

One Piece 431

Chapter 431 - 431: Volume 3 – Chapter 74 I Was Just Careless

The sudden voice made Crocodile instinctively pause.

Before he could react, a figure came crashing down from the sky like a cannonball, slamming into the ground.

Boom!!

A massive cloud of dust erupted outward, and a huge crater suddenly formed, riddled with cracks.

At the center of the pit, the upper half of a person was completely embedded in the earth, with only two hairy legs twitching in midair.

Crocodile: ???

Daren covered his face in silence.

The next second—

"Damn it, Daren! I told you not to fly so fast!!"

Tokikake yanked his head out of the ground like pulling a green onion, spat out a mouthful of dirt, turned his head, and glared at Daren, face flushed red.

Daren replied helplessly,

"I did slow down."

"Damn it!"

Tokikake wiped the mud off his face, turned, and angrily pointed at Crocodile.

"You! It's you, isn't it!?"

"You actually dared to attack the Marines... Looks like you've got a death wish!"

Crocodile frowned and said coldly, "Who are you?"

"Glad you asked!!"

Tokikake jolted with excitement, hands on his hips, pointing a single finger at Crocodile as he laughed loudly,

"I'm a genius of Marine Headquarters! A leading figure of the Marines' 'Golden Generation'! I am Commodore Tokikake!!"

"Not interested."

Crocodile's eyes turned cold. The sandstorm swirling in his right palm suddenly compressed, then lashed out violently!

In an instant, a massive sand blade shot forth.

A sharp blast rang out. Wherever the sand blade passed, the ground and nearby buildings were sliced cleanly apart as it roared toward Tokikake.

"Desert Spada!"

"Damn pirate, attacking out of nowhere!?"

Tokikake cursed and, instead of retreating, charged straight toward the blade!

His arms instantly turned pitch-black with Armament Haki, and like a raging bull, Tokikake slammed head-on into the seemingly unstoppable Desert Spada!

Boom!!

A heavy explosion rang out. The towering sand blade slammed Tokikake backward with overwhelming force, dragging his flip-flops along the ground and carving out a groove over ten meters long.

He blocked it!

Crocodile's eyes narrowed.

This ugly-looking Marine... actually blocked one of his attacks?

"Hahaha! Bet you didn't see that coming!! I'm tougher than I look!!"

Armament Haki burst from Tokikake's arms, blasting the sand blade into a storm of yellow dust.

The next moment, his figure vanished on the spot.

Soru—one of the Rokushiki!

Daren's eyes lit up slightly.

Though Tokikake was short, his skill in close combat was quite impressive. The title of genius wasn't just talk.

From what Daren saw, this kid's strength had definitely reached the level of a Vice Admiral.

Since Tokikake had made his move, Daren wasn't in a rush. He lit a cigar and sat on a rock, watching the show unfold.

After all, in the original story, Crocodile's strength had always been something of a mystery.

When weak, he couldn't even beat Luffy. But when strong, he stole the MVP as a member of the losing side at the Summit War and could go toe-to-toe with anyone.

One thing was for sure—Crocodile, who was preparing to challenge Whitebeard at this point, had to be nearing his peak!

"Beast Kick!"

Just as Daren's eyes flickered, Tokikake's figure appeared right beside Crocodile in a flash.

Wearing flip-flops, his foot whipped up a fierce wind as it shot straight toward Crocodile's head with incredible force.

Crocodile glanced at him with a blank expression.

Bang!

His head burst into sand.

Tokikake's kick carried the force of a massive sword slash, carving a deep crack into the ground that stretched dozens of meters.

"Logia? Damn it!"

Tokikake's pupils shrank slightly.

Just then, Crocodile moved.

With fierce, swift steps, he lunged forward, his black fur coat billowing behind him. His entire right arm swelled and transformed into a crescent-shaped sand blade, slashing horizontally toward Tokikake!

"Tch! Isn't that the same move as before?"

Tokikake scoffed dismissively. Armament Haki coated both arms as he crossed them in front of his chest, preparing to block the attack like last time.

"Oh really?"

Crocodile's lips curled into a cold smile.

As soon as the sand blade touched Tokikake, instead of the usual explosive clash, it suddenly dispersed.

Tokikake's expression changed drastically.

"Barján!"

Shhhhk!

The sand blade connected with his body.

A bizarre sight unfolded.

Tokikake's body looked like a sponge being squeezed—moisture rapidly drained by the sand blade. His skin visibly shriveled, his eye sockets sunk in, and he looked like skin stretched over bone.

"Sables!"

With the hit landing, Crocodile gathered a massive sandstorm in his palm and hurled it forward.

The storm swelled and raged as it moved, swallowing Tokikake and flinging him through the air.

Tokikake's body was tossed violently midair before crashing down like a ragdoll, rolling a dozen times before landing at Daren's feet.

His eyes spun as he struggled to focus.

The first thing he saw was Daren's face.

Tokikake: ...

Daren: ...

"Knew you couldn't be counted on."

Daren sighed, giving Tokikake a disdainful look.

Tokikake's shriveled face flushed red with anger. Gritting his teeth, he snapped,

"That guy's too sneaky! I just let my guard down!"

Daren shook his head.

He could see it now.

Crocodile was clearly much stronger than Tokikake—not in raw Haki or physical strength, but in sheer combat experience.

Whether it was on-the-fly tactics or the precise timing of Devil Fruit abilities, Crocodile's sharp instincts and battlefield cunning far surpassed Tokikake's.

But that was understandable.

After all, Tokikake had grown up in the Headquarters, rarely facing real hardship or bloodshed. Compared to a pirate like Crocodile who grew through savage battles, his experience was sorely lacking.

Daren casually picked up a canteen and tossed it into Tokikake's arms.

"Leave the rest to me."

He slowly stood up.

Suddenly—

"Desert Grande Espada!"

Shhhk!!

A massive sword of compressed sand shot up from the ground, aiming straight for Daren's waist in a surprise attack!

Far off, Crocodile had transformed one hand into sand and merged it with the earth. He looked up and sneered coldly at Daren.

"Daren, watch out!!"

Tokikake's pupils shrank into pinpoints as he instinctively shouted.

But it was already too late.

An attack this fast couldn't be dodged or blocked in time!

With Crocodile's power, even a warship would've been split in two if it took a hit like this!

Tokikake's heart seized in shock.

Shhhhk!!

The massive sand blade slammed into Daren's abdomen!

Sparks exploded.

It was like slamming into diamond—sparks and shards of sand scattered wildly from the compressed yellow blade.

Then...

Crack!

The Desert Spada Grande... shattered.

Tokikake: ...

Daren: ???

Crocodile stood frozen in disbelief.

Chapter 432 - 432: Volume 3 – Chapter 75: Was That Really Necessary?

The Vice Admiral's uniform was shredded by the blast of yellow sand, revealing a scar-covered, muscular frame beneath.

A cold, almost imperceptible gleam shimmered across his skin.

Crocodile's eyes widened in disbelief.

His attack... hadn't even left a scratch!

"This... how is that possible?!"

Crocodile's voice was hoarse, his expression stunned.

Tokikake stared at Daren, jaw practically hitting the floor.

He'd already experienced Daren's "hardness" firsthand back in the North Blue, but back then, his durability was at best on par with Tekkai from the Rokushiki.

Even if Daren's physique had improved over the past half-year, it shouldn't be strong enough to tank an attack from Crocodile without a mark!

This wasn't just "steel-hard" anymore!!

"Hey, that actually hurt, you know."

Daren seemed to snap back to attention only now, speaking with a hint of exasperation.

He casually ripped off the remnants of his torn uniform, revealing a torso packed with knotted muscle.

A bead of cold sweat rolled down Crocodile's forehead. He suddenly clenched his teeth.

