their foreheads in exasperation.

Of all the numbers in the world, the only one he could recite perfectly... was bounty figures.

But to be fair, he wasn’t wrong.

Among the top-tier pirates and global criminals in the world, bounty rankings were divided into two major tiers, based on strength, notoriety, influence, and overall threat.

The first tier, with bounties over 2 billion Belly, included:

Monkey D. Dragon, Garp’s biological son and leader of the Freedom Fighters – 3.059 billion Belly!

Kaidou of the Beasts, “the strongest creature on land, sea, and air” – 3.089 billion Belly!

Big Mom Charlotte Linlin, the “Evil Spirit” – 3.36 billion Belly!

And Rayleigh and Gaban, vice-captains of the Roger Pirates.

Above them was the top echelon—those with bounties exceeding 4 billion Belly, the true apex predators of the sea:

Edward Newgate, the “Strongest Man in the World,” Whitebeard – 4.515 billion Belly!

Shiki the Golden Lion, the “Flying Pirate,” who once rivaled both Roger and Whitebeard – 4.45 billion Belly!

And standing above them all, the man with the highest bounty in history—

Gol D. Roger himself, with a jaw-dropping 4.59 billion Belly!

“Ahem... that might not hold up much longer.”

Rayleigh’s mouth twitched as he spoke under his breath.

Everyone turned in surprise.

Another newspaper had drifted down from the sky, landing right at the cave entrance.

And on the cover, printed boldly across the front page, were three freshly issued wanted posters.

Name: Monkey D. Dragon

Crimes: Founded the Freedom Fighters, openly defied the World Government, overthrew multiple national governments, incited chaos across the seas.

Threat Level: Extremely High

Bounty: 3.059 billion Belly

...

Name: Momonga

Crimes: Former Captain of Marine Headquarters, former North Blue Admiral, currently Deputy Commander of the North Blue Fleet, code-named "Raichu." Led an assault on Mary Geoise, the Celestial Dragons' Holy Land. High treason.

Threat Level: High

Bounty: 2.05 billion Belly

...

But all eyes quickly landed on the final poster—the largest one of the three.

Name: Rogers Daren

Crimes: Former Vice Admiral of Marine Headquarters, current Fleet Admiral of the North Blue Fleet. Violently disobeyed World Government orders, carried out a mass execution of Celestial Dragons, and openly attacked Marineford. His crimes are monstrous.

Threat Level: Highest

Bounty: 5 billion Belly

The cave went dead silent.

So quiet, you could hear a pin drop.

The entire crew of the Roger Pirates stared at that staggering number in stunned silence, hearts skipping a beat.

5 billion Belly.

“Not that much more... just 410 million more than yours,”

Rayleigh smirked, glancing at Roger and giving him a cheeky wink.

“About two Byrnni Worlds’ worth, give or take.”

Roger’s face flushed beet red like a boiled octopus.

“No way!”

“Absolutely no way!!”

He shot up in a rage, stomping toward the mouth of the cave.

The others scrambled to grab him before he bolted.

“Let go of me! I’m heading straight to Marine Headquarters—no, to Mary Geoise!!”

Roger roared, eyes bloodshot, snorting white steam from his nostrils.

“How the hell does that brat Daren have a higher bounty than me?!”

Chapter 767: Volume 4 – Chapter 286: The Final Island Appears!

"Captain Roger! Don't be reckless!"

"We can't fly, you know!"

"Charging into Mary Geoise is one thing, but there's no way we're getting out!"

"Calm down, calm down..."

"..."

The crew of the Roger Pirates clung tightly to their fool of a captain, faces flushed with anxiety, looking like they were about to cry.

"If we can't escape, then we don't need to!"

Roger was furious, gritting his teeth as he growled,

"That bastard Sengoku actually let some Marine brat's bounty surpass mine... He's looking down on me!"

"..."

Everyone's mouths twitched violently in disbelief.

The World Government and the Marines didn't assign bounties solely based on strength.

A target's destructive capabilities, their potential for danger, the threat they posed to the World Government's authority and the sea's stability, the size of their following, whether they had an uncontrollable lust for chaos—these all factored into the bounty amount.

