

One Piece 91

Chapter 91: Island-Destroying Bombardment!?

"Even someone moving at the speed of light shows up late, huh... Rear Admiral Borsalino."

Daren trembled as he reached out, trying to grab a crack in the rock wall to steady himself, but failed.

Thick drops of blood dripped onto the white snow, blooming into glaring red stains like plum blossoms.

He could feel the searing, metallic taste of blood in his shattered ribs and lungs. The massive blood loss had left his mind hazy, and waves of excruciating pain surged through every muscle and bone in his body, crashing over him again and again.

Yet, despite his pale face, he still managed a smile and spoke in a teasing tone.

"If you'd taken any longer, I might've had to file a complaint with HQ."

Borsalino scratched his head like he was troubled and raised his hands in mock surrender.

"Well, what can I say..."

He turned toward the dark-faced Byrnni World and smiled slowly.

"Long time no see, Byrnni World. Looks like you've healed up well. You've got one hell of a monster body..."

"You brat! You're asking for it!!"

Byrnni World's eyes blazed with fury. In a flash, he vanished from sight.

In an instant, he reappeared beside Borsalino, his Haki-wrapped fist crashing down like a mountain, sweeping in with a surge of wind.

"More-More Hundredfold Speed!"

Clang!!

A golden lightsaber suddenly materialized and blocked Byrnni World's punch head-on.

The violent shockwave from the collision burst outward, sending snow within a hundred meters flying like a tornado.

Sparks exploded where the sword and fist clashed, illuminating Borsalino's face behind his sunglasses.

"Pretty fast, huh..."

"Bullshit!!" Byrnni World snarled. His figure flickered again, appearing on Borsalino's right side. Planting one foot firmly on the ground, he twisted his waist and lashed out with a heavy whip kick toward Borsalino's head.

Borsalino raised an arm to block. A dull thud sounded—then in the next moment, his body turned into a golden beam and shot into the distant mountains.

Boom!!

A massive explosion erupted across the mountainside. The deafening crash of collapsing rock echoed as snow and debris tumbled in a roaring avalanche.

Seeing the hit land, Byrnni World didn't hesitate. Radiating killing intent, he charged at Daren.

If he took out this Marine brat, the Den Den Mushi jamming would vanish. Then he could contact the patrolling pirate ship—and escape!

But in the next instant...

Specks of light gathered behind him again.

"That really hurt... But hey, ever been kicked at the speed of light?"

Blinding golden light flared behind Byrнди World's head. A foot clad in white leather, wrapped in searing light, tore through the air and aimed for his skull!

Byrнди World caught a glimpse of the Marine Captain just inches away. Grinding his teeth in frustration, he barely managed to use Soru to pull back.

Biu~~

The kick missed, the golden beam slicing through the air and vanishing into the jungle.

A beat of silence—

BOOM!!

A colossal explosion followed by a blaze of orange-red flames erupted into the sky. The fireball consumed a wide swath of forest instantly.

Borsalino's form reappeared, still wearing that trademark teasing grin.

But Daren noticed the slight tremble in his right hand.

Clearly, while Borsalino was powerful at this point in time, he wasn't yet the bottomless force seen in the original storyline.

Taking a full-force blow infused with Armament Haki from Byrнди World had clearly taken a toll.

"You doing okay, Rear Admiral Borsalino?"

Daren asked with a half-smile.

Borsalino shrugged helplessly and pointed toward Byrнди World, who had reappeared a hundred meters away.

"That guy's the 'World Destroyer' after all..."

Suddenly, distant artillery roars echoed from the coastline, and Byrнди World's expression darkened.

From that direction, a massive Marine battleship was charging into the harbor. Elite Marines with grim faces poured from the deck, storming the flaming coastline and launching a final assault on the surviving pirates from the North Blue fleet's bombardment.

At the same time, a towering figure leapt from the warship's bow, his wide cloak billowing behind him. Using Geppo, he rocketed toward the three at stunning speed.

Marine Headquarters Admiral—the World Government's top military power...

Sengoku the Buddha!

Byrнди World's heart sank like a stone.

His escape was completely cut off. He was already injured, and now with Sengoku, his longtime rival, and Kizaru...

There was no hope of a comeback!

"Sorry, Byrnni World. You're under arrest,"

Borsalino said with a grin, swinging his Ama no Murakumo Sword.

"Not necessarily."

Byrnni World suddenly grinned hideously, eyes burning with madness.

Borsalino froze.

Sengoku, still racing toward them, seemed to realize something. His pupils shrank as he shouted in alarm:

"Stop him!!"

But before the words finished, Byrnni World had already disappeared again, reappearing at the edge of the jungle with blinding speed.

"Barorororo!"

"What difference does it make how many of you there are!?"

In Sengoku's horrified gaze, Byrnni World let out a loud roar and raised an enormous cannon over his head.

The nearly ten-meter-long black barrel, like the gaping maw of a war beast, reeked of gunpowder!

"Everything will be destroyed by my power!!"

"I'll crush anything that stands in my way!!"

"I am..."

Byrнди World suddenly raised his head, eyes bloodshot, and laughed maniacally.

"—The World Destroyer!!"

As the words fell, a terrifying, searing red light—like it could consume everything—began rapidly condensing inside the massive barrel.

Seeing it, Sengoku felt a chill crawl up his spine. An ice-cold dread spread from his feet to his skull.

He had just seen Byrнди World's "test shot" through his scope, and if that terrifying firepower was enhanced by the Moa Moa no Mi's hundredfold effect...

It would obliterate the entire island in an instant!

"Moa Moa—100 times—"

Byrнди World's pupils twitched, blood veins popping.

But out of the corner of his eye, he caught sight of the battered Marine brat suddenly smirking. The boy clenched his five fingers into a tight fist!

Then—

The cannon's massive barrel suddenly twisted like a pretzel.

"No—"

BOOM!!!

A towering inferno rose thousands of meters high, transforming into a sky-darkening mushroom cloud that erupted on the spot.

Chapter 92: Seastone

The world fell into a moment of dead silence.

Blinding white light engulfed everything in an instant, followed by a shockwave that blasted outward from the epicenter, sweeping across the land in all directions.

Countless trees were uprooted by the tremendous blast, and a massive fireball blazed across the sky. In the frigid air, the searing heat birthed a terrifying crimson fire tornado that devoured everything in its path—stones, trees, snow—all reduced to ash.

Only after a full second did the deafening boom reach the ears.

Every Marine along the coastline instinctively dove for cover. As they looked toward the towering fireball, their faces turned pale, eyes filled with unprecedented fear.

High above, the North Blue fleet was rocked violently by the blast wave. The ships jolted and groaned, and faint cracks formed along the hulls and decks.

Tokikake, Gion, and the others gripped the railings tightly, faces full of shock.

Sengoku raised an arm to shield himself from the scorching winds, his expression frozen in disbelief.

At last, he understood.

Why that brat Daren had dared to hand over such a massive cannon to Byrnndi World.

Rumble...

The entire island shook violently, as if struck by a magnitude ten earthquake.

Waves tens of meters high roared across the ocean like a sea dragon.

"So... this was part of your plan too?"

Borsalino stood tall in front of Daren, arms raised parallel to the ground in a defensive stance. Channeling outward Armament Haki, he shielded Daren from the lingering shockwaves of the explosion.

Daren's blood-matted black hair whipped in the wind, the blood at the corner of his mouth long dried.

He licked his parched lips and grinned.

"He wanted a heavy cannon, so I gave him one."