His arm once again expanded and turned to sand, forming a massive blade of yellow grit that roared toward Daren.

The ground split open as it tore through, streaks of violet lightning faintly flickering within.

"Desert Spada!"

As the razor-sharp blast closed in, Daren's expression didn't change. Smirking coldly, he raised his arm—and reached straight for the incoming Desert Spada.

A deafening crash followed. In Tokikake's bulging eyes, Daren actually caught the seemingly unstoppable sand blade with one hand—then...

He clenched.

Boom!!

The blade shattered, yellow sand erupting skyward.

The next moment...

Behind the swirling storm of sand, Daren's body dipped low, knees bending—and as he launched forward, half the island trembled from the impact!

Rip!!

Within a hundred-meter radius, the earth cracked apart. Towering columns of dust shot into the sky, and fissures spread out across the town like shattered glass.

"Just sand..."

Daren lifted his head, a savage grin curling his lips.

Boom!

Like a tiger unleashed, his figure tore through the yellow sandstorm, vanishing from sight in a blink.

Crocodile's pupils shrank to pinpricks, a shudder gripping his core.

Too fast!

Far too fast!

With his level of Observation Haki, he couldn't even track the Marine's terrifying speed!

How could this be?!

Could such a monster really exist in this sea?!

"Not even close."

A cold laugh echoed in his ear.

Crocodile's eyes flew open.

Before he could react, the Marine Vice Admiral's imposing figure had already appeared at his side.

A fist cloaked in Armament Haki...

Struck.

It crashed into Crocodile's gut like a meteor from the heavens!

Boom!!

A muffled impact rang out. Crocodile's body folded in half like a shrimp, as if hit head-on by a speeding warship.

Blood vessels burst in his eyes, his pupils bulged outward, and the cigar shot from his mouth.

"With power like yours, you want to take on Whitebeard? You're a few centuries too early."

Daren sneered.

His fist pulsed, and Armament Haki erupted a second time!

Bang!!

A blast of white shockwave exploded from Crocodile's back, obliterating his vest and black fur coat into tatters.

Crocodile spewed a mouthful of blood, his eyeballs trembling.

The sheer, overwhelming force launched him like a cannonball, as if struck by a giant's club.

Boom!

Boom!

Boom!

He crashed through building after building, flying so fast that white shockwaves rippled through the air in his wake.

"Damn... he's strong..."

Tokikake stared in shock, instinctively pulling his head back as he swallowed hard.

But just as Crocodile began to fall, Daren's figure vanished again.

In the next instant, he reappeared directly in Crocodile's path.

Tokikake's eye twitched.

"No way... right?"

He watched as the Marine Vice Admiral calmly lit a cigar, shoved his hands into his pockets, then bent his knee and launched a brutal kick straight into the oncoming Crocodile!

Bang!!

Crocodile coughed up blood again as if struck by lightning. Daren's kick sent him hurtling skyward.

His pupils began to lose focus, blood flooding his mouth and nostrils.

But Daren wasn't finished.

He leapt from the ground.

Another kick!

Then...

Bang!

Bang!

Bang!!

One heavy thud after another echoed from above, and Tokikake—along with the battered Marines still barely conscious—witnessed a nightmarish scene that made their scalps tingle.

Thirty meters in the air, the once-arrogant pirate who had boldly claimed he'd "use Daren to hone his skills" was now being kicked around like a ball... completely at Daren's mercy.

The Vice Admiral's movements were so fast they couldn't even follow them. To the spectators below, all they could see was Crocodile's body being flung around midair, a bloodied mess that refused to hit the ground.

He was kicked up, stunned, fell, slammed, struck again, launched once more...

Tokikake and the others were dumbfounded, cold sweat trickling down their backs, eyelids twitching uncontrollably.

Was this... really necessary?

A full minute.

Crocodile remained suspended midair, twitching under the relentless assault for a whole minute before finally crashing down, carving a massive crater into the earth.

As the dust settled, Daren appeared once more. The cigar in his mouth was already more than half burned.

"D... damn it..."

Crocodile lay bloodied in the cracked crater, eyes wide with fear as he watched the Marine approach him step by step.

This guy... was terrifying.

That relentless, savage, beast-like way of fighting—once he found an opening, he didn't stop until the enemy was utterly crushed. Crocodile had never faced anything like it.

He tried to move, but the Marine had clearly shattered the bones in all four limbs. Coupled with the internal injuries, Crocodile didn't even have the strength to lift a finger.

"Get it now?"

Daren stood beside him, looking down from above.

"This is the New World... not some playground in Paradise."

Chapter 433 - 433: Volume 3 – Chapter 76: You Dare Give Me Orders?

At those words, Crocodile's pupils contracted sharply, as if thunder had crashed through his mind. He stared ahead, stunned.

Seeing his expression shift, Daren sneered inwardly.

This guy had bulldozed through the first half of the Grand Line and stormed into the New World, probably without facing many real threats. After all, most of the big-name powerhouses had already been "offended" by Daren himself—who had the time to mess with a newcomer like Crocodile?

That was likely why Crocodile felt bold enough to demand help from the Marines.

But make no mistake—Crocodile was no weakling.

Based on what he'd just shown, even some of the elite Vice Admirals back at headquarters wouldn't stand a chance against him.

But that was it.

Out here on the open sea, countless factors could tilt the scales of battle. Below Admiral-level, it wasn't uncommon for the weaker to overcome the strong.

But Admiral-level combat power marked a line that was crystal clear—and absolutely crushing.

If you weren't an Admiral, you were an insect.

Aside from freaks of nature like Daren, Sakazuki, and Borsalino, everyone else facing Admiral-level power was bound to get flattened.

"Well then, farewell, Crocodile."

A glint of grim amusement flashed through Daren's eyes as he raised his foot, smirking.

Dark, hardened Armament Haki spiraled around his right boot like a vortex, hovering above Crocodile's head.

As he stared up at that pitch-black boot, a wave of deathly pressure washed over Crocodile. A chill crept up his spine.

"Damn it..."

He clenched his bloody teeth, his face young but battered, eyes brimming with unshed tears—not from fear, but from regret.

He hadn't even challenged Whitebeard yet... Was it really going to end here?

But his pride wouldn't let him beg—not even once.

Daren's lips curled slightly.

He stomped down.

Crocodile shut his eyes.

Tokikake and the surrounding Marines all turned away, unwilling to watch the brutal scene about to unfold.

Clang!!

Boom!!

But instead of the wet crunch of a skull being crushed like a watermelon, a sharp metallic clang rang out.

A blast of wind burst out, sending Crocodile's blood-matted hair flying wildly.

He opened his eyes on reflex.

And saw—a white leather shoe.

It had blocked the Vice Admiral's boot mid-stomp.

The clash of their strength and Haki sent shockwaves tearing through the air.

What...?

Crocodile's eyes widened as he looked up—only to see a pale-robed figure, draped in white silk, standing beside him... shielding him from Daren's killing blow!

"C... CP0!?"

The sandstorm whipped around them. The moment Tokikake saw the figure clearly, his expression shifted, and he couldn't stop himself from blurting out in shock.

The figure was thin as a specter, wearing a flowing white robe, face hidden behind a mask marked with strange, arcane patterns.

"I figured you'd stay in hiding and keep watching the show."

Daren didn't seem surprised by CP0's sudden appearance. He smirked coldly.

In truth, he'd sensed this guy the moment he stepped onto the island.

Whoever this was, they had some special technique to mask their presence, and they'd used it well. If not for Daren's Observation Haki having advanced drastically under Katakuri's "guidance"—especially with the added "magnetic field sensing" trait—he might not have noticed at all.

"Crocodile is the government's chosen candidate. I can't allow you to kill him."

A hoarse, stiff, and detached voice came from beneath the eerie mask, laced with arrogant superiority.

"Oh?"

