

One Piece 801

Chapter 801: Volume 4 – Chapter 320: Conversation with Roger

At Daren's casually spoken remark, the corners of the Roger Pirates' mouths twitched despite themselves.

His talent and strength needed no explanation.

In less than two years, he had skyrocketed from a rookie just stepping into the Grand Line to a top-tier powerhouse—strong enough to go head-to-head with Roger or Whitebeard without being at a disadvantage.

But that wasn't what made him truly terrifying.

Alongside his monstrous strength was a sharp, calculating mind and frightening strategic talent.

And with the way he acted—ruthless, uncompromising...

Anyone or any organization that found themselves targeted by someone like him would probably be left sleepless, riddled with anxiety.

So, for a brief moment, they silently mourned the World Government in their hearts.

Then, they couldn't help but smile.

Just then, Crocus walked over, wiping his hands with a clean towel.

"Zephyr-san's condition has stabilized."

"Dr. Kureha's skills are just as impressive as I remembered. Her surgery completely excised the infected and decayed tissue."

"The situation isn't too severe. With the special medicine I've prepared, the spore toxin in his body has been mostly suppressed."

"From here on out, it's just a matter of rest and letting his immune system do the work."

"But that part's out of a doctor's hands."

He took a seat beside Rayleigh. As soon as he reached out, someone passed him a bottle of wine.

"Thanks for your help, Crocus-san," Daren said sincerely.

Crocus gave him a quick glance, smiled, and accepted the bottle.

After taking a swig, he shook his head and said,

“To be honest, I would’ve treated him even if Captain Roger hadn’t said a word.”

“If Dr. Kureha sent you to find me, I wasn’t going to turn her down...”

“Besides—”

He looked over at the peacefully resting former Admiral not far away and smiled.

“‘Black Arm’ Zephyr has always been a hero worth respecting.”

Surprisingly, no one from Roger’s crew objected.

Unlike with most Marines, it was hard to truly dislike someone like Zephyr.

No matter the enemy, he had always stood firm in his ideals.

Even when facing the vilest of pirates, he adhered to his “no-kill” principle, wholeheartedly believing that anyone could change for the better.

Someone like that—enemy or not—was worthy of respect.

Especially to the Roger Pirates, a crew known for their free-spirited, passionate, and romantic nature.

Daren parted his lips, as if to speak, but Crocus cut him off with a wave of the hand and a chuckle.

“No need for thanks. I didn’t do it for you.”

“It’s just a shame about his arm. I couldn’t do anything there... Compared to monsters like you with your ‘Indestructible Body,’ the human body is just too fragile.”

He lifted the wine in his hand, then stood and walked toward the Oro Jackson by the shore.

Daren sat in silence for a moment, then raised his own bottle and downed it in one go.

The others quietly took their leave, one after another.

...

Before the crackling bonfire, only the two most dangerous criminals in the world remained, sitting face to face.

“So, you really went after those five old bastards, huh?”

Roger suddenly smirked and casually tossed a bottle of wine over to Daren as he spoke.

His eyes now were clear and profound—none of the goofy, rough-edged aura he’d shown earlier remained.

The disheveled hair and beard, the dirt-stained red captain’s coat... they only added to his wild, heroic charm.

“Yeah, definitely not easy to deal with.”

Daren took the bottle, flicked his finger, and the cork shot out like a bullet, embedding itself into the ground with a splash of dirt.

He lowered his gaze, quietly staring into the amber-colored liquid, brows furrowed in thought.

“No matter how bad the injury, that eerie black flame cloud could just regenerate it. Practically an immortal body... Was that what you were up against at God Valley?”

Roger let out a hearty laugh.

“Not exactly. Things at God Valley were... complicated.”

“I originally just wanted to challenge Rocks, but then Garp barged in, and somehow, I ended up teaming up with him.”

“Back then, Rocks had a bunch of tough bastards under his command.”

“As for the Five Elders, I remember only one of them showed up to watch the so-called God Valley Hunt.”

Daren’s eyes narrowed slightly.

“Saint Jaygarcia Saturn.”

“Yeah,” Roger nodded. “Honestly, I was shocked. I didn’t think such a Devil Fruit power could exist—no matter the attack, nothing worked. Total immortality. Or maybe... it wasn’t even a Devil Fruit ability at all.”

“Of course, I didn’t fight him. Just saw him from a distance,” he added with a sheepish scratch of his head.

“I still don’t really understand what that power was.”

“My focus back then was entirely on Rocks.”

Just hearing that name, Daren could clearly see the blaze of fighting spirit rise in Roger’s eyes—burning, intense, untamed.

Rocks D. Xebec. The legendary pirate who once ruled the New World, with ambitions grand enough to claim the title “King of the World.”

Even Admiral Sengoku once said, “He might have been the first—and possibly the strongest—enemy Roger ever faced.”

Still, knowing Sengoku’s habit of exaggerating the power of his enemies, Daren had his doubts.

“It wasn’t Rocks who destroyed God Valley, was it?” he asked suddenly.

Roger blinked, caught off guard.

“What makes you say that?”

Daren looked up, locking eyes with the Pirate King, his voice low and steady.

“I’ve researched it. A lot.”

“God Valley was massive—several times the size of Philseque Island, which they now call the Island of the Fallen Gods.”

“And yet that entire island vanished after that battle, wiped clean off the world map.”

“That kind of destruction... even I think it’s excessive.”

He raised his hand, pointing at Roger, then at himself.

“We can split the earth, shatter islands—sure. But not to that scale.”

“I don’t buy that Rocks was that strong, strong enough to erase an entire island.”

“If he really had that kind of power, not even you and Garp together could’ve stopped him.”

“So, Roger—what really happened at God Valley?”

“Or more importantly... what is the World Government hiding up its sleeve?”

Chapter 802: Volume 4 – Chapter 321: The Extinguished Light

Daren felt like he was starting to uncover something buried deep.

The fog clouding the truth seemed to be thinning, just enough for glimpses to emerge.

The top-tier combatants in this world could destroy mountains, tear open the earth, or even, with certain Devil Fruit powers, unleash disasters so devastating they could shatter islands.

But no matter how strong, no ability—no power—should be able to make an entire island, or even a whole nation, vanish from the world map without a trace.

That was something far more terrifying.

Staring intently at Roger, Daren spoke with certainty.

“Roger. If it wasn’t Rocks, if it wasn’t you, or Garp... if none of you had that kind of power—then there’s only one possibility.”

Roger gave him a sidelong glance and pretended not to understand.

“During the God Valley incident, the Marines did launch a Buster Call. Sengoku was the one in charge.”

Daren shook his head.

“I know exactly how effective a Buster Call is. Don’t forget—I’ve led one myself.”

“Five Vice Admirals, five battleships, thousands of elite troops... it’s not enough.”

“Sure, a Buster Call can level an island, turn it into a scorched ruin... but to completely erase it from the ocean? That’s impossible.”

“So Roger—what really happened at God Valley?”

Roger's eyes flickered. He was silent for a few seconds before taking a slow sip of wine and smiling.

"You really don't want to know."

Daren exhaled sharply.

Riddlers... damn them all.

"You should get going," Roger said with a grin, pointing off in the distance.

In that direction, Zephyr's chapped lips trembled slightly—he was on the verge of waking up.

Daren paused, slightly puzzled.

"I thought you said you wanted a fight?"

Roger laughed.

"Forget it. Next time, maybe."

He winked and raised his bottle.

“You’re still not fully healed, right? Wouldn’t be much of a fight like that.”

“Once you’ve patched yourself up, settled all that mess you’ve got going on—when you’ve got no distractions—then we’ll have ourselves a proper brawl.”

Daren thought it over for a second.

“Fine.”

He smiled and lifted his bottle.

The two bottles met.

Clink!