He paused, and the smirk on his face turned sly.

"Of course, the gift I gave him wasn't just that."

"Oh?" Borsalino blinked, then a strange grin crept across his usual goofy face.

...

The fierce winds faded, the flames receded.

Thick black smoke curled across the sky, twisting through the falling snow.

Everyone suppressed the flood of emotions from surviving the devastation and looked toward the center of the blast.

The terrain of the island had completely changed.

Barren. Charred. Pockmarked with craters. Scorched earth still smoldered with embers.

Within a kilometer radius, all snow, boulders, forests, and vegetation had been annihilated—utterly incinerated by the explosion.

At the blast center, the oversized cannon spewed thick smoke. Its twisted barrel was torn open with a massive hole, and molten metal—now black and red—sizzled and dripped onto the ground like liquid iron.

The Marines collectively gasped, horror etched into their faces.

Because they saw someone.

Byrndi World—no, what remained of him was barely recognizable as human.

His flesh seemed to melt like liquid, dripping steadily. Charred, rotting wounds covered nearly every inch of his body.

His neck and chest were the worst. Beneath scorched, decaying flesh, muscle fibers were clearly visible. His exposed throat and windpipe pulsed slightly beneath white fascia.

There was no intact skin left on his chest. The outer layer of flesh had been blown away, revealing his ribs—and through the gaps between them, the beating of his heart and lungs was visible.

The gruesome sight made everyone's skin crawl.

"D-Damn it..."

Byrnndi World struggled to lift his head, blood streaming uncontrollably from his body.

His horned helmet was gone, revealing a face torn apart like a skull. With no eyelids, the mucous-covered eyeballs bulged grotesquely from his sockets.

Those bloodshot eyes rolled and finally locked onto Daren, veins spiderwebbing across the whites.

"You... planned... all of this..."

Daren staggered to his feet from the rock wall, laughing through ragged breaths.

"More or less. Honestly, I didn't think you'd survive a blast like that."

Byrnndi World's eyes burned with rage. He bared his teeth, revealing bloody gums beneath his mutilated cheeks.

"Impossible!"

"How could I... fall to some brat from the North Blue!!"

His eyes blazed with killing intent. He took a step forward.

Even if he died—he'd take this brat with him!

Sengoku and Borsalino, who had just arrived, immediately tensed at the sight of his movement.

But the next second, Byrнди World stumbled and dropped to one knee with a heavy thud, coughing up a mouthful of dark blood.

"Wh... What's happening to my body..."

He gasped wildly, clutching his mouth with a decaying hand as blood seeped through his fingers, his face filled with disbelief.

A crushing wave of weakness seized his body, leaving him limp and powerless.

"Sea... Seastone..."

"When...?"

Byrнди World stared at the wounds on his thighs, abdomen, and arms—and clearly saw tiny black stones embedded deep in the exposed flesh!

"It was the shell."

Daren's breathing finally steadied. He wiped the blood from his face and spoke calmly.

"I packed a measured amount of Seastone into the shell of that cannon."

"I wanted to use more, but after searching the entire North Blue... that was all I could find."

As the words left his mouth, not just Byrнди World—even Sengoku whipped around, staring at him in shock.

Borsalino squinted at Daren with a grin.

"Now that's downright sneaky..."

"Right back at you, Rear Admiral Borsalino."

Sengoku suddenly snapped out of it, shouting in anger.

"What the hell were you thinking, you little brat!? What if that cannon had hit my warship!?"

That shell was packed with Seastone!

If it had hit him, even with Haki defense, his fate wouldn't have been any better than Byrnni World's!

"Then I'd have no choice but to pray for your safety. Mistakes happen when you're making plans, after all."

Daren's absurdly calm tone nearly made Sengoku choke on his own blood.

This bastard... this lunatic of a brat!

"I'm sure Rear Admiral Borsalino would be more than happy to take your place as Admiral."

Daren added with a smile.

Sengoku's face went dark.

Borsalino's grin froze.

Daren chuckled and shook his head, turning his gaze back to Byrnndi World.

"Well then, it's over."

"Byrnndi World... any last words?"

Chapter 93: Who Needs Last Words

"Last words, huh..."

Byrnndi World panted lightly, murmuring to himself as his eyes drifted into a daze.

Instinctively, he turned to glance in a particular direction not far away.

There, a charred pile of bones was still smoldering, releasing wisps of dark smoke.

It was Byojack's corpse.

Caught in an explosion of that scale, and being weaker than most, he hadn't stood a chance.

"Brother..."

Suddenly, Byrnndi World laughed.

"Heh... Baro...Barorororo!"

The curve of his lips twisted into madness. Laughter spilled out, laced with helplessness, resentment, despair—an overwhelming flood of mixed emotions.

Two streaks of blood-red tears trickled from his skull-like eyes, still clinging to shreds of flesh.

Drip...

Drip...

He stretched out his mangled, bloodied hands. Trembling and struggling, he pushed himself up from the scorched, barren earth.

He used every last ounce of strength, every bit of willpower and resolve left in his broken body, forcing himself to stand upright on unsteady legs.

His eyes swept across Sengoku, Borsalino, and the Marines rushing over with weapons drawn. With a sneer, he spat out a mouthful of blood and finally fixed his gaze on the Marine Captain.

And he laughed—wild and defiant.

This was his final moment. He refused to show a shred of weakness before death.

He drew one last breath and roared:

"Come on, Daren, do it!"

"My life... was one hell of a ride!!"

Byrnni World threw his head back and bellowed, voice thunderous:

"Who needs last words!?"

Daren smiled.

"As you wish."

He pulled out a silver coin and flicked it with his thumb.

The coin spun through the air, flipping over and over. In the pale winter sunlight, it reflected a series of faces:

Sengoku's solemn expression.

Borsalino's smirk.

The tense Marines.

And Daren himself, blood trickling from the corner of his mouth...

Time seemed to slow.

In the frigid breeze, snowflakes danced down, only to vanish as they touched the scorched ground.

Byrnndi World stared blankly at the spinning coin. Its polished surface flashed with fragments of buried memories—

Boastful words shouted from a cliff's edge as a child staring out at the sea.

The danger of his first storm at sea.

The fear he felt facing a brutal pirate for the first time.

His first crew, first brawl, first kill...

The fierce light in Byrndi World's eyes gradually softened.

Then, a voice—young, familiar—echoed deep within his mind.

"Look, World... this sea connects to islands and countries we've never even seen before. Isn't that amazing?"

"World, you have to sail out there one day... At the edge of this endless ocean, something unimaginable is waiting."

"You have to go in my place, explore the world, and grow strong."

The child gazed up at his confident older brother, arms raised proudly, and his own face began to glow with admiration.

Brother... I'm sorry.

Without you, even if I reached the end of the world, even if I saw every corner of this ocean... what would be the point?

Byrndi World smiled.

He turned his face upward, embracing the sunlight and the falling snow.

Splat!

A burst of blood bloomed from his chest.

The coin, having reached its apex, suddenly shot out—piercing straight through his heart.

Byrnni World's eyes slowly closed as he collapsed to the ground.

Sengoku watched in silence, his face solemn.

By standard procedure, a pirate like Byrnni World—one with a powerful Devil Fruit—should be captured alive and sent to Impel Down for long-term imprisonment. It was the only way to prevent such a dangerous fruit from returning to the world and falling into the hands of another ambitious pirate.

But Sengoku didn't intervene.

Because through his Observation Haki, he could already sense that Byrnni World's life force was as faint as a thread.

No one could survive wounds like that.