Rogers Daren might be powerful, with a body and strength like a monster, but even then, his overall combat level was at most comparable to First Mate Rayleigh—not anywhere near Roger's level.

Let alone exceeding it.

Still, the World Government and Marine Headquarters had slapped a massive bounty on Rogers Daren, likely taking into account his Devil Fruit powers, his airborne fleet, and the dangers posed by his personality.

After all, even the Roger Pirates didn't go around provoking the Marines or attacking the World Government for no reason.

But that Marine brat? He absolutely would!

As Roger struggled against the crew trying to restrain him, Rayleigh rolled his eyes and snapped,

"Are you really going, Roger?"

"We're about to reach the final island. If you leave now, everything we've worked for will be wasted."

Roger froze. His body stiffened, expression hardening in place.

Muttering under his breath, he reluctantly pulled his foot back and turned to reenter the cave.

Outside, the rain still poured in sheets.

Inside, Roger squatted by the damp cave wall, swigging from a bottle and angrily scribbling circles into the dirt.

"Why the hell... That Marine brat only killed a few Celestial Dragons, and his bounty just shoots straight to the highest in the world..."

At some point, Kozuki Oden had crouched beside him, looking every bit the dejected companion. He said nothing, simply chugged down wine.

The air around the two seemed to darken, their resentment nearly manifesting as waves of purple-black miasma.

Rayleigh and the others: "..."

With a captain like this, it was no wonder they were exhausted.

Rayleigh sighed and rubbed his temples. He glanced toward the back of the cave, where two young figures sat near the fire, concern flickering in his eyes.

"Shanks, how's Buggy? Any better?"

Beside the bonfire...

Young Shanks sat cross-legged, the flickering flames casting shifting shadows across his face.

Buggy, red nose and all, lay on a cloak nearby. His cheeks were flushed, his expression twisted in discomfort.

Hearing Rayleigh's question, Shanks shook his head.

"He's still unconscious. His fever won't go down."

As he spoke, he soaked a towel and laid it across Buggy's forehead to help lower the temperature.

"Don't worry, it's just a cold. Devil Fruit users are especially vulnerable in storms. He should recover after a couple of days of rest."

The ship's doctor, Crocus, took the thermometer from Buggy and checked the reading, then patted Shanks on the shoulder with a smile.

He turned to Rayleigh and gave a reassuring nod—Buggy would be fine.

Rayleigh nodded, then looked toward Gaban.

"Any luck finding the final route?"

Gaban was fiddling with a Log Pose, which was vibrating and spinning wildly in all directions—no clear course in sight.

"The magnetic field in this region is a mess."

Gaban frowned deeply and shook his head.

"Oden managed to decode the ancient text on the Road Poneglyph, and we've got intel on the 'Final Island.' But the exact route is still a huge mystery."

"The New World is just too unpredictable. Even with route data, we often lose our bearings in this upside-down sea."

"But we can say for sure—we've reached the entrance to the final route. If we can just find that 'entrance,' we'll be able to reach the legendary 'Final Island.'"

...

The entrance...

Hearing this, Rayleigh and the others furrowed their brows, falling into silent contemplation.

To find this "entrance," they had been circling this stretch of sea for over two weeks.

Although they appeared to be laughing and joking as usual, anxiety was taking root deep within them.

The Oro Jackson was running dangerously low on both food and medical supplies.

If this kept up, they wouldn't even need Garp's unit to catch them—they'd end up lost in these chaotic waters... starved and helpless.

Buggy's persistent fever was mostly due to their medical stores being completely depleted. All they could do was hope his body could fight through it.

Just as everyone was lost in thought, someone suddenly cried out in surprise.

"What's that?!"

Rayleigh and the others were stunned and turned toward the voice.

They seemed to see something incredibly shocking—their eyes widened in disbelief.

"That's..."

"The sea... it's splitting apart!"

"A passage has appeared in the storm!"

"Could it be..."

Amid the raging storm, a massive whirlpool emerged on the distant ocean, lightning and thunder tearing across the sky.

Golden lightning crackled within the pitch-black vortex, the deafening roars painting a hellish scene.