The pale green glass collided mid-air, and amber liquid splashed upward, catching the sunlight in a bold shimmer.

At that moment, the two most dangerous criminals in the world looked at each other and smiled.

Then they both tilted their heads back and drank deeply.

...

Aboard the distant Oro Jackson,

Buggy, Shanks, and the rest of Roger's crew leaned over the railing, jaws slack as they stared at the scene.

"Something's not right..."

"Captain Roger's drinking with that bastard."

"That's seriously weird."

"..."

Rayleigh lounged on the deck, resting against the rail with half-lidded eyes, his face flushed with drink.

Nearby, Gaban held a bottle and let out a quiet sigh.

Deep inside the ship, a lone figure in a samurai robe, arm missing, was already passed out in a drunken stupor.

...

He watched as Daren vanished into the sky with Zephyr, their figures disappearing into the distance.

Roger leaned back against a large rock, sitting on the ground without a care, and let out a long, weary breath.

"I thought you were going to give him the answer."

At some point, Rayleigh had walked up behind him and handed over a bottle of beer.

Roger smiled and shook his head.

“If you learn the answer too early, what’s the point of living?”

He twisted off the cap, took several big gulps, then looked up at the sky, his cheeks flushed.

“Besides, even if you knew the answer, what could you do?”

“The truth buried for 800 years... that kind of power isn’t something that kid can fight against—not yet.”

Rayleigh went quiet, a shadow flickering in his eyes as though something unpleasant had resurfaced.

“We thought it was a one-time thing...”

Roger suddenly let out a hoarse laugh, eyes red as tears streamed down his face.

He pushed up with one hand, staggering to his feet.

The cool sea breeze swept over him, lifting his blood-red captain’s cloak and making it whip loudly in the wind.

He stood there silently, staring off into the endless blue horizon, lost in thought.

“Rayleigh, do you still remember Shyarly’s prophecy?”

Roger spoke suddenly.

Rayleigh paused, then nodded.

“The mermaid princess would be born ten years later... and based on what we deciphered from the Poneglyphs, she’s the legendary ancient weapon, Poseidon.”

“Exactly,” Roger muttered, taking another swig of his drink. His voice was low, fading into the wind.

“I heard that ‘voice.’ ‘The king’ and ‘the king’ will meet at last.”

“Someone who hasn’t even been born yet... will one day surpass us.”

He burst into laughter.

But within that bold, unrestrained laugh, there was an unmistakable trace of bitterness.

“We were too early. Me... and that brat Daren too...”

“No one can change that cruel truth.”

He stumbled slightly, then collapsed backward onto the ground.

Rayleigh jumped in surprise, but relaxed when he realized Roger was just drunk.

As dusk fell, the Pirate King—worshipped, feared, and hailed as the man who conquered the Grand Line—lay on the ground like a mischievous child, arms wrapped around an empty bottle, smiling drunkenly as he mumbled,

“I wish I’d lived in the same era as you, Joy Boy...”

Whether in the past or the future...

Too bad I’m out of time.

...

At the same time.

Red Line.

Holy Land Mary Geoise.

Deep within Pangaea Castle.

A tall figure, crowned and draped in white robes, stood silently in an ancient chamber.

Dust swirled through the dim air. Photographs covered the gray-black walls.

Most were faded and warped with age, time having gnawed away at their edges.

But the most chilling detail was what they all had in common:

Each one was marked with a large, blood-red X.

The figure stood motionless before the wall, as if deep in thought—or in some kind of slumber.

“Another... light... is about to...”

A hand slowly lifted.

Slender fingers, sickly pale, slipped out from oversized sleeves.

“...go out.”

The fingers drifted over Roger’s photo.

Then moved to the last and newest one.

“Now... it’s your turn.”

“Rogers... Daren.”

In the depths of the ancient chamber, the voice echoed cold and rigid—like something out of a nightmare.

Behind the figure, black mist writhed and twisted.

A massive straw hat loomed in the shadows, faintly visible.

Chapter 803: Volume 4 – Chapter 322: Thank You for Your Guidance

Chapter 322: Thank You for Your Guidance

New World, a remote island.

In front of a traditional Japanese-style estate, a clearing had been carved out of the surrounding tropical rainforest.

A bonfire crackled at the center, with a massive fish nearly as tall as a man slowly roasting over the flames. Freshly picked tropical fruits were scattered across the ground.

“You think Daren’ll be able to find the right doctor for Zephyr-sensei?”

Dalmatian, unshaven and looking more weathered than usual, sat on a rock turning the spit, a worried look creeping across his face.

“If even he can’t, then there’s probably no one on this ocean who can.”

Leaning against a thick tree, Yamakaji puffed on a lit cigar. His weary eyes were bloodshot with fatigue.

“Daren acts all cool and indifferent most of the time, but no one respects and trusts Zephyr-sensei more than he does.”

“He’d tear the whole world apart before letting anything happen to him.”

Not far off, Tokikake took a deep drag from his cigarette and muttered through clenched teeth,

“If anything happens to Zephyr-sensei... I swear, I won’t let that bastard Daren off the hook.”

Everyone else winced slightly.

Seriously? You can’t even beat him.

“So, what exactly would you do to not let me off the hook?”

A low voice cut in suddenly.

Tokikake's expression froze.

The others blinked, then quickly turned their heads.

Out from the dense foliage stepped a tall, imposing figure. Floating silently behind him was a sleek, metal container hovering in the air like a shadow.

"Daren!"

"You're back!"

"How's Zephyr-sensei?"

"Did you find a doctor?!"

Yamakaji and the others instantly dropped what they were doing, voices rising in a chorus of surprised relief.

"Relax. Zephyr-sensei's fine now. Just needs some proper rest, and he'll be back on his feet before you know it," Daren said with a calm smile, lifting a hand.

Behind him, the floating metal box slowly unfolded, revealing Zephyr inside.

“Damn it, Daren, you little bastard! Didn’t I tell you I was fine?!”

As soon as the restraints came off, Zephyr immediately started barking, glaring at Daren with fiery irritation.

“You’re not the only one who can fly now! I’m a Devil Fruit user too!”

Daren rolled his eyes.

“Yeah, yeah. I gave you that Fuwa Fuwa no Mi, remember?”

“Besides, using any Devil Fruit power still burns stamina... Crocus made it clear you’re supposed to rest if you want to recover faster.”

Seeing Zephyr grumbling and irritable again was oddly comforting—everyone could finally breathe. The weight that had been pressing on their chests all this time quietly lifted.

“Get Zephyr-sensei inside to rest.”

Daren didn't hesitate to snatch a crumpled pack of cigarettes from Tokikake's pocket as he gave the order.

Yamakaji and the others immediately moved to help Zephyr into the house.

His safe return had clearly lifted the mood—smiles started to return, and the tension eased.

...

Night fell.

The bonfire burned higher, casting flickering light across the clearing.

The group sat around the fire, drinking, eating grilled meat, and talking freely with brightened spirits.

"Hahahaha! So tell us the truth, Daren... did you really fight with the Five Elders?"

Dalmatian and the others were huddled around him, cups in hand, eyes gleaming with barely contained excitement.

The Five Elders—supreme authority of the World Government. Even for them, seasoned and high-ranking Marines, those figures were nothing short of mythical. Untouchable.

Most of them had never even seen the Five Elders in person.

But now, someone their age—a fellow peer, their comrade—was rumored to have done the unthinkable: take them on in battle.

They'd already been intrigued by the headlines in the papers. Now that Zephyr-sensei was confirmed safe, they couldn't hold back anymore and surrounded Daren with eager questions.

The former Vice Admiral smiled faintly and took a quiet sip from his cup.

In the shifting light of the fire, his sharply defined face appeared both vivid and shadowed, his eyes dark and unreadable.

