

One Piece 681

Chapter 681: Gundam? I Have One Too!

Desert island.

Two figures closed in at incredible speed.

Whitebeard's golden hair streamed in the wind, his eyes flashing a dark red glow. In a furious rage, his presence was like a wrathful deity descending.

A milky white halo laced with black lightning erupted from his fists and slammed straight toward the Vice Admiral's sinister black dragon claws!

Boom!!

It was like a missile detonating on the spot—violent shockwaves burst outward from the point of impact, centered on the two of them.

Daren let out a muffled grunt as his body shot backward like a cannonball, skidding dozens of meters before finally grinding to a halt.

Blood dripped steadily from his arms, which were split open with torn flesh and strained muscles showing signs of rupture.

Compared to Roger's refined and dangerous swordsmanship, Whitebeard's destructive power was on another level.

Especially the terrifying impact imbued with the Gura Gura no Mi's "world-destroying power." The shockwaves could tear through the void itself—each blast strong enough to threaten even Daren's "Indestructible Body."

"Kahahaha! Daren, you're still too weak! Watch this!"

Bullet roared with laughter as a strange purple halo suddenly appeared on his body, spreading across the ground beneath him in the blink of an eye.

"Unión Armado!"

An unbelievable sight unfolded—

Under the influence of some invisible force, the vegetation, rocks, the very ground... everything, living or not, began to squirm uncontrollably, surging toward Bullet's body.

His form rapidly expanded and grew taller. In no time, a colossal figure, several dozen meters high, burst from the earth, kicking up massive clouds of dust and rubble.

The towering giant cast a terrifying shadow, completely engulfing Whitebeard's silhouette.

Roar!!

Covered in a thick coat of Armament Haki, the giant's head took on the shape of a snarling wolf. It let out a thunderous howl, and its lantern-sized eyes glowed with savage scarlet fury.

The roar sent cracks rippling through the ground as if the earth itself were crying under the pressure.

The "Giant Bullet" form!

"Kahahaha! See my strength now, Daren?!"

Inside the giant's body, Bullet looked as though he was sitting at the controls, gripping a pair of levers and laughing with exhilaration.

"This move was made just for you!"

As he spoke, the Unión Armado giant let out another earth-shaking roar, raising a mountainous fist and hurling it down toward Whitebeard like a falling peak!

With overwhelming mass and force, the punch tore through the air, releasing shockwaves in concentric bursts of white energy.

"Ultimate Faust!!"

The punch crashed down like a meteor!

The blast kicked up roaring winds, sending Whitebeard's blond hair and snow-white cloak billowing wildly.

Panting lightly, he narrowed his eyes at the massive fist falling from above. Then, suddenly drawing a deep breath, he stepped forward—

And threw a punch straight at it, without dodging!

Boom!!

Despite the drastic difference in size, the two fists collided midair. They never even touched, but the air itself shattered—countless cracks splintered through the void around them.

Bullet's eyes widened.

The scene before him twisted violently, then shattered like broken glass!

Whitebeard roared, the milky white halo around his fist bursting outward.

"I'm Whitebeard, damn it!!"

Crack-crack!!

A sharp, explosive sound rang out as countless cracks spread across the giant's fist. Then, like a detonation from high-grade explosives, it began to disintegrate and blow apart!

From the fist, to the forearm, to the upper arm... under the overwhelming might of the "world's strongest," the giant created by Bullet through the power of the Gasha Gasha no Mi—

Came crashing down in pieces!

...Revealing Bullet sitting there in stunned disbelief.

"That's it?"

Daren rolled his eyes in exasperation.

Bullet's face turned bright red as he snapped,

"You try it then!"

"I got bigger, didn't I?! Can you do that?!"

To his surprise, Daren suddenly grinned.

"Well, funny you should mention that."

Gundam? I have one too!

He took a deep breath, and as he exhaled to steady himself, his body began to change.

Crack, crack—

It sounded like his bones were shattering and fusing again, sending chills down the spine.

Under Bullet's wide-eyed stare and Whitebeard's grim gaze, the Vice Admiral's body began to swell and grow, as if inflated.

His uniform shirt tore apart in an instant. Metal fragments spun and assembled around him, forming armor that quickly covered his body. In moments, a sleek and imposing steel giant stood before Bullet.

A Giant's Body!

A crushing sense of pressure surged outward, whipping up a storm of wind and sand. Whitebeard's eyes immediately sharpened.

He saw it at a glance.

This was different from the brat in Roger's crew who used a Devil Fruit. The power this Marine kid just unleashed... it came from within himself!

"The bloodline of the giants?!"

A ridiculous thought flashed through Whitebeard's mind.

Before he could react, Daren had already extended his massive arm and, with one hand, gripped the suddenly enlarged cursed blade "Enma," swinging it down like a titan tearing open the heavens—straight at the world's strongest man!

Instinctively, Whitebeard raised his naginata to block.

Boom!!

The immense black blade crashed down like a falling sky. Despite Enma's razor-sharp edge, Daren was wielding it like a slab of iron.

Overwhelmed by the sheer force, Whitebeard's expression shifted. A metallic taste rose in his throat, and his feet drove into the ground like stakes.

With a deafening impact, the earth within several kilometers sank downward, collapsing by several meters as rubble burst skyward.

Whitebeard's face flushed red on the spot.

Feeling the crushing force bearing down on him, his features turned crimson, and veins bulged across his forehead and arms.

"...What the hell is that ability?!"

Bullet's shocked voice rang out.

He could hardly believe his eyes.

Transforming into a super-sized giant was a combat technique he had painstakingly developed.

In that form, his combat capability skyrocketed. Though his reaction speed and agility were reduced, his destructive power and brute strength soared exponentially!

It was tailor-made to counter someone like Whitebeard—an opponent not known for speed, but capable of overwhelming devastation.

So how had Daren managed to come up with something like this!?

Daren growled through clenched teeth.

"Quit yapping and help me already!!"

Bullet paused for a second, then in a flash, landed right on top of Daren's head.

"What the hell are you doing?!"

Daren roared in annoyance, the force of it nearly shattering Bullet's eardrums.

"Get off my damn head!!"

But Bullet suddenly looked like he'd remembered some brilliant technique. His eyes lit up with excitement.

"If you can turn into a giant..."

He stood tall, staring straight at Whitebeard.

"Then what if I add my ability on top of that?"

Daren froze.

Add your ability?

What's he talking about...

Wait a second—

His eyes flew wide open, as if he'd just imagined the most absurd scene possible.

Chapter 682: A Combination Move That Sets the Blood Boiling

After transforming into a giant, and now combining it with Bullet's Unión Armado ability...

An idea so absurd it bordered on delusional suddenly popped into Daren's head.

"Kahahaha! I've got it!!"

Just as Daren was spacing out, Bullet's eyes lit up and he burst out laughing.

"This is our blood-pumping combo move, Daren!!"

A blood-pumping combo move!!

Daren's eyes lit up as well.

No way...

His heart started pounding wildly.

A Gundam—that was every man's dream!

"Hahahahaha! Let's do it, Bullet!"

The gigantic Daren let out a booming laugh that thundered through the void, rumbling like distant stormclouds and even drawing arcs of black lightning into the sky.

Whitebeard, still bracing himself with both hands on the black greatsword, suddenly felt his chest tighten, his face flashing with alarm.

A combination technique!?

His mind flashed back to his time with the Rocks Pirates—Charlotte Linlin and that brat Kaidou were always scheming up some kind of joint attack...

Those terrifying moves that could level everything within dozens or even hundreds of kilometers.

Don't tell me... these two brats came up with something like that too!?

At that thought, a cold sweat broke out across Whitebeard's back.

"Let's go!!"

With a thunderous shout, Bullet leapt into the air, landing once again atop Daren's head. The power of the Gasha Gasha no Mi activated instantly.

A pale purple energy wave rippled outward as the metal on Daren's surface suddenly bristled like dragon scales and launched into the air.

The fragments quickly reassembled, melted, and fused in midair, wrapping around Bullet's body.