Granting him this final wish—dying at Daren's hands—was Sengoku's last act of respect for a longtime rival.

The coin flipped neatly back into Daren's hand. He turned to Sengoku with a smile.

"Mission accomplished, Admiral Sengoku."

Sengoku blinked, then quickly turned to his subordinates and ordered:

"Move out! Sink the last remaining pirate ship of the Ward Pirates! Wipe out every last one of them!"

"No need for that."

Daren gave a tired smile, pulling a blood-stained Den Den Mushi from his coat and dialing in.

"...Commander Daren," came Momonga's steady voice from the other end.

"Target confirmed?"

"Affirmative."

"Then eliminate it."

"No problem."

The moment he finished speaking, Sengoku instinctively looked up, a strange premonition flashing across his face.

One of the North Blue Fleet's warships, still hovering in the sky, adjusted its heading.

A black missile extended from the ship's side.

Then—

Boom!

A blast of orange-red flame erupted from the missile's tail as it launched from the ship, trailing a long exhaust plume as it streaked across the sky toward a distant point at sea.

Two seconds later, a muffled explosion echoed in the distance, and flickers of firelight rose through the dense sea fog.

Sengoku stared in stunned disbelief.

What the hell... was that?

"Reporting to Commander Daren, the target has been sunk."

Momonga's voice came through once more.

"Good work."

Daren laughed and hung up, then turned back to Sengoku.

"Reporting, Admiral Sengoku. Mission complete."

"During this operation against the World Pirates, the North Blue Fleet sank five enemy ships and killed over three thousand pirates. Captain Byrnndi World and First Mate Byojack were executed on the spot."

"North Blue Fleet casualties: zero."

Sengoku opened his mouth, but no words came.

Before he could reply, Daren suddenly wobbled. His vision went black—and he collapsed backward to the ground.

"Captain Daren!!"

"Get a medic—now!!"

"Where's the doctor?! Bring the ship's doctor!!"

...

Shouts of panic rang out from the surrounding Marines.

"So it's over, huh..."

Borsalino looked at the unconscious Marine Captain and smiled.

"Yeah... it's really over," Sengoku murmured, dazed, like waking from a dream.

"You know, Admiral Sengoku... it kinda feels like whether you were here or not didn't make much of a difference," Borsalino commented casually.

Sengoku was hit like lightning.

Right...

Aside from shouting "stop him," he'd... basically done nothing.

At least Borsalino, that unreliable goofball, had shown up in time to save Daren's life and bought some time against Byrnni World.

Was this whole World Pirate takedown... really unrelated to him?

Was he... irrelevant?

As Sengoku stood there, shell-shocked by the absurd realization, he met Borsalino's smug grin—and his face turned the color of liver.

He snapped, flustered and angry:

"Dammit! What kind of look is that!?"

"I was... I was holding the line, Borsalino! You don't know anything about strategy!"

"If I hadn't had the foresight to push past objections and hand command over to Captain Daren, do you think this operation would've gone so smoothly?!"

Having blurted that out, he turned and stormed toward the warship—practically fleeing.

His footsteps were quick and heavy.

Borsalino watched Sengoku's retreating figure and smiled faintly.

Then he looked down at the Marine Captain being carried away on a stretcher, and muttered softly:

"You always find a way to make the impossible seem easy, don't you?"

Chapter 94: A Minor but Fatal Injury

North Blue, Branch 321.

Base Commander's Office.

Sengoku stood with his hands behind his back in front of the massive floor-to-ceiling window, gazing out at the warships of the North Blue Fleet gradually returning to the military harbor. A strange glint flashed in his deep-set eyes.

North Blue Fleet, air supremacy, strategic flying fleet, elite trained units, small-scale missiles, cutting-edge technological weapons...

One term after another raced through his mind, stirring his imagination.

"That brat Daren has some serious ambition..."

Sengoku narrowed his eyes, muttering to himself.

Knock knock knock...

A light knock came from the door.

"Come in."

Sengoku responded, slowly pulling his gaze away and regaining his usual composure.

He turned around to see Momonga pushing the door open.

Wearing a Marine cap, Momonga's face was firm and composed as he raised a hand in salute.

"Admiral Sengoku, you called for me?"

Sengoku looked over the Vice Base Commander of Branch 321, also Daren's second-in-command in the North Blue, and nodded in approval at the calm and steady demeanor the man carried. He smiled.

"My visit to Branch 321 must be giving you quite a bit of trouble."

Although Byrnni World was already dead, the mop-up operations against the World Pirates still needed to be handled. On top of that, due to resupply needs, Sengoku had decided to stay at Branch 321 for a few days before returning to Marine Headquarters in Marineford.

Naturally, the Base Commander's Office had been directly taken over by him.

Momonga shook his head.

"Please don't worry, Admiral Sengoku. The North Blue Fleet has been greatly encouraged by your presence."

"If not for your planning, we wouldn't have seen such a decisive victory in the campaign against the pirate Byrnni World."

Sengoku rolled his eyes.

"Flattery like that doesn't suit you. Don't start mimicking that brat Daren."

Momonga smiled awkwardly. That kind of thing really wasn't his style.

"Speaking of that brat... how's his condition?"

Sengoku asked.

Momonga paused for a moment, his expression growing serious.

"According to the military doctors, Base Commander Daren suffered extremely severe injuries in this battle. Over thirty bones across his body were fractured to varying degrees, there was internal bleeding, and significant blood loss... The situation is quite dire."

Sengoku fell silent, letting out a sigh in his heart.

That brat Daren was certainly ambitious—assembling such a powerful fleet on his own without even informing Marine Headquarters. But with Sengoku's experience, it was obvious at a glance that the ten warships used in the operation against Byrnni World had all been heavily modified.

And the heavy weapons mounted on those ships, as well as the high-tech gear used by the Marines of Branch 321, clearly originated from Germa 66.

Germa 66... Sengoku suddenly remembered something else.

The North Blue Marines had recently stepped in to mediate a war between the Germa Kingdom and the Yadis Kingdom. For some unknown reason, the North Blue Fleet and Germa 66 had ended up signing a friendly cooperation agreement.

So... Daren's "partnership" with Vinsmoke Judge had started back then?

Though Sengoku was somewhat displeased with Daren's series of actions, he couldn't bring himself to pursue the matter. Not when he recalled how much Daren had sacrificed in the battle against Byrnni World—and the brutal state of his injuries.

After all, this was Byrnni World. A pirate who posed a real threat to Marine Headquarters and the World Government.

"...I've never seen Captain Daren this badly injured,"

Momonga continued his report, unaware of the subtle shift in Sengoku's expression.

"According to the doctors, anyone else suffering injuries this severe would've already been dead. Even if they survived, they'd be left with long-term aftereffects—crippled for life."

The more Sengoku listened, the more uncomfortable he felt, a creeping sense of guilt rising within him.

Daren had nearly died to help him take down Byrnni World. And yet, moments earlier, he had actually considered commandeering the North Blue Fleet and its technology for Marine Headquarters.

You bastard, Sengoku!

How could you even think of that after all Daren's done?

"...Based on the military doctor's assessment, it'll take at least two or three days for Captain Daren to fully recover."

Momonga sighed with a somber look.

Sengoku shook his head, full of emotion.

"That kid's really something. Leaving him stuck out here in the North Blue all these years was a waste of talent. I'll make it up to him however I can... Let him rest and recover. Once he's fully healed—"

He suddenly froze, as if something clicked.

"Wait! What did you just say!?"

He stared blankly at Momonga.