"This is how it happened. Everything started on Philseque Island..."

As Daren recounted it all in a steady, even tone, the circle around the bonfire erupted with gasps—shock, anger, disbelief, and awe flickering from face to face.

“...So that’s it. I declared North Blue independent and cut it off from the World Government’s alliance system. That was the most I could do.”

His gaze was calm, and he smiled slightly.

“And just like that, I went from being a Marine... to the world’s most wanted criminal.”

When he finished, Yamakaji and the others were at a complete loss for words.

Each of them wore the same look—stunned, overwhelmed.

They’d believed that standing up for justice, defying the World Government’s commands, and clashing with CP agents had been the greatest act of courage they’d ever muster.

But hearing everything Daren had been through, the weight of his choices, the scale of his rebellion—it made their own struggles feel almost trivial in comparison.

“You did well, Daren.”

A low, slightly hoarse voice broke the silence.

Everyone turned sharply.

“Zephyr-sensei?”

“You’re up?!”

“You should be resting!”

Zephyr’s steps were shaky, but he waved them off with one hand.

“I’ve been lying around long enough. Needed to stretch my legs.”

He brushed off Gion’s attempt to help him and walked over to the fire, sitting down with casual ease.

“I thought you’d be chewing me out by now,” Daren said with a grin, tossing him a bottle of beer.

Zephyr caught it, twisted it open, took a sip, and gave a small shake of his head.

“You never liked being lectured anyway, did you? You were like that even back when you first entered the academy.”

“And besides... this time, you weren’t wrong.”

“Daren, you’re a hell of a lot braver than I ever was.”

The firelight flickered across his weathered face as he smiled openly.

But in the eyes of those watching, Zephyr looked more tired than usual—less because of his wounds, and more because of something deeper.

Everyone fell quiet, and their expressions turned heavy.

After everything they’d been through, they now knew the truth—what had happened to Zephyr’s wife and child back in Marineford.

None of them could imagine how this iron-willed old man had endured all these years.

“No.”

Daren suddenly shook his head.

Everyone looked up, surprised.

His expression was solemn as he said, clearly and firmly,

“I never thought I was brave, Zephyr-sensei.”

“Anyone can act fearless when they have nothing left to lose.”

“But to face the full cruelty of life... and still grit your teeth, hold your ground, and carry a vision bigger than yourself—that’s what a true hero is.”

“Zephyr-sensei... I think I’ve always owed you one thing.”

He raised his drink.

“Thank you—for everything you taught me.”

Chapter 804: Volume 4 – Chapter 323: He Will Lead Us There

The bonfire flickered gently.

The black-haired young man raising his drink wore an expression more solemn than ever.

Seeing the sincerity in his eyes, Zephyr's gaze wavered for a moment. Then, slowly, a warm and genuine smile crept across his lips.

...

Night had deepened.

The flames had mostly died down, leaving behind drifting wisps of smoke.

Everyone was full, drunk, and sprawled carelessly around the clearing.

Under the star-studded sky, a chorus of snores rose and fell.

"I figured you'd stick around at headquarters."

Daren walked over to Tokikake and held out a cigar.

Tokikake glanced at him, took the cigar, lit it, and grunted, “Why stay? Everyone else left.”

“I’ve spent enough years holed up in Marineford. Getting out, breathing fresh air... not so bad.”

“At least now, I feel a hell of a lot more free.”

Daren lit one himself and asked, half-casually,

“So, what’s next for you guys? I mean, unless...”

Sensing where this was going, Tokikake immediately raised his hand in a firm “no way” gesture.

“Nope. Don’t even think about trying to recruit me into the North Blue Fleet.”

Daren blinked.

Before he could respond, Tokikake was already shaking his head like a spinning top.

“If I stay out, we’re equals. But if I join, that makes me your subordinate—and that means taking orders from you.”

Daren frowned.

“But you used to take my orders just fine.”

Tokikake flushed.

“That was because you gave me a VIP pass—wait, no, because I was cutting you some slack. We’re friends, you get it? Friends.”

“That’s totally different.”

Daren paused, then sighed.

“But it’s still dangerous for you guys right now...”

Tokikake waved him off, annoyed.

“We’re doing just fine. You should worry more about yourself, Daren.”

“The World Government doesn’t care enough to bother with us anymore—not when they’ve got you to chase around.”

“And don’t go thinking you owe us anything, either. We talked about this. Protecting Toki-san wasn’t because of you.”

He paused and exhaled smoke into the night air.

Under the stars, Tokikake seemed to have changed—gone was the usual slouch and sleaze. The days of unshaven stubble added weight to his face, and he had the air of someone who’d been through something real.

It was obvious—this whole ordeal had made him grow.

“Or I should say... not just because of you.”

He let out a quiet sigh.

“A Marine commander’s family getting ambushed and nearly assassinated in the middle of Marineford? That’s not something anyone could imagine.”

“We stepped in because it was the right thing to do.”

“Even if it wasn’t Toki-san, we wouldn’t have stood by and let some innocent person get killed.”

“And the reason we left Marineford? Mostly... because we were lost.”

He looked up, letting the breeze hit his face, eyes fixed on the starry sky above.

“If the justice we’ve always believed in is flawed... or worse, if the justice we upheld was just a tool for the World Government’s power—then what’s the point of our uniforms?”

“We don’t know where we’re headed. But we do know we won’t find the answer by staying in Marineford.”

“That’s why we chose to follow Zephyr-sensei—because we believe he’ll help us find what real justice means.”

As he said this, Tokikake turned and looked toward the room where Zephyr was resting.

A faint smile formed at the corner of his mouth.

“He’ll lead us there.”

There was a quiet strength in his voice—an unshakable conviction.

Under the starlight, with smoke curling through the night air, Daren stood still.

In that moment, Tokikake seemed to shine with a different kind of light—brilliant, steady.

Daren never would’ve imagined that this lazy, pervy guy had been carrying such a pure, noble belief in justice all along.

And in that moment, even he couldn’t help but feel a deep sense of respect.

“I see. So you've already made plans for the future,” Daren nodded.

“Hahaha! Don’t underestimate me, Daren!”

Tokikake grinned confidently and flicked his sticky hair back in an exaggerated, stylish gesture.

“I’m a genius of Marine Headquarters, after all—Tokikake!”

Daren couldn't help but chuckle. He had to admit, Tokikake had definitely grown.

"But that aside, there's actually something I need your help with."

Tokikake suddenly seemed to remember something. His expression turned solemn as he looked at Daren.

Seeing him so serious, Daren straightened up as well.

"What is it?"

Clenching his fists, Tokikake wore a tragic expression as he said,

"My VIP card got damaged during the fight. You have to get me a new one."

"..."

Daren's mouth twitched.

Yeah, maybe he hadn't grown at all.

...

After giving Tokikake a good beating, Daren strolled into the mansion feeling quite satisfied.

Despite the chaos of the Marineford battle and the long, turbulent journey afterward, the Japanese-style mansion—originally located at Marine Headquarters—had barely suffered any damage. It looked as pristine as ever.

It was already deep into the night.

Not wanting to disturb Toki's rest, Daren moved carefully, making no noise.

But just as he opened the door, he saw a figure in a nightgown sitting quietly at the bedside, flipping through a book in the moonlight streaming through the window.

"Toki?"

Daren froze, then quickly stepped forward, concern flashing across his face.

“Why aren’t you asleep? That’s not good for your health.”

Amatsuki Toki closed her book, gently shook her head, and smiled softly.

“Husband, I’m not sleepy.”

She looked at Daren, her eyes filled with the love of a long-awaited reunion.

Seeing her serene and gentle face, Daren suddenly felt the exhaustion from all the recent battles and endless travel melt away, leaving only tenderness in his heart.

She was always so thoughtful.