A warlike, blood-drenched aura pulsed outward with the forming energy, and even Whitebeard felt his nerves tighten from the pressure.

Twisting... morphing...

Then, rapidly "forging" into a very... peculiar shape.

Whitebeard's expression froze. The corner of his mouth twitched involuntarily.

Daren stood rooted in place, stunned.

"..."

"..."

"Kahahaha!! What do you think?! This is the fruit of our teamwork, Daren!!"

Bullet's triumphant laughter shattered the awkward silence.

Sitting atop Daren's giant head was now a bizarrely shaped structure.

A massive military green base was embedded into his forehead like an aggressive-looking "military cap."

And on top of that cap... was a giant black heavy cannon protruding outward.

Daren: "..."

"This is my masterpiece! Unión Armado—Ultimate Faust!!"

From inside the cannon, Bullet beamed with pride.

"Perfect for covering your lack of long-range firepower!"

From a distance, the towering giant now had a uniquely shaped cannon mounted on its head. It looked... downright ridiculous.

After a brief silence,

"I get the cannon part, but why did you have to make it green?" Daren asked through gritted teeth.

He sounded like he was forcing every word through clenched jaws.

"What's wrong with green?" Bullet asked, genuinely confused.

Just then—

"You damn brats!! Have you finished screwing around yet?!"

Whitebeard's furious roar exploded like thunder.

He was the strongest man in the world—yet these two brats were fooling around in the middle of a battle with him!?

Not even in his worst dreams had he imagined being underestimated like this!

Rip! Rip!!

Uncontainable rage erupted from his chest. Whitebeard's eyes narrowed as an overwhelming wave of power surged from his body.

Black and red lightning twisted and roared around him, rapidly surging up the shaft of his naginata, Murakumogiri.

Wrapped in Conqueror's Haki, his muscles bulged like flowing magma. Gritting his teeth, he roared and shoved forward!

The mountain-sized giant was actually forced back several steps.

Daren's expression changed instantly.

Gritting his teeth against the full force of Whitebeard's Haki, he swung his blade sideways once more.

The black greatsword ripped through the air, carving a massive trench in the ground as it surged forward with overwhelming force.

Whitebeard's bloodshot eyes locked on, and he too stepped forward, sweeping his naginata in a horizontal arc.

Clang!!

Two blades of vastly different size clashed in midair. Black and red energy surged wildly as if thousands of bolts of lightning were tearing the sky itself apart. The void twisted violently under the pressure.

"Die!!"

Whitebeard's eyes burst with a terrifying crimson light as his aura surged wildly.

Conqueror's Haki—fully unleashed!

A blood-red blade of energy shot into the sky, forcing Enma to stagger back from the sheer force.

"Leave it to me!!"

Bullet immediately took control of the massive cannon and fired a thunderous blast!

Boom!!

The force of the recoil sent Daren's giant head jerking back, making him momentarily dizzy.

A massive cannonball, over ten meters in diameter, streaked through the sky like a meteor trailing fire, aimed straight at Whitebeard.

Whitebeard's eyes flashed red again as he instantly locked onto the projectile's path. Gripping his naginata with both hands, he slashed out!

Shing!!

The blade flickered.

The enormous shell was cleaved cleanly in two, the split halves exploding in a distant mountain range, sending flames roaring into the sky.

The intense heat and shockwave from the blast outright flattened two peaks, each dozens of meters high.

Feeling the overwhelming impact from behind, Whitebeard's eyelid twitched slightly.

That kind of power...

These two brats weren't just playing around!

With firepower like that, they could easily level an entire country—or wipe a whole island off the map.

But even so...

"With just that kind of power, you think you can kill me—Whitebeard?! Not even close!!"

High above, the aura surrounding Whitebeard turned into crackling black-and-red lightning, frantically converging on his naginata.

"Die!!"

His white captain's coat whipped in the wind as he raised his Supreme Grade blade and slashed downward with all his might!

"Murakumogiri!!"

"Crap!!"

Bullet and Daren's faces twisted at the same time.

Without hesitation, they both instantly deactivated their abilities.

Their bodies shrank rapidly.

Whoosh!

The crimson slash barely grazed past them, tearing through the air, slicing through the distant Torikago, and plunging deep into the far-off sea.

On the coast, those locked in combat didn't even have time to react before they were horrified to witness a smooth, bottomless trench suddenly carve itself across the ocean's surface.

It stretched from the nearby shallows all the way to the horizon—kilometers, possibly even dozens of kilometers long!

Bang!

Bang!

Bang!

The next moment, three figures came crashing down from midair.

Whitebeard, panting, stared at the cloud of dust ahead—only to see those two brats taking up a strange stance.

"That old man's completely lost it... This just got tricky, Daren..."

Bullet's breath was ragged, his voice hoarse.

"This wouldn't have happened if you hadn't held us back, Bullet."

Daren was breathing heavily too, clearly annoyed.

"Tch... Then I guess we've got no choice but to use that move."

Bullet growled, indignant.

"Yeah... This is Whitebeard, after all."

The Vice Admiral's sigh echoed through the air.

The wind blew away the swirling dust.

What came into view made Whitebeard's pupils shrink to pinpoints.

The two brats were standing shoulder to shoulder, knees bent, ready to unleash.

Their arms were cloaked in dense, jet-black Armament Haki—cold and hard as steel—crackling with visible black lightning.

Their eyes burned with unrestrained madness and defiance.

"This... looks familiar..."

Whitebeard's heart sank like a stone, his expression turning grim.

In that instant, a terrifyingly concentrated wave of destructive aura erupted from the two of them—locking onto him with lethal precision.

This was... a blow that couldn't be avoided!

Chapter 683: Let's Call It a Day

The rising energy surged violently, streaked with dense black lightning that crackled around Daren and Bullet's fists as they readied their strike, warping the air itself.

Seeing the stance those two brats had taken, Whitebeard's heart sank to the bottom. He instinctively gripped Murakumogiri tighter.

He could clearly feel it—an overwhelming, indescribable sense of danger crashing down on him, locking onto his very presence.

It gave him the terrifying illusion that no matter how early he used Observation Haki to predict their move, there was no way to dodge what was coming—the combined strike of those two monsters.

And it wasn't just Whitebeard. Fighters from both sides across the battlefield felt that terrifying pressure surge. A suffocating weight blanketed the land, making it hard for anyone to breathe.

"What the hell is going on?"

"Diamond" Jozu's eyelids twitched madly. Forget wiping the blood from his mouth—he just stared in shock at the distant mountains on the island.

Even Moria, who was trading blows with him, felt his heart pound out of rhythm.

"Hey, hey... That aura's insane..."

Clang!

Crocodile's golden hook clashed with Marco's airborne kick. A smirk curled on his lips.

"You think Whitebeard can take on those two together?"

"Oyaji's the strongest there is!"

Marco gritted his teeth, but his gaze flickered uneasily.

He could feel it too—that overwhelming, all-consuming aura of destruction.

Everyone on the battlefield wore different expressions, but deep in their eyes, there was the same glint of awe, faint and hard to detect.

One impossible thought surfaced in all their minds—

Is this what a true clash between top-tier forces looks like?

...

Deep within the island...

A howling storm tore through the forest like a living inferno, churning dust and leaves into a blinding tempest.

Wreathed in lightning and wind, Bullet suddenly roared, his eyes blazing with searing intensity.

"You ready, Daren?!"

Daren's black hair whipped around him, his entire body exuding a frigid, brutal madness as he grinned viciously.

"Just don't drag me down this time!"

Their eyes locked in sync, both fixed on the "World's Strongest Man" unleashing his own unstoppable aura. In a single step forward—

Their movements mirrored each other perfectly, afterimages overlapping like they had practiced this a thousand times. Together, they punched!

"Combined Technique: Retsukoku Break!!!"

Roar!!

A titanic shockwave exploded outward, crashing toward Whitebeard with overwhelming force and unstoppable fury.

Everything in its path—stone, soil, foliage, even ancient trees—

Was instantly pulverized into dust, vanishing without a trace.