"Daren will make a full recovery in two to three days!?"

Momonga, confused by Sengoku's outburst, nodded.

"Yes."

A twitch formed at the corner of Sengoku's eye.

"Didn't you just say his injuries were severe!? Thirty-something broken bones, internal bleeding, life-threatening!?"

"Yes."

"You also said that anyone else would've died, and even if they survived, they'd be crippled for life!?"

"Yes."

Sengoku gritted his teeth.

"And didn't you just say you've never seen Daren injured this badly before!?"

Momonga replied with a straight face.

"That's right."

Sengoku practically roared:

"Then why!?"

Momonga answered honestly:

"I've never seen Captain Daren this badly injured."

"Before, even if he was cut by a sword, blown up by a cannon, burned by fire, or riddled with bullets... he'd usually be scabbed over within half an hour."

"This time, Base Commander Daren has to stay in the hospital for three full days."

With complete seriousness, he added:

"It's really that serious."

That solemn, earnest expression nearly drove Sengoku insane.

He opened his mouth, but faced with Momonga's completely straight-laced demeanor, he couldn't say a single word. He could only cover his face in frustration.

"All right, all right, I get it. You can leave now. I need a moment."

"Yes, Admiral Sengoku. If you need anything, just call."

Momonga gave a crisp salute, then turned to leave the office.

"Wait..."

Sengoku suddenly stopped him.

"Where are Gion and Tokikake? Tell them to come see me."

Momonga thought for a moment and replied:

"Reporting to Admiral Sengoku, Lieutenant Commanders Gion and Tokikake aren't currently at the branch."

"Where did those two run off to?" Sengoku asked.

"Lieutenant Commander Tokikake went out to sea with Rear Admiral Borsalino... According to them, they're surveying the civilian situation in the North Blue."

Momonga pursed his lips.

Sengoku's mouth twitched.

"And Gion?"

"Lieutenant Commander Gion went to go catch them."

Sengoku: ...

Chapter 95: An Offer You Can't Refuse

"So, Sengoku... how feasible do you think it is to apply the North Blue Fleet's model to our headquarters?"

In the Base Commander's office, the military Den Den Mushi transmitted the deep, commanding voice of Fleet Admiral Kong.

Sengoku frowned and paused for a few seconds, then responded carefully,

"Reporting to Fleet Admiral Kong, it's hard to say at this stage. I'll need to wait until that brat Daren wakes up before I can get an accurate estimate of the cost of the North Blue Fleet's equipment and weaponry."

Over in Marineford, inside the Fleet Admiral's office, Kong stood with his arms crossed, speaking in a low tone.

"I've heard a lot about Germa's high-tech weapons. With gear like that, a military force can see massive improvements in combat capability in a very short time. But Sengoku... you should know better than anyone—the North Blue Fleet's real strength isn't in its weapons."

"It's Daren," Sengoku said slowly.

"That's right. The key to the flying fleet lies in Daren's Devil Fruit ability... Without him, no matter how many high-tech weapons they have or how elite their troops are, the North Blue Fleet is just a powerful force—nothing more."

Kong let out a heavy sigh.

"But with Daren's Devil Fruit ability, the strategic value of that fleet..."

He paused, his expression turning solemn as he said clearly:

"Is immeasurable."

Sengoku nodded in agreement.

The terror of a flying fleet had already been proven by Shiki the Golden Lion. Though his Flying Pirates were vast in number—far more than an average pirate crew—and he commanded dozens of ships, his crew wasn't particularly strong. They lacked the core fighters that could hold a front like the captains under Whitebeard's Moby Dick, and were no match for the elite composition of Roger's crew.

Yet, to Marine Headquarters, if there was one pirate in this sea who was the hardest to deal with, it would undoubtedly be Shiki the Golden Lion.

His sheer personal strength and large fleet were threats, but those weren't the biggest concerns.

What made him truly dangerous was his Fuwa Fuwa no Mi.

With the ability to lift an entire fleet into the sky, granting unmatched mobility, he could strike anywhere at will and retreat just as easily. It was nearly impossible to defend against.

"And you need to understand, Sengoku..."

"The stronger Daren gets, and the more he develops his Devil Fruit, the more ships he'll be able to carry."

"With the talent he's shown, that's inevitable."

Kong lit a cigar, took a deep drag, and a faint smile appeared at the corner of his mouth.

"Maybe in the not-too-distant future, the world's forces of justice will have a flying Admiral."

Sengoku remained silent for a while.

"But Fleet Admiral Kong... about control over the North Blue Fleet, and Daren collecting taxes in the North Blue... are we really just going to turn a blind eye?"

"In the past two days I've observed the North Blue Fleet closely. Their devotion to Daren has reached a peak."

"To the point that, in the North Blue, the orders of an Admiral like me hold less sway than a simple word from Daren, a mere Captain from HQ."

"And the investigation results from Gion and Tokikake are in—Daren's been using the tax revenue he collects to equip his men with top-tier weapons, the most advanced ships, and pay and benefits far beyond HQ standards..."

"If we don't put a stop to this, the North Blue Marines might eventually break free of Headquarters' control altogether—and become Daren's personal army."

Hearing this, Kong suddenly laughed.

He said something that seemed completely unrelated:

"Sengoku, it's time you grew up."

Sengoku frowned, clearly displeased.

"Fleet Admiral Kong!!"

Kong chuckled.

"I've reviewed Daren's file... Sharp, ambitious, capable, ruthless—and skilled at winning people over."

"Do you really think that, without his approval, those two hotheaded rookies Gion and Tokikake would've uncovered that much intel?"

Sengoku was taken aback.

His eyes widened slightly, as if something had clicked.

"Fleet Admiral Kong... you mean..."

Kong exhaled a cloud of smoke, eyes gazing out toward the sea beyond Marineford.

The waves crashed and surged. The vast blue sea stretched endlessly into the horizon, swallowing all in its depth.

"For this operation against Byrncdi World, Daren could've easily kept the North Blue Fleet hidden."

"The time and place of the deal were known. Risky, yes—but with your strength, plus Borsalino's, as long as you blocked World's escape route, it wouldn't have been hard to take him down."

"But Daren didn't do that..."

Kong's voice carried a subtle undertone.

"He sent out the North Blue Fleet anyway."

Sengoku's body trembled. He murmured in disbelief,

"He was making a show of force...!"

Kong nodded.

"Exactly. He's forcing Headquarters to make a choice."

"He's shown his value—his strength, his talent, the potential of his Devil Fruit, and... the future possibility of building a flying armada for the Marines."

"And what he wants—is the North Blue."

"He wants full control and leadership over it. He wants HQ to stay silent about his actions there. He wants to be recognized as the rightful..."

Kong narrowed his eyes.

"...King of the North Blue."

...

"Do you think HQ will agree to this?"

At the same time...

Branch 321, Military Hospital.

In the quiet high-grade ward, the hallway was stacked with all kinds of flower bouquets and fruit baskets.

The air carried a faint mix of blood and disinfectant.

Momonga sat straight and serious on a wooden stool by the bed, his expression grave as he asked.

"They'll agree. I revealed my ability voluntarily... It's an offer they can't refuse."

Daren leaned back against the hospital bed, a lit cigar between his lips. His narrowed black eyes looked through the glass window toward the harbor, a confident smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

Both arms were in casts, and his bare upper body was wrapped in bloodstained bandages. His face was pale from the heavy blood loss.

"Let's wait and see. I can't say it outright, but Sengoku and Kong are smart. They'll get the message."