Never prying into what he’d been doing out there—just quietly, gently, and patiently waiting for him to return home.

She didn’t ask questions, but Daren could imagine how lonely and helpless she must’ve felt, lying alone in bed, wondering what he was doing out there, whether he was hurt, too worried to fall asleep...

“Toki, I’m sorry for putting you through all this.”

Daren took her hand and sighed.

“How could you say that?”

Toki smiled and shook her head.

She lifted her chin proudly, her face glowing with open pride, and blinked playfully.

“My husband is the most dangerous criminal on the seas.”

Chapter 805: Volume 4 – Chapter 324: Organizing Forces

Days passed one after another.

Daren hadn't left the island shrouded in tropical rainforest. On one hand, he was still worried about Zephyr-sensei. On the other, the island's climate was perfect for Toki's recovery.

Besides that, he himself needed a quiet, undisturbed place to fully heal the lingering wounds on his body.

From leading the Shichibukai to intercept the Whitebeard Pirates in the New World, to the brutal fight against the Five Elders on Philseque Island, and finally clashing with Sakazuki and the others at Marine Headquarters... all of this had happened in less than ten days, leaving him with no time to breathe.

Even after three days of treatment in the Pleasure District post-battle, his horrifying injuries still hadn't completely healed.

But the global situation was shifting rapidly.

Daren had no chance to rest. He had to rush to contact Morgans for a world broadcast to declare strategic deterrence, then race across the seas to help Zephyr-sensei search for a doctor... and, well, he even exchanged a blow with Roger.

Though it looked like he'd fought Roger's earth-shattering Kamusari to a standstill, the truth was that the sheer power of Roger's overwhelming Conqueror's Haki had caused fresh internal damage.

So, with this rare opportunity, Daren had decided to settle down, focus on recovery, and review everything he had gained during this period.

...

Deep in the wilderness of the island.

An empty, uninhabited clearing in the tropical rainforest.

The sunlight filtered down, shimmering in the misty air.

A clear stream flowed by, sparkling with iridescent colors. Tiny fish darted through the water, weaving between vivid green aquatic plants.

Daren sat cross-legged on a massive rock in the middle of the stream, using his innate perception ability to closely observe his physical condition.

The external wounds on his skin and muscles were mostly healed, with the scabs flaking off to reveal fresh new flesh.

As for his internal injuries, the resilient patterns of his organs were laid bare under his perception ability.

“Looks like I’ll still need some more time to fully recover.”

After a few seconds of contemplation, Daren came to this conclusion.

There was no denying it—this was the most severe damage he’d ever taken.

The continuous battles and relentless travel had pushed his body beyond its limits. At one point, he had even relied on Ivankov’s Horu Horu no Mi to force his body into a higher state of combat.

Even for someone like Daren, that level of overexertion demanded time to recover.

Still, the growth in his combat power during this time was just as astonishing as the damage he'd taken.

As he quietly sensed the condition of his body, Daren slowly exhaled a deep breath, a faint smile forming at the corners of his lips.

Physique: 98.826 (Indestructible Body)

Strength

: 95.015 (Giant's Body)

Speed: 89.098 (Soru's Godspeed)

Devil Fruit Ability: 89.010 (Island-Wide Coverage)

Armament Haki: 85.335 (Emission Burst)

Observation Haki: 79.917 (Magnetic Field Induction)

Conqueror's Haki: 89.999 (Affects Matter)

There was no need to say much about physique and strength. Thanks to the “assistance” of the Five Elders—especially Saint Saturn—these two previously stagnant attributes had seen obvious improvement.

In fact, Daren's ability to endure the Five Elders' onslaught was largely due to the enhanced survivability granted by those gains.

As for speed, there wasn't much progress—it had hit a plateau.

Daren figured it was likely because he hadn't found a proper training method yet, or perhaps he just hadn't met a qualified “master” to guide him.

After all, in the original storyline, there weren't many people in this vast ocean who truly excelled at ultra-high-speed movement.

“I wonder if Devil Fruit users count. If they do, then maybe Momonga or Borsalino could pull it off...”

Daren rubbed the stubble that had just started growing on his chin, lost in thought.

In truth, it wasn't just speed. His "Observation Haki," which worked in tandem with speed, had also hit a serious bottleneck. No matter how hard he trained, he just couldn't break through.

To a large extent, how one's abilities develop is deeply tied to their fighting style and direction. Different styles and habits inevitably lead to a degree of specialization.

Typically, swordsmen focus their growth on speed and Observation Haki—using sharp perception to break down their opponent's moves, predict their actions, and then strike with explosive speed to land a deadly blow in a single instant.

Clear examples of this approach include Katakuri, Hawk Eyes, Red-Haired Shanks, and Rayleigh—all fighters who've honed their technique above all else.

On the flip side, you have people like Garp and Zephyr—more traditional brawlers who excel in close-quarters combat.

But Daren didn't fall into either of those camps.

With his "Indestructible Body," his combat style resembled Kaidou and Big Mom more closely. And when it came to brutality and fighting dirty, he had thoroughly "inherited" the worst of Shiki's tendencies.

Why bother dodging attacks if you can just tank them?

After all, in real combat, constantly dodging puts you on the back foot, making it easier for opponents to exploit your openings. But with a body that can take the hit, you keep the pressure on—and once an opening appears, you can launch an immediate counterattack.

His brawling style, driven by raw strength and endurance, had left Daren extremely unbalanced in other areas.

On the other hand, his Armament Haki had progressed significantly.

After enduring the relentless beatdowns from Sakazuki and the other two “monsters” at Marine Headquarters, Daren had been pushed to develop a stronger form of Armament Haki. His abilities had evolved from “Internal Destruction” to the more advanced “External Burst.”

“Internal Destruction” is one form of Armament Haki's “externalization”—releasing Haki from within the body to invade the opponent’s insides, bypassing their defenses. It’s an incredibly powerful offensive technique.

Another advanced use, “Emission Burst,” however, is even more efficient. A prime example is the iconic scene during the Battle of Marineford, where the three Admirals raised their hands and stopped Whitebeard’s Gura Gura no Mi shockwaves in mid-air to protect the execution platform. That was “Emission” in action.

As for Conqueror’s Haki...

“Eighty-nine point nine nine nine... Even Puzzle & Dragons’ final hit wasn’t this damn hard...”

Daren rubbed his temples and let out a bitter smile.

Chapter 806: Volume 4 – Chapter 325: Hellish Special Training!

Looking at the number “89.999” under his Conqueror’s Haki on the personal attribute panel, Daren’s mouth twitched slightly. He let out a silent sigh.

He’d already hit 89.999 back when he was on Philseque Island. Logically, after that brutal battle at Marine Headquarters, he should’ve at least gone up a couple of points—if not more, then at least crossed the 90 mark, right?

But no.

That tiny gap of 0.001 looked so close, yet felt impossibly far.

Daren knew full well this wasn’t something he could figure out on his own anymore. After all, Conqueror’s Haki wasn’t something you could improve through training alone.

“Looks like I’ll have to find time to visit Kaidou-sensei...”

He rubbed his chin, deep in thought.

Sure, Roger's strength definitely surpassed Kaidou's, and his mastery over Conqueror's Haki was far more refined. After their last meeting, their relationship seemed to have improved too—so maybe he could ask Roger for a bit of “advanced instruction.”

But knowing Roger's personality, Daren had a feeling that if things got too heated, he'd end up taking quite a beating.

Thinking about it that way, Kaidou—a familiar, top-tier mentor—actually seemed like the more reliable choice.

If he could really master Conqueror's coating, Daren would gladly endure not just three hits, but thirty.

With that thought, he let out a long breath.

“They're here?”

He suddenly sensed something and looked toward the depths of the jungle with a smile.

Figures slowly emerged from the foliage, hesitating, shuffling forward unwillingly.

