

One Piece 101

Chapter 101: Volume 2 – Chapter 3: Don't Let Me Down

A crumpled newspaper drifted softly to the floor.

The wind from the window sent the curtains billowing, folding and swirling in the air.

Doflamingo leaned back against the soft leather sofa, one hand over his forehead, silently enjoying the breeze.

"Fufufufufu..."

The corners of his mouth lifted, and a low chuckle gradually grew louder.

"Madman... what a madman..."

"The Great Pirate Byrnni World... he actually took him down! Fufufufufu!!"

Thinking about the pirate who once crushed him like a demon, now dead in the North Blue, filled Doflamingo with a sense of absurdity so intense he couldn't stop shaking with laughter.

Not far from the family's council hall, Trebol and the others stared at the newspaper in their hands, shock written all over their faces.

"What do you think? Like the news?"

A low voice, tinged with amusement, drifted in from the distance.

Trebol and the others flinched. A chill ran down their spines.

An explosive roar approached at blinding speed—a tall figure riding a silver metal skateboard dropped from the sky and landed firmly.

The wide cloak of justice rippled behind him. The streamlined board quickly melted and reshaped into a metallic wrist guard that latched onto his arm.

"Didn't expect this, did you... Godfather?"

Doflamingo looked at the black-haired Marine approaching step by step and smiled.

Daren stopped in front of him, towering over him. He reached out with his left hand, smiling.

"You're my godson... Doffy."

"Never forget that. Anyone who dares offend you... will pay the price."

His eyes narrowed dangerously.

"Anyone."

Doflamingo paused for a moment.

Faced with the black-haired Marine's overbearing gaze, he went silent, then knelt on one knee, bowed his head, and gently kissed the back of Daren's hand.

"Thank you, Godfather."

Daren smiled with satisfaction.

"Get up. Has anything changed in the underworld lately?"

Doflamingo rose slowly and replied in a deep tone.

"Not much. Under your protection, the Donquixote Family has taken complete control of most industries in the North Blue underworld."

"As for the Grand Line, we've already cleared key trade routes and established several merchant connections. I believe it won't be long before the Donquixote flag flies across the seas of the Grand Line."

"Good. Just be mindful of the pace. The Grand Line isn't like the North Blue. Expand too fast, and the Marines will start paying attention."

Daren's tone carried a hidden warning.

Doflamingo froze, then nodded firmly.

It was true—the Donquixote Family had been growing too quickly. It was bound to attract unwanted eyes.

He'd been able to act so brazenly in the North Blue thanks to Daren's protection—Daren, the true "King of the North Blue."

But the Grand Line was a different beast entirely. The Marine branches marked with "G" and the elite-filled Marine Headquarters weren't forces they could afford to provoke.

To those stationed in the Grand Line, especially the Vice Admirals from HQ, crushing the Donquixote Family would be no harder than swatting a fly.

"Take it slow, Doffy..."

Daren reached out and ruffled Doflamingo's hair with a grin.

Doflamingo hesitated, then asked,

"Godfather... when are you leaving for training in Marineford?"

"In less than a week. I'll head out two days early."

Daren glanced back, thinking to check on Trebol and the others—but they'd already slipped away unnoticed.

"Before I go, I need you to handle something for me."

Doflamingo lowered his head. The shadow of his sunglasses hid his eyes.

"Say the word, Godfather."

"Byrnci World died in the North Blue. I need you to use every resource, both underground and above, to track down any information on the Moa Moa no Mi."

Daren lit a cigar. The drifting smoke swirled around his sharp features.

"If you find a lead, use any means necessary. At any cost—secure the Moa Moa no Mi."

Moa Moa no Mi!

Doflamingo was stunned, though his face remained unreadable.

Having faced Byrnci World's strength himself, he was naturally curious about the fruit that could multiply both speed and mass.

He cast a subtle glance at Daren.

Could it be... Daren had been after the Moa Moa no Mi from the start?

"I'll follow your orders, Godfather."

"Good. Then I'm leaving this to you."

Daren turned to leave.

The metal bracelet on his wrist twisted and stretched again, transforming into the streamlined silver skateboard that hovered at his feet.

Daren stepped onto it.

Just as Doflamingo thought he was finally leaving and began to relax, Daren suddenly turned back—making Doflamingo's heart skip a beat.

"Doffy..."

"Yes, Godfather?"

His heart raced.

Daren looked at Doflamingo's submissive pose and chuckled.

"From now on, the North Blue is yours."

"I expect great things from you. Don't disappoint me... understood?"

"Rest assured, Godfather."

"Good. If anything comes up and you can't reach me, contact Momonga. He'll be taking my place as the new Marine Admiral of the North Blue."

With that, Daren turned away.

The air around him erupted with energy as the magnetic field surged, launching the silver board beneath him.

He vanished into the clouds with a sonic boom.

A violent wind swept through the council hall, sending papers flying in every direction. Curtains flapped wildly.

Doflamingo remained kneeling, breathing heavily, cold sweat dripping from his forehead.

"Doffy... you okay?"

"What the hell did that bastard want with you?"

"..."

Trebol and the others snuck in through the side door, glancing around carefully. After confirming the Marine Admiral was gone, they finally spoke.

"He... asked me to find a Devil Fruit."

Doflamingo took a deep breath and pushed himself up with both hands.

He reached for the cigarette on the table, lit it, and took several harsh drags. His eyes were bloodshot.

"That guy... he's gotten even stronger..."

Doflamingo muttered through pale lips, still shaken by the oppressive presence in Daren's final gaze.

Chapter 102: Volume 2 – Chapter 4: Rear Admiral Dragon

Branch 321, Military Hospital.

The bespectacled doctor, a refined-looking man in his fifties, was carefully examining the wounds on Daren's body.

The crisscrossing wounds had already begun to grow new pink skin. They itched slightly, but there was no more pain.

"Well, your wounds are healing nicely. Nothing serious at all. With a body like yours, you're practically a monster."

Even after all these years of witnessing Daren's remarkable recovery ability, Dr. Wells was still astonished.

"Thanks, Dr. Wells."

Daren chuckled.