"The death of Byrnni World, the potential of a flying fleet, my future development... All of it is enough to secure at least twenty years of peace in the North Blue."

"It won't be long before your commission arrives."

Daren's gaze settled on Momonga's composed, resolute face. He grinned.

"Congratulations in advance—North Blue's new Admiral."

Chapter 96: Ambition and Resolve

"This is absolutely out of the question!!"

Sengoku slammed his fist down on the desk, fury blazing in his eyes.

"Fleet Admiral Kong, the North Blue Navy is not the private army of Rogers Daren!"

"If we allow this precedent, Marineford—as the headquarters of the Marines—will lose the authority and dignity to lead the world's forces of justice!"

On the other end of the Den Den Mushi, Kong pressed a hand to his forehead, clearly feeling a headache coming on.

Sengoku was smart, no doubt about it. But when it came to matters of power, he often got caught up in rigid thinking.

At his core, Sengoku was a traditional soldier, devoted to duty and obedience. And that made him overly cautious when it came to certain sensitive issues.

...Not bold enough.

Kong paused for a moment, then asked,

"Tell me, Sengoku—besides Daren, who else could've done what he did?"

Sengoku fell silent.

Kong let out a bitter smile.

"I wish we had more young men like Daren. But the truth is, we don't have a single one."

"Even those you've pinned your hopes on—Sakazuki, Borsalino... and that kid from Garp—they still couldn't pull off what he did."

Sengoku muttered under his breath, "I never had much hope for Borsalino..."

Kong: ...

He shook his head, took a long drag from his cigar, then continued.

"Daren is exceptional. Far beyond any of our expectations."

Sengoku grudgingly admitted, "His talent is indeed remarkable."

"No—it's more than just talent," Kong said solemnly.

"I read your report on the operation to eliminate Byrnni World... Let's not even mention the North Blue Fleet he built from scratch. Just the force deployment, the ambush planning, the tactical layout—Daren's military aptitude is among the finest on these seas."

"He used the fleet's firepower advantage to cut off Byrnni World's escape route first."

"Then he tampered with the arms shipment ahead of the exchange."

"Every move Byrnni World made was anticipated—if you ask me, I'd say Daren had already played out this operation in his head a hundred times."

"To have someone so young with this level of military prowess... the Marines are lucky."

"If it had been Sakazuki, Borsalino, Dragon—or even you, Sengoku—could you have pulled it off so cleanly?"

Sengoku hesitated, unable to give a reply.

Sakazuki, Borsalino, Dragon... their talents were dazzling. Rising stars of justice that inspired awe wherever they went.

But Daren's political acumen, military command, and strategic depth were already beyond what those three could offer.

He wiped out the World Pirates without sacrificing a single soldier. A complete annihilation with zero casualties.

Who else could claim such a feat on this sea?

Byrnni World was no ordinary opponent.

Sengoku, Garp, and Zephyr had clashed with him countless times over the years—and always come up empty-handed.

In that sense, Daren had already surpassed them.

Sengoku's face burned at the thought.

The worst part? In this final campaign against Byrnni World... he hadn't even been able to contribute.

"So now you understand, Sengoku,"

Kong said with meaning in his voice.

"When you weigh the North Blue against the future possibility of a Marine Admiral with both brilliance and might... isn't it worth handing it over?"

"And most importantly—no matter what others say about Daren, that kid has a line he won't cross."

"You can see that clearly from how he's governed the North Blue."

"Crime is down. Civilian life has improved. Pirate activity has dropped significantly... Isn't that the kind of justice we want?"

Sengoku frowned. "But Fleet Admiral Kong, all of this still stems from his personal ambitions..."

"It doesn't matter!"

Kong cut him off sharply.

"Anyone living on this sea has ambition."

"We all know what Daren wants. But if he truly grows strong enough—if one day he can lead the Marines to eliminate Whitebeard, Shiki, and Roger—then why shouldn't he take my place as Fleet Admiral?"

His weathered eyes gleamed with clarity.

"Sengoku, I know you're worried the North Blue will become Daren's personal power base..."

"I get it."

"But what you need to understand is this—true justice cannot be bound by narrow thinking. The Marines' vision must be far broader than you realize!"

"Let me share something with you. It won't be long before I take up a new post in the Holy Land."

Sengoku's eyes widened.

"Fleet Admiral... you mean...?"

"Yes. The position has opened up. The previous commander passed away from illness."

Kong didn't deny it, brushing the matter off lightly.

He leaned back into the sofa, cigar smoke curling around the hard lines of his face as he spoke in a deep, earnest tone.

"Sengoku, I've always had high hopes for you."

"Out of you, Zephyr, and Garp, only you have what it takes to succeed me."

"To lead from the top, you need the heart to match the rank. You must have the vision to look beyond the immediate."

"As long as Daren is fighting pirates... as long as he follows Marine orders... as long as he still wears that cloak of justice—he is one of us."

"Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Sengoku's heart shook violently.

Kong's words hit him like a bolt of lightning, exploding in his mind and stirring up a storm within.

The Den Den Mushi line went silent for a long time.

"I understand, Fleet Admiral,"

Sengoku finally said, lifting his head slowly. His voice was once again calm and composed.

Kong let out a satisfied laugh.

"Then... what about the press release? Have you decided on the wording?"

Sengoku thought for a moment, then said solemnly:

"North Blue Admiral Rogers Daren, in the name of justice, has successfully eliminated the 'World Destroyer,' Byrnni World!"

"Hahahahaha..."

Kong's hearty laughter echoed throughout the Marshal's Office in Marineford.

Chapter 97: The Golden Age

321 North Blue Marine Branch.

Military Hospital.

Ash from Daren's cigar drifted lazily to the floor as he exhaled a puff of smoke. He gave the nurse adjusting his IV a playful wink, making her ears flush red.

"How's that thing I asked you to do?" he asked casually.

Momonga glanced briefly at the nurse, then replied carefully, "As per your instructions, the warships involved in the operation were stocked with a variety of fruits in their cargo holds. But... there's been no sign of anything unusual."

Daren frowned.

"What about the target island? Did you search it?"

Momonga nodded with gravity.

"We've been conducting a full sweep for the past two days. Still nothing. That island is in a polar climate, constantly battered by snow and wind. Only a few hardy plants can survive there—completely unfit for human habitation. As for fruit-bearing plants, practically nonexistent."

He paused, waiting until the flustered young nurse left the room before lowering his voice.

"When Admiral Sengoku's warship docked here for resupply, I boarded and searched it myself. Still couldn't find what you were hoping for."

"I checked the ship's log. Three days before the mission even started, their fruit supplies had already been completely used up."

Daren let out a slow exhale, silent for a moment before laughing under his breath.

"So it really isn't that simple, huh..."

Momonga looked hesitant.

"Are you sure about your theory? That when a Devil Fruit user dies, their fruit reincarnates on the nearest piece of fruit..."

"There's never been a recorded case of that happening in these seas."

Daren shook his head.

"No—I'm not sure. It was just a theory."

"Having you prepare fresh fruit in advance and conduct a post-battle sweep of the island... it was just a small experiment."

"Guess that theory doesn't really hold up after all."

Daren had full confidence in Momonga's capabilities.

After working together for years, he knew exactly how diligent and precise the man was. No matter how outlandish the order, if it came from Daren, Momonga would carry it out to the letter.

And if he said there was nothing, then there was nothing.

Which meant the idea that "a Devil Fruit reincarnates on a nearby fruit upon the death of its user" could be ruled out.

It made sense.