The diameter of the blast spanned hundreds of meters, swallowing an enormous section of land ahead of them.

At that very moment, Whitebeard struck back!

His power had already peaked. Black and red lightning swirled around his towering frame as his crimson eyes gleamed, golden hair billowing wildly—

He swung his naginata!

Crack!

The atmosphere itself shattered. The combined might of the Gura Gura no Mi and his Haki fused into a single blazing red slash that tore straight forward!

And then—

Blinding white light engulfed everything.

Only after that came the earth-shaking roar, as if the world itself had split in two.

If someone were watching from the sky, they'd see a scene that would chill them to the core:

A massive white shockwave spiraled outward from the point of impact, obliterating everything in its path. In less than a breath, it devoured the land for dozens of kilometers in every direction!

The blast wave surged into the heavens!

The gale flattened every tree on the island, cracking the earth and sending boulders flying.

Along the shoreline, everyone fighting recoiled in horror, diving for cover—some dropping flat to the ground, others raising their arms in panic to shield themselves from the onrushing storm. Their bodies trembled uncontrollably.

The deafening explosion pierced their ears, leaving them dizzy and disoriented...

It was impossible to tell how much time had passed.

Maybe it felt like a century. Maybe only seconds. But the colossal vortex of energy slowly drew inward, fading into nothing.

Dust and debris hung suspended in the air. Everyone stared wide-eyed, as if witnessing the unimaginable.

Many of the Whitebeard Pirates gasped aloud.

Before them lay a massive, seemingly endless crater—barren, lifeless.

The lush jungle that had once filled this part of the island was gone, replaced by desolate earth.

Even the towering mountains, hundreds of meters tall, had vanished entirely.

It was as if some divine being had sliced away a portion of the world itself.

The land fell into dead silence.

Three towering figures still stood where they had struck, their hands hanging loosely by their sides, motionless.

White steam curled up from their scorched bodies.

"Oyaji!"

Marco clenched his teeth, transforming into his phoenix form in a flash and soaring through the sky toward the blast zone.

The others quickly reacted and followed.

When they arrived, they finally got a clear look at the state of the three...

It couldn't have been worse.

Daren and Bullet were covered head to toe in wounds, their skin split open and blood dripping nonstop, as if they were walking corpses made of blood.

Their breathing was weak, their energy completely drained.

In contrast, Whitebeard was clearly in better shape—aside from his blood-soaked hands gripping his naginata, his body showed no major injuries.

"Oyaji!!"

"Damn it! Kill those two bastards!!"

"They're done for!!"

"..."

The members of the Whitebeard Pirates, seeing this, burned with killing intent. Weapons were already in their hands as they prepared to charge at Daren and Bullet.

Whoosh! Whoosh! Whoosh!...

One after another, figures appeared in front of Daren and Bullet—Doflamingo and the other Shichibukai stepped in, forming a wall to block them.

After the brutal battle earlier, both sides were now on guard against each other's strength. The air grew tense, the scene locked in a deadlock.

"Doffy..."

Just then, Daren's lips moved faintly. In a raspy voice, he said,

"Take down the birdcage."

He struggled to lift his head, his blood-streaked face pale as he forced his heavy eyelids open.

Doflamingo froze for a moment, then followed the order without question.

As the massive white birdcage that had enveloped the entire island slowly dissolved into the sky, a collective sigh of relief rippled through the Whitebeard Pirates.

"Well then... let's call it a day."

Daren glanced at Whitebeard, who remained expressionless and silent, then suddenly grinned, baring his bloodstained teeth.

Chapter 684: The World's Strongest?

Despite Daren's provocative words, Whitebeard's bloodshot eyes remained calm and unchanged.

The rest of the Whitebeard Pirates were furious, their faces flushed with rage.

Before they could react,

Daren casually raised his hand and gestured. In an instant, the wreckage of the metal ark ship flew toward him, twisting and reforming mid-air into its original shape, then hovered silently above.

Daren and the Shichibukai leapt onto the ark and began ascending skyward.

From above, they looked down at the enraged Whitebeard Pirates below, eyes filled with defiance.

"Kishishishi... Shouldn't we just finish them off right here?"

Moria, hoisting his jagged greatsword, let out a chilling laugh, licking his cracked lips as he asked.

But the moment he spoke, several sharp gazes turned toward him.

Crocodile and the others stared at him like he was an idiot.

"Did you take a hit to the head?"

Mihawk, ever calm, said flatly.

"You—!"

Moria's face froze, then flushed with embarrassment.

He opened his mouth, but when he remembered the man's terrifying swordsmanship, his expression wavered. In the end, he just gave a cold snort and turned away.

Daren paid him no mind. Hands relaxed at his sides, he stared ahead, his expression indifferent as he watched the Whitebeard Pirates grow smaller beneath him.

Whitebeard wasn't someone that could be killed so easily. Daren didn't know the extent of his injuries, but his own condition was already dire—he could barely stay on his feet.

As for Bullet, he was likely in even worse shape. His body wasn't nearly tough enough to match the strength of an Indestructible Body.

Add to that the desperate defense by Marco and the others, and trying to kill Whitebeard here was practically impossible.

Worst of all, if Whitebeard decided to launch one of his terrifying, last-ditch assaults like he did during the Summit War, Daren doubted his battered body could survive even a few punches.

This was Whitebeard in his prime—golden hair, still at the height of his power.

In any case, they'd already completed their mission. Headquarters had tasked them with stopping the Whitebeard Pirates—and they had.

Given their current state, there was no way Whitebeard's crew could still head to the Miracle Island.

"What a satisfying battle, Whitebeard."

A cold, defiant smirk tugged at Daren's lips.

The rest of the group couldn't help but chuckle at the sight of the Whitebeard Pirates' pitiful condition.

This was supposed to be the most powerful pirate crew in the world...

and they'd been left here, completely humiliated!

Keep in mind, Crocodile and the others were still rookies at this point—yet they'd pulled off something close to miraculous.

The thought alone filled them with an indescribable rush.

Especially Moria and Crocodile, who had initially been reluctant to join the Shichibukai—now, seeing the furious faces of Marco and the others below, they couldn't help but feel a surge of satisfaction!

A ridiculous thought popped into their heads:

"Maybe... being one of the Shichibukai isn't so bad after all..."

"Those damn bastards!!"

Marco, burning with fury under the sneering glares of the Shichibukai, felt like his eyes would burst from rage.

He stepped forward, hands igniting with blue-green flames, ready to transform into his phoenix form and give chase.

The others clenched their jaws, looking like they were about to charge forward.

They were the Whitebeard Pirates—how could they swallow such shame!?

But just then, a large, bloodied hand landed firmly on Marco's shoulder.

"Let them go."

Whitebeard's hoarse voice came from behind.

Marco froze and turned around.

There stood his Oyaji, towering like a mountain, gazing calmly at the ark ship ascending into the sky.

"This sea... just got a few more troublesome brats to deal with."

Only after the ship vanished into the distant clouds did Whitebeard sigh, a hint of loneliness flickering across his face.

"But Oyaji, why don't we chase after them..."

Marco gritted his teeth in frustration and was about to speak, but Oyaji suddenly staggered. With a heavy thud, he dropped to one knee and coughed up a pool of hot blood.

His face turned deathly pale, and the sight of that dark red blood pooling on the ground sent Marco and the others into a panic.

"Oyaji!!"

"Heal him!!"

"Damn it!!"

"Oyaji is hurt!!"

"..."

Marco quickly activated his Devil Fruit powers. Blue-green flames—known as the Blue Flames of Resurrection—burst from his hands, spreading across Whitebeard's chest.

The others rushed over, surrounding him with tense, worried expressions.

"I'm fine..."

Whitebeard gasped, his voice so hoarse it sounded like his throat had been scorched by fire.

He waved his hand with difficulty and forced a reassuring smile.

"Don't forget, your Oyaji is known as the strongest man in the world."

Marco's eyes turned red as tears welled up.

As the ship's doctor of the Whitebeard Pirates, it wasn't until he activated his powers that he truly grasped just how serious Oyaji's injuries were.