"I'm just used to getting hurt. Habit is a terrifying thing."

"I can see that," Dr. Wells said, putting away his medical tools. "Would it be foolish of me to suggest avoiding fights in the future?"

Daren shrugged.

"You might not believe it, but some things are out of my control. Trouble always seems to find me."

"Besides, as a Marine, getting injured is about as common as eating or sleeping."

"Is that so?"

Dr. Wells shook his head and didn't argue further.

"Still, I recommend avoiding intense activity for now. I mean real fights with pirates or that suicidal training you tend to do."

"I'll try my best," Daren said with a grin.

While washing his hands, Dr. Wells asked casually,

"I heard you're heading to Marineford?"

"Yeah, for training. I've been in the North Blue long enough."

Daren buttoned up his shirt, then picked up his cloak and gave the middle-aged doctor a slight bow from behind.

"Thanks for looking after me all these years."

Dr. Wells paused, the sound of running water suddenly loud in the quiet ward.

"Go, Daren."

He smiled.

"After all these years of training and countless scars—I must have patched you up over a hundred times... wasn't it all for this day?"

"Let those folks on the Grand Line see what the men of the North Blue are made of."

Daren draped the cloak over his shoulders, turned, and walked out of the room, waving back as he laughed.

"Of course!"

...

Morning after the rain.

The sun was shining bright. Wispy clouds floated across the sky, and beams of golden light pierced through the clouds, scattering into radiant shafts—a perfect Tyndall effect.

"How long until the warship from HQ arrives?"

Daren, wearing his broad justice cloak, strolled toward the military harbor of the 321st Branch, stretching lazily as the cool sea breeze blew over him.

"Should be arriving soon."

Momonga glanced at Daren and asked,

"Dr. Wells checked you out already?"

Daren grinned.

"Yeah, told me to avoid heavy activity."

"Sound advice," Momonga said with a raised brow.

Sound, sure—but hardly practical. Daren was never one to stay put.

That thought crossed Momonga's mind, but his eyes remained fixed on the distant sea.

Bathed in the morning light, the sea shimmered with brilliance, each ripple reflecting a dazzling glow.

That endless ocean seemed to hold every ambition and dream. In Momonga's eyes, a trace of longing quietly surfaced.

"Just wait a little longer. No matter what, I'll make sure you get a spot next time."

Noticing the change in him, Daren smiled and patted his shoulder.

Momonga pulled his gaze back, exhaled softly, and shook his head.

"The North Blue needs someone reliable."

Daren looked at him, his expression suddenly serious.

"Momonga... the North Blue is important, but your growth is more important."

"Power, status, fame, wealth—those things are secondary. On this sea, what matters most is strength."

"Too many people never figure that out in their whole lives. But I believe you're not one of them."

Listening to Daren's sincere words, warmth stirred in Momonga's heart.

He clenched his fists and gave a firm nod.

Daren's face relaxed again, and he smiled.

"Wonder who'll be leading the escort this time?"

Momonga chuckled.

"I know you're hoping it's Rear Admiral Sakazuki."

Daren rolled his shoulders and neck with interest.

"I could never beat him. Not back in the North Blue, and definitely not after he graduated."

"So you're stupid enough to want a beating?"

A cool voice cut in.

Gion approached quickly from a distance, followed by Tokikake, who looked half-asleep, yawning non-stop.

Daren laughed it off.

"Getting beaten up is a talent too. Anyway, I've been in the hospital for days—feels like I'm rusting."

Gion was about to say something more, but Momonga suddenly spoke up.

"They're here."

As soon as he said it, everyone looked up.

A massive warship was slowly emerging over the golden sea in the distance.

Suddenly, a fierce wind rose.

Waves crashed furiously against the port. A visible storm swept across the harbor, sending flags flapping with loud, sharp snaps.

"What's going on!?"

"Is a storm coming!?"

"Why's the weather changing so suddenly!?"

"..."

Marines patrolling the dock turned pale, barely able to stay upright as the gale ripped through the base.

Momonga and the others instinctively raised their arms to shield themselves, eyes wide with uncertainty.

Daren squinted.

A black-gloved hand suddenly shot out from the green-tinged windstorm, reaching straight for his face.

Already sensing it through his magnetic field, Daren smirked and sidestepped the incoming hand with ease.

His eyes gleamed with a savage light. With a swift lunge, he struck forward, his elbow blasting out like thunder, aimed to shatter that arm.

Whoosh!

The blow hit nothing. The arm vanished just before impact.

Behind me!

Without hesitation, Daren dropped his stance, twisted his waist, and hurled a punch backward without even turning.

Boom!!

Their fists collided mid-air with a heavy thud.

A shockwave burst outward, whipping their white cloaks into a frenzy behind them.

"I heard there's a 'monster' in the North Blue who can rival Sakazuki... and even took down the legendary Byrnni World. Looks like the rumors were true."

A bold laugh rang out as a fierce, commanding face took shape in the storm.

Long black hair whipped around wildly. His brow was bare, his features sharp and stern.

"Nice to meet you, Commodore Daren. Sorry for the sudden welcome."

The man retracted his fist. The confidence in his smile was oddly endearing.

"Your reputation precedes you. I just couldn't resist the urge to spar."

"I'm the escort for this trip. Rear Admiral of Marine Headquarters..."

He raised his hand in a crisp salute.

"—Monkey D. Dragon."

Chapter 103: Volume 2 – Chapter 5: Two People as Different as Night and Day

The fierce wind abruptly ceased—gone as quickly as it had come.

The clear blue sky reappeared overhead, and brilliant sunlight spilled down, casting a soft glow across Dragon's face. His gentle smile felt like a spring breeze.

"Mon... Monkey... You're Vice Admiral Garp's..."

Tokikake stared wide-eyed at Dragon, his expression frozen in disbelief.

Of course, he knew that the famous Marine "Hero" Garp had a son holding a key position within the Navy. But unlike most officers stationed at Headquarters, Vice Admiral Garp's son had volunteered for Grand Line patrol duty, so Tokikake had never seen him before.

Dragon turned to him and smiled.