As the sea howled and surged, a terrifying gap—seemingly without end—gradually opened up across the roaring waves, revealing a transparent tunnel beneath the sea!

At the same time, the magnetic needle in Gaban's hand suddenly began trembling violently. The spinning needle halted abruptly and locked onto the direction of the "underwater tunnel"!

Gaban jumped to his feet, eyes blazing with a desperate hope, locked firmly onto the path ahead.

"That's it!!"

"The final route!!"

"The entrance to the 'Final Island'! We've finally found it!!"

Everyone erupted with excitement. Hearts pounded. Fists clenched.

After half a month of fighting against the merciless sea—just as they were about to reach their limits—they had finally found hope!

That grand, dangerous, and awe-inspiring undersea tunnel... it was the dream the Roger Pirates had been chasing since the beginning!

At the far end of the tunnel, they could faintly make out the silhouette of an island!

The Final Island!

"Wahahaha!! Let's go!!"

Roger rose to his feet, bursting with energy, the bounty already forgotten as he laughed heartily.

"Let's go!!"

"To the island!!"

"This is our destination!"

"The Final Island, here we come!"

"..."

The Roger Pirates erupted into loud cheers. The gloom that had hung over them was swept away in an instant.

"But... Buggy..."

Crocus spoke up hesitantly.

"I'll stay behind."

A young voice rang out.

Shanks cast a long look at the awe-inspiring undersea tunnel, then slowly turned away, reluctant.

He lowered his gaze to Buggy, still lying on the ground in pain. After a moment of hesitation, he clenched his teeth.

"He needs someone to look after him."

Under everyone's gaze, the red-haired youth took a deep breath—then smiled.

"Besides... if it weren't for me, he wouldn't have become a Devil Fruit user."

Chapter 768: Volume 4 – Chapter 287: Are You So Sure I Won't Betray You?

"Vice Admiral Garp!"

"This storm is too strange!"

"This isn't a normal weather pattern... Even the magnetic field in this area has shifted dramatically!"

"Damn it! What the hell is going on?!"

"..."

Amid the howling waves, a massive dog-headed warship roared through the raging wind and rain.

With every surge of the ocean, the warship was tossed into the air as if flung by a giant hand from the depths.

On the deck, Marines in cloaks struggled against the storm, gripping the wheel and doing their best to steer the ship forward.

"Keep pushing ahead! No matter what happens, we cannot let Roger escape!"

At the bow of the warship, Garp stood with his fists clenched, his dog-head cap drenched in rain. His eyes locked onto the hellish storm ahead as he gritted his teeth and shouted with a roar that nearly drowned in the thunder.

Cold rain streamed down his face, and the fatigue in his bloodshot eyes was unmistakable.

After half a month of relentless pursuit and drawn-out skirmishes, Garp and the elite Marine unit under his command were running on fumes. Any normal force would have called off the chase by now.

But Garp knew better than anyone—if they were this exhausted, then Roger's crew had to be in even worse shape.

This was their best chance to take down the Roger Pirates for good.

"Roger, I will never let you reach the 'Final Island'!"

His fists tightened until they cracked, faint flashes of black and red lightning dancing across his knuckles.

He knew—if he couldn't catch Roger now, there might never be another chance.

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

Just then, an urgent Den Den Mushi call rang out from inside Garp's coat.

The tone was sharp and panicked. Garp pulled out the military Den Den Mushi, frowned, and hung up without hesitation.

It was from Marine Headquarters.

He didn't even need to check—it had to be that bastard Sengoku.

"I can't afford to get distracted right now, Sengoku..."

He wiped rain from his face and muttered to himself.

He wasn't in the mood to take any nonsense orders. Even if the sky fell, it wouldn't change his goal.

He had only one mission—to capture Roger!

"Vice Admiral Garp! Urgent transmission from Admiral Sengoku!"

A cold voice suddenly came from behind him.

Bogard appeared, holding a military Den Den Mushi in his hands and speaking in a low, steady tone.

Garp rolled his eyes and cursed,

"Not answering!"

"That bastard Sengoku probably wants me to deal with some mess again!"

"Always making me clean up after him while calling himself a 'Strategic Genius'. He's more like a 'Strategic Moron'! I'm not doing anything that stupid!"