He might have looked fine on the outside, but internally, his organs had suffered significant trauma.

It wasn't fatal, but Marco had never seen Oyaji hurt this badly before.

Not even during battles with Roger or Shiki had Oyaji ever been injured like this.

But Marco didn't realize that those fights with Roger's crew or Shiki had been little more than scuffles compared to what they'd just experienced.

After all, those battles had been between prominent figures of the sea. With Whitebeard's immense strength and towering reputation, most opponents never pushed the fight too far.

The Whitebeard Pirates had never been ambitious about ruling the seas, so few had ever dared to force them into a life-and-death struggle.

Only lunatics like Daren and Bullet would turn a simple clash of strength into an all-out battle to the death.

"Quick! Help Oyaji onto the ship to rest!"

"Prepare nutrient injections! Start the IV immediately!"

Marco, eyes bloodshot, barked orders at the others.

Several officers sprang into action, carefully supporting Whitebeard as they boarded the Moby Dick and entered the cabin.

The others finally let out a breath of relief and began cleaning the battlefield and maintaining the ship.

"What's wrong, Teach? You alright?"

A crewmate patted the shoulder of a dazed young man standing nearby.

The boy stood there, frozen. His skin was dark, messy black curls stuck out from under his hat, his lips were thick, and a pair of chilling steel claws adorned his hands.

The blood on the claws had yet to dry.

"I'm... I'm fine."

Teach snapped out of it and forced a smile.

"Do you think Oyaji will be okay?"

The crewmate hesitated, then suddenly laughed.

"Of course! Our Oyaji is the strongest in the world! Don't worry too much."

He gave Teach another pat on the shoulder before heading onto the ship.

The young man named Teach remained rooted in place, silently watching as blood-soaked bandages were carried in and out of the cabin. A faint light flickered deep in his eyes.

A single drop of blood gathered at the tip of the steel claw and slowly fell.

Chapter 685: A Hidden Wound

The sea of clouds was hazy, and the wind howled fiercely.

A small metal ark soared smoothly through the sky at astonishing speed, slicing through the mist.

The Shichibukai were either standing or sitting, quietly tending to their wounds.

Doflamingo curled his fingers, and threads shimmered into existence, weaving through the air as they stitched the ghastly gashes on Daren's body.

Thanks to Daren's guidance, he had refined his seemingly simple Ito Ito no Mi into a versatile tool. Using threads to suture wounds and quickly stop bleeding—something Doflamingo had done many times—was now second nature.

But as his sunglasses reflected the deep, bone-exposing injuries of the Vice Admiral, even someone as brutal and cold-blooded as Doflamingo felt a chill crawl down his spine.

Wounds like these would've long since killed any ordinary person.

The more he stitched and examined, the more cold sweat gathered on Doflamingo's forehead.

Part of it was disbelief—Whitebeard's overwhelming power had actually inflicted such devastating injuries on Daren.

But what truly shook him was Daren's monstrous physique.

By all rights, the threads from his Devil Fruit ability could slice through rock, buildings, even the hardest steel with ease.

Yet now, just pushing the thread through Daren's flesh brought staggering resistance and sluggishness. Every single stitch demanded his full focus and strength.

And because the process had to be meticulous, the pressure weighed on him more heavily than a battle against the Whitebeard Pirates.

What's more, this was Daren deliberately lowering his muscle tension and defenses.

If he hadn't, Doflamingo's razor-sharp threads might not have even pierced his skin.

Behind his sunglasses, his eyes flickered with unease. Doflamingo kept stitching in silence, pushing away the thoughts brewing in the back of his mind.

"Almost done."

Daren suddenly smiled weakly and waved his hand.

"Thanks, Doflamingo."

"Patch up Douglas Bullet too, will you?"

Doflamingo paused, noticing that Daren's bleeding had mostly stopped. He tensed, then gave a silent nod.

"I don't need it!"

Bullet gritted his teeth, glaring fiercely as he growled at Doflamingo.

"Blond brat, keep your filthy threads away from me or I'll kill you!"

"Even Whitebeard, the so-called 'strongest in the world,' wasn't much. These little fatal wounds of mine—"

"If you end up with lingering damage, we won't be able to fight again," Daren said with a faint smirk.

"My back and abdomen are the worst!"

Bullet immediately rolled onto his side, striking a pose that screamed surrender.

Everyone: "..."

Watching the battle maniac who'd fought Whitebeard head-on now obediently lie down from a single line from Daren, Doflamingo's mouth twitched.

He gave Daren a subtle glance—Daren was pulling out a bloodstained cigar, lighting it with calm ease.

Shaking his head slightly, Doflamingo silently stepped forward and began treating Bullet's wounds.

The thread slipped through flesh effortlessly, dancing like embroidery along the surface. The bleeding slowly lessened.

And once again, Doflamingo was reminded of the terrifying strength of Daren's body.

"Daren-san, where to next?"

Mihawk walked over slowly, kneeling with a straight back and asking with keen anticipation.

His eyes gleamed with fighting spirit. Not a single wound marred his body—if anything, he looked unsatisfied.

Clearly, his clash with Vista of the Flower Swords hadn't been enough to sate him.

Daren exhaled a stream of smoke like a dragon, staring out at the endless sea and sky with a faint smile.

"We wait for news. The battle on the Miracle Island should be wrapping up soon."

Suddenly sensing something, he turned toward one side of the ship.

Crocodile sat there, back against the railing, eyes dark and focused on the horizon.

His usually slicked-back hair was now a bit disheveled.

A crimson claw mark slashed across his neck.

Just a bit deeper and it would've torn his throat open.

Daren narrowed his eyes. For some reason, the scar looked familiar. He couldn't help but ask,

"Crocodile, that wound of yours?"

Crocodile lifted his head, eyes flashing with cold, murderous intent.

"A sneaky little brat."

"He jumped me while I was tangled up in a fight with that Phoenix."

His voice was raspy, filled with shame and fury.

Even when battling Whitebeard's right-hand man, Marco the Phoenix, Crocodile had never taken such a hit. Yet here he was—brought low by some unremarkable, black-haired brat.

"A sneaky little brat?"

Daren frowned. A thought crossed his mind, and then he chuckled.

"The wound's not too bad, but I bet it still aches, doesn't it?"

Crocodile froze, staring at Daren with a look of stunned disbelief, as if to say, "How did you know?"

Daren smiled knowingly.

A certain redhead who preferred not to be named had said the same thing.

"Brr... brr..."

Just then, the sharp ring of a military Den Den Mushi echoed through the air, drawing everyone's attention.

Daren reached into his coat, pulled out the Den Den Mushi, and connected the line.

"Admiral Sengoku, this is Daren."

Heavy breathing came through the receiver, followed by a brief pause. Then Sengoku's voice rasped through, hoarse and worn.

"Daren... you did well this time."

"The Whitebeard Pirates didn't join the battle."

Daren smiled faintly.

"It was my duty, Admiral Sengoku."

"But... what's the situation on Miracle Island? Did we gain anything?"

At that, Crocodile and the others instinctively leaned in, eyes fixed on the Den Den Mushi in Daren's hand.

The battle on Miracle Island was likely the most chaotic, large-scale war in the history of the seas.

The Marine Headquarters had deployed nearly all its elite forces. On the pirate side, three of the great pirate crews had clashed in open war.

It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say the outcome of this battle would drastically reshape the political landscape and power structure of the New World.

This was something that could determine all their futures.

But right after Daren's question—

Sengoku hesitated.

"Well... um... overall, we did achieve some results."

Daren raised an eyebrow. A bad feeling crept into his chest.

"What about Roger's crew?"

Sengoku's voice dropped.

"They got away."

Daren's mouth twitched. He shook his head in resignation.

He wasn't exactly surprised by the outcome. After all, Roger was wrapped in the kind of plot armor reserved for legends—the so-called "Child of Prophecy."

And sending Garp after Roger? That was basically letting him go.

Those two had always walked the line between enemies and allies. They'd even joined forces during the Battle of God Valley. All these years of chasing and fleeing had forged a bond between them far deeper than simple rivalry.