As a transmigrator, Daren had a fair grasp of the One Piece timeline.

In the original story, Devil Fruit reincarnation was shown only three times.

First: Whitebeard dies in the Marineford War. Blackbeard, likely using the Yami Yami no Mi, somehow extracts his Gura Gura no Mi.

Second: Ace's death. Two years after the war, his Mera Mera no Mi ends up in Doflamingo's hands and is later used as bait in the colosseum.

Third: Punk Hazard. Caesar Clown creates the lethal slime weapon "Smiley." It consumes a Devil Fruit through scientific means, taking on the form of a new Devil Fruit. After it dies—presumably from eating candy—one apple in a nearby basket morphs and becomes a Devil Fruit.

That last scene in particular had led many fans to believe that was the rebirth mechanism.

So for this operation against Byrnni World, Daren figured it was worth testing. He had the North Blue Fleet carry a large supply of fresh fruit on board.

After all, the Moa Moa no Mi was incredibly powerful. Even if he couldn't use it himself, passing it to a subordinate to form a powerful core team would've been ideal.

But now, it seemed the truth was far more complex.

Still... that was understandable.

If the rebirth mechanism were really that simple, the World Government or Marines would've figured it out long ago.

Not to mention the number of Devil Fruit users locked up in Impel Down.

Over its long history, surely some had died—from torture, illness, cruelty, harsh environments, or simply old age.

As far as Daren knew, supply ships regularly brought food into Impel Down—including fruit.

And Impel Down was geographically isolated, surrounded on all sides by sea and located in the Calm Belt.

If a Devil Fruit user died inside, and fruit was present, then by that logic, the fruit should've transformed.

But despite the countless prisoner deaths over the years, there had never been any report of a Devil Fruit appearing within Impel Down.

"So... maybe there really is no pattern. Maybe it's entirely random?"

Daren murmured to himself.

"Should I keep the search going? Maybe it just takes more time for the fruit to reappear?" Momonga asked.

"Yeah. Leave a few men behind to continue the sweep on the island."

Even if the odds were slim, Daren wouldn't pass up the chance—no matter how small.

"No problem."

Momonga nodded.

"Oh, right. One more thing. A message just came in from Marineford—Headquarters has confirmed that the third Officer Training Camp will officially begin in ten days."

A sharp gleam flashed in Daren's eyes as he smiled.

"So it's finally starting?"

Momonga pulled a document from the folder at his side and handed it over.

"This is the participant list for the third Officer Training Camp."

Daren opened the file.

Right at the top was his own name.

"North Blue Admiral, Marine Headquarters Commodore, Rogers Daren."

Daren grinned.

"Looks like the commendation for the Saint Xildes incident got approved. I've been promoted."

Momonga's lips twitched slightly.

Daren continued down the list.

"Lieutenant Commander, Kuzan. South Blue."

"Captain, Doberman. West Blue."

"Lieutenant Commander, Yamakaji. South Blue."

"Lieutenant Commander, Onigumo. West Blue."

"..."

So many familiar names.

"The Golden Generation... what a constellation."

As he looked at the list—names that would one day echo across the Grand Line and shape the future of the Marines—Daren's smile deepened, filled with anticipation.

The tides of a new era were rising.

And this was an age lit by stars.

Chapter 98: The King of the North Blue (End of Volume 1)

With the release of Marine intelligence, word quickly spread through news outlets large and small: the legendary pirate, the "World Destroyer" Byrncdi World, had been slain by the Marines in the North Blue.

The moment the news broke, it was like a bombshell dropped into a still lake, sending shockwaves rippling across the entire sea.

...

New World, somewhere at sea.

White, liquid-like clouds drifted across the sky, where the deep blue above met the endless ocean below.

A colossal pirate ship lay silently on the surface of the water, its size akin to that of a white whale. A skull flag bearing a white scimitar mustache fluttered high atop the towering mast, level with the seagulls soaring through the skies.

"Pops!! Big news!!"

A blond, pineapple-haired youth dashed toward the bow, shouting in shock while waving a freshly printed newspaper above his head.

A figure sat idly at the ship's prow, casually holding a bottle of liquor, the heavy scent of alcohol wafting from his body.

"How many times have I told you, Marco? When something happens, the first thing you need to do is stay calm."

The man slowly stood.

With that single motion, an overwhelming presence rose from him, like a towering mountain emerging from flat ground—seemingly endless in height and weight.

Beneath the massive pirate ship, the calm sea suddenly churned. Concentric ripples and bubbles broke the surface like rain disturbing still waters.

"Sorry, Pops!"

Marco skidded to a stop and bowed hastily, his expression anxious.

"But you've gotta see this!"

The towering man slowly turned around.

Sunlight poured down in brilliant beams.

He wore a wide captain's cloak, a massive naginata planted by his side. His long, wild blond hair fluttered gently in the sea breeze.

He was the legendary pirate who ruled the New World, recognized by the Marines as a formidable threat!

The "Strongest Man in the World"—Edward Newgate, Whitebeard!!

Whitebeard looked down at Marco. His fierce eyes softened slightly with a smile.

"Alright then. What happened?"

Still catching his breath, Marco took a deep inhale to calm himself before shouting,

"That guy Byrnni World... he got taken out by the Marines!"

The other crew members on deck froze, visibly shaken. Their hands stilled as they all drew in sharp breaths.

Crash... Waves surged around the ship.

"Oh? That World guy actually got taken down by the Marines?"

A trace of surprise flickered across Whitebeard's face.

The Whitebeard Pirates had once clashed with the World Pirates led by Byrnni World. Though it was merely a test skirmish, and not a grudge match, Whitebeard had a decent grasp of World's strength.

Both parties had kept their distance, knowing the destructive force of each other's Devil Fruit powers. To avoid unnecessary casualties, they settled for a ranged exchange rather than an all-out battle.

To be precise—Whitebeard shattered Byrnni World's "100x Cannon" with a single punch.

"Was it Sengoku or Garp?"

Whitebeard asked in a low voice.

"Neither..."

Marco shook his head.

"It was some guy I've never heard of. A Marine Captain stationed in the North Blue. Name's Rogers Daren!"

Whitebeard narrowed his eyes.

He took the newspaper from Marco and opened it.

A massive front-page headline jumped out:

"The King of the North Blue, Rogers Daren!! Successfully defeats the legendary pirate, Byrnni World!!"

"Strongest Admiral in the North Blue! The Navy's 'Future Admiral'!?"

"The 'World Destroyer,' Byrnni World—killed in the North Blue!?"

"Shocking! The Marine Supernova who took down Byrnni World is a scandal-ridden rogue!? Is this the distortion of humanity or the collapse of morality!?"

...

The article included a photo: Rogers Daren standing atop a heap of pirate corpses in the midst of a battle, smoke billowing behind him.

"Seems like a pretty ambitious kid..."

Whitebeard studied the photo of the black-haired Marine with a wild grin, then suddenly burst out laughing.

"Gurararara!! Looks like you guys might have a solid rival on your hands!"

His thunderous laughter boomed across the sky like a great bell.

Far off on the sea, enormous waves rose without wind.

Layer after layer... roaring like dragons.

The sea was trembling!

...

At the same time, somewhere on the Grand Line.

Rip!

Countless streaks of pale lightning tore through the black sky, thunder roaring as a torrential downpour crashed down.

Howling winds stirred up towering waves, like the invisible hands of a giant hurling a pirate ship forward at breakneck speed.

"Captain Roger! Huge news!!"

In the pouring rain, a red-nosed kid in a hood sprinted across the deck.