Bogard's mouth twitched as he stepped forward and said quietly,

"Vice Admiral Garp... the line's already connected..."

Garp: "..."

His face turned dark.

He glared hard at Bogard, snatched the Den Den Mushi from his hands, and forced a laugh.

"Bwahahaha, Sengoku! My dear friend! What can I help you with today?"

"But with your brilliance, I doubt you'd need my help, right?"

"Yep, exactly—so I'll go ahead and hang up now!"

But Sengoku's furious voice roared out from the Den Den Mushi:

"Garp, you bastard! Hang up on me again and I'll never give you senbei again!"

Garp froze mid-motion, grinding his teeth.

"Damn it, Sengoku! What do you want now?!"

He glanced toward the storm-shrouded, chaotic sea ahead, his voice resolute.

"I've got the Roger Pirates surrounded! I'm about to take them all down!"

Sengoku snapped,

"That's bullshit! Bogard already reported you lost Roger!"

Garp's mouth twitched.

That damn Bogard!

He turned to yell—but found Bogard had vanished without a trace.

Garp: "..."

He clenched his jaw.

"So what? It's only a matter of time before I catch Roger!"

"I'm not going back!"

"Whatever it is—just let that brat Daren handle it!"

Suddenly, Sengoku's voice on the other end turned ominously cold.

"But what if the thing that needs handling... is Daren?"

Garp was stunned.

...

Half an hour later.

A uniquely shaped dog-headed warship suddenly burst out of the vast storm and stumbled onto the surface of the sea.

On the battered vessel, the Marines—soaked to the bone—collapsed across the deck, completely spent. They stared at the clear skies and calm waters ahead, then turned back toward the storm that had darkened the entire horizon. An indescribable shock slowly crept onto their faces.

Just then, News Coos flew overhead, dropping fresh copies of the latest newspapers.

The Marines picked them up casually and began flipping through—until the headlines struck them like lightning. Their expressions froze, and the blood drained from their faces.

"This... how is this possible..."

"Vice Admiral Daren..."

"He's gone up against the World Government!?"

"..."

Their hands trembled uncontrollably as they read, fear seeping into their bones. Almost instinctively, they looked toward the broad back of Garp.

"Damn it!"

At the bow, Garp suddenly turned around and furiously kicked over a barrel. His bloodshot eyes were blazing red.

"Of all times—it had to be now!"

He glanced back toward the storm, his gaze seeming to pierce through the roaring rain and wind. In the distance, a massive vortex was beginning to form, arcs of lightning crackling within it.

A crushing sense of defeat flooded into Garp's eyes. Veins bulged across the backs of his hands and his forehead.

"Turn back!"

He barked the order in fury.

But before turning away, he took one last, long look behind him.

And in that brief moment, a deep, gut-wrenching sense of dread welled up in his chest.

He couldn't shake the feeling... that he had just missed something monumentally important.

...

New World — Pleasure District.

Top floor suite of the Central Hotel.

"I understand, my lords."

Stussy, her short golden hair impeccably styled, nodded solemnly to the military Den Den Mushi and said in a low voice,

"I'll mobilize all underworld channels and resources to track down Rogers Daren and the North Blue Fleet."

The Den Den Mushi on the other end immediately clicked off.

Staring at the now-drowsy device, Stussy paused in thought for several seconds before slowly rising from her seat.

She was dressed in the signature white bodycon dress of CP0 female agents, her long, shapely legs wrapped in black fishnet stockings—highlighting her curvaceous silhouette perfectly.

At that moment...

She slowly turned around, her gaze falling toward the corner of the room.

At some point, a blood-soaked figure had silently entered the suite.

He now sat on the plush leather sofa, fresh blood dripping steadily from his wounds.

His face was deathly pale. The aura he exuded was faint—fragile, like a dying flame in the wind.

Stussy stood still for a moment. Then, the corners of her crimson lips curled upward in a faint smile.

"Are you so sure I won't betray you?"

From her back, a pair of pitch-black, bat-like wings unfurled slowly. Her presence shifted dramatically—bloodlust and a killing intent began to radiate from her gleaming crimson eyes.