There was no way they'd ever really try to kill each other.

One chased, the other ran, and they'd been at it for years.

They were practically enjoying the game.

If Garp had actually caught Roger, now that would've been the real miracle.

Chapter 686: The Results Were Quite Good

Daren didn't have much of a reaction to Roger's escape.

After all, he had expected it from the start.

It was only Sengoku who had been kept in the dark, foolishly convinced that Garp could bring Roger down.

He didn't even stop to consider that Roger alone was enough to fight Garp to a standstill.

What could Garp possibly rely on to defeat the entire Roger Pirates?

Did he really think Rayleigh and Gaban were just decorative?

Or maybe our mysterious adjutant Bogard was secretly the world's strongest swordsman, capable of taking on both of them at once?

Daren shook his head, took a deep breath, and asked,

"What about that crazy woman, Big Mom?"

"I've heard her hunger pangs have been flaring up more frequently lately. She's been going berserk more and more... and while she can fly, her speed isn't anything special."

"This time, with all the forces we deployed, even if Roger got away, we should at least have been able to deal with Big Mom, right?"

Truth be told, Daren was more wary of Big Mom than Roger—the lunatic obsessed with having his children.

While she didn't exude the same crushing presence as Roger, there was just something deeply off-putting about her.

That was also why, even now, Daren had no plans to set foot on Whole Cake Island.

Charlotte Linlin still had a certain charm about her. If it were any other woman, Daren might've just gritted his teeth and gone for it. Wouldn't be the worst thing.

But every time he saw her, he couldn't help but picture that horrifying mountain of flesh.

His skin crawled just thinking about it.

If the battle on Miracle Island ended with her death, that would've been ideal.

However...

The Den Den Mushi vividly mimicked Sengoku's gradually reddening face in response to Daren's words.

His voice grew even more hesitant.

"Uh... Daren... that crazy woman... she ran too."

Daren: "..."

Crocodile and the others, who had been eavesdropping the whole time, also twitched at the corners of their mouths.

"Then what about Kaidou!?"

Daren clenched his jaw, took another deep breath, and forced himself to stay calm as he analyzed,

"Kaidou is the weakest among the captains of the three great pirate crews. Once a real fight starts, he tends to lose control. Even he can't rein himself in."

"As long as we pinned him down, with all the top-tier forces from Headquarters, it shouldn't have been too difficult to encircle and eliminate him, right?"

What he got in return... was a long silence.

The Den Den Mushi imitated Sengoku's face turning red—then purple.

Daren: "..."

"..."

The Shichibukai pinched their temples in unison, black lines appearing above their heads in exasperation.

So they'd been fighting tooth and nail on their end—well, mostly Daren and Bullet—to intercept the Whitebeard Pirates, and in the end...

Not a single one of the Marine's targets on the "Miracle Island" battlefield had been taken down!?

So with all those deployments, all that funding, all those elite forces and warships...

What exactly did Marine Headquarters do?

"Ahem... Actually, overall, the final outcome was quite good."

Trying to cover up his embarrassment, Sengoku cleared his throat twice and said,

"According to preliminary statistics, in this battle, we eliminated over 3,000 members of the Big Mom Pirates and the Beasts Pirates, including more than 300 officers..."

He looked like he was trying to play it off, forcing an awkward smile as he went on.

"This was definitely a heavy blow to both pirate crews!"

"Both crews suffered significant losses. For at least five years, they'll lack the manpower to wage another large-scale war!"

Faced with Sengoku's hollow, political response, Daren rolled his eyes in frustration.

They didn't take out a single key figure—just a bunch of nobodies. And this was supposed to be a "heavy blow"?

Mid-tier officers and ordinary pirates were everywhere on the sea. With the power and prestige of Kaidou and Big Mom, they could easily gather more underlings in no time.

Daren shook his head and chose not to press the issue further.

The conclusion of the Miracle Island battle was ridiculous, but not incomprehensible.

If Roger, Kaidou, and Big Mom could be taken down that easily, there'd be no future where the Yonkō dominated the New World.

"All right, Admiral Sengoku."

Daren let out a slow breath and said calmly,

"Since the war is over, there's no need for us to head to the battlefield. We'll return directly to headquarters."

Sengoku's face darkened with guilt, seemingly picking up on the discontent in Daren's voice.

Daren had brought only six unruly "misfits" with him, and yet they managed to block the Whitebeard Pirates and complete the mission with ease.

By comparison, Sengoku's side—despite being the main battlefield—had achieved nothing of substance except taking down some bottom feeders.

It was an embarrassment.

Worse yet, they had squandered the opportunity Daren had risked his life to create for them.

"Uh, sure, that's fine..."

He coughed twice again.

"Daren, you've made a great contribution this time. I'll definitely report this to the World Government and make sure you're properly rewarded!"

Sengoku puffed out his chest, seemingly regaining some confidence as a Marine Admiral.

"My Admiral candidate reward still hasn't come through, right?" Daren said coolly.

Sengoku's smile instantly froze.

"Uh... that's... still in the process. It should be soon. Very soon."

He replied awkwardly.

"Fine. Then I'll wait for your good news, Admiral Sengoku."

Daren replied casually and immediately hung up the Den Den Mushi.

He didn't care about some honorary title like "Admiral candidate."

Even if they made him a full-fledged Marine Admiral, so what?

His authority in Marine Headquarters didn't come from government appointments or the rank on his shoulder.

As long as his strength was undeniable, there was nothing he couldn't do.

Power? He had it.

Money? He had plenty.

A fleet? He had no shortage of those either.

The title of Marine Admiral was nothing more than optional decor.

The only upside was that it sounded a bit more impressive when spread around.

The downside? Admirals constantly had to deal with those pig-headed Celestial Dragons—endless restrictions and red tape.

But that wasn't a problem for Daren.

Protecting the noble Celestial Dragons? That was something Rogers Daren excelled at.

He smiled, turned to look at the assembled Shichibukai, and gave a playful blink.

"You all heard that, right? Admiral Sengoku said the Marines did pretty well this time."

The six of them were silent for a moment, exchanging glances.

Then—

"Hahahahaha!!"

A wave of laughter filled with mockery erupted into the sky.

The high-speed metal ark echoed with light-hearted joy.

Chapter 687: The Enraged Admiral Sengoku

"Ah..."

Sengoku slowly set down the Den Den Mushi in his hand, sitting on a crumbling rock as he let out a weary sigh, not bothering to wipe the rain running down his face.

Rainwater streamed down his cheeks, gradually washing away the dried blood at the corners of his mouth.

Miracle Island remained shrouded in relentless rain. The sky loomed dark and heavy, like an enormous hood drawn over the land.

Sheets of rain poured down, casting a hazy veil over the world. Cold droplets pelted the shattered ground, fallen trees, and every Marine's face.

Scattered across the island were countless pirate corpses. Their rain-soaked, pale faces were filled with gloom.

They ran.

All of them ran.

The captains, core officers, and elite fighters of the three great pirate crews—nearly everyone who could escape had escaped.

As for the pirate corpses that blanketed the battlefield, what looked like a grand victory was, in truth, a silent defeat.

"The results of the battle were quite good?"

Borsalino, squatting nearby with a cigarette between his fingers, asked with a smirking expression full of mockery.

Sengoku's mouth twitched as he glared at the freeloader.

Earlier, when Kaidou and Big Mom unleashed their combined technique, this bastard had been the first to slip away!

Sakazuki and Kuzan had both stepped forward without hesitation... yet this irritating bastard Borsalino had subtly positioned himself to shield all three of them without making a sound!

...

Swish, swish, swish...

Sakazuki stepped out from the ruined jungle, his expression dark. His breathing was uneven, and blood was seeping through his uniform from his arm.

The rain cloaked his figure, making him appear even colder and more imposing.

"Everything's basically been dealt with, Admiral Sengoku," he said flatly.

"Except for the core officers and key members of the two Yonkō crews, the rest of the small fry have been eliminated."