Daren raised an eyebrow, and instinctively pressed down harder with his foot.

Feeling the growing pressure, the CP0 agent's brow furrowed behind the mask.

This guy's strength... was far beyond expectations.

However, he didn't seem the least bit concerned and replied coldly,

"The government is about to initiate a plan—selecting individuals with sufficient strength from among pirates and granting them the legal right to plunder."

"With official sanction, these empowered pirates will use their strength and reputation to suppress ordinary pirates. At designated times, they'll also be subject to mandatory conscription by the government."

As soon as those words landed, Tokikake and the surrounding Marines turned pale, their faces filled with disbelief.

Grant pirates legal authority to plunder!?

That was like throwing the Marines' honor on the ground and stomping all over it!

Everyone knew the Marines stood for justice and the eradication of piracy. Politically, they were diametrically opposed to pirates. If the government did this, it would be no different from slapping the Marines right across the face.

And loudly at that!

"So that's how it is..."

Daren looked at the CP0 agent with a faint smirk.

"So the government's lost faith in the combat capabilities of its own Marines? To the point it's ready to compromise with pirates and hand them legitimacy and status?"

The moment CP0 opened his mouth, Daren had already guessed the government's objective.

The Shichibukai plan!

In the original story, the Shichibukai were powerful pirates officially recognized by the World Government. Each one possessed devastating destructive power and the might of a nation.

Together with the Yonkō and Marine Headquarters, they formed the "Three Great Powers" of the Grand Line. Only pirates with overwhelming strength or massive notoriety could qualify to become one of them.

Since arriving in this world, Daren had always wondered when the Shichibukai plan would begin.

He didn't expect it to start this early.

CPO replied coolly,

"That's none of your concern, Rogers Daren."

"I'm here on behalf of the government. As a Marine, all you need to do is follow orders."

"Crocodile has already been added to a special observation list. Until the higher-ups make their final decision, no one is permitted to kill him."

Hearing that, Daren's expression suddenly calmed.

"I see."

A mild, almost harmless smile spread across his face.

"So the government's been watching Crocodile all along. Even when he called for Marine reinforcements, you just stood by and did nothing... all to assess his strength?"

"You could say that," CPO replied, failing to notice the chill behind Daren's smile—perhaps too self-important to care.

"Alright."

Daren nodded and slowly lowered his foot.

Seeing this, Crocodile couldn't help but breathe a sigh of relief.

"If it's an order from the Five Elders, then I suppose I'll have to obey."

Daren sighed as if helpless.

"But then again..."

His smile twisted.

His fingers came together, black light tearing open as a three-pronged claw lashed out with brutal force!

Under the stunned gazes of Crocodile, Tokikake, and the gathered Marines, Daren's razor-sharp strike...

Drove straight through CP0's chest!

Shhhhk!!

A warm clump of flesh pulsed violently in Daren's grasp.

Blood sprayed upward, splattering across his face.

CP0 froze, as if it had never occurred to him that this Marine would actually dare attack him. He stood motionless, the eyes behind his mask filled with disbelief and confusion.

"You think you can order me?"

Daren clenched his hand into a fist.

Crack!!

Blood burst in every direction.

Chapter 434 - 434: Volume 3 – Chapter 77: Saint Topman Warcury

The heart burst in Daren's hand, spraying blood in all directions.

Behind the CP0 mask, the agent's pupils quickly lost their light. Blood gushed from the hole in his chest, soaking the pristine white silk robe in crimson.

With a dull thud, the body hit the ground, blood pooling rapidly beneath it.

Silence.

Not a single sound.

Crocodile stared at Daren, completely shaken by the sudden attack. His pupils shrank and trembled violently.

Tokikake and the other Marines looked even more stunned, expressions full of disbelief as if they couldn't trust their own eyes.

"D... Daren... you just killed... him..."

Tokikake gulped, his face pale, voice trembling.

That was a member of the World Government's highest intelligence agency!

In many ways, they could even be considered a superior force to the Marines themselves. Daren had killed a CP0—was he openly rebelling against a direct order from the World Government!?

"I didn't want to. But he was just too damn arrogant."

Daren shrugged with a helpless look, pulling a handkerchief from his pocket and casually wiping the blood from his hand.

Tokikake: ...

The Marines: ...

Their expressions said it all—they were on the verge of tears.

He was arrogant for a reason!

CPO agents reported directly to the top brass of the World Government—sometimes even to the Five Elders themselves. Not to mention Daren, even someone like Admiral Sengoku wouldn't necessarily be shown any respect by them.

Just then—

"Brrru... Brrru..."

A soft ringing echoed from the fallen CPO's coat.

Tokikake and the others instantly sucked in a breath, their faces turning white.

"We're screwed... totally screwed... The government's checking in on his status... There's no covering this up..."

Tokikake grabbed his head in panic, practically pulling his hair out.

"Relax, relax..." Daren chuckled calmly. He reached into the CP0's robes, pulled out the still-ringing military Den Den Mushi, and answered it without hesitation under the stunned gazes of the others.

"Moshi moshi?"

There was a brief pause on the other end—then a low, chilly voice spoke:

"Who are you? Where's Falcon?"

Daren smiled.

"Reporting in, this is Vice Admiral Rogers Daren of Marine Headquarters."

"Falcon... If I'm not mistaken,"

He glanced at the corpse on the ground with a faint smirk.

"That should be the CP0 agent you're referring to."

...

On the other end of the Den Den Mushi—Pangaea Castle, World Government Headquarters.

Rogers Daren!?

The Five Elders, seated or standing, all froze. One, dressed in traditional samurai garb, paused mid-swipe while polishing his long blade.

"Daren, why do you have Falcon's Den Den Mushi?"

The bald elder with the distinctive handlebar mustache frowned deeply and spoke in a heavy tone.

"I am Topman Warcury. What is Falcon's status?"

As he spoke, Saint Ethanbaron—who had been tending to a legendary cursed sword—lifted his head. A glint of cold menace flashed behind his rimless glasses.

...

Back on the island, the moment Tokikake and the Marines heard that name, they collectively gasped. A chill surged up from the soles of their feet, shooting straight to the top of their skulls.

Topman Warcury!!

One of the Five Elders—the highest ruling authority in the World Government!

As the "Warrior God of Justice," he was also known by his noble title: Saint Topman Warcury.

This wasn't just some minor oversight...

The Five Elders were personally monitoring this incident!?

Their hands instinctively went cold.

Despite everything, Daren's expression didn't change at all. A slight smile curled at the corners of his lips.

"Reporting to you, Lords... there's been a development. Falcon was killed during the mission."

"What?" Topman Warcury—no, Saint Topman Warcury—asked sharply.

His aged eyes narrowed with suspicion, and he spoke coldly,

"Who killed him?"

The moment the question landed, Tokikake and the other Marines began to tremble.

"Oh, that would be Crocodile,"

Daren said with a pleasant smile.

Crocodile, who'd been silently observing, suddenly widened his eyes, locking them on the Marine Vice Admiral with disbelief and fury.

"He discovered Falcon tailing him. The two clashed in a fierce battle," Daren went on without hesitation.

"By the time I arrived to provide support, Crocodile had already taken him out."

Tokikake: ...

The Marines: ...

Crocodile: ...

All of them stared blankly at the Vice Admiral standing there spouting lies, their faces twitching uncontrollably.

Crocodile in particular was shaking with rage, his face flushed red. If his injuries weren't so severe, he'd already be charging over to tear Daren apart.

...

Silence fell on the other end of the Den Den Mushi.

After a few seconds, Saint Topman Warcury spoke again.

"What is Crocodile's current status?"

Daren straightened slightly and replied,

"Rest assured, my lord. I have the target under control. If you give the word, I'll execute him immediately."

Crocodile's eyelid twitched.