"Gorororo! Buggy, don't slip!"

Standing at the ship's bow, a black-haired man radiating wild Haki laughed in the face of the storm, one foot planted firmly forward. His crimson captain's coat flared in the wind, scattering water in every direction.

Gol D. Roger!!

"Let me say it! I found it first, Buggy!!"

Another red-haired kid burst from the cabin and clung to Buggy tightly.

"Damn it, Shanks! Who told you to be so slow!?"

The two kids rolled and wrestled across the deck, their young faces contorted in frustration as they scuffled.

Roger, soaking in the storm at the bow, looked toward a bespectacled man in a shirt standing nearby.

"So full of energy... now that's youth and passion. Makes me think of when we first set out... right, Rayleigh?"

Rayleigh rolled his eyes and sighed inwardly—back then, the only one full of youth and passion was you.

If not for this guy's relentless pestering, I'd be living the good life in retirement by now.

"Say it together, Buggy, Shanks."

Rayleigh waved his hand.

"Yes, Mr. Rayleigh!!"

Shanks and Buggy glared at each other, then stood straight and shouted in unison:

"The King of the North Blue, Rogers Daren, has successfully defeated the legendary pirate, Byrndi World!!"

Roger and Rayleigh both froze.

"King of the North Blue? That's a nickname I've never heard before..." Rayleigh muttered, frowning as he squinted at the soggy newspaper, the ink smudged from rain.

Roger's eyes gleamed with interest.

"Sounds like a guy who can really fight..."

Rayleigh twitched and sighed.

"Seems like he's not even twenty yet."

"Hahahaha! So what!?"

Roger laughed it off.

Boom!

A massive column of seawater erupted beside the Oro Jackson, drenching the deck with salty spray.

"Artillery fire!"

"Captain Roger! Marines incoming! They're on our tail!"

Boom!

Rumble!

Rumble rumble!!

Black cannonballs tore through the storm, arcing through the sky as they hurtled toward the ship.

Clang!

Sparks flashed like cascading petals.

Several cannonballs were sliced midair by Rayleigh's blade, exploding overhead in clouds of smoke.

The flickering flames lit up Rayleigh's serious face.

"Roger! You're not getting away!!"

A powerful roar echoed from the stern, far across the stormy sea.

In the blurred distance, a shirtless, muscle-bound Marine stood atop the bow of a dog-headed Marine warship—hurling cannonballs barehanded at them!

"Ahhh!! Not again!!"

Buggy shrieked, clutching his head in terror.

"Why won't that guy ever leave us alone!? We're really gonna die this time!!!"

"Shut up!!" Shanks slapped a hand over Buggy's mouth, gritting his teeth.

But judging from his pale face, he was just as terrified.

"Gororororo! Garp! I'm not in the mood to play with you today!!!"

Roger made a face at Garp across the sea, grinning like a mischievous kid.

"Time to get out of here—he's the 'strongest Marine,' after all!!!"

"Got it!!!" the crew shouted in unison.

Under the crew's command, the sails of the Oro Jackson billowed full, surging ahead with the storm winds.

"Damn it!!!"

Garp gritted his teeth, hurling cannonballs faster and faster. His hands were a blur as he shouted into the storm:

"Don't run, Roger!!!"

"Don't chase, Garp!!!"

Rumble rumble rumble!!

"Don't run!!"

"Then don't chase!!"

...

Similar scenes played out across the seas.

As people read the headlines, some sneered, some scoffed, some stayed silent, some cheered, some raged, some were indifferent... and some were itching to make a move.

But one thing was certain—

On this day,

The name "King of the North Blue" Rogers Daren officially stepped onto the stage of the Grand Line!

Chapter 99: Volume 2 – Chapter 1: New-Type Weapon

Three days later.

Branch 321, Military Hospital, High-Level Ward.

One by one, the blood-soaked bandages were peeled off, revealing fresh pink skin and raw muscle underneath.

The well-defined, muscular physique radiated masculinity, making the young nurse blush, her mouth dry.

"Daren-sama, I'll remove the cast on your arm now."

The young nurse spoke softly.

"No need. I'll do it myself."

Daren smiled, lowered his head, and clenched his fists—hard!

Crack!

With that motion, the muscles in his arms swelled and flexed, forcibly shattering the cast into powder.

After rolling his shoulders and loosening his joints, Daren closed his eyes, enjoying the nurse's gentle cleaning and care.

Knock knock knock...

A soft knock at the door, followed by Sengoku pushing it open with a smile.

"Daren, did you see the reports in the paper? You've made quite the name for yourself across the seas..."

Daren saluted with a smile.

"It's all thanks to your guidance and trust, Admiral Sengoku."

He signaled for the nurse to leave the room.

Sengoku chuckled in satisfaction.

Somehow, when this kid flattered him, it always sounded pleasing to the ear.

"Looks like you've recovered well."

He eyed the Marine officer up and down—not Captain anymore, but Commodore now.

"Not bad. I've been stuck in bed for three days, at least," Daren replied.

Sengoku's eye twitched.

He shook his head and continued,

"You've received the notice from headquarters, right? The officer training camp's induction ceremony is in seven days."

Daren nodded.

"Good..." Sengoku paused, as if wanting to say something more but hesitating.

Daren chuckled.

"Admiral Sengoku, you're here to ask about the North Blue Fleet, aren't you?"

This kid... really sharp.

Sengoku sighed inwardly, then his expression grew serious.

"Yes, that's right."

"Daren, with your insight and strategic ability, you should understand the significance of the North Blue Fleet's model to Marine deployments."

"A naval fleet capable of flight is enough to change the balance of power across the seas."

"But don't worry. The Four Seas forces operate independently, and the North Blue Fleet will remain intact... What headquarters wants is to implement the fleet's model within the main forces."

Daren raised a hand and firmly replied,

"No need to say more, Admiral Sengoku. As long as I can contribute to justice, I'll cooperate fully."

"I'll compile a detailed list of the North Blue Fleet's configurations and ship modifications for your review. If headquarters needs anything, I'll provide whatever I can."

"However, Admiral Sengoku, I should remind you—the North Blue Fleet's situation is unique. The weapons and equipment, as well as the ship modifications, might be rather costly."

"Hahaha! That's not a problem at all!"

Sengoku burst out laughing, clearly pleased with Daren's response. His gaze toward the young man was filled with approval.

Now this—this is a rising star of the Marines.

Not like that slacker Borsalino, who's never around and always has such a lackluster attitude!

"Well then, I'll leave it at that."

Sengoku patted Daren on the shoulder with a smile.

"I've got high hopes for you, Daren. Make sure to stand out at boot camp!"

He paused, then leaned in slightly and lowered his voice.

"...Once you graduate, come be my adjutant."

"...Nice weather today, Admiral Sengoku."

A slow, drawn-out voice came from the doorway.

Sengoku's face darkened.

Daren's expression turned strange.

There stood Borsalino, already leaning lazily against the doorframe with his hands in his pockets, watching Sengoku with a half-smile.

The room fell into an awkward silence.

Sengoku stood frozen. A few beads of sweat began forming on his forehead.

Suddenly—

"Hey! It's me, Sengoku!!!"

He whipped out a military Den Den Mushi from his coat and shouted into it, panicked.

"What?! Something that serious happened!? Alright! I'll return immediately!!"

He rushed out of the room, his steps hurried and a little clumsy.

Daren: ...

Borsalino casually pointed at the Den Den Mushi.

"Uh... Admiral Sengoku, I think the line wasn't connected..."