"The world's most wanted criminal... Rogers Daren."

Chapter 769: Volume 4 – Chapter 288: I'm Just Not in the Right State of Mind

Half an hour later.

The lavishly decorated luxury penthouse suite was in total disarray.

Shreds of the white CPO-exclusive bodycon dress lay scattered alongside torn black fishnet stockings.

Near the edge of the plush bed, a pair of black high heels with red soles had been tossed carelessly to the side.

A Vice Admiral of the Marines, his body stained with blood, slowly sat up from the bed, walked over to the leather sofa, and dropped into it. Without hesitation, he poured himself a glass of whiskey.

He downed it in one gulp. Only then did Daren exhale slightly, raising his head with interest as he gazed at the trembling, pale figure on the bed. A faint smirk tugged at the corners of his lips.

"Aren't you supposed to be great at keeping up appearances? What happened to you, giving in this quickly... Senior agent of the World Government's top intelligence organization, Queen of the Pleasure District, Lady Stussy?"

That damn bastard!

Stussy lifted her head from the soft pillow, panting as she glared fiercely at the fierce and arrogant man. Her flushed face was captivating as she gritted her teeth.

"You're the most wanted criminal in the world now. Your bounty even surpasses those legendary Yonkō. Why the hell are you here?"

Her eyes lingered on the brutal injuries marring Daren's body, once again shaken by how monstrous this bastard's physique was.

Wounds this fatal would have killed even CP0's so-called "strongest shields of the Celestial Dragons" a dozen times over.

Yet this lecherous freak was still alive and moving. It defied everything she understood about the human body.

Still, no matter how tough someone's body was, their aura couldn't lie.

The life force radiating from Daren was weak and sluggish, unmistakably burdened by excruciating pain and fatigue.

Stussy fell silent for a moment, then said coldly,

"You've fought against the Five Elders and the monsters of Marine Headquarters. Even with your 'Indestructible Body,' you must be at your limit."

"In this condition, instead of returning to your fleet for protection and treatment, you came to me. Aren't you worried I'll break our agreement and hand you over to the Five Elders?"

"I'm still alive, aren't I? Besides, if you wanted to turn me in, you could've done it the moment we were talking over the Den Den Mushi."

Daren chuckled casually. He pulled out a blood-stained cigar, stuck it between his lips, and lit it.

"—Cough! Cough!!"

The harsh smoke scorched his wounded throat and lungs, triggering a violent fit of coughing. His pale face flushed with a sickly red, and he gasped several times before rasping hoarsely,

"...With the state I'm in, there's no way I could've snuck into this top-floor suite without you sensing me."

Stussy sneered.

"I wasn't sure how bad your injuries were at the time."

She casually grabbed a black silk robe from the bedside and draped it over her flawless body. Her long, pale legs touched the floor as she stood, crossing her arms as she looked down at Daren. Her eyes gleamed with cold arrogance and biting mockery.

"You managed to stand against the highest authority of the World Government and five Warrior Gods without falling behind. Can you blame me for being cautious?"

"How could I know if you'd suddenly lash out and snap my neck if I made a wrong move?"

Daren leaned back against the sofa, slowly exhaling a plume of smoke, his smirk laced with provocation.

"So now you're sure?"

Stussy's eye twitched ever so slightly. Her chest rose and fell in fury.

She gritted her teeth, glaring at this shameless scoundrel who clearly thought he had her wrapped around his finger. Forcing herself to remain composed, she suddenly broke into a sultry laugh.

"Fufufu... Yes, I'm sure now."

"After all, if this were under normal circumstances... I probably wouldn't even be able to stand right now, would I?"

Daren: "..."

His smirk faltered. He opened his mouth, but found himself speechless.

Right... maybe being too strong really wasn't such a good thing.

"...I'm just not in the right state of mind."

His mouth twitched as he turned his head away and gloomily exhaled a cloud of smoke.

It was rare to see this shameless man look so defeated, and Stussy felt an unexpected wave of satisfaction wash over her. The frustration from moments ago vanished in an instant, and she smiled coquettishly, lips gently curved.

"So, Mr. World's Most Wanted Criminal, you're really that sure I won't betray you?"