"No. Crocodile is one of the individuals under our evaluation," Saint Topman Warcury interrupted.

After a brief pause, the Five Elders gave Daren a short explanation of the Shichibukai plan.

"Since Crocodile has demonstrated the strength to eliminate Falcon, it proves he has the qualifications to be considered for the Shichibukai."

"Daren, you've done well. I wasn't wrong about you."

"I already saw your talent and capability during the Saint Xildes incident in the North Blue."

"And since you're on the scene now, I'll grant you temporary authority to extend an offer to Crocodile—to invite him into the Shichibukai."

Daren gave a slight bow and nodded.

"As you command, my lord."

"By the way, Saint Topman Warcury..."

"You may address me as Topman Warcury," the elder said with a smile.

"Yes, Topman Warcury... regarding Falcon?"

"He's dead. That's the end of it. The dead hold no value," Warcury said indifferently.

"Understood, my lord."

Daren nodded again, pausing briefly before speaking with a sudden spark of thought.

"As for the other candidates for the Shichibukai, do the Lords have anyone in particular in mind?"

"Hm?"

Topman Warcury made a curious sound.

Daren smiled.

"No offense intended. I simply believe I may have a candidate who fits the bill perfectly."

"Who?"

"Donquixote Doflamingo."

Chapter 435 - 435: Volume 3 – Chapter 78: Congratulations on Becoming a Shichibukai

"Donquixote Doflamingo?"

At the mention of the name, a sharp glint flickered in the eyes of the Five Elders on the other end of the Den Den Mushi.

A defiant, blond brat came to mind.

They remembered that scene vividly.

Wearing sunglasses, the boy had climbed the Celestial Stairway step by step, carrying a bloody head. When he reached them, he tossed it at their feet.

"This is my father's head. I want to become a Celestial Dragon again."

That's what he said.

"Daren, what's your relationship with Doflamingo?"

Saint Topman Warcury's tone turned cold.

Daren smiled.

"Reporting to you, sir, I have no direct relationship with Doflamingo."

"While I was stationed in the North Blue, the Donquixote family under his command expanded rapidly. I launched multiple operations against them, but regrettably, none were successful."

"That was my failure."

"However, it also proves Doflamingo's remarkable talent and potential. Since you are currently considering candidates for the Shichibukai, I merely think Doflamingo could be a strong contender."

"At the very least..."

He glanced at Crocodile with a faint, mocking smile.

"...his strength may prove more impressive."

Crocodile's face flushed with anger as he clenched his teeth.

The Five Elders fell silent.

They exchanged looks, as if confirming something among themselves.

Saint Topman Warcury narrowed his eyes and said slowly,

"Daren, Doflamingo is just a minor pirate in the North Blue. He is not yet qualified to become one of the Shichibukai. He is not under our consideration."

The smile on Daren's face took on a colder edge.

"Understood, my lords."

"In that case, I'll trouble you no further."

"Hmm."

The Den Den Mushi call ended.

...

Crack!

The Den Den Mushi was crushed in Topman Warcury's hand. A flash of killing intent lit his eyes as he said coldly,

"That arrogant Marine brat—does he think he can meddle in the selection of the Shichibukai?"

Another Elder, gripping a katana, chuckled coldly.

"Topman... you don't actually believe what he said, do you?"

"We all know Falcon's strength. While he hasn't reached the level of the Celestial Dragons' strongest shield, he's certainly not someone Crocodile could kill."

Topman Warcury glanced at his friend and sneered.

"Of course I know that, Saint Ethanbaron V. Nusjuro."

"But so what?"

A CP0 agent is just that—expendable. As the supreme leaders of the World Government, they felt no remorse over his death.

"I just didn't expect that brat Daren to rise so quickly."

"His surprise attack on Totto Land caused such a stir that many member and non-member nations are now uneasy about the Marines possessing this level of long-range strategic strike capability..."

That statement drew silence from the other Elders, their expressions darkening.

A file lay before each of them.

On the cover: the name and photo of Rogers Daren.

Saint Ethanbaron V. Nusjuro, the Warrior God of Finance, ran a thin finger along the blade of a cursed purple-black sword, his gaze cold.

"The Marines' direction is shifting."

"Under Daren's influence, the Marines are beginning to show signs of slipping from our grasp again."

"Especially the new generation—each more unruly than the last."

The blond Elder, Saint Shepherd Ju Peter, suddenly said,

"At least Borsalino still follows our orders, doesn't he, Saint Saturn?"

He turned to another Elder—dressed in a black suit, with white curly hair, a fluffy white beard, and a black flat cap. The man leaned on a withered cane.

This was Saint Jaygarcia Saturn, the Warrior God of Science and Defense.

Saturn nodded, his tone icy.

"Borsalino has always followed government orders. He's done well with the task of guarding and supervising Vegapunk."

Saint Topman Warcury chuckled.

"Perhaps we can use that... to sow discord between them."

The Elder with a long white beard, Saint Marcus Mars, the Warrior God of Environment, shook his head.

"The more urgent issue is the Shichibukai plan."

"Daren has matured... The threat he showed in Totto Land rivals even Golden Lion."

"The Shichibukai system helps suppress pirates in the New World—and it also helps keep the Marines in check."

"But we can't push Daren too hard," the blond Elder said.

"Exactly. The methods we used in the past can't be repeated," Saturn added, his gaze lowered.

"He's not Zephyr, after all."

Saint Topman Warcury said slowly,

"With his personality, if we corner him, he could become an enemy even more dangerous and unstable than Shiki."

There was a confident gleam in his eyes—one that spoke of control.

"In fact, his personality works in our favor."

"Power, status, fame, women... if he craves these things, then let's give them to him."

"As long as he has desires, he'll be easy to control."

"The real problem is with those who are immune to temptation."

The other Elders all smiled at that.

"Agreed."

"Agreed."

"Agreed."

"Seconded."

...

Daren watched as the military Den Den Mushi slowly drifted off to sleep, then sneered and crushed it in his hand.

"How infuriating... those old fossils."

He exhaled a plume of smoke shaped like a dragon, turned to glance at the dazed Tokikake and the others, and grinned.

"See? Problem solved."

Tokikake: ...

The Marines: ...

Ignoring them, Daren turned and walked toward Crocodile.

"You heard it too, Crocodile."

He stopped in front of Crocodile, squatted down, and used a handkerchief to wipe the blood from his face.

"Looks like I can't kill you after all. What a shame."

Crocodile glared at him with fury.

"Hey now, don't look at me like that... You didn't care about their feelings when you were killing Marines, did you?"

Daren shrugged.

"Still, just because you get to live doesn't mean you're off the hook."

"From the Grand Line to the New World, you've killed plenty of Marines and civilians... So it's only fair you leave something behind, wouldn't you say?"

Crocodile blinked, caught off guard.

Before he could react, Daren's gaze sharpened. In a flash, he drew Enma and swung down hard!

Slick!

A severed hand spun through the air.

Crocodile's mind went blank for a second. Then the pain hit him like a tidal wave, his bloodshot eyes wide with agony as he let out a howl.

"AAAAAAGH!! You bastard!!!"

His body shook violently on the ground, his right hand gripping the bleeding stump of his left wrist, blood pouring out between his fingers.

"Now this... fits the story better."

Daren muttered, amused by his own joke.

"Oh, one tip—you could attach a gold hook to that arm. Would really sell the pirate image."

"And another thing..."

He raised his boot and stomped down on Crocodile's chest. As Crocodile's eyes bulged with rage, Daren leaned in and whispered coldly:

"Don't forget, I'm not sparing you because of those five decrepit geezers' orders."

"Trust me, I've got the power... Even if I cut you down right here, at worst they'd yell at me a bit. Doesn't mean a damn thing."

"I'm sparing you because I expect more from you."

"Remember this, Crocodile..."