"You must be Headquarters' Lieutenant Commander Tokikake, right? I'm often away on missions, but I've heard the name of your genius many times."

Tokikake froze, then his scruffy face suddenly flushed with a dramatic blush. He covered his face with both hands and began fidgeting in place.

"Aww, genius? That's just people exaggerating! Rear Admiral Dragon, you flatter me too much!"

He was practically floating with joy, little red hearts bubbling above his head as he screamed internally:

"This is the son of Hero Garp! The son of a Marine legend just called me a genius!!! Hahahahaha!!!"

Dragon chuckled, then turned to Gion, his gaze warm.

"Gion, it's been a long time."

Gion gave him a serene smile.

"It has been a while, Dragon."

As fellow second-generation officers from the core of Marine Headquarters, the two naturally shared a close bond.

Standing off to the side, Daren watched the exchange with a smirk tugging at the corner of his lips.

It was the first time he'd seen Gion wear such a genuine smile. He had to admit—Dragon, the man destined to become the future leader of the Revolutionary Army, definitely had a unique charisma.

Dragon turned next to Momonga, eyes full of calm confidence.

"Then if I'm not mistaken, this must be Commodore Daren's right-hand man—Vice Base Commander of the 321st Branch in the North Blue, Lieutenant Commander Momonga?"

Faced with Dragon's sincere and friendly demeanor, Momonga seemed slightly overwhelmed. He gave a small nod and said in a low voice,

"Yes, Rear Admiral Dragon."

He raised his hand in a crisp salute.

Dragon smiled.

"No need to be so formal. We're all comrades here—there's no need to stand on ceremony."

"Oh, right—congratulations in advance. The appointment from Marine Headquarters has been finalized... As of today, you are officially the highest-ranking officer in charge of military operations in the North Blue: Captain Momonga."

As he spoke, he motioned with his hand.

From the warship anchored at the port, a well-trained Marine leapt from the deck and swiftly ran over, respectfully handing a document to Dragon.

"Rear Admiral Dragon."

Dragon accepted it with a smile.

"Thanks, Felmer."

The young Marine—Felmer—froze for a second, then stared at Dragon with stars in his eyes, trembling with excitement as he clenched his fists.

He'd only joined Dragon's ship two days ago and had never even spoken to him. There were hundreds of crew on board... Yet Dragon still remembered his name!

With a serious expression, Dragon handed the appointment letter to Momonga.

"Congratulations, new Admiral of the North Blue... Captain Momonga."

Momonga accepted it with both hands, voice solemn.

"All glory... to justice."

The two saluted each other at the same time.

Then Dragon turned toward Daren, his deep eyes locking onto him with a soft smile.

"Commodore Daren, my warship needs some time to resupply. Before we depart, how about a chat?"

Daren grinned.

"Of course, Rear Admiral Dragon."

Just what he was hoping for.

Even if Dragon hadn't approached him, he would've made the effort himself. After all, this was the future revolutionary leader who would one day shake the seas—Dragon of the Marines era.

Naturally, Daren was curious.

What kind of person was Dragon in his youth? What was his stance toward the government? What kind of justice did he believe in?

At the very least, one thing was clear: Dragon had a natural charisma and leadership presence.

He respected subordinates, smiled easily, remained patient and gentle, humble and composed, sincere and warm—he exuded a radiant trustworthiness.

The mark of a true leader.

"This way, Rear Admiral Dragon."

Daren raised a hand and smiled.

The two exchanged polite gestures before walking side by side toward the Base Commander's office.

"Hey hey hey, Gion, did you notice something...?"

Tokikake crept up to Gion and whispered in a hushed voice,

"Those two guys... are completely opposite in style, aren't they?"

Gion blinked and instinctively looked up.

Daren and Dragon, similar in height and build, had already walked ahead to the entrance of the military fortress.

For a moment,

Daren on the left stood beneath the fortress's shadow, while Dragon on the right was bathed in sunlight.

The two conversed and laughed heartily.

Yet the justice cloaks flowing behind them took on completely different hues beneath shadow and light.

One black, one white.

Clear as day.

...

At the same time, somewhere on the Grand Line...

A massive warship sliced steadily through the roaring waves, sailing firmly in a set direction.

"At current speed, we'll reach Headquarters in half a day," the adjutant reported solemnly.

"Yes, I'm aware."

Sengoku was in high spirits.

In fact, he hadn't felt this good in years.

His sworn enemy, Byrncdi World, had finally been eliminated—and the World Government's commendation had already arrived.

Although he hadn't directly taken part in the operation, he was still listed as the official leader. The Five Elders themselves had expressed their satisfaction with the mission's results and encouraged him to keep pushing forward, their words filled with trust and expectation.

This trip to the North Blue had also opened his eyes to new possibilities.

Even setting aside the potential for airborne fleets, the sheer technological advancement of the North Blue fleet's weaponry alone was enough to make Sengoku envious.

He could already imagine how awe-inspiring it would be when Headquarters' elite warships were outfitted with such state-of-the-art arms.

Just thinking about it brought a smug smile to his face.

He picked up the armament price list Daren had submitted, flipping it open as he muttered with confidence,

"It's just money... If even the North Blue fleet can afford it, then surely the great Marine Headquarters..."

His smile suddenly froze.

He shot to his feet in disbelief.

"—What!?"

Chapter 104: Volume 2 – Chapter 6: Truly Vice Admiral Garp's Son

Sengoku stared at the densely packed numbers on the procurement list, unable to believe his eyes.

"This... how is this possible... I must just be too tired lately, not getting enough rest..."

"Yes, that has to be it."

Unwilling to accept it, he removed his glasses, rubbed his eyes, and put them back on—but the numbers on the page hadn't changed a bit.

Especially those endless strings of zeros after each figure... they made his jaw tighten.

A high-voltage stun gun: 500,000 Belly.

A portable rocket launcher: 1,000,000 Belly.

A flamethrower: 800,000 Belly.

A mid-range ballistic missile mountable on a warship—the kind that sank Byrnndi World's last pirate ship... 8,000,000 Belly!

And that was for just one missile.

As for the cost of warship modifications...