Daren shrugged.

"I wouldn't call it trust. I just think that with your intelligence and perspective, you wouldn't go so far as to drag us both down."

"After all, this war is only just beginning. Taking sides too early isn't something a smart person would do."

Stussy's long lashes narrowed slightly at his words.

"You mean... you still think you haven't lost?"

Daren blinked, as if he'd just heard the most absurd joke, then burst into laughter while clutching his stomach.

"Hahahaha! When did I ever lose?"

"Or is that what you all believe? That I'm bound to lose to those five decrepit fossils?"

He laughed so hard his shoulders trembled.

Stussy's brows drew together. She scoffed coldly.

"Isn't that the truth?"

"Sure, your fleet nearly razed half of Mary Geoise, but the foundations of the World Government are untouched."

"The Five Elders are now stationed in the Holy Land themselves. You're not getting another opening like that."

"And now you've completely severed ties with the Marines. You've become the most dangerous criminal in all the seas."

"Without the backing of the World Government, without your rank and status as a Marine, you're facing a reorganized World Government with absolutely no chance of winning."

"Daren, you know better than anyone—your previous advantage in dealing with the government and the Five Elders came from the fact that you were holding several hidden cards... and more importantly, they didn't see you as a serious threat."

"But now it's different. With both the government and the Marines issuing a global bounty on your head, they're coming for you with everything—ruthless, merciless, and absolute."

Despite the pointed warning, Daren simply smiled, unfazed.

"Funny... because you sound a lot like you're worried about me."

Stussy snorted.

"Don't flatter yourself. If you hadn't gotten dirt on me, do you really think you'd be sitting here this casually?"

Daren shook his head and let out a quiet chuckle.

"From the moment I walked into this room, you had at least three clear chances to take me out."

"But I'm still here, aren't I?"

"If earlier you weren't sure about the extent of my injuries... now that you are—"

He set down his cigar, spread his arms wide, and smiled.

"Go ahead. Take your shot."

Chapter 770: Volume 4 – Chapter 289: How About We Make Another Bet?

The top-floor luxury suite fell into complete silence.

Not a sound could be heard.

The scarred Vice Admiral sat with his arms wide open, fully relaxed, showing no sign of defense or tension. A calm, indifferent smile hung on his face.

Across from him, the Queen of the Pleasure District stood still in her black silk robe, clearly stunned. Her gaze lingered blankly on the smiling man. Her fingers, painted in bright crimson polish, twitched slightly—then eased.

One second.

Two seconds.

Three—

"Tch. You think I'd fall for that?"

Stussy scoffed with a cold smirk.

"Trying to test me with something that crude, Daren? Isn't that a little beneath you?"

"If you don't believe me, that's fine."

Daren shook his head with a sigh.

"All I'll say is—you just missed a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. You could've turned me in right now and secured deeper trust from the top of the government."

"I've been embedded in the World Government long enough to learn one thing: anything that's too easy to get your hands on usually hides something deadly."

Stussy responded with a chilling laugh.

She walked over and sat opposite the wounded Vice Admiral, crossing one leg gracefully over the other. She tilted slightly to light a slender lady's cigarette.

"So, what now?"

"I'm sure you heard it earlier—right now, the entire world is hunting you down. The higher-ups even named me directly, ordered me to activate every channel and contact I have to track your movements."

A minty plume of smoke curled around Stussy's alluring profile, sharp yet not vulgar, adding a uniquely icy beauty to her already dangerous presence.

She tapped a newspaper on the coffee table with the tip of her cigarette.

"This just came out. That lunatic Morgans seems to be a big fan of yours. He's even calling you a hero—someone standing against the World Government's tyranny."

"Tsk, tsk... A bounty of 5 billion Belly. Unprecedented. The Marines really pulled out all the stops this time."

Daren chuckled lightly.

"If you're strapped for cash, you could always turn me in. Though I highly doubt the Marines could actually cough up 5 billion Belly right now."

"As for that bird Morgans, I've always been intrigued by him. An Underworld Emperor who controls an intelligence and propaganda empire that vast... It's always made me wonder why the government tolerates his existence in the New World."

He was just too calm.