A burning ambition shone in Daren's eyes.

"From this moment on, you're one of the Shichibukai."

"Go ahead—stir up chaos, challenge Whitebeard, hell, even take a shot at Roger. I won't stop you. I can even make sure the Marines and the World Government won't come after you."

"But keep one thing in mind... You don't take orders from the Marines, or the World Government. You take orders from me."

Crocodile's eyes widened, shaken to the core.

This guy... What terrifying ambition!

"Looks like you understand."

Daren smiled, pulled out a fresh gold-embossed cigar, placed it in Crocodile's mouth, and lit it for him.

Then he casually smoothed back Crocodile's pompadour before slowly rising to his feet.

As Crocodile stared in disbelief, the Vice Admiral flashed a bright, mocking smile.

"Well then, congratulations, Crocodile."

"From this moment on, you are a proud member of the Shichibukai."

Chapter 436 - 436: Volume 3 – Chapter 79: Further Planning

Step, step, step...

A flurry of tense, hurried footsteps echoed from the shoreline, drawing closer.

At that moment, Tokikake's warship finally arrived.

Hundreds of Marines stormed forward with wary expressions, rifles in hand as they formed an assault formation, all weapons aimed squarely at Crocodile.

But as they took in the sight before them, every single one of them froze on the spot.

Wasn't this the target said to be incredibly powerful—capable of annihilating an elite Marine unit in mere minutes?

How was he... pinned under Vice Admiral Daren's foot?

That was... unbelievably fast.

"Let's go."

Daren rose slowly, lifting his boot off Crocodile's chest and lighting a fresh cigar. A satisfied smile spread across his face.

A Marine rushed over, reverently offering a pristine set of dress blues with both hands.

Daren took the uniform, slipped it on, and threw his Marine cape over his shoulders.

He looked up at the sky, clear and deep as an ocean, and said with a light smile,

"Beautiful weather today, isn't it?"

Tokikake: ...

Only you would say that right now.

He chugged a few gulps of water. His body, no longer shriveled like a half-dead husk, had mostly recovered. Climbing to his feet, he muttered,

"We're just leaving like this?"

He gave Crocodile a wary glance and lowered his voice.

Daren shrugged.

"What else can we do? He's now one of the Shichibukai. As long as that title stands, we Marines can't lay a finger on him."

Tokikake's mouth twitched.

"Oh, right—someone patch up our new Shichibukai. If he bleeds out and dies, that'd be a shame."

Daren said casually, then strode toward the shore without looking back.

As Daren led his men away in arrogant fashion, Crocodile clenched his teeth until they nearly cracked, his bloodshot eyes on the verge of bursting.

It took a full half hour before he managed to gather enough strength to sit up, trembling.

The area was deserted. Every Marine had already withdrawn.

His severed left arm had stopped bleeding. The wound had been simply bandaged and medicated to prevent infection.

Crocodile stared blankly at the stump of his wrist—then suddenly erupted with fury.

"Damn Marines!!!"

Boom!

A massive surge of golden sand burst into the sky, morphing into a monstrous crocodile that blotted out the sun, its gaping jaws swallowing what remained of the ruined town.

...

The warship set sail once more.

Cool sea breeze drifted through the air under a radiant sun.

Daren stood alone at the ship's bow, a cigar clenched in his mouth, arms folded as he quietly took in the ocean wind.

Tokikake had long retreated to the cabin to sleep. While replenishing water could counter Crocodile's ability, sudden and massive dehydration still took a heavy toll. Full recovery would take rest.

The other Marines, diligently attending to their duties, sensibly avoided the bow, leaving plenty of personal space for their esteemed Vice Admiral Daren.

"Shichibukai..."

Daren muttered softly, falling into contemplation as he exhaled a long stream of smoke.

His eyes narrowed into dangerous slits. From inside his coat, he pulled out a Den Den Mushi and dialed a number.

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

A few seconds later, the Den Den Mushi connected.

"Godfather-sama."

A low, raspy voice came through— unmistakably Doflamingo.

A faint smile tugged at the corners of Daren's lips as he spoke casually,

"Doffy, how have things been on your end? Everything alright?"

...

North Blue, Rubeck Island. Inside the Donquixote Family's main hall.

Doflamingo stared at the Den Den Mushi with a complicated expression before answering slowly,

"Thank you for your concern, Godfather-sama. Everything is fine here."

He paused, then added,

"I saw your raid on Totto Land a few days ago. Congratulations on that."

Daren's voice came back with a relaxed chuckle.

"With your intellect, you should've realized it was just a show of force. Nothing worth celebrating."

Doflamingo responded calmly,

"Even so, it was impressive enough to make people take notice."

"Now then, I assume you contacted me for a reason, Godfather-sama?"

"There is something, yes... Doffy, have you heard of the Shichibukai initiative?"

Shichibukai?

Doflamingo furrowed his brow and shook his head.

"No, I haven't."

Daren briefly laid out the situation, then his tone grew more serious.

"...The government is currently selecting candidates for the Shichibukai. If you were to become one of them, it would greatly benefit your future."

"You wouldn't need to keep hiding in the shadows. You'd have a legitimate status, officially recognized as one of the government-sanctioned Great Pirates."

"This is a golden opportunity, Doffy."

At those words, a sharp gleam flashed behind Doflamingo's sunglasses.

With his foresight and intellect, he instantly grasped the immense potential behind the title "Shichibukai."

"What must I do, Godfather-sama?"

Suppressing his excitement, Doflamingo clenched his fists and asked in a low voice.

Daren let out a chuckle.

"I tried submitting your name... but the Five Elders rejected it."

Doflamingo's pupils contracted.

The Five Elders!?

This meant Daren's influence in the Marines had grown strong enough to speak to those five old fossils directly?

For a moment, Doflamingo was torn between shock and doubt.

But then his thoughts turned to his past dealings with the Five Elders.

Their arrogant, hateful faces surfaced in his memory. His expression darkened with resentment as he clenched his fists tighter, knuckles pale, fingernails biting into his skin until blood seeped out.

"They said you're just a small-time pirate from the North Blue. Lacking the strength or fame to carry the title of Shichibukai," Daren said with a sly smile.

That same condescending tone again!

Doflamingo ground his teeth.

"Then tell me, Godfather-sama—what must I do to earn the title of Shichibukai!?"

On the other end, Daren's smile deepened.

That's it—fury and hate. Exactly what he wanted.

"Doffy, you know as well as I do—their rejection had nothing to do with strength or reputation."

Doflamingo went silent, gritting his teeth.

He understood Daren's implication.

Ever since being cast out from the Celestial Dragons, the Five Elders would never allow him that title.

To them, he was a traitor.

Which meant... they despised him even more than the average pirate.

"But Doffy, that doesn't mean we're out of options here."

Chapter 437 - 437: Volume 3 – Chapter 80: Godfather

"Oh? What do you mean, Godfather-sama?"

At those words, Doflamingo couldn't help but raise an eyebrow.

Daren smiled.

"The Shichibukai candidates chosen by the World Government are really just second-tier contenders in these seas... Those who truly stand at the top would never accept the government's summons."

"We can't control who the World Government considers, but we can shrink their options... until they're left with no choice at all."

The moment he said that, a chill ran down Doflamingo's spine.

He didn't know if it was just his imagination, but even separated by thousands of miles through a Den Den Mushi, he could feel the suffocating murderous intent and arrogance in Daren's voice!

Yes—murder!

No matter who the government selects, if they don't meet Daren's standards, he'll eliminate them without a sound.

And the scariest part? With Daren's current strength and mobility, it wasn't just talk.

"Cut down the weeds, and in the end, the one that blossoms will be the most beautiful rose."

Daren gave a half-smile.

"Doffy, this is your chance."

Doflamingo took a deep breath. For a moment, he was speechless.