It was Tokikake, Yamakaji, and the others.

“You go first...”

“Are you kidding? You outrank me!”

“We’re not even Marines anymore. Rank doesn’t matter!”

“I’m not going. He says it’s training, but who knows if he’s just itching to beat someone up...”

“Anyway, Daren’s smile is seriously creeping me out...”

“I’ve got a really bad feeling about this...”

...

They pushed and shoved, all trying to hide behind each other, faces flushed with unease.

Seeing them like this, Daren scoffed, clearly annoyed.

“You’re supposed to be the backbone of the Marines. Where’s all that courage you had facing CP0?”

Dalmatian twitched at the eye and muttered,

“I’d honestly rather go another round with CP0 than deal with you...”

“I’ll be leaving in a couple of days. Even if you want to spar with me later, you won’t get the chance.”

Daren shook his head.

“Zephyr-sensei’s injuries will take time to fully heal. Until then, I need to be sure you’re strong enough to stand on your own.”

“You don’t want Zephyr-sensei dragging around his wounded body while still having to worry about your training, do you?”

That shut them up.

They had to admit, Daren had a point.

If they'd been stronger during the battle at Marineford, maybe they could've helped Zephyr-sensei more. Maybe he wouldn't have been hurt so badly.

"I'll go first!"

Suddenly, Yamakaji gritted his teeth and stepped forward.

Everyone paused, then looked at him with admiration.

Daren nodded in approval, stood up from the rocks, and casually rolled his neck, joints cracking loudly.

"Good."

He couldn't stay here much longer.

The North Blue Fleet's operations, the shifting tides of the New World, finding ways to grow stronger, uncovering how to deal with the Five Elders and their so-called "immortality"... There were far too many things demanding his attention.

But he couldn't just ignore Zephyr-sensei—or the group of comrades standing before him.

Unlike the North Blue Fleet, who had fought alongside him and Momonga, these people were once the backbone of Marine Headquarters. Many were part of the “Golden Generation.”

But without the military might and resources of HQ backing them, out here in these treacherous seas, they were little more than rookies.

So before he left, Daren wanted to help them as much as he could.

Which is why he set up this three-day hellish special training.

To give them every last bit of strength he could before he moved on.

“I’ll give it everything I’ve got.”

Yamakaji took a deep breath, eyes blazing with rising battle intent.

He slowly drew the sword at his waist, locking eyes with Daren as he spoke in a low voice,

“I remember when we first entered the academy. We fought to compete for the top spot.”

“At the time, I said I’d create a sword technique strong enough to defeat you!”

Daren nodded with a smile.

“Yes, I remember it clearly.”

Yamakaji grinned, a fierce light surging in his eyes.

“It’s not fully perfected yet, but...”

Shhh!

A burst of searing orange-red flame suddenly ignited along his blade, twisting and dancing violently.

“What the...”

“That’s the heat generated from Armament Haki clashing!”

“A slash hot enough to cut through fire!”

“Yamakaji’s swordsmanship has reached this level?”

...

The others gasped in surprise as their expressions changed in an instant.

Where they had first looked at him with pity, assuming he’d just be a punching bag, now their faces lit up with excitement and anticipation—maybe he could actually put up a fight!

“Daren, I created this technique specifically to break through your defense!”

Sensing the gazes around him, Yamakaji’s aura surged even higher.

“Open your eyes and watch closely!”

Step!

He shot forward, sword in hand, dragging a trail of blazing crimson light as he charged at Daren with explosive speed.

With this strike, his momentum reached its peak.

At that moment, it wasn't clear if Yamakaji was swinging the roaring military blade, or if he himself had become a blazing Meito!

Brilliant light flared—dazzling and fierce!

And in the next instant—

Boom!

He was sent flying back at double the speed, slamming into the ground like a cannonball.

Everyone: "..."

Daren touched the flame-scorched gash on his shoulder and glanced at the blood on his fingertips, looking slightly surprised.

A flicker of eager excitement lit up in his eyes.

You've really gotten stronger, my comrades.

"You'd better come at me all at once. Don't waste time."

He turned to the others and gave them a chilling smile.

"Three days of hellish special training... begins now."

Chapter 807: Volume 4 – Chapter 326: Uh... Go Easy?

For a split second, the jungle ravine fell completely silent. Then, like a spark hitting dry grass, the entire group erupted, faces flushing red with anger.

"That bastard!"

"I've never seen anyone so full of himself!"

"Get him!"

"No matter what, we've gotta teach him a lesson!"

...

They all gritted their teeth and glared at the black-haired young man grinning wildly, drawing their swords and charging in together.

Dalmatian was the fastest.

The moment he sprang forward, his body stretched and grew—his hybrid form of the spotted dog already taking shape.

With the natural speed of a Zoan-type and the boost from Soru, he was in front of Daren in the blink of an eye.

“Don’t think you’re the only one who’s gotten stronger, Daren!”

His sharp claws gleamed with a cold light, wrapped in Haki as they slashed down hard toward Daren’s chest.

“We’ve never once slacked off!”

Dalmatian roared as he attacked.

A faint smile flickered in Daren's eyes.

As he raised his arm to block, a ripping sound tore through the air, and sparks flew from the impact.

Dalmatian felt like he'd just clawed into solid diamond—his fingertips and nails flared with sharp pain.

Meanwhile, Daren, who had effortlessly blocked the strike, showed nothing but a faint white claw mark on his arm. Not a single drop of blood had spilled.

What kind of monster is this!?

Dalmatian's pupils contracted—he couldn't believe what he was seeing.

There are some things you only truly understand when you experience them yourself.

He'd long known Daren's body was absurdly tough, but this? This was far beyond anything he'd imagined.

"Dalmatian, your focus is off. You hesitated at the moment you struck."

Daren's voice suddenly boomed in his ears like thunder.

"You need to commit fully to your attack! Haki... is the power of will!"

Dalmatian's entire body trembled, as if something had just clicked in his mind.

But before he could act on it—

Daren's military boot slammed into his gut like a rocket-powered battering ram.

Bang!

"I—!"

Dalmatian curled in on himself, eyes bulging as his stomach twisted violently. He nearly threw up every drop of beer from the night before.

"Watch carefully. This is the second-stage release of Armament Haki."

Daren said it calmly.

Bang!

A burst of invisible force exploded from his boot. The upper half of Dalmatian's uniform tore apart instantly, and a white shockwave erupted from his back.

His body launched like a cannonball, smashing through more than a dozen towering trees before finally crashing into the ground.

Boom!

Dust and debris shot skyward, trees collapsing in a chain reaction.

The others watched in stunned silence. Eyes twitching, cold sweat beading on their foreheads.

"Don't worry, I'm holding back."

Daren turned to face them, his gaze cold and commanding.

“But the sea out there is merciless. The enemies waiting for you won’t hold anything back.”

“You’re no longer part of the Marines. You don’t have warships or cannons watching your backs. When you’re up against someone you can’t defeat, there won’t be any reinforcements... The only ones you can rely on are yourselves.”

The moment he finished speaking, the group fell silent—but their eyes lit up with newfound resolve.

Their hands no longer trembled as they gripped their swords. They drew a deep breath, then burst forward in unison.

Blades slashed sharply, shots rang out with precision, and Rokushiki techniques struck fiercely. They moved in formation, covering one another, retreating and advancing in perfect rhythm. For a moment, it almost looked like they were pushing Daren back.

This group of officers, hardened by the most rigorous military academy training, was now facing the strongest “opponent” they’d ever known. Yet through seamless coordination, they displayed incredible tactical brilliance.

As the battle wore on, their synergy only improved. Dalmatian and Yamakaji soon joined the fray as well.

A dozen or more former Marine officers threw everything they had at the demon-like young man—trying to force an opening, or simply hoping to learn something from the clash.