Facing the wrath of a colossus that had ruled the world for eight centuries, and yet he still had the time to drop by for a smoke and a drink.

Stussy narrowed her eyes at the man before her—the world's most wanted criminal—watching for even the slightest shift in his expression, hoping to catch a hint of what he was planning.

"No follow-up plan? That's not your style."

"Let me give you a little intel. The World Government fleet just entered the North Blue. It's highly likely they'll impose direct force and start terrorizing the region."

"The Five Elders won't spare anyone who dares to oppose them. They'll destroy everything you care about. That's not just their strategy—it's the arrogance embedded in their bones."

Daren exhaled a thin stream of smoke and raised an eyebrow.

"Oh? So the World Government has naval forces aside from the Marines?"

Stussy shook her head.

"Not exactly. It's just a makeshift unit formed from the Holy Land's guards."

"But even so, with the power and military hardware the World Government possesses, wiping out a few countries or islands is nothing to them. What's worse is that they're moving in waves, with massive numbers of ships. Even with your airborne fleet, there's no way you could intercept them all."

Her voice took on a note of irritation near the end.

That bastard had put together a flying fleet with terrifying power—and hadn't said a word to her!

What kind of partner was that supposed to be?

She'd given him access to her entire intelligence network—for free!

"The fleet is my biggest secret. Even my godson, Doflamingo, doesn't know about it."

Daren, catching the irritation in Stussy's tone, offered a calm smile as he explained.

"Tch, like I care about your so-called flying fleet."

Stussy curled her lips, then fixed him with a playful look and let out a laugh.

"At this rate, you're not going to be able to hold North Blue. No matter how loyal or satisfied those countries were with you before, in the face of the World Government's overwhelming power, they'll be forced to bow their heads."

"Without a fixed base of power, your fleet loses its source of revenue. Without proper military funding, collapse and desertion are just a matter of time."

"The Five Elders truly live up to being the highest authority in the World Government. They don't even have to lift a finger. With one casual order, they can destroy everything you've built... your greatest trump card."

Daren cast her a sidelong glance and replied with detached indifference,

"Oh, is that so."

Stussy: "..."

She nearly choked on her cigarette.

What do you mean, "Oh, is that so"?

How are you this calm?!

The World Government just mobilized on a massive scale—even your unstoppable fleet can't hold them back!

"Did you not hear what I just said?!"

Stussy bit down on her teeth, her voice sharp with frustration.

"This is intel I went through hell to get for you!"

"Intel you went through hell to get?"

Daren narrowed his eyes and chuckled.

Stussy stiffened.

Before she could respond, Daren waved a hand and smiled, eyes gleaming.

"How about we make another bet?"

"No way!"

The moment she heard the word "bet," Stussy reacted like a startled cat, instantly bristling.

She instinctively tugged down the hem of her black nightgown to cover certain markings on her thighs, a blush of shame rising to her cheeks as she snapped,

"Don't even think about it!"

Daren laughed aloud.

"Alright, alright. Just sit tight and relax. There's no need to worry about the North Blue."

"You've got a line to that bird Morgans, don't you? Contact him for me. Tell him I've got a big scoop he's going to want."

"If there's nothing else... let me sleep a bit. I really am exhausted..."

No need to worry about the North Blue?

Just sit and watch?

"What do you mean by that—"

Stussy began to question him, but paused when she realized the Vice Admiral had already closed his eyes. Slumped on the sofa, bloodied and battered, Daren had drifted into a deep, steady sleep.

Staring at his peaceful, sleeping face, Stussy froze.

She stood there in silence for a long time, then turned to the desk and picked up the Den Den Mushi.

As her hand reached out, she glanced once more at the black-haired Marine, lips gently pressed together. A flicker of hesitation crossed her eyes, but in the end, she dialed.

"Bring some bandages and medical supplies."

She spoke softly, then ended the call.

After setting the Den Den Mushi down, Stussy looked at Daren again, letting out a helpless sigh. She muttered to herself,

"You can just fall asleep like this? Aren't you even the least bit afraid I might betray you?"

As she spoke, deep within her proud and seductive gaze, a trace of tenderness quietly surfaced.