He deliberately paused when saying "small fry."

Sengoku felt irritation welling in his chest as he picked up on the dissatisfaction laced in Sakazuki's tone.

"In the end, we accomplished nothing... If I'd known, I would've gone with Daren to intercept Whitebeard."

A grumbling voice came from behind.

Kuzan was sprawled in a patch of weeds, chewing on a blade of grass, arms folded behind his head.

He stared listlessly up at the gray, rain-speckled sky and pouted, sounding genuinely wronged.

Sengoku: "..."

"Enough!"

He ground his teeth and sprang to his feet, his face flushing red with rage as he glared at the three "brats" in front of him and practically roared,

"How the hell was I supposed to know Kaidou and Big Mom had some freakish combined technique!?"

He swung his arm furiously, pointing toward the distant horizon, his hand trembling with anger.

His palm was torn open, bleeding heavily.

"Those two bastards nearly flattened the entire island!! Mountain ranges and forests across hundreds of kilometers were obliterated in a flash!"

He jabbed his finger toward the coastline, where several massive warships lay capsized, and the sea was littered with broken wreckage and debris.

"Yes! The four of us barely held the line with our combined Haki, but we all ended up wounded, didn't we?"

"That attack—Hakai... Just the shockwave alone almost destroyed the entire fleet from headquarters. How the hell were we supposed to stop them from escaping!?"

"Tell me that!!"

Sengoku's sudden outburst startled the surrounding Marines cleaning up the battlefield. Not daring to make a sound, they quietly backed away.

Peeking out from behind fallen trees, heads popped up one after another, their faces full of curiosity and gossip.

Borsalino's smirk froze.

Sakazuki fell silent.

Kuzan shrank his head like a turtle.

Seeing the three of them say nothing, Sengoku's fury only grew.

The failure of this war weighed most heavily on him.

Two battlefields. Two commanders.

Daren, with just a ragtag group of Shichibukai, had effortlessly blocked the Whitebeard Pirates, keeping them completely out of the battle. His speed and execution were flawless.

According to the intel relayed back, they even managed to seriously wound Whitebeard!

And on Sengoku's side?

The full elite force of Marine Headquarters had been deployed. Sengoku prided himself on the planning, strategy, and execution—none of which, in his mind, had been flawed.

But who could've predicted that Kaidou and Big Mom would unleash such a terrifying joint technique?

The moment he faced "Hakai," Sengoku swore he could smell death.

He was certain that if he alone had taken the brunt of that move, he'd be dead or at least gravely wounded.

It was a completely unforeseen, incalculable disaster.

What was he supposed to do?

The four of them had barely managed to block "Hakai," and all sustained injuries of varying severity.

Add to that the chaos of the battlefield, the brutal weather, and most of their warships being destroyed...

Even with a slight edge in fighting strength, how were the Marines supposed to stop Kaidou and Big Mom from breaking through in a desperate charge?

Sure, Sakazuki, Borsalino, and Kuzan had grown stronger, but they'd only just reached the threshold of Admiral-level power.

They still weren't a match for natural monsters like Kaidou and Big Mom.

And in the end, didn't all the pressure fall squarely on him?

The more Sengoku thought about it, the angrier he got. His chest rose and fell rapidly as he stomped his foot and shouted furiously,

"If this keeps up, I'll hand over the title of Marine Admiral to you brats instead!"

Silence.

Utter, deathly silence.

The Marines gossiping in the distance froze, all of them trembling where they stood.

None of them had ever seen Admiral Sengoku—usually known for his calm and composed demeanor—explode like this.

"I was just saying... no need to take it so seriously..."

Borsalino scratched his head with a hint of regret and muttered under his breath.

But to Sengoku's ears, it might as well have been shouted through a megaphone.

His face darkened instantly.

"I'm naturally interested in the position of Marine Admiral," Sakazuki said flatly, "just not right now."

Then he turned and walked off toward the warship without looking back.

"..."

Sengoku's molars ground together with an audible crunch.

Kuzan got up, gave a lazy chuckle, and said,

"I'm not taking the fall for this one."

Clack, clack, clack...

Sengoku stumbled back a few steps, clutching his chest with a pained expression.

Before he could explode again, the three of them had already vanished.

"You little punks..."

He was practically grinding his teeth into dust—

Just then, the Den Den Mushi in his coat rang again.

Still seething with anger, Sengoku didn't even look before answering.

"I'm in a terrible mood right now, so if you've got something to say, spit it out!"

A brief silence came from the other end.

Then a cold, hoarse, elderly voice drifted through.

"Sengoku... you've gotten bold."

The moment the words landed, Sengoku stiffened as if struck by lightning.

His face froze.

Chapter 688: The Five Elders Want to See Me?

That voice...

One of the Five Elders, the Warrior God of Science and Defense—Saint Jaygarcia Saturn!

Sengoku froze on the spot. A chill crawled up his spine, and cold sweat beaded on his forehead.

"S-Sorry! Saint Saturn-sama!!"

He began to stammer, quickly explaining,

"I was just... scolding my subordinates..."

"Hmph. Let it go."

On the other end of the Den Den Mushi, Saint Saturn, dressed in a black flat hat and leaning on an ancient, weathered cane, spoke with quiet indifference.

Sengoku breathed a sigh of relief and hurried to change the subject.

"The battle on Miracle Island has ended. I must apologize—due to my subordinates' incompetence, Roger, Big Mom, and Kaidou all escaped!"

He gritted his teeth and said seriously,

"Although the operation achieved some decent results overall, as the commanding officer, I must bear the greatest responsibility for its failure. I'm fully prepared to accept any punishment."

At this point, Sengoku had no choice but to take the fall.

He couldn't exactly push the blame onto Garp, could he?

That guy had practically held off the entire Roger Pirates alone and immediately pursued the Oro Jackson with a warship after their escape.

More importantly, as the highest-ranking officer and the overall commander of the operation, Sengoku had no way to distance himself from responsibility.

Better to accept it head-on.

...

"We've already reviewed the situation on Miracle Island through our intel."

At that moment, another voice came through the military line—Saint Topman Warcury, the Warrior God of Justice.

This powerful Elder, who oversaw the World Government's judicial authority and commanded all CP units, spoke calmly:

"Kaidou and Big Mom's strength was indeed beyond expectations. The intelligence was flawed, so the fault does not lie with you."

"After all, Sakazuki, Borsalino, and Kuzan are still young. It's normal that they haven't fully matured yet—suffering a temporary setback is understandable."

Sengoku paused, stunned.

Just like that... they brushed it aside?

He exhaled quietly, not having expected the Five Elders to be this lenient.

But a thought quickly struck him. He hesitated, then cautiously brought it up:

"However, regarding the Roger Pirates... Based on the intel we've gathered, Roger now has possession of all four Road Poneglyphs necessary to reach the Final Island."

"He's successfully escaped from the Miracle Island battlefield, and at this rate, it won't be long before he uses those coordinates to locate the Final Island."

Sengoku's expression grew grave as he lowered his voice.

"If he truly reaches that legendary place... could it trigger some major catastrophe?"

"Perhaps I should immediately mobilize a large force and continue the pursuit—carry out a full-scale siege against the Roger Pirates..."

As an Admiral of Marine Headquarters, Sengoku had at least some awareness of the World Government's secrets and taboos.

The Poneglyphs, in particular, were a topic the World Government treated with utmost secrecy. Studying the ancient script was strictly forbidden.

And now, a new addition to Roger's crew—Kozuki Oden, a disgraced samurai from Wano—just so happened to be one of the few people alive capable of reading them.

Sengoku didn't know what secrets the so-called Final Island held—whether it was some ancient truth or a world-altering treasure.

But considering the World Government's extreme efforts to suppress knowledge of the Poneglyphs, it was clear they didn't want anyone reaching that island.

So Sengoku made the suggestion decisively.

The blame for this war might have been brushed aside, but he still wanted to prove himself.

And if he could eliminate Roger before he reached the Final Island...

"No need."

Saint Saturn's flat response left Sengoku stunned.

"Why?"