Sengoku was stunned. He couldn't help but leap up, stomping and cursing.

That reckless brat Daren... he actually spent 100 million Belly to reinforce the keel of a mid-sized warship!?

That kind of money could build two ships of the same class!

(And in this era, Belly holds a higher value.)

Sengoku did some quick mental math and came to a conclusion that made the corner of his mouth twitch uncontrollably:

The force deployed by the North Blue Fleet in the campaign against the World Pirates—ten warships and around two thousand elite Marines—cost over 2 billion Belly to assemble!

And that wasn't even counting the goods and weaponry destroyed during the battle.

But Byrnni World's bounty... was only 400 million Belly...

Sengoku covered his face in despair.

No sugarcoating it—this entire victorious campaign had been bought with Daren's mountain of Belly!

"That damn brat... where the hell did he get so much money!?"

He suddenly gritted his teeth.

He'd never admit that the contorted look on his face was jealousy.

As an Admiral of Marine Headquarters and a top candidate for the next Fleet Admiral, Sengoku knew better than anyone how Marine budgets worked.

After all, with Commander-in-Chief Kong getting on in years and not particularly detail-oriented with numbers, Sengoku handled most of Headquarters' military funding directly.

But 2 billion Belly? What kind of concept was that?

That was nearly the equivalent of Marine Headquarters' entire quarterly budget!

And mind you, that budget covered the maintenance of bases, fortresses, firearms, ships, and salaries for personnel.

If you deducted those "essential" operating expenses, the actual amount Headquarters could freely allocate in a single quarter was less than 300 million Belly!

What was more outrageous was that despite the massive cost, Daren sounded like he planned to expand the North Blue Fleet even further.

"Insane... absolutely insane..."

Sengoku muttered to himself.

...

"So, is it true?"

The moment the door to the Base Commander's office clicked shut, Dragon's warm, easy smile vanished. In its place was a grave expression.

His sharp gaze locked directly onto the young Marine Commodore before him.

"The most powerful figure in the North Blue underworld... the leader of the Donquixote Pirates, Doflamingo—is he working for you?"

Daren raised an eyebrow, then chuckled.

"To be precise, Doffy is my godson."

"Godson?" Dragon frowned, clearly puzzled.

Daren casually lit a cigar, then without a shred of formality, sat directly on the edge of the desk.

"It's a North Blue tradition. We have an old saying..."

'The world is too dangerous—a child needs two fathers.'

"Doffy's a pitiful case. Lost his parents young, grew up neglected."

"When he came to the North Blue, he made a lot of mistakes. I've punished him, and now he's truly realized his faults. He's determined to change and walk the right path."

"As Marines, we can't just stand by and watch a gifted kid stray down the wrong road, right, Rear Admiral Dragon?"

Dragon's brow furrowed even deeper.

"So you're saying Doflamingo acknowledges you as his... 'Godfather'?"

Daren spread his hands with a smile.

"That's right."

"Do you know who he really is? He's not just a 'gifted kid'."

Daren remained silent, still smiling.

Dragon narrowed his eyes, quietly studying the calm, unflustered Commodore before him.

Daren showed no rush or anxiety. He simply puffed on his cigar with an amused air.

He hadn't planned on hiding much about Doflamingo anyway—it wasn't something that could be concealed from everyone.

Especially after the campaign against Byrnni World. Anyone with half a brain could connect the dots through that "deal" and uncover the ties between himself, Doflamingo, and the Donquixote Family.

If nothing else, Sengoku—that old fox—was surely capable of seeing through it.

And that was what made it interesting.

Sengoku had left the North Blue two days ago. Technically, he could've confronted Daren directly.

But he didn't.

Instead, the person sent from Headquarters to "talk" to him... was Rear Admiral Dragon.

In a way, this was a gesture of goodwill.

Dragon didn't yet rank among the Marine core leadership—meaning this wasn't a formal investigation.

And as the biological son of Vice Admiral Garp, the famed Marine hero, Dragon wielded influence others did not.

This represented respect from Headquarters.

All in all, having Dragon sent to speak with him was a good sign.

If this had been about holding him accountable, they wouldn't have sent Dragon—they would've sent Tsuru, the staff officer in charge of oversight.

The office fell into silence.

You could hear a pin drop.

Until—

"Hahahahaha!!"

Dragon suddenly burst out laughing, threw an arm around Daren's shoulders, and slapped his back hard.

"You're a damn legend, Daren!"

"Taking in a Celestial Dragon's kid as your godson—only you would come up with that!"

"Hahaha!! That's incredible! Brilliant!"

Daren stared blankly at Dragon, whose face was flushed with excitement. His mouth twitched.

Why the hell are you so excited?

"I've had it with those bastards for a long time!"

Dragon pumped his fist, looking every bit like a rebellious teen.

Then, as if realizing he'd said too much, he hurriedly waved his hands.

"Ah—wait, forget I said that. I take it back!"

Hold up.

Daren stared at the man in front of him and suddenly sensed something odd.

This guy who had radiated charisma and leaderly poise just moments ago... was now giving off a dumb, goofy vibe.

It reminded him... of someone.

Daren sighed helplessly.

"Rear Admiral Dragon..."

"Yeah?"

"You really are Vice Admiral Garp's biological son."

"Oh."

Chapter 105: Volume 2 – Chapter 7: See You Off

Half a day later...

Crates of supplies and provisions were being loaded onto the warship under the orders of their superiors.

Marines from Marine Headquarters were all smiles as they carried the varied supplies, creating a bustling scene. The freshest fruits, marbled dried meats, canned goods, even premium cigarettes and whiskey... For soldiers from Headquarters, it was a rare sight to witness such a well-funded Marine branch. They could feel the North Blue Marines' warm hospitality firsthand.

Standing on the deck, Dragon beamed with a wide smile.

"The soldiers of the North Blue are far too generous..."

He pulled out a pack of senbei from the cargo, tore it open, and began munching noisily.

"Dragon, don't let that schemer Daren corrupt you,"

Gion said with a frown, raising an elegant brow in disapproval.

"Come on, I'm a devout Marine."