This man's spirit, his vision, his madness—even the audacity to defy the World Government itself—was enough to shake even someone like him, a natural-born "bad seed."

Lighting a cigarette, Doflamingo took a long drag before slowly speaking.

"But... even if I go that far, what if those five old geezers still refuse to grant me the title of Shichibukai?"

"No, no, Doffy. You've misunderstood something important."

A reckless grin tugged at the corners of Daren's lips.

"My godson doesn't need charity."

"We don't need the Five Elders to bestow the title of Shichibukai... Remember this—you're my godson, Rogers Daren's godson. If we want something, we just take it."

Doflamingo's breath caught.

Take it?

How?

Even though he'd long since fallen from the World Nobles' inner circle, as a former Celestial Dragon, Doflamingo understood better than anyone just how deep and powerful the World Government truly was.

Those wasteful pigs—the Celestial Dragons—had ruled from atop the Red Line for centuries not by luck, but through real, undeniable power.

The World Government's authority was absolute. That was a truth Doflamingo had learned firsthand.

"Godfather-sama, I don't understand what you mean."

Still too young... Daren chuckled to himself.

"Doffy, on these seas, absolute strength is certainly crucial... but just as important is learning to ride the tide."

"Ride the tide?"

"Exactly. Ride the tide."

Taking a slow puff of his cigar, Daren spoke with ease.

"You have something no one else on these seas does—your bloodline."

"Running through your veins is the noble, supreme blood of the Celestial Dragons."

"Even if the Five Elders stripped you of that status, it's a fact they can't erase or deny."

At that, something clicked in Doflamingo's mind. A glint flashed behind his sunglasses.

"Please continue, Godfather-sama."

That title rolled off his tongue more naturally now. Daren smiled and went on.

"If you can make full use of that identity, many problems that seem insurmountable will suddenly become trivial... Things others think impossible will be child's play to you."

"So let's return to the original question. In your view, what is the World Government's greatest weakness—or rather, its Achilles' heel?"

The World Government's... weakness?

Doflamingo was stunned.

Could such a massive entity, sitting atop the world, really have a weakness?

His mind kicked into high gear.

He knew this was Daren's way of guiding—or testing—him.

A man as overbearing as Daren would never keep useless trash at his side.

If he failed to give a satisfactory answer, Daren would lower his expectations of him.

At that thought, a strange sense of unease welled up inside Doflamingo.

He forced his brain to think faster, digging deep through his memories.

Countless pieces of intelligence on the World Government surged through his mind.

Soon, a thin sheen of cold sweat began to form on his forehead.

...

Five seconds,

Ten seconds,

Half a minute...

A full minute of silence passed, and Doflamingo's back was unknowingly drenched in cold sweat.

Suddenly—

"Heavenly Tribute!"

He abruptly stood up from the sofa and shouted in disbelief, his face filled with shock.

"That's right."

Daren smiled contentedly.

With Daren's confirmation, Doflamigo's pupils contracted sharply.

Then—

"Fufufufufufufu!!!"

He suddenly threw his head back and burst into maniacal laughter, his fingers curling in excitement.

His entire body began to tremble from sheer exhilaration and agitation.

"Heavenly Tribute!"

"That's it!!"

"How did I not think of it before?!"

"The weakness of the World Government—those useless pigs—their weakness is the Heavenly Tribute!!"

"If I steal the Heavenly Tribute, even if those five old geezers still hate me, they'll be forced to give me the title of Shichibukai under political pressure!"

"Fufufufufufu!!! And the most important thing is—I'm a Celestial Dragon!! A supreme Celestial Dragon... Even if I raid the Heavenly Tribute, they wouldn't dare lay a finger on me!!"

"Fufufufufufu!!! Godfather-sama, I get it now!!"

Doflamingo's laughter grew increasingly deranged. His Conqueror's Haki burst out uncontrollably, sweeping through the empty conference hall with surging gales.

If Daren had been present, he would have been astonished to find that Doflamingo's Conqueror's Haki had suddenly surged in strength—by at least 10 points!

"Very good. You finally understand... Truly, you are my most trusted godson."

Daren smiled with satisfaction.

"But don't rush things. There's something else you need to handle first."

Doflamingo quickly suppressed his grin and said in a serious tone,

"Godfather-sama, I'm listening."

This time, unlike his earlier pretense, there was a genuine trace of respect in his voice.

Daren smiled lightly.

"Leave the North Blue, my godson..."

He paused briefly.

"...I'll be waiting for you in the New World."

With that, the Den Den Mushi communication was cut off.

...

On the warship.

Daren put away the Den Den Mushi and leisurely exhaled a puff of smoke.

He stood there with his hands in his pockets, looking up at the sky with a proud and defiant gaze.

Suddenly, a curious thought flashed through his mind.

The so-called 'Shichibukai'... won't they be just the Seven Warlords of the Sea under the command of the 'King of the North Blue'?

Chapter 438 - 438: Volume 3 – Chapter 81: The Obedient King

North Blue.

Rubeck Island.

"Bru."

The Den Den Mushi in front of him slowly went to sleep.

Doflamingo leaned back into the soft leather sofa. A cold glint flickered beneath his sunglasses, and a twisted smile crept onto his face, lingering there like a shadow.

"What happened!?"

"Doffy!?"

"Why did your Conqueror's Haki suddenly erupt!?"

"..."

At that moment, Trebol and the other officers burst in, flustered and alarmed, assuming a defensive stance as if ready to face an intruder. They quickly scanned the room, and when they saw no threat, they all let out a collective sigh of relief.

"It's fine. No need to panic."

Doflamingo gave them a glance, smiled faintly, and lit a cigar.

Seeing their young master sitting there so casually, as if nothing had happened, Trebol and the others exchanged uneasy glances.

"Um... I mean... Doffy, did something happen?"

Trebol asked carefully.

He could sense that something about Doflamingo felt different today—his mood seemed exceptionally good.

Doflamingo exhaled a long stream of smoke, paused for a moment, then suddenly asked,

"How's our Donquixote family's business doing in the North Blue?"

Hearing the question, Trebol thought for a moment, ticking points off on his fingers.

"Everything's going really well. Thanks to Momonga's connections, our partnership with Germa 66 is now officially underway. Soon, our family members will be equipped with some of Germa 66's advanced technology."

"In the past year alone, our gambling, loan sharking, arms trade, and vice businesses have all seen at least a 50% increase."

"Most importantly, many of the ruling elites and nobles of North Blue's nations have begun to recognize our Donquixote family's standing. They're starting to trade with us."

Diamante, standing nearby with his usual eccentric flair, chuckled.

"As for our dealings with the underworld, business is booming... especially with the Underworld Emperors like the Shipping King Umit. Our collaborations have grown closer and more profitable. Just from those ventures alone, we're pulling in at least 2 billion Belly in profit every month."

A monthly profit of 2 billion Belly meant over 20 billion a year.

In an era untouched by inflation, that was a staggering sum—comparable to the annual tax revenue of a small island nation.

With that kind of income, Doflamingo could easily build a formidable small fleet.

Of course, according to the "friendly cooperation agreement" between the Donquixote family and the North Blue fleet, half of the profits exceeding 20 billion Belly were discreetly funneled into the hands of the North Blue fleet.

Even so, the remaining 10 billion Belly was still a mind-boggling fortune for any mafia pirate group.

Hearing their reports, Doflamingo smiled and said calmly,

"Looks like our business in the North Blue really is doing quite well."

"More than just well! We're living like nobles!" Pica shrieked with laughter.

"That's right, Doffy, you wouldn't believe it... When those government officials and nobles see the Donquixote family's symbol, they tremble in their boots!" Diamante let out a sharp laugh, full of smug pride.

"We've finally realized our dream! We're living like kings!" Trebol's snot wobbled under his nose in excitement.