Sengoku froze. His expression shifted.

"Mmm... bad signal?"

He gritted his teeth.

"Damn it, and at such a critical moment too..."

With that, he picked up the pace and disappeared down the hall.

Dark lines slowly appeared on Daren's forehead.

Borsalino chuckled and stepped into the ward.

"Seems like your recovery's going well."

"Not bad."

Daren flexed his still-stiff wrists and elbows.

Borsalino gave him a glance. Beneath those toad-like shades, something shimmered.

"Never thought you were hiding this deep... The North Blue Fleet really caught me off guard."

Daren shot him a look and smiled.

"Rear Admiral Borsalino, just say what you're here to say."

Borsalino raised both hands in mock surrender.

"You got me."

"Alright, alright. I do have something to talk to you about."

His slow, dragging tone made him seem all the more irritating.

"The North Blue Fleet is impressive. An airborne fleet has huge strategic value. But didn't you notice something? Even with Germa 66's tech-based weaponry, the fleet's firepower... still isn't quite enough?"

Daren narrowed his eyes, subconsciously sitting upright.

"What are you implying, Rear Admiral Borsalino?"

Borsalino smiled faintly.

"The Marines are about to establish a new scientific unit—meant to work directly with research from the 'genius scientist' Dr. Vegapunk. The goal is to apply his innovations in combat to strengthen Marine forces."

"As someone five hundred years ahead of his time, Dr. Vegapunk has recently uncovered some very interesting patterns... Based on them, he's developed a rather intriguing weapon."

That piqued Daren's interest.

"You want to field-test it and collect combat data?"

"Bingo."

The light in Borsalino's glasses flickered.

He grinned.

"Is the North Blue Fleet interested?"

Daren asked,

"What kind of weapon is it?"

Borsalino raised one finger.

"This."

A wave of intense, destructive heat began rising from his fingertip.

Golden light started to gather...

Chapter 100: Volume 2 – Chapter 2: Apology

The laser cannon installed on the Pacifistas—had Vegapunk already developed a working prototype that quickly?

Watching Borsalino's figure as he bent forward and exited the hospital room, Daren thought to himself.

If that's the case, then Vegapunk must have already unraveled the secret behind transferring Devil Fruit abilities.

That was an unexpected bonus.

At this point in time, the Shichibukai system hadn't been established yet, and the Pacifist prototype "Tyrant" Bartholomew Kuma likely hadn't even set sail.

Which meant that the Pacifists who showed up during the Sabaody Archipelago incident in the original story probably didn't even exist as a concept yet.

If the North Blue Fleet could be equipped with a certain number of laser cannons...

Rows of invincible warships piercing the clouds and descending from the skies, sweeping everything within range with the most advanced laser weaponry on the seas.

Just imagining the scene sent a thrill through Daren.

Overwhelming technological superiority...

If this plan succeeded, he was going to show these so-called great pirates just what the power of science really meant.

Knock, knock...

A soft knock came at the door.

"Come in."

Daren answered.

The hospital room door opened gently. A tall, black-haired woman strode in on high heels, exuding a bold, confident aura.

"What a rare visitor..."

Looking at the striking figure known as the "Flower of the Marines," Daren couldn't help but tease.

Gion gave Daren a cold glance, casually placed a bouquet on the bedside table, and said flatly,

"You're still alive. Villains really do live long."

Daren shrugged.

A face swollen like a pig's head peeked out from behind Gion, grinning and wincing.

"You're looking pretty energetic..."

Seeing Tokikake's bruised and battered face, now even more haggard, Daren burst into laughter.

"Tokikake, what happened to you? Got beat up at a brothel?"

Tokikake's face flushed deep red. He glanced nervously at Gion and began to stammer.

Bullseye...

Daren's eye twitched, a few dark lines creeping across his forehead.

He shook his head.

"You two need something?"

Gion spoke slowly.

"The officer training camp is about to begin. Lieutenant Commander Tokikake and I are also part of this cohort. We'll be heading to headquarters for training alongside you."

Daren nodded.

"Yeah, I saw the list already."

With their strength and rank, it was only natural that they'd get slots in the officer training camp.

Even if it was a bit early for them.

Considering their time in the North Blue had significantly sharpened their abilities and experience, Sengoku placing them in the program ahead of schedule made sense.

Of course, it was also possible the old fox just wanted him to keep playing babysitter for these two.

"Congratulations to you both."

Gion nodded and turned to leave. But just as her foot crossed the threshold, she abruptly paused and stepped back.

She stood there silently for a moment.

"Captain Daren—no, Commodore Daren... I believe I owe you an apology."

"Oh?"

Daren smiled with interest.

"Why's that?"

Gion murmured,

"I take back what I said about you before."

"Even if you smoke, drink, love money, chase women, enjoy killing, and have a huge lust for power..."

She bit her lower lip.

"You're still a good Marine."

"Hmm, fair enough."

Daren's eyes narrowed in amusement.

"Looks like you realized something."

Gion said nothing.

On the way back from capturing Tokikake, she had spotted two familiar figures.

A small, cozy flower shop.

Inside, a father and daughter dressed differently, with altered hairstyles and dyed hair—completely changed in appearance.

But she had recognized that innocent little girl instantly.

Daren, however, suddenly grinned.

"But I still prefer the old you. All wild and untamed."

Gion's expression darkened, and she stomped out of the ward in her heels, leaving behind the cheerful laughter of the Marine commodore.

In the ward, Tokikake shook his head, watching the scene with a look of amazement.

"You've really got something... I've never seen Gion apologize to anyone before."

Daren chuckled.

"Just because it hasn't happened before doesn't mean it never will."

"Psh!" Tokikake snorted. "You're such a show-off!"

He paused, then suddenly threw an arm around Daren's shoulder, grumbling.

"But seriously, you're cold, man... Taking out Byrnndi World and not bringing me along for the glory?"

He raised a clenched fist, eyes blazing with fire.

"Standing on that warship in the sky, watching you fight down on the island—my blood was boiling. I was shaking all over with battle fever..."

"Really? I heard from Momonga that you turned pale and your hands were shaking so badly, you almost broke the railing."

"That was... fear of heights!"

Tokikake blushed furiously.

"You get it? Fear of heights!"

"If you'd let me down, I could've fought alongside you. Maybe we wouldn't have even needed Borsalino. The two of us, side by side, could've taken Byrnni World down ourselves!"

His voice was full of indignation.

"Man, that would've been the perfect tale... The genius Marine from HQ, Tokikake, defeating a legendary pirate! Just think of all the ladies—no, the public support I'd get!"

"I'd be the rising star of the Marines, the beacon of justice!!"

Daren glanced at him.

"But that's exactly how I heard you bragging about it..."

Tokikake faltered.

"I... I... I..."

His face shifted colors, then he dropped hard onto a chair, grabbed the fruit basket nearby, and began angrily gnawing on it.

Daren laughed and shook his head.

He stood, slipped on his uniform, and pulled a brand-new justice cloak from the coat rack.

"I'm heading out for a bit."

"Where to?"

Tokikake asked with his mouth full, gnawing on a watermelon.

"To visit a brothel."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa—take me with you!"

"Aren't you afraid Gion will beat you to death?"

"Well, you know, I was just testing you... A virtuous man like me would never go to a place like that."

"Oh? And here I was thinking I still had a bunch of unused VIP cards from the gifts people sent me..."

"Commodore Daren! Something this corrupting to Marine morale must be destroyed—leave it to me! I swear I'll carry out the mission!"

"..."