Dragon chuckled, then pulled out a box of cigars from another crate, lit one, and took a contented puff, his eyes narrowing in satisfaction.

Gion: ...

She bit her lower lip.

"That bastard Daren!!"

Dragon was the brightest rising star in the Navy—a natural-born leader, blessed with charisma as the direct descendant of a hero. His calm and inherently gentle leadership style had earned him a stellar reputation within the ranks.

Marine Headquarters had already unanimously recognized him as a future Admiral.

Someone so perfect—Gion simply couldn't stand the thought of him being tainted by Daren's indulgent and corrupt lifestyle.

"Lieutenant Commander Gion, speaking ill of someone behind their back isn't a good habit."

Daren stepped steadily onto the deck, looking at her with a half-smile.

Gion snorted and turned away, saying nothing.

"What's wrong? No salute for your superior?"

Daren smiled.

Gion's expression stiffened. She turned back reluctantly and saluted.

"Commodore Daren."

Then turned and walked away without another word.

Dragon stroked the stubble on his chin, watching them both with amusement.

Something's up with these two...

"Gion's always been like that. She's just got a sharp tongue. But it's obvious she respects you."

Dragon glanced at Daren with a grin.

Daren shrugged.

"No big deal. I don't take it personally."

Dragon nodded and smiled.

"So, how do you feel? Leaving the North Blue after all these years?"

Daren lit a cigar as well, his expression calm.

"People have to keep moving forward. Besides, it's not like I'll never return."

"You're taking it pretty well." Dragon laughed and shook his head.

"Set sail!!!"

The call of the messenger echoed across sea and sky.

The rust-covered anchor rose from the water, sending up a spray as it came free.

With the massive sail unfurling, the bold black kanji for "Justice" swelled in the wind. The warship groaned as it began moving, slowly pulling away from the 321st Branch's naval port.

From the side rail, Tokikake wailed like a pig being slaughtered, tears streaming down his face as he waved frantically toward the harbor.

"Goodbye!!"

"Miss Maria, Miss Yui, Miss Natsume, Miss Ayaka... and Mrs. Rowe, Mrs. Scully, Mrs. Fix... While I'm away, please take good care of yourselves! Don't forget to write!!"

"I'll never forget you!!"

Daren: ...

Dragon: ...

"Uh... has Lieutenant Commander Tokikake always been this... emotionally expressive?"

Dragon twitched his lips, staring blankly.

Daren rubbed his temple in frustration and nodded with a pained expression.

Then Gion stormed over with a face like thunder, grabbed Tokikake by the scruff of the neck, and dragged the sobbing mess back onto the deck.

The warship cleared the port.

Daren stood at the bow, back to the 321st Branch, smoking quietly.

"We're leaving soon. Aren't you going to say goodbye?"

Dragon walked up beside him with a smile.

Daren shook his head.

"No need."

His life philosophy had always been the same—always forward, never back.

That's how he'd lived for the past decade, and he had no plans to change that now.

"But they don't think that way."

Dragon gave him a pat on the shoulder before turning into the cabin.

"Oh, by the way, Daren—the voyage from here on out is all yours."

Before Daren could process what he meant, a raspy roar erupted from the port behind them.

"All hands on deck!!"

"Prepare—!"

Boom! Boom! Boom!

A thunderous barrage echoed across the sky.

Daren froze.

He pressed his lips together and slowly turned around.

The port was now packed with a dense crowd of Marines. At some point, they had assembled into a grand military phalanx, a sea of blue and white stretching as far as the eye could see. Eyes reddened, faces burning with emotion.

At the front, Momonga stood tall, draped in a Captain's cloak.

He took off his cap, drew in a deep breath, and shouted with all his might:

"Salute!!"

At his command, tens of thousands of North Blue Marines raised their arms in perfect unison. The sheer force stirred the air, creating a sound like rumbling thunder.

They gazed into the distance, eyes fixed on that tall figure moving away. Some were already in tears.

The world went still.

Daren stood frozen, a faint, complex smile slowly curving on his lips.

"Really now..."

He whispered softly.

Then he straightened up, sharp as a spear.

Salute!

A smile crept onto Momonga's face. With a crisp motion, he swung his arm down.

Rumble!!

From forts, warships, and strongholds, countless cannons roared, spewing flames.

A sky full of ceremonial salutes lit up the heavens in dazzling color.

"See Admiral Daren off!!"

"See Admiral Daren off!!"

"..."

The thunderous cries echoed between sea and sky, long and unyielding.

Amid the cheers of countless North Blue Marines, the warship gradually faded into the horizon.

Daren didn't lower his arm until the silhouette of the 321st Branch was nothing but a speck on the sea.

He took a long drag on his cigar, forced down the emotions stirring within him, and walked slowly into the cabin.

"Rear Admiral Dragon, about our route—"

He stopped mid-sentence, staring blankly.

Dragon was sprawled unceremoniously on the floor, fast asleep, snoring like thunder, a bubble puffing in and out with each breath.

Daren stood silent for a moment, then let out a helpless laugh.

So that's what he meant...

Shaking his head, Daren turned toward the window, gazing out.

The warship cruised ahead, cutting through the undulating blue waves.

White seagulls soared from the mast, wings slicing the sky, flying boldly into the distance.

He clenched his fist.

Chapter 106: Volume 2 – Chapter 8: Sparring with Dragon

The cabin of the warship swayed with the rolling waves. The oil lamp on the table flickered softly, casting shifting light and shadow.

Daren sat cross-legged on the floor, eyes closed, while three coins hovered in the air around him, spinning and circling.

Anyone watching closely would be stunned to see just how precise the motion was—the speed, spacing, and orbit of the coins were perfectly uniform.

It was like watching three miniature satellites revolving around a single planet.

The cabin was quiet.

Only the rhythmic sound of waves lapping against the hull came from outside.

But as time ticked by, a thin layer of cold sweat slowly formed on Daren's forehead.

Faint blue arcs of electricity began crackling across his skin... a clear sign that his control over the magnetic field was beginning to overload.

Then, all at once, the coins lost their suspension and dropped to the floor.

Daren opened his eyes slowly and let out a long breath.