And through it all, a faint smile began to form in Daren's eyes.

Not everyone is cut out to reach Admiral level. For most people on this sea, the highest they'll ever get is Commodore or Rear Admiral.

A Vice Admiral at Marine Headquarters is already someone most can only dream of becoming.

Standing too high above it all, it's easy to forget that without Admiral-tier strength, you're just another speck in the grand scheme.

But the reality is, it's the hard work and perseverance of these core officers that uphold justice and keep the majority safe.

And for them, Daren was willing to rein in his destructive instincts—to spend more time coaching, guiding, and refining their skills.

“Shuzo, your mastery of Rokushiki is solid. From now on, focus more on combat application!”

“Yamakaji, I don't know swordsmanship—but your strikes are too hesitant!”

...

Daren corrected and instructed tirelessly, creating every opportunity he could for their growth.

Just then—

“Hahahaha! An opening!”

Tokikake suddenly flashed behind Daren, unleashing a heavy kick toward his waist.

Thud! A hand caught his foot mid-air.

“Tokikake, your problem is underestimating your opponent and not using your head.”

Daren said flatly.

Tokikake’s face turned red with frustration.

“That’s because I’m strong enough!”

Daren casually stepped back, narrowly dodging Yamakaji’s vertical slash, and shook his head.

“Oh yeah?”

Tokikake gritted his teeth.

“Damn it! Are you looking down on me!?”

He swung a heavy punch straight at Daren. The force was immense—ripping through the air and sending shockwaves in its wake.

Bang!

Daren reached out with one hand.

Three fingers formed a dragon claw, gripping Tokikake’s punch effortlessly. But Daren’s brows furrowed.

That strength—something’s off.

“Tsk, tsk... You noticed.”

Tokikake let out a low chuckle.

“Ready for this, Daren?”

“Let me show you... my strongest form.”

As his voice dropped, an ancient, wild aura erupted from his body.

In an instant, his appearance began to shift dramatically.

Thick black bristles rapidly spread across his skin, gleaming with a metallic sheen. His body swelled and lengthened, jaws extending forward with rows of razor-sharp teeth spilling out, breathing foul-smelling air.

Muscles bulged like coiled serpents beneath his fur—radiating pure brute force.

Ancient Zoan-type: Buta Buta no Mi, Model: Entelodont!

Boom!

Tokikake stomped the ground. The earth beneath his feet—covered in green-black bristles—shattered with a thunderous crack.

“Hahaha! Ugly as it is, this is my ultimate form!”

In his hybrid state, Tokikake roared like a prehistoric beast.

Soundwaves rippled outward, shaking and bending trees all around. The other officers exchanged uneasy looks.

“With the power of an Ancient Zoan, victory’s a given! Get ready to be flattened!”

Tokikake bellowed, veins bulging across his thick, muscular arms.

“Let go!”

Roar!

His furious shout shook the jungle, stirring up a whirlwind.

Yamakaji and the others instinctively backed off, watching in stunned silence.

Then their expressions started to shift... and turn a bit strange.

...

Ten seconds later, Tokikake fell quiet.

Despite his desperate struggle, he hadn't broken free.

The dragon claw gripping his fist hadn't budged a millimeter.

Daren stood calmly, watching his little performance with amused interest.

Tokikake: "..."

Seeing Daren's faint, mocking smile, he suddenly gave a sheepish grin and said, almost pleading,

"Um... maybe go a little easy?"

Before he could say more—

As Yamakaji and the others winced in anticipation,

The black-haired young man gripped the Entelodont's arm tight, twisted his hips, and hurled him at the ground like a wrecking ball.

Boom!

The ground cracked apart, rocks flying in every direction.

One slam.

Then another.

Boom!

Boom!

Boom!

The once-imposing ancient beast, roaring with confidence, now looked like a ragdoll being smashed into the earth.

Everyone stood frozen in place, jaws slack. Not one dared to breathe.

Soaked in cold sweat.

Chapter 808: Volume 4 – Chapter 327: I'm Here for Training

Half an hour later...

The terrain of the mountain stream had been completely transformed.

The stream had run dry, trees lay toppled, and the ground was cracked and torn apart.

Yamakaji and the others were sprawled across the ground, bruised and battered, their faces twisted in pain.

It was a pitiful sight.

"That's all for today's special training."

Daren sat casually on Tokikake's chest, his eyes sweeping over each of them.

Grinning, he exhaled a thick stream of smoke like a dragon, feeling thoroughly relaxed.

Just as he'd thought.

Moderate exercise really did help with recovery.

Even his breathing felt smoother now.

"Go back and get some rest. Same time tomorrow."

The gloating in his tone instantly triggered another round of groans.

...

Night fell.

After a simple meal, Daren carried a bottle of wine and made his way to the island's shore.

A cool breeze drifted in from the sea.

Waves beat rhythmically against the rocky coastline.

A broad-shouldered, one-armed figure stood there, already waiting.

The cigar in his mouth glowed faintly in the darkness.

The familiar white cloak was gone, replaced by a long, somber black one. It gave the former Admiral an air of solemnity.

"Zephyr-sensei."

Daren called out, tossing the bottle of wine over.

Zephyr caught it, glanced at the label, and chuckled.

"Jerez."

Daren stepped up beside him, smiling.

"Yeah. Your favorite... Kuzan loves this stuff. Says it's the coolest beverage."

"Kuzan..."

Zephyr's gaze flickered at the name.

"That hot-blooded brat... Just like me when I was young..."

He licked his cracked lips.

"...He's bound to take a hit one day."

Daren looked over and said calmly,

"Everyone has their own path to follow... That's what you taught us, Zephyr-sensei."

Zephyr fell silent.

He stared at the Jerez in his hand for a long moment, then suddenly asked,

"Daren, do you think my life... was a failure?"

He twisted open the bottle, took a deep swig, and immediately coughed hard.

As he gasped for air, he stared out at the distant sea with a bitter smile.

"I dreamed of being a hero since I was a kid, of protecting justice in this world... But in the end, I couldn't protect anything."

"You protected Toki."

Daren cut in, his voice steady.

"Success or failure isn't something you judge so simply."

"You might not have become a Marine hero, but to countless people, you already are one."

"You may not have protected your own family, but you protected me—and countless others' families."

"You never made it to Fleet Admiral, but your legend still echoes across the seas."

"I could go on and on... But what matters most is this, Zephyr-sensei..."

He looked directly at his weathered mentor, his tone firm and clear.

"Your life isn't over yet."

Zephyr blinked, stunned.

After a long silence, he chuckled dryly.

"You're good with words, kid."

"If Sakazuki were the one answering, he'd probably just say, 'Yes, Zephyr-sensei, your life was a failure.'"

Daren nodded.

"Well... he wouldn't exactly be wrong either."

Zephyr: "..."

He took a deep breath and suppressed the urge to smack the kid.

Slowly, he said,

"Daren, I know you're worried about me. About Tokikake and the others... You want us to join the North Blue Fleet."

"But like you said—everyone's got their own path to walk."

"What true justice is... I didn't understand it before, and I still don't now. But that doesn't mean I'm giving up."

A faint, relieved smile crossed his face.

“When I was in the Marines, I didn’t see things so clearly... But now, the answer might be different.”

Zephyr turned around.

His slightly hunched frame slowly straightened, and his one remaining fist clenched tight.

“I will lead them to rebuild an army—an army completely free from the control of the World Government!”

“...To pursue true justice!”

The moment he said that, a deep, overwhelming aura erupted from his body and spread outward.

His pitch-black cloak whipped violently in the wind, rustling with force.

In that moment, he looked as sharp and resolute as an unyielding battle spear.

Daren's eyes lost focus for a second, caught off guard.

So that's it...

You've awakened Conqueror's Haki too?