But the next words out of Doflamingo's mouth froze their triumphant expressions.

"In that case, it's time for us to leave the North Blue."

Doflamingo's voice was flat, almost casual.

Leave... the North Blue!?

Trebol and the others widened their eyes in disbelief, staring at him as if they hadn't heard right.

They had poured everything into building their empire here—endured endless trials, fled countless dangers—only to finally reach a position of unmatched fame, wealth, power, and influence...

And now, before they could even enjoy it, they were going to leave the North Blue?

Everyone looked around, uncertain. They hesitated, but none dared to question Doflamingo directly.

The atmosphere turned tense in an instant.

...

"What's wrong?"

Doflamingo glanced at them, his face expressionless.

His cold gaze sent a chill down their spines, and everyone swallowed hard in unison.

Finally, Trebol opened his mouth hesitantly.

"Um, I mean... Doffy, we've only just begun our reign in the North Blue. Isn't it a bit too sudden to leave like this?"

"Hasty?"

A self-mocking smile tugged at the corner of Doflamingo's lips.

"Not at all."

His gaze dropped, unreadable.

"...He even thinks I'm moving too slow."

"Who dares to say that about you!? Let's kill him!" Pica shrieked, his voice high-pitched and full of murderous intent.

Doflamingo replied calmly,

"Rogers Daren."

Pica's words caught in his throat, his face freezing mid-expression.

Seeing their reactions, Doflamingo shook his head and sighed.

"I know how much all of you cherish what we've built in the North Blue."

"Yes, compared to the wandering, unstable life we had in the beginning, we're now enjoying a life of luxury."

"But deep down, you all know—it's only temporary."

At those words, everyone fell silent.

There was nothing they could say to argue.

Before they met Doflamingo, each of them had been a thug, a scoundrel, or a villain—scraping by through robbery, theft, scams, and all sorts of petty crime.

But the moment they laid eyes on Doflamingo, the moment they felt the innate charisma radiating from him, they saw something else—an opportunity.

They gave him their loyalty, made him their king. But truthfully, they did it to escape their old lives and grasp a better one.

Craving comfort—it's only human.

Doflamingo didn't blame them.

"One day, we were always going to leave the North Blue."

"We can indulge in comfort all we want, but the sea waits for no one. And this era waits for no one."

"Daren... no, my godfather just told me that the government is planning to launch the Shichibukai system. And I intend to claim one of those titles."

Doflamingo rose slowly to his feet. Behind him, his pink feather coat stirred wildly despite the still air, lifted by the overwhelming aura he released.

A powerful pressure surged outward, the dominating presence of a ruler bearing down on them all.

"My family... Godfather-sama has shown us the way."

"And now, it's time for us to reclaim everything we once lost."

Trebol and the others trembled. One by one, they dropped to one knee, heads bowed with conviction.

"Yes, young master."

But deep within their hearts, the same uneasy thought crept in—

Doffy is becoming more and more obedient to that Marine...

...

Chapter 439 - 439: Volume 3 – Chapter 82: Shiki's Unusual Behavior

One day later.

Grand Line, first half — Marine Headquarters, Marineford.

A warship docked.

"That's... Commodore Tokikake's warship!"

"Salute!"

As the orderly shouted, all the Marines patrolling the massive oval-shaped harbor halted what they were doing and saluted in unison.

The gangway was lowered.

Tokikake strolled down the ramp with his hands in his pockets, glancing at the rows of Marines eagerly awaiting at the dock. Playing the part of a humble leader on inspection, he waved and smiled modestly.

"This is a bit much. I just went to the New World for some intel gathering and—eh?"

His smile froze.

A group of elite Marines with urgent expressions walked right past him, heading straight for Daren, who was descending the gangway at a calm pace.

"Vice Admiral Daren! You're finally back!"

"Fleet Admiral Kong and Admiral Sengoku... along with the rest of the high-ranking officers, are already waiting in the conference room."

The Commodore leading the group saluted Daren solemnly and spoke in a firm tone.

Daren smiled lightly.

"Sorry to keep you waiting. Lead the way."

"—Salute!!"

The orderly's voice rang out again.

All the Marines on-site snapped into another salute.

But this time, it was unmistakably for Daren—not Tokikake.

Tokikake: ...

The corner of his eye twitched. He stepped forward, pointing to his own face with a cheeky grin.

"What about me? Admiral Sengoku and the others must be waiting for me too, right?"

"No worries, no need to show me the way. I know the route to the Fleet Admiral's office like the back of my hand."

The Commodore glanced at him, his tone suddenly turning formal and icy.

"Apologies, Commodore Tokikake. This military meeting is for Headquarters officers of Rear Admiral rank or higher... You are not required to attend."

Tokikake: ...

"Seriously!? I'm a Commodore, for god's sake!"

He shouted in frustration.

The Commodore paused in his steps.

"Who here isn't?"

Tokikake: ...

"Aaaaahhh!! Dammit!!!"

...

Fleet Admiral's Office.

Led by the Commodore, Daren had just stepped into the military conference room when a heavy, oppressive atmosphere hit him like a wave.

Around an exaggeratedly large oval table, dozens of officers with ranks of Rear Admiral and above from Marine Headquarters were already seated. They all wore grave expressions, focused on the simulated battle map before them.

The moment the doors opened, dozens of sharp gazes locked onto Daren.

The weight of their stares was indescribable.

But Daren remained unfazed, a relaxed smile on his face.

"Yo, it's lively in here."

Kong frowned.

Staff Officer Tsuru's mouth twitched.

Sengoku pressed his palm against his forehead in pain.

Everyone: ...

"Take your seat, Vice Admiral Daren... We've been waiting for you."

Kong spoke in a low, authoritative voice.

"Yes, Fleet Admiral Kong," Daren replied and casually looked around at the empty seats nearby.

"Hey, Daren! Over here! I saved you a seat!"

Kuzan stood up in the corner, waving with excitement as he pointed at the seat beside him.

"This spot's perfect! It's convenient for your smoking!"

Everyone: ...

Sengoku clutched his chest in frustration.

Daren smiled.

"Alright."

"No, Vice Admiral Daren, please sit next to me. Your input is especially important in today's meeting."

Kong suddenly interjected.

Daren paused for a second, then nodded in acknowledgment.

He walked over and took the empty seat to Kong's right.

This seat originally belonged to Zephyr-sensei...

Daren glanced around the table and quickly pieced it together.

As Fleet Admiral, Kong sat at the head of the table.

To his left was Sengoku, followed by Sakazuki, Borsalino, and other combat-aligned Vice Admirals from Headquarters.

To his right was the seat that once belonged to former Admiral Zephyr, followed by Tsuru and other staff officers, administrative officials, and "freelancers" like Garp who basically just coasted along.

Which meant Daren now sat directly between Kong and Tsuru.

But the moment he took his seat, he suddenly felt a chill wafting from his side.

"Daren, I hear you've been having a lot of fun in the Pleasure District these past few days?"

Daren froze. He turned to see Staff Officer Tsuru glaring at him with the cold intensity of someone conducting an interrogation.

"Ahem..."

He coughed twice, a flicker of embarrassment crossing his face.

How the hell had word of his visit to the Pleasure District already gotten out?

Damn it!

Was it that bastard Tokikake who sold him out?

Thankfully, Gion was still just a Commodore—she didn't qualify to attend a meeting like this...

Just as he was racking his brain for a way to cover himself, Kong tapped the table lightly with one thick-knuckled finger, officially opening the meeting.

"Everyone is now present."

He lifted his gaze, scanning the room with a stern look, and spoke in a deep voice.

"From this point on, everything discussed in this meeting is classified as top-level military intelligence. Any leaks to the outside will be dealt with severely."

"Yes, Fleet Admiral Kong!"

The response from everyone in the room was loud and in unison.