"It really isn't that easy..."

He wiped the sweat from his brow.

Among the three main Devil Fruit types, the development of Paramecia-type abilities was the most unique.

Zoan-type users had to adapt to the survival and combat instincts of their animal archetype, constantly tempering their physique to match those traits.

Logia-type users focused on assimilating with the element of their fruit, then developing diverse offensive techniques from that foundation.

But Paramecia was different.

Even within the Paramecia category, there were distinct subtypes—like Charlotte Katakuri's Mochi Mochi no Mi, a special Paramecia, or rule-based fruits like the Hobi Hobi no Mi, practically bugged by design.

The Jiki Jiki no Mi was another outlier.

It didn't drastically alter the user's body. Instead, it manipulated external metal objects through the application of magnetic fields.

After years of trial and error, Daren had identified two main methods to develop his Jiki Jiki no Mi further.

The first was adapting to magnetically "transport" heavier and bulkier metal objects—this helped increase the overall output of his magnetic field.

The second was improving the precision of his control within a fixed range.

Making all metal move in the same direction within a given field was relatively easy. That was how he controlled cannonballs—or even "piloted" the warship before.

But directing multiple metal objects to move independently in different directions within that same space required layering complex magnetic lines—something that demanded extreme mental control.

It was a tough process, but this second method had produced real results. His previously stalled fruit development was finally showing signs of advancement.

With that in mind, Daren activated his innate "perception" ability to assess his body stats.

Physique: 63.513

Strength: 61.395

Speed: 62.115

Fruit: 73.067

Leaving aside the Devil Fruit progression, his battle with Byrnni World had pushed his Physique, Strength, and Speed to noticeable new heights.

"Yep, only top-tier fights can really help you break your limits... No wonder Rayleigh trained Luffy for two years with limited results, and Kaido's training stick got him to master Advanced Conqueror's Haki in three swings."

Daren quipped with a mocking smirk.

Of course, that was just a joke.

Not everyone had Luffy's main character aura or his absurd "sit-up" resilience.

Anyone else getting hit by even one of Kaido's strikes would be meeting their maker, let alone three.

That's why Daren pushed himself so relentlessly, even resorting to borderline self-harm to strengthen his physique.

In game terms: the higher your Physique, the thicker your armor and HP bar. More survivability meant more chances to turn the tide in battle.

Though even that couldn't escape the curse of "the tankiest always takes the nastiest hits."

Daren picked up the three coins and stood. He ducked slightly to pass through the low door and stepped out of the cabin.

The blinding sunlight made him squint.

"There you are. Been waiting for you..."

Daren turned toward the voice. Dragon had just finished a set of one-finger push-ups, sweat pouring down as he stood with a grin.

He wore a loose shirt, a few buttons undone to reveal his broad chest.

That bright, sunlit smile matched with his rugged frame had an oddly striking beauty.

"I heard you're a training maniac. It's still a long trip to Headquarters—how about a little sparring?"

Dragon's smile was genuine, not a hint of provocation. His eyes were full of excitement—like someone eager to test themselves against a worthy rival.

Daren glanced toward Tokikake nearby, who immediately ducked behind the mast like a kid caught red-handed.

Daren chuckled.

Looked like he'd "tormented" Tokikake a bit too much back in the North Blue. The guy was probably hoping Dragon would beat him up to blow off some steam.

"Rear Admiral Dragon, I'm no match for you."

Daren said it plainly, with zero hesitation.

According to the data Momonga gathered from the Officer Training Camp, Dragon was a top graduate of the second class—on par with Sakazuki in final evaluations.

First class? Borsalino.

And on top of that, Dragon's father was none other than "Hero" Garp.

Thinking of the brutal "training" Luffy endured growing up under Garp, it was easy to imagine Dragon had suffered the same fate.

That meant Dragon not only had elite credentials but also inherited even more resources and training than either Borsalino or Sakazuki.

Daren didn't kid himself—he wasn't Dragon's equal.

More importantly, he hadn't yet mastered Haki.

His fight with Byrnni World had made it painfully clear just how massive the gap was between having Haki and not.

"No problem. I won't use Haki or my Fruit."

Dragon's eyes gleamed, clenching his fists with anticipation.

"Let's take this chance to get to know each other."

"A real man speaks with his fists!"

That's the line I was waiting for!

Daren grinned. If Devil Fruits and Haki were off the table, he wasn't afraid of anyone in close quarters.

"Alright!"

He grabbed his collar and tore it off in one pull!

His uniform and cape hit the deck, revealing a body covered in savage, dense scars—a feral, bloody aura radiated from him instantly.

Dragon's pupils narrowed.

Just how many serious injuries had this guy survived to get here?

"Bring it on, Rear Admiral Dragon!"

The words had barely left his lips before Daren shot forward like a leopard.

Against an opponent far stronger than himself—he didn't hesitate to strike first!

Chapter 107: Volume 2 – Chapter 9: The Origin of Ryusoken

The moment Daren lunged forward with astonishing speed, Dragon's eyes lit up, and he moved at once.

Bang!

The two charged simultaneously, their wrists colliding with a heavy impact that sent shockwaves rippling through the air.

A perfect draw!

Without pausing, both men shifted their stances mid-air.

Fists clashed, elbows struck, a series of sharp blows echoing across the deck.

The Marines watching stood wide-eyed, holding their breath as the intense clash unfolded before them.

"Nice!!"

Dragon's eyes gleamed. He slipped past Daren's heavy punch and, gliding forward, unleashed a strike surging with force.

Boom!

A white ripple burst across Daren's sharply defined abs, sending him skidding back several meters. But his face twisted into a fierce grin.

With a crack, the deck splintered beneath his feet, and the ship dipped half a meter from the impact.

Using the recoil, the Marine commodore shot forward like a cannonball, eyes gleaming with ferocity as he launched himself at Dragon.

Daren covered the distance in an instant, his movements ghostlike. He dropped his waist, raised his left leg, and whipped it toward Dragon's face like a bolt of thunder.

Dragon leaned back, the military boot grazing his cheek as the gust lifted his long black hair.