He quickly snapped back to reality, a strange smile creeping onto his face.

Wait, why did I say "too"?

Daren carefully sensed the aura radiating from Zephyr, a flicker of surprise flashing deep in his eyes.

It had only just awakened... and yet the intensity—it was already on par with Sengoku!

Wait, why did I say "already" again...?

...

After parting with Zephyr, Daren walked along the beach back home.

He silently lit a cigar, letting his thoughts drift with the smoke carried by the wind.

Since Zephyr-sensei had made up his mind, there was no point pressing further.

After all, this Zephyr was no longer the same as the one in the original timeline.

Not only had he acquired the Fuwa Fuwa no Mi, but he had also awakened Conqueror's Haki.

It was a full-blown epic power-up.

Once he recovered from his injuries and received that custom mechanical arm, with his powerful Haki and physical prowess, he'd be able to go toe-to-toe with even the likes of Roger and Whitebeard at their peak.

Add in the mobility granted by the Fuwa Fuwa no Mi, and Zephyr-sensei—and everyone else—would have a much better shot at staying safe.

That thought settled Daren's heart quite a bit.

But soon, he let out a bitter chuckle and shook his head.

Once upon a time, he had been a carefree rogue of the Marines.

Who'd have thought he'd end up like this—so sentimental?

This whole “bond” thing... it really was the most annoying part.

As he slowly exhaled a cloud of smoke, Daren suddenly stopped walking.

“Why are you here?”

He looked up.

On the shoreline ahead, a tall figure stood bathed in the moonlight.

Her long black hair was tied in a high ponytail, swaying gently in the sea breeze.

“I didn't come to training during the day, so I'm making up for it now.”

Gion bit her lower lip and slowly drew the golden Meito from her waist.

Daren looked at her in silence for a moment, then suddenly smiled.

“I thought you were going to stay mad and ignore me forever.”

Under Daren’s teasing gaze, a faint blush rose on Gion’s cheeks.

She clenched her teeth and said,

“I’m not angry!”

“If you’re not angry...”

The man’s deep voice suddenly sounded in her ear.

Before Gion could react, a strong hand wrapped around her waist.

Her eyes widened.

“W-What are you doing!?”

Gion yelped, flustered, the tips of her ears flushing red.

“I’m here to train with you!”

“Yeah, that’s right—training.”

“Y-You bastard...”

“That’s right, that’s right...”

“Mmh...”

GM – Chapter 809: Volume 4 – Chapter 328: Resistance to Change

Daren had been unusually busy over the past few days.

During the day, he focused on—well, let's say "guiding"—Tokikake and his group through intense special training. At night, he carved out time to give Gion additional drills in various battlefield environments like the shoreline and the forest.

He also regularly consulted Zephyr-san to discuss his own training direction and analyze the broader situation across the seas. Each day was packed from start to finish.

Before he knew it, three days had passed.

It was late at night.

Waves surged against the shore, and the cold sea breeze swept through the air.

“How’s the situation in the North Blue?”

Standing at the island’s edge, Daren puffed on a cigar. From the Den Den Mushi in his hand came Momonga’s excited voice.

“Don’t worry, everything is unfolding just as we expected.”

“The majority of people in the North Blue strongly support independence.”

“After all, we’ve been building our presence here for years. The locals are already used to relying on the North Blue Marines for their protection... and the citizens of the Member Nations are even more ecstatic. They won’t have to pay the Heavenly Tribute anymore, which means they can keep most of their income for themselves.”

“Improving family living conditions, boosting nutrition, raising children, healthcare spending... it’ll even give a big push to birth rates.”

“According to the military’s hired statisticians, independence and cutting off Heavenly Tribute payments to the World Government will greatly stimulate economic activity in the North Blue. The average standard of living could increase by at least 50%, major industries will experience rapid growth, and the crime rate has already dropped to an all-time low.”

“If this momentum keeps up, it won’t be long before the North Blue’s economy takes off completely—surpassing the other seas and becoming the most prosperous among the Four Seas!”

Momonga’s voice over the military Den Den Mushi was laced with barely contained excitement and anticipation.

Despite now holding a high-ranking post and commanding the North Blue Fleet, Momonga was still in his twenties. He was in the prime of youth, full of drive and passion untouched by the grind of time.

Commanding a military force was a mark of ambition, but to him, shielding the people had always been the truest form of justice.

Now, watching the region under his protection grow peaceful and prosperous before his very eyes, even the usually composed and level-headed Momonga couldn’t hide the pride in his voice.

Daren exhaled slowly, smoke curling from his lips.

“Lower taxes mean more money in the hands of the people. Naturally, that boosts consumption and stimulates the economy. With industries growing and more jobs being created, crime rates will drop. It won’t be long before pirates are wiped out from the North Blue.”

“But we shouldn’t celebrate just yet.”

“I’m not worried about the people. Ordinary folks are always the most honest. What I’m more concerned about are the bureaucrats and royals of the Member Nations.”

“Momonga...”

His eyes narrowed, and his tone darkened.

“Any reform faces resistance. That’s an unchangeable truth.”

Hearing the shift in Daren’s tone, Momonga instinctively straightened, brows furrowed.

“You mean there could be problems from within the Member Nations?”

“It’s just a suspicion, but it’s not off the table.”

Daren let out a cold chuckle.

“The corruption bred by the Heavenly Tribute system doesn’t stop with the Celestial Dragons.”

“It’s a rot that runs through the entire Member Nation hierarchy from top to bottom. The World Government might set the tribute at 3 billion Belly, but by the time it gets passed down to the people, the actual cost might be 4 billion, maybe even 5 billion.”

“So, guess where that extra money goes?”

Momonga fell silent, his pupils contracting.

“I get it.”

Something had clicked. He took a deep breath, his voice now cold and cutting like a blade in the chill of the North Blue wind.

“We’ll clean it up... but we won’t go overboard. Politics is the art of compromise.”

Daren gave a simple instruction and moved on.

With the North Blue Fleet now fully developed, Momonga had grown from a green Marine officer into a fully capable commander.

Daren had deliberately cultivated his leadership and management abilities, entrusting him with the fleet's growth and operations.

It was thanks to Momonga's support that Daren could freely pursue the things he needed to do...

"...Has Vinsmoke Judge been keeping himself in check lately?"

Momonga replied,

"No issues so far. I've already passed along the design schematics for Zephyr-san's mechanical arm. It shouldn't be long before a working prototype is completed."

"But I've noticed he's getting more unhinged. He's even started conducting human experiments to strip his own children of their emotions, turning them into emotionless killing machines."

Daren shook his head with a cold smile.

"He's always been obsessed with restoring Germa's former glory and ruling over the North Blue."

“But now that the North Blue Fleet has made its official debut before the world, the pressure’s finally gotten to him. He can’t sit still any longer.”

Momonga nodded.

“I’ll keep a close watch on him.”

He paused, then asked,

“Any progress on the Five Elders’ ‘Immortal Bodies’?”

Daren shook his head and frowned.

“Nothing yet. I asked Zephyr-san, but he said he’s never seen or even heard of an ability like that.”

“More importantly, Zephyr-san never actually witnessed the Five Elders using that kind of extreme regeneration himself... Seems like the government never really trusted him, even back when he was an Admiral.”

“As for Roger... I have a feeling he knows something, but if he won’t speak up, there’s no way I can force it out of him.”

“Regardless, I still have to make a trip to Wano.”

Momonga’s mouth twitched.

“If this keeps up, you’re going to drive Kaidou insane.”

Daren laughed, cracked a quick joke, and ended the Den Den Mushi call.

With Zephyr-san about to establish the Neo Marines and the North Blue Fleet steadily expanding, everything was in place. He could now move freely and focus on what needed to be done.

He took one last drag from his cigar, then snuffed it out.