"Good. Then..."

Kong turned to Sengoku and gave him a nod.

"Sengoku, begin."

Sengoku nodded and rose from his seat, sweeping his hand outward.

With a soft whoosh, the prepared Den Den Mushi began projecting a series of startling images onto the giant screen in the conference room.

Towns reduced to ashes. Islands scarred and broken. Countless refugees left homeless. Corpses strewn among the ruins...

Sengoku's somber and resolute voice filled the room.

"A few days ago, the legendary Great Pirate Shiki the Golden Lion reappeared on the seas."

"He's rebuilt a flying fleet tens of thousands strong. Under his command are at least thirty pirate ships. He has already launched large-scale destruction and massacres in several countries and islands across the New World."

"Attacks, annihilation, slaughter... Shiki's Flying Pirates have gone on a rampage."

"But through post-incident investigations, we've identified something unusual—most of the targeted islands and towns weren't wealthy. And most critically, the Flying Pirates didn't seize any wealth or resources from these locations."

"This means that Shiki's objective... wasn't plunder."

The moment those words landed, the expressions of the gathered officers shifted.

Because at their core, pirates are driven by one thing: plunder.

If a massive pirate crew launches attacks without taking loot, then what they're after must be something... far more valuable than treasure.

Chapter 440 - 440: Volume 3 – Chapter 83: Shiki Becomes an Archaeologist?

The very thought sent chills down the spines of all the Marine officers present.

No one knew better than the Marines just how insane Shiki could be.

This pirate, whom Admiral Sengoku had openly called a "legend," was so terrifying and dangerous that, in many ways, he surpassed even Roger and Whitebeard—let alone Kaidou and Big Mom.

He treated human lives like weeds, stopping at nothing to achieve his goals. Cruel and decisive in his killings, he saw his subordinates as disposable tools. That madness, that overwhelming Haki, and that utter disregard for limits had already been on full display during the recent battle at Marineford.

After all, even Whitebeard and Roger had their lines they wouldn't cross.

But not Shiki!

Every time he appeared on the seas, it was a guaranteed storm of bloodshed and chaos.

This time, he led his fleet in a crazed assault on major towns, islands, and ports—not for plunder or supplies.

So what was his goal?

"So what is that guy really after?"

Sakazuki's hoarse voice suddenly cut through the air, laced with a chilling killing intent that made everyone stiffen.

Sengoku shook his head, his expression grim.

"We haven't uncovered anything yet. The Flying Fleet's movements are difficult to predict, and Shiki's personality is wildly erratic. Based on what I know of him..."

He paused, brow deeply furrowed.

"Many of the places he's hit might just be decoys."

Decoys...

"So what you're saying, Admiral Sengoku, is that Shiki is deliberately attacking towns and islands unrelated to his actual goal, just to mislead our pursuit and investigation—to mask his true objective?"

A veteran Vice Admiral from headquarters couldn't help but ask.

Sengoku nodded.

"Exactly. That possibility can't be ruled out."

Hearing this, a heavy silence fell over the room. The tension was palpable, and the officers sat in silence, brows furrowed with worry and frustration.

Seeing this, Sengoku and Kong exchanged a glance—both recognizing the weight in the other's eyes.

This was what made Shiki such a formidable threat.

His cunning, his unpredictability, his overwhelming strength... It wasn't an exaggeration to say he was the most dangerous pirate on the seas.

And reality bore that out.

Since the God Valley Incident, almost every one of those defiant individuals who once served under Rocks had risen to become powerful and infamous pirates.

Ochoku, who now ruled Hachinosu. The former Empress of Amazon Lily, Gloriosa. Buckingham, once part of the MADS illegal research team...

Big Mom, who built the Totto Land empire. Kaidou, who took over Wano Country. Whitebeard, with his vast territory and powerful fleet...

Though all of them were remnants of the Rocks Pirates like Shiki, none posed as great a threat to the world—or the Marines—as he did.

Every time Shiki moved, the Marines were forced to react, dancing to his tune.

It was a frustrating position to be in.

"That guy seems to be searching for something."

A calm voice suddenly broke the silence.

Everyone turned to look.

There sat Daren, legs crossed, smiling as he pulled out a cigar. Beside him, Kuzan eagerly offered a lighter.

Sengoku's mouth twitched slightly at the sight.

However, he managed to rein in his emotions and asked patiently,

"Searching? Daren, do you know something?"

Daren lit his cigar, took a puff, and smiled.

"I don't know either."

"But take a look at the islands Shiki has attacked."

He gestured toward the massive sand table in front of him. Each of the towns, islands, and ports targeted by Shiki had a small red flag stuck in it.

"In just a few days, Shiki has attacked sixteen locations."

As he exhaled smoke, Daren spoke calmly and clearly.

"Among them, eight places—like Ross Town, Sleeping Valley, and Rising Sea Island—are remote, economically underdeveloped, and impoverished. If Shiki really wanted to create a smokescreen to mislead us, he would've chosen prosperous, wealthy nations, not these obscure little towns and islands."

"After all, the more extravagant the trick, the larger the stage needs to be."

Kong's eyes flickered, and he couldn't help but ask,

"So, Daren, based on your understanding of Shiki, what do you think his true objective is in attacking these locations?"

At that, the rest of the officers began to understand.

Why had Fleet Admiral Kong seated Daren beside him and granted him such a high-profile presence at this strategy meeting?

Simple. Because Vice Admiral Daren was the only Marine who had repeatedly thwarted Shiki's schemes through both intellect and skill.

If anyone in the Navy knew Shiki best, it was undoubtedly Daren.

Daren turned toward Kong and gave a small nod.

"Reporting to Fleet Admiral Kong, a better question would be—what do these places have in common?"

"Besides being poor, remote, and sparsely populated, there's one more critical connection."

"They all have long histories and are tied to mysterious legends."

He pointed to a location on the sand table.

"Ross Town has passed down tales of demons for centuries."

"Sleeping Valley, with its unique terrain, has historical roots going back two thousand years."

"Rising Sea Island, with its upward sea current like Reverse Mountain, is considered one of the New World's great natural wonders."

"...The others are similar."

Daren smiled, a glint in his eye.

"It seems he's searching for something tied to ancient history, trying to trace clues buried in myths and strange phenomena."

At that, Kuzan stared at Daren, eyes glowing with admiration.

"Amazing, Daren! How do you know all this?!"

Sakazuki gave Daren another look, clearly intrigued.

The other Marine officers were visibly stunned, eyes fixed on Daren in disbelief.

Vice Admiral Daren's knowledge was far beyond the norm.

Daren looked around, confused.

"Supplementary reading materials from the cultural studies classes at the Marine training camp—world geography and history... Didn't any of you read them?"

Everyone: ...

They joined the Marines to fight pirates!

Who actually paid attention to cultural studies?

Especially the supplementary reading materials!

"Well, I mean, yeah, we've read them."

"Most of us are training camp graduates after all..."

"Yeah, yeah..."

"We just didn't make the connection right away..."

"Exactly, that's all..."

"Vice Admiral Daren really is top of the class!"

The generals muttered with embarrassment.

Garp quietly shuffled over to Sengoku, nudging him with his elbow and whispering,

"Sengoku, did you know this stuff?"

Sengoku's face turned slightly red. He coughed, straightened up, and said,

"Of course I knew."

"You knew but didn't say anything, tsk..."

Garp muttered.

Sengoku: ...

"So..."

Borsalino glanced at Daren, his grin teasing.

"Looks like our Great Pirate has given up on looting and decided to become an archaeologist. Just what does he hope to find in these ancient legends and histories?"

He spoke lightly, but others listened with intent.

As Daren and Borsalino spoke, Kong and Sengoku's expressions subtly shifted. Their pupils contracted.

It was as if they'd suddenly remembered something they'd rather not.