He reached out, grabbing Daren's leg tightly. Taking a deep breath, he prepared to slam him into the deck.

But mid-air, Daren used Dragon's grip as a pivot, bringing his right leg down like a battle axe!

Bang!!

An arm intercepted the strike.

Taking the opening, Daren broke free from Dragon's hold, landed, and leapt again like a pouncing tiger.

His fists flew at blinding speed, forming a blur of dark afterimages that rained down toward Dragon.

"Hahahaha!! That's what I'm talking about!"

Dragon laughed heartily, meeting the blows head-on.

Bang bang bang bang!!

A barrage of heavy thuds rang out as their strikes exploded across each other's bodies.

Tokikake and Gion stood nearby, dumbfounded, their mouths twitching at the sight.

Those two... weren't dodging at all.

Every punch... landed squarely on the body!

...

Half an hour later.

Daren and Dragon lay sprawled on the battered deck, gasping for air.

The surface was riddled with craters, and one of the ship's heavy cannons had been caved in by a punch.

Sweat streamed from their bodies, blood trailing from the corners of their mouths.

The surrounding Marines were still frozen in shock.

They had never seen a fight like this before.

More accurately, they had never seen a fight this stupid.

No defense, no evasion—just straight-up pounding each other in the face and body like lunatics. It was pure madness.

"Your body's like steel... damn."

Dragon chuckled, wiping blood from his mouth and sitting up with zero composure.

Though he was faster and stronger, Daren's durability outclassed him.

By the end, Dragon was shocked to find that without using Armament Haki, he couldn't break through Daren's defenses at all.

The rare feeling of defeat only got him more fired up.

"Those punches of yours are no joke either..."

Daren sat up and smiled.

Sparring with Dragon—trained under both Zephyr and Garp—was a valuable experience. His physical stats had clearly improved.

Looking at Daren's smile, Dragon suddenly felt that this mission to the North Blue had been well worth it.

This guy... might just be his kind of person.

"Still, fists spread the impact too much. Hard to break through defenses..."

Dragon frowned, studying his hands.

Thick knuckles, radiating strength.

Daren casually wiped sweat from his face and said,

"If you want a more focused impact, maybe finger strikes would work better..."

That was the principle behind Shigan, one of the Rokushiki.

"Finger strikes, huh..."

Dragon muttered as if a thought had clicked.

"That's it!! Hahaha!! Daren, you're a genius!"

He suddenly slapped his thigh and burst out laughing.

Daren could swear he actually saw a lightbulb flash above Dragon's head.

Dragon raised his right hand.

He awkwardly formed a strange hand gesture—index and middle fingers together, ring and pinky fingers together, knuckles slightly bent, forming what looked like a claw.

The moment Daren saw it, his pupils shrank. A wave of shock surged through his chest.

That gesture... could it be...?

"Using the fingers... Yeah. The thumb alone has power. Combine index and middle fingers, ring and pinky—this reinforces the joints and makes it easier to channel Armament Haki..."

Dragon muttered in a trance, then suddenly slashed his clawed hand toward the deck.

"Wait!!"

Daren's face changed. He swiftly grabbed Dragon's wrist, shifting the force to the side.

Caught off guard, Dragon's claw landed squarely on Daren's upper arm.

In that instant—

It felt like something in the air snapped.

A line of blood arced through the air.

Dragon stared in disbelief at the shallow wound on Daren's arm.

"Did... did I break through?"

He had only been testing the motion, not even using full strength—and yet, he'd pierced Daren's defenses?

That... didn't seem possible...

Daren rolled his eyes.

"If you'd hit the deck with that, the whole ship might've been torn apart."

Dragon blinked, then scratched his head with an embarrassed grin.

"Uh... sorry, Daren."

Daren waved it off. It was just a scratch—it'd scab over in minutes.

But in his mind, chaos reigned.

That technique...

That claw strike...

No doubt about it—that was Ryusoken!

The powerful technique he'd pass on to Sabo one day—the one that would shake the arena in Dressrosa—Ryusoken!!

Sure, it was crude right now, but unmistakable.

In under half an hour of sparring... Dragon had already created this move?!

Truly... the protagonist's father.

Daren rubbed his temples, exasperated.

Wait a second.

He glanced at Dragon's dumb grin—and a terrifying thought hit him.

Had he... just become Kaidou-sensei!?

"Hahahaha! Daren, seriously, thank you. I never expected to come up with a brand-new technique just from sparring with you!"

Dragon laughed loudly.

"When I've refined it more, I'll teach it to you as thanks."

"So... what do you think I should call it?"

Daren resisted the urge to retort and muttered,

"Let's just go with Ryusoken."

"Ryusoken... Ryusoken! Hahaha! That's a perfect name!"

Dragon threw an arm around Daren's shoulders, still grinning.

"Brrrr... brrrr..."

Suddenly, the Den Den Mushi buzzed to life.

Dragon quickly picked it up and answered.

"This is Dragon."

A deep, cold voice came through, carrying a weight of authority.

"This is Kong."

"Marshal Kong!"

Dragon instantly sat up straight, expression turning serious.

"Report your current sea location," Kong ordered, sharp and direct.

Dragon scratched his head and instinctively looked at Daren.

Daren twitched slightly and whispered,

"We're just about to leave the North Blue and enter the Grand Line."

Dragon repeated the same to the Den Den Mushi.

Kong paused.

"Good. I'm assigning you an urgent mission."

"First, drop off the North Blue officers nearby. Then proceed to the Grand Line at top speed."

"You'll receive coordinates for the island shortly."

Dragon glanced at Daren and asked,

"Marshal Kong, what's the mission?"

There was another moment of silence.

"Coordinate with Vice Admiral Garp of Marine Headquarters to seal off the target area... and arrest Gol D. Roger."

Chapter 108: Volume 2 – Chapter 10: Got a Problem with That? Daren

Arrest... Gol D. Roger!?

As soon as Fleet Admiral Kong's words came through the military Den Den Mushi, the Marines present were all visibly shocked, their expressions changing dramatically.

Gol D. Roger.