Only then did he slowly turn around and notice the tall figure standing behind him—he hadn’t even realized when she’d appeared.

“You’re leaving tomorrow?”

Gion didn't look at him. She turned her face away, eyes fixed on the rolling tides, and asked in a cool voice.

Daren smiled.

"Yeah, time doesn't wait."

Gion bit her lower lip.

"Then... I need one last training session."

Under the moonlight, she finally looked at him.

Her refined and striking face shimmered with fierce determination beneath the silvery glow.

As her words fell, her form began to shift.

Her high ponytail unraveled, the jet-black hair gradually fading into soft pink.

A vivid crimson light flared in her eyes, and fine pink fur began to sprout along her pale skin. A snow-white tail slowly emerged from the base of her spine.

The graceful moon rabbit, holding a golden Meito in hand, radiated both delicate charm and fierce cold. Under the night sky, her beauty was otherworldly—stunning, dangerous, and ethereal.

Daren, looking at the breathtaking Gion before him, suddenly felt his throat go dry.

“Uh... I don’t think one session is going to cut it.”

Gion: ???

She froze for a moment, then immediately understood, her face flushing red.

“I meant actual training!”

“Yeah, yeah, training... I know, I know.”

“...You bastard!”

Clang!

Boom!

A light pink slash of energy burst into the sky.

Chapter 810: Volume 4 – Chapter 329: You, Why Are You Here?

Boom...

A series of dull, earth-shaking rumbles echoed from somewhere far across the island.

Zephyr, who had been studying a map in his bedroom, flinched at the sound. His eyebrows rose as he turned to look out the window, gaze fixed on the direction of the coast.

Seeing golden sword light repeatedly shooting into the night sky, he paused for a moment, then shook his head with a bitter smile.

“Gion really has a temper. Daren’s leaving tomorrow, and she’s still not letting him off tonight...”

As Gion’s teacher, Zephyr had practically watched her grow up. He knew her personality all too well.

Once she got mad, there was no holding her back.

“I almost feel bad for that brat Daren...”

With a sigh, Zephyr closed the window and quietly returned to studying the map.

About half an hour later, Zephyr stretched his back and rose from his chair, thinking he might step outside to get some fresh air.

It had been years since he’d operated at sea. After retiring from the front lines, now he was planning to build a military force from scratch—an uphill task by any standard.

This world map was just the beginning.

Navigation, troop recruitment, training new soldiers, global politics...

Even though Zephyr was already intimately familiar with all of it as a chief instructor at the military academy, he still reexamined everything with meticulous care.

As the leader of a brand-new army, he wasn’t just responsible for his own life—he also carried the responsibility for every subordinate who chose to follow him.

So, he had to be cautious about everything.

Lost in thought, Zephyr stepped out of the mansion courtyard.

The moment he exited the doorway, he spotted a figure emerging from the jungle.

It was Gion.

Her hair was disheveled, and her steps were weak, almost unsteady.

“Gion?”

Gion froze for a second, clearly not expecting to run into Zephyr. She panicked slightly.

“Z-Zephyr-sensei.”

Zephyr frowned as he took in her unstable posture.

“Are you hurt?” he asked with concern.

In the dim light, a blush spread across Gion's delicate face.

"Y-Yeah... just a little. I twisted my ankle."

She stammered.

The darkness masked the red hue on her face, and Zephyr didn't catch her expression.

Instead, he scowled and said with a hint of irritation,

"That brat Daren... even if it's training, he should know to hold back! How could he go so hard on you?"

At the mention of "training," Gion seemed to recall something—her ears instantly turned crimson, red enough to drip.

"Don't worry, I'll give him a good lesson later!"

When Gion didn't respond, Zephyr assumed she was feeling upset. He patted his chest and said in a deep voice,

“I’ll take care of it.”

“I-It’s fine, Zephyr-sensei.”

Gion pressed her lips together, avoiding his gaze.

“I’m going to rest now.”

She staggered past him, heading deeper into the courtyard.

Zephyr watched her back, and a flash of helplessness passed through his weathered eyes.

“She really is too strong-willed...”

Even if she wanted to catch up to that brat’s pace, she didn’t have to push herself so hard.

After all, not everyone was a monster like Daren.

Zephyr shook his head and turned, intending to continue his walk—

Only to see another figure emerge from the jungle.

“Daren?”

He stared at the young man leaning against a tree trunk, his steps unsteady, and asked in confusion,

“You hurt too?”

Daren: ???

...

Two days later.

New World, Wano Country.

Onigashima, Research Institute.

“Don't lose weight, don't lose weight, this is my funk style!”

“As long as that bastard Daren isn't around, my life is paradise!”

Wearing black-and-white suspenders, the fat man Queen hummed a cheerful rap, grinning as he tinkered with dozens of test tubes on the lab table.

“Kaidou-san went on patrol, so I didn't get beat up today!”

As he mixed the reagents, bubbles began to rise furiously in the glass tubes.

When he hit a line he liked, his butt started to sway in rhythm as he broke into a little dance.

Behind him, pirates in gas masks and protective suits chuckled as they chimed in.

“Queen-sama seems to be in a great mood!”

“Of course! The Ice Oni Virus is about to see a major breakthrough!”

“Its infectivity and destructive power have increased by at least 30% compared to before!”

“Queen-sama is the most brilliant scientist in the world!”

“...”

Their enthusiastic praise made Queen feel like he was floating on air.

“Damn right! Do you guys even know who I am?”

Queen laughed, raising a test tube of glowing blue liquid, puffing out his belly, and exhaling cigar smoke from his nostrils.

“This stuff? It’d kill a dragon on the spot, let alone a human!”

“I bet even Kaidou-san couldn’t handle this enhanced Ice Oni Virus!”

“Hahahahaha!”

He burst into smug laughter—

But quickly realized he was the only one laughing.

“Why aren’t you laughing?”

He glared at the crew in front of him—

Only to see all of them staring dead ahead, eyes fixed behind him, faces drained of color, trembling uncontrollably.

“Oh? The virus has been enhanced? Mind if I give it a try?”

A deep, calm voice tinged with amusement suddenly echoed through the lab.

Queen’s pupils shrank to pinpricks. It was like a bolt of lightning struck his brain.

In an instant, nightmarish images—countless terrifying scenes—rushed back into his mind, making the fat on his face tremble like jelly.

“No... no, this can’t be real...”

Right in front of his stunned subordinates—

Smack!

He suddenly slapped himself hard across the face.

Pain.

Queen jolted back to reality.

This wasn't a dream!

"You—what the hell are you doing here!?"

He let out a shrill cry and spun around.

But all he caught was a blur—

And the next thing he knew, the test tube of bubbling blue liquid was gone from his hand.

Queen's eyes widened.

That black-haired young man from his nightmares—Daren—was standing there, unscrewing the test tube with a fiery gleam in his eyes.

Then, without hesitation, he tilted his head back and downed it all in one gulp.

Again!?

Daren chugged the virus, let out a satisfied burp, and frowned slightly as he muttered to himself:

“Doesn't really hit that hard... not even as strong as Magellan's poison.”

He smacked his lips.

Twin streams of purple-blue gas hissed from his nostrils.

Then he grinned at the dumbfounded, suspender-wearing Queen.

“Got anything stronger?”

The other pirates saw that demonic smile and shuddered in unison, backing away step by step.

“N-No, that’s all!”

They all spoke in unison, heads shaking like rattles.

Queen, who had also backed away a step, flushed red.

“Why the hell are you here, you bastard!?”

But the moment the words left his mouth, he realized something was off—

His subordinates were staring straight at him.

So—

Queen abruptly pointed in a random direction.

“Kaidou-sama is patrolling the Kuri region!

You’d better get lost right now, and I’ll pretend I didn’t see anything!

Otherwise... I won’t go easy on you!”