He blurted it out instinctively.

"That's not your place to ask, Sengoku."

Saturn's voice took on a cold sneer, laced with mockery.

"As a Marine Admiral, your sole duty is to carry out our orders without question."

"Anything beyond that is unnecessary. And you should especially refrain from asking questions that don't concern you."

Sengoku fell silent.

Two seconds passed before he took a long breath and slowly replied,

"Understood, my lords."

His hands, clasped behind his back, clenched unconsciously.

"Good."

From the other end of the Den Den Mushi, the Five Elders seemed pleased with Sengoku's response. Smiles surfaced on their faces.

"Leave the Roger Pirates to Garp. At this point, even deploying a massive force to hunt them down would amount to nothing. The odds of success are virtually zero."

"The New World is chaotic, perilous, and unpredictable. There's no point in making a big move over a man who's already on the brink of death."

"And even if he does find the so-called 'Final Island'—so what?"

"He's missing a key... He's doomed to fail. It's a wasted effort."

"Gol D. Roger... his so-called life and dream are nothing but a pitiful joke."

Missing... a key?

Sengoku's heart jolted, a deep haze forming in his eyes.

What key was Roger missing?

His mind raced, but no matter how hard he thought, he came up with nothing.

The intel he had access to was extremely limited. Even as a Marine Admiral, he lacked the authority and clearance to learn much of the World Government's deepest secrets.

But the Five Elders' absolute certainty that Roger would fail filled him with an overwhelming sense of unease.

Sengoku knew exactly how strong Roger's will and power were.

Not to mention, Roger had gathered an exceptional crew—warriors who rampaged across the seas, nearly unstoppable.

Yet this man, who had put all of Marine Headquarters on high alert, was seen as nothing more than a joke by the five elders sitting atop the world.

A chill unlike any other swept over Sengoku, as if he had plunged into a bottomless, icy abyss.

He instinctively raised his head, staring up into the black sky drowned in rain.

It felt as though a vast, invisible net loomed above—like the thick thunderclouds themselves—blanketing the entire sea, leaving no room for escape.

"I understand."

Sengoku exhaled deeply, cold rain sliding down his cheeks as he spoke quietly.

"Then I will rest the fleet for a moment... and prepare to return to headquarters."

"No. There's no need to return."

Saturn's tone was as calm as ever.

"We have a new assignment for the fleet."

Sengoku straightened, his voice steady.

"Please give the order, sir."

He fixed his burning gaze on the Den Den Mushi before him, resolve radiating from his stance.

Splash...

The downpour hit the ground, splashing mud onto the legs of the Admiral's uniform.

Thunder and rain muffled the Den Den Mushi's voice.

As the military Den Den Mushi opened and closed its mouth, it was as though a god's decree had descended.

Sengoku stood frozen, as if struck by lightning.

He maintained a proud posture, body rigid with tension.

The fire and clarity in his eyes faded away, replaced by shock and disbelief.

Then came the fear. The unease. The guilt.

He stood motionless in the storm, like a statue slowly losing its soul, letting wind and rain batter his frame.

His hands wouldn't stop trembling.

And the rain... poured endlessly.

...

At the same time.

Aboard the high-speed ark ship.

Daren sat shirtless at the bow, wrapped in layers of bloodstained bandages. His chiseled, powerful muscles radiated raw strength and energy.

He lounged without ceremony, a lit cigar clenched between his teeth, cradling a Den Den Mushi that had just dozed back into sleep.

His brow was furrowed.

The ark was silent.

The others watched his back in stillness, none of them speaking.

Only Doflamingo's sunglasses gleamed with a sharp glint, a cold sneer dancing on his lips.

Then, at some point—

The Vice Admiral chuckled, amusement flickering in his eyes.

"The Five Elders... want to see me?"

Chapter 689: Destination... North Blue!

The New World.

Miracle Island.

The rain kept falling—relentless, cold—drenching the land in silence.

The world felt like a giant tomb, with only the mournful sound of rain echoing through it.

No one knew how much time had passed before a Marine soldier in a hooded raincoat came running over. He stopped before the unmoving Sengoku and saluted sharply.

"Report, Admiral Sengoku! The warships have been fully refitted. We have ten vessels ready for combat. Five are capable of sailing normally post-battle. Please give your orders!"

Sengoku's gaze, vacant and unfocused, flickered for a moment before he slowly came back to himself.

He was soaked to the bone, his signature afro hanging limp and matted. He looked utterly defeated.

"...Give the order. All personnel, board the warships. Prepare to set sail."

His rain-whitened lips parted slightly, the words emerging in a hoarse murmur.

The messenger hesitated.

He stared carefully at Sengoku's pale face, then pressed his lips together.

As part of Sengoku's personal guard, he had never seen the Admiral so lost, so hollow.

Sure, this battle hadn't gone exactly as planned, but was it really such a devastating blow?

They had still taken down plenty of pirates from the New World, hadn't they?

"Are you all right, Admiral Sengoku? Should I call the ship's doctor to take a look at you?"

He asked cautiously.

Sengoku was silent for a moment before forcing a stiff smile and waving him off.

"I'm fine. Just a bit tired, that's all."

His eyes wandered blankly toward the Marines preparing in the rain.

Seeing the young, resolute faces, he unconsciously clenched his fists tighter.

"Go."

The messenger nodded and left without another word.

Sengoku remained rooted to the spot, eyes fixed ahead.

In his mind, the hoarse, aged voices of the Five Elders echoed again—cold, mocking—like demons whispering, over and over.

They wouldn't go away.

"Sengoku, you're a smart man. You should know what choice to make at a time like this..."

"This is our final test for Daren, just as we once tested you. We trust you understand the care behind our decision."

"The choice he makes will define his life and his fate."

"And you, Sengoku... You know we've always had high hopes for you."

"Kong has already decided. Once this matter is settled, he'll assume his new post in the Holy Land."

"You know what that means..."

"You... will become the next Fleet Admiral of Marine Headquarters!"

"The greatest strength of a Fleet Admiral is making the right call at the critical moment—and standing firmly with the government, defending the absolute authority of the World Government."

"So... don't let us down, Sengoku."

...

"Damn it!!"

Sengoku suddenly bowed his head, grinding his teeth as a low, feral growl escaped him—he couldn't hold back a curse.

His eyes were bloodshot.

Those five old bastards were telling him to prepare for the worst.

Yes, this was a test for Daren...

But it was just as much a test for him, Sengoku!

If he didn't make the most rational, decisive choice, he might never become Fleet Admiral.

Worse, he could be held responsible, dismissed—or even arrested!

In the pouring rain, Sengoku's fists clenched tighter, nails digging into flesh until blood began to seep out.

The World Noble Hunting Tournament...

The so-called "graduation trip" for the Celestial Dragons' elite...

Wasn't that kind of inhuman spectacle buried by history long ago?

Why, after twelve years, were they digging it out of the trash heap and putting it back on some sacred altar again?

Did they think the seas weren't chaotic enough already?

Roger's pirate crew was about to reach the "Final Island," and yet the Celestial Dragons in Mary Geoise were still obsessed with their twisted games of pretend.

And the most chilling truth—the one that made Sengoku's spine go cold—was...

Would that proud, defiant brat Daren really go through with such a mission?

The "Celestial Dragon killing" in the North Blue suddenly flashed through Sengoku's mind, and his heart sank.

Would a young man like that really be willing to carry out something so vile?

And worst of all...

The tournament was to be held in North Blue.

That was where Daren rose to power—his domain.

A place he would never let anyone defile.

Could Daren really stand by and watch an entire nation—or an entire island—be wiped out in a genocidal massacre?

Sengoku didn't dare think any further.

In his mind's eye, he could already see the flames, the blood, the bodies—burning before him.

"Admiral Sengoku."

A cold, grim voice rang out unexpectedly.

Sengoku paused, wiped the rain from his face, and turned his head.

Sakazuki, wearing his military cap, had walked over at some point. Rain dripped steadily from the brim as he looked at Sengoku with a solemn expression.

"Prepare to set sail."

He frowned, clearly noticing something was off about Sengoku.

"Hmm..."

Sengoku took a deep breath, pulled himself together, and began striding toward the coastline.

But after only a few steps, he suddenly stopped and turned to glance back at Sakazuki.

"Sakazuki, if one day our comrades or fellow soldiers disobey the government's orders... what would you do?"

He asked it as if in passing.

Sakazuki froze for a moment.

He looked deeply at the worn-out Admiral in front of him, then replied grimly,

"It is the duty of a soldier to obey orders."

There wasn't the slightest hesitation.

Sengoku went silent.

Without saying another word, he turned and continued walking toward the warship.

When he reached the front of the vessel, he stopped.

"The rain has stopped!"

"That's great... Otherwise, we would've hit a storm on the way back."

"..."

Some Marines had noticed and spoke up in surprise.

The rain... stopped?

Sengoku slowly raised his head, staring up at the sky, now slightly brighter. His lips pressed even tighter together.

On the far horizon, the cloud sea rolled and churned. Dense black clouds hung heavy and unsettled.

Lightning flickered faintly within.

He sighed inwardly.

No, the rain hadn't stopped.

A far greater storm was brewing.

"Let's go!"

Sengoku clenched his fists.

Under the stunned gazes of the surrounding Marines, he coldly raised his hand and gave the order:

"Destination... North Blue!"

The moment those words left his mouth—

Kuzan, Gion, Yamakaji, and the others were all struck dumb.

Borsalino blinked in surprise, then smiled with hidden meaning.

Sakazuki looked as if he'd been hit by lightning.

Chapter 690: What Conditions Did the Five Elders Set?

The Red Line.

This ring-shaped continent intersects with the Grand Line and is named for its crimson soil. Towering thousands of meters above sea level, it rises like a sheer, cloud-piercing cliff, inspiring awe with its immense, unreachable presence.

At its summit lies a city both mysterious and magnificent—the most revered place in the world. This land is home to gods who dwell above the clouds and look down upon the masses like ants: the Celestial Dragons.

Inviolable, sacred, supreme... this is the "Holy Land" of Mary Geoise.

Outside the outer walls of Mary Geoise, beyond its towering fortifications...

Whoosh!

A powerful figure suddenly plummeted from the clouds above, crashing into the ground with immense force and shaking the earth with a deep rumble.

Dust exploded outward as long cracks spread from the impact site, reaching even the city walls of the Holy Land, causing faint fissures to appear.

The deafening commotion immediately put the Holy Land Guard on high alert.

"Who's there?!"

"Something just fell!"

"Full alert!"

"Stand ready!"

"..."

The guards, who had been slouching lazily moments ago, snapped to attention. They raised their poorly maintained rifles and drew spotless, unused swords, their eyes wide with suspicion as they stared toward the source of the disturbance.

Dust swirled. Gunpowder smoke was carried by the howling wind.

A tall, shadowy figure slowly stepped forward, lifting one gleaming black military boot from the cracked ground.

As the sharp wind howled, that imposing and frigid presence began to emerge from the smoke and dust.

Black hair whipped wildly in the wind, and beneath those tousled strands, eyes gleamed like a star-filled sky.

Gone was the familiar crisp Marine uniform and cape. The black-haired young man stood bare-chested, revealing a physique chiseled with explosive muscle.

His broad, icy frame was crisscrossed with scars like writhing centipedes—some old, others still fresh and unhealed.

Dark military trousers clung to legs still stained with drying blood.

He stood calmly before Mary Geoise's grand walls, reeking of blood, hands in his pockets, a lit cigar clenched between his teeth.

The raw, murderous aura radiating from him—unintentional yet suffocating—froze the hundred-plus Holy Land guards in place. Their pores bristled. Hands trembled.

"H-He..."

"Is that..."

"Rogers Daren!"

"That Vice Admiral everyone talks about!!"

"The one who took down Shiki!!"

"..."

The guards gulped nervously.

Though they had heard bits and pieces about this man's fearsome reputation, their understanding of Rogers Daren was limited to newspapers and idle gossip.

Some of them had even joked during patrols that the so-called "King of the North Blue" was just the World Government's best-trained dog.

After all, as members of the Holy Land Guard—men who had spent their lives in this exalted place above the clouds—they naturally looked down on all others with disdain.

What could the Marines do? Kill a few pirates? Clean up after them?

How could such lowly tasks compare to guarding the Holy Land and protecting the noble Celestial Dragons?

But now...

As they stared at the smoking, expressionless Marine, every one of them felt a bone-deep chill crawl down their spine, as if they'd been plunged into ice water. Their teeth began to chatter.

He hadn't even released his full presence, yet the oppressive ferocity rolling off him made it nearly impossible to breathe.

It felt like the man before them wasn't human at all—but a beast that had clawed its way out of a mountain of corpses!

"Wait, didn't he just finish intercepting the Whitebeard Pirates...?"

"Could those terrifying wounds be from fighting Whitebeard?"

"He's a real monster..."

...

More and more Holy Land guards poured in from all directions, swarming the city walls like a white tide.

While they watched Daren with nervous caution, he casually scanned the crowd in return.

Bloated figures, sloppy formations, poorly maintained and unlubricated firearms, brand-new swords and spears with not a scratch on them, and eyes brimming with fear and unease...

A faint, mocking smirk curled at the corner of his lips.

"Daren!"

Suddenly, a powerful voice rang out from the rear of the gathered guards.

The crowd froze, then instinctively parted to form a clear path.

Kong stepped forward, draped in a heavy cloak. The golden epaulettes on his shoulders, symbolizing his rank as Fleet Admiral, swayed gently with his stride, carrying an aura of calm authority, firm and immovable as a mountain.

"Fleet Admiral Kong."

Daren withdrew his gaze from the trembling guards and looked over at the approaching Kong, raising his hand in a salute.

"You're out of control, kid. Can't you hold back just a little?"

Kong stared helplessly at the massive crater before him and the cracks that spread all the way to the city walls.

Daren gave a small laugh and shrugged.

"Just had a fight with Whitebeard. Still recovering. Lost control for a second."

Kong's face darkened.

There was no good way to respond to that.

He already knew the battle report from Miracle Island—Roger, Kaidou, and Big Mom had all escaped. It was understandable that Daren held a grudge.

He turned and waved his hand, signaling the guards to retreat, then lowered his voice.

"It's not something we can discuss over the Den Den Mushi. I'll take you into the city—we can talk as we go..."

"So what conditions did the Five Elders set for my promotion to Admiral?"

Daren cut him off.

Kong froze in place.

"How did you—"

Daren shook his head, a cold smile tugging at his lips.

"I'm just a Vice Admiral. What right would I have to meet the Five Elders in person?"

"If they want to see me, it's obviously because they plan to promote me to Admiral."

"But an Admiral holds the highest authority in Marine Headquarters, second only to the Fleet Admiral, with access to many of the World Government's secrets... so of course there are strings attached, right, Fleet Admiral Kong?"

Meeting that mocking, unwavering gaze, Kong sighed inwardly.

He fell silent for a while. The weathered lines on his face tightened, his expression caught between hesitation and burden.

"Forget it. I'll ask them myself."

Daren shook his head and strode past Kong.

"I'll handle it. Don't worry, Fleet Admiral."

His calm voice lingered in the air as the Vice Admiral's tall figure walked toward the majestic holy city.

A cold gust swept through. Kong felt the chill down to his bones.

He turned slowly, his aged eyes fixed on Daren's retreating back, his expression shifting, jaw clenched tight.

Dusk was falling. A blood-red sunset pierced the sky like a blade, casting its glow across the land.

It made the scarred figure of the Vice Admiral appear even more solitary and solemn... as if bathed in blood.

There was no fluttering white cape, no "Justice" emblazoned behind him.

Only a back riddled with wounds.

Upright and unyielding—like a spear.

The snow-white holy city, the thriving capital, the grand gate and towering walls...

At this moment, they seemed like the jaws of a monstrous beast, slowly swallowing that proud, blood-stained silhouette.