A man who stood at the very pinnacle of the seas. Alongside Whitebeard and Shiki the Golden Lion, he was hailed as one of the "Three Legendary Pirates."

Unlike Shiki and Whitebeard, Roger didn't command a massive pirate fleet. His crew was small—but every single one of them was a powerhouse known across the seas. The Roger Pirates were the most well-balanced, ironclad crew among the three legendary crews.

"You all heard that, right?"

Dragon ended the call, the easy smile gone from his face. In its place was a deep, heavy seriousness.

"Where's the nearest island?" he asked the navigator.

The navigator saluted.

"Reporting, Rear Admiral Dragon. About half an hour northeast, there's a small resupply island along the route."

Dragon nodded.

"Set course immediately. This is a direct order from Headquarters. You two don't have any objections, right?"

He looked toward Gion and Tokikake.

When Dragon got serious, the air around him changed. There was no trace of the goofy man from earlier—only undeniable authority.

Gion and Tokikake exchanged glances and shook their heads in silence.

Never mind that it was a direct order from Fleet Admiral Kong—putting that aside, Gol D. Roger was not someone they could handle right now.

They both knew that all too well.

Rushing in blindly would be nothing short of suicide.

In fact, within the Marines, there was an unspoken rule regarding pirates of Roger, Shiki, and Whitebeard's level:

Only Admirals or equivalent-level forces were authorized to engage Great Pirates.

For anyone below that level, if they happened to encounter someone like Roger at sea without orders, the accepted response was to avoid engagement and report it immediately—there would be no punishment.

This was to avoid unnecessary casualties.

"What about you, Daren?"

Dragon turned to the Commodore, eyes sharp.

"You might've fought the 'World Destroyer' Byrnni World and survived, but you should know—his death in the North Blue had a lot to do with luck."

"This time is different. The World Pirates were carried by Byrnni alone. But the Roger Pirates? They're full of monsters."

Gion and Tokikake nodded in agreement, their eyes falling on Daren.

But when they saw how strangely calm his face was, both of them felt a growing sense of unease.

"It's definitely dangerous,"

Daren unexpectedly agreed, nodding in response.

But just as the two of them started to relax, he suddenly smiled.

The corner of his mouth curled upward—and the more he smiled, the more intense the bloodlust in his eyes became.

"But I still want to go."

"—Are you insane!?"

Gion and Tokikake shouted in unison.

A chill ran up their spines, freezing them to the core.

It wasn't that they didn't understand the danger.

They knew Daren too well.

Once this guy made up his mind, nothing—no person, no reason—could change it.

"Hey, hey, Daren. We're talking about Gol D. Roger! This isn't some North Blue rookie pirate... Byrnni World might've been strong, but he's nowhere near Roger's level!"

Tokikake stepped closer, lowering his voice with urgency.

"Oh?" Daren raised an eyebrow.

Gion, cold sweat running down her face, also spoke quietly.

"There are things you don't know... but right now, Roger isn't someone we can deal with."

She bit her lip.

"Have you heard of the God Valley Incident?"

Gion and Tokikake weren't like the rest of the crew.

They knew better than anyone what the name Gol D. Roger really meant.

Extreme danger.

And all that terror stemmed from a single place—

God Valley.

Although the World Government and Marine leadership had jointly ordered a complete blackout of all information related to the battle, intending to bury it in history, given Gion and Tokikake's backgrounds and talent, they had learned bits and pieces of what had really happened.

"The God Valley Incident took place eight years ago. Before that battle, there was a name that made both the World Government and the Marines tremble."

"—Rocks D. Xebec."

Gion exchanged a glance with Dragon. When he didn't stop her, she continued.

"The Rocks ruled the seas more than a decade ago. With his overwhelming strength and ambition, he recruited a terrifying crew."

"It's said that Whitebeard, Shiki the Golden Lion, Kaidou, and Big Mom... were all once under the Rocks Pirates."

"As his power grew, so did his ambition. Determined to become the king of the world, he turned against the World Government and, eight years ago, launched a brutal assault on the Celestial Dragons' territory."

"That's when the God Valley War broke out. Facing the full force of the Rocks Pirates, the Marines assembled their own elite forces—and temporarily allied with a rising star of that era: Roger."

"Vice Admiral Garp joined forces with Roger. Together, they ended Rocks' ambitions in a battle that earned Garp the title of 'Hero'..."

"So now do you understand? Roger's strength is on a whole different level. He's the most dangerous enemy recognized by Marine Headquarters."

Gion knew Daren's reckless personality too well, and she had no choice but to speak up. Her expression was filled with concern.

She wasn't afraid of dying in the name of justice—but dying needlessly when you knew you couldn't win? That was pointless.

Even if she was always gritting her teeth over Daren being a "Marine disgrace," she couldn't stand by and watch him walk into a death trap.

"Well, you all make good points,"

Daren grinned.

"But now that you've said all that... I want to go even more."

Gion froze.

Tokikake buried his face in his hands in despair.

Chapter 109: Volume 2 – Chapter 11: Confronting the Pirate King

"Crap... totally forgot about that..."

Tokikake clutched his head, his face twitching uncontrollably.

"Are you a child!?"

Gion snapped, gritting her teeth as she glared at Daren.

Daren just shrugged, ignoring the two of them. He turned to Dragon and smiled.

"Rear Admiral Dragon, you can drop Lieutenant Commanders Gion and Tokikake off at the nearest island. But I've decided—I'm staying on this ship. It's my personal decision and has nothing to do with anyone else. If anything happens, I'll take full responsibility."

Dragon frowned, his tone serious.

"Are you sure about this, Daren?"

"This isn't a game. If battle breaks out—and in a situation that intense—I can't guarantee your safety."

"I'm sure," Daren replied with a grin.

"Besides, Rear Admiral Dragon, you know just as well as I do... even if you threw me off onto some island, I'd still make it to the battlefield."

"I can fly."

Dragon stared at him deeply, his brows furrowing even tighter.

Gion and Tokikake were practically holding their breath, eyes fixed on Dragon, hoping he could talk this lunatic down.

One second...

Two seconds...

Three seconds...

"Hahahahaha!! Good!! Daren, you really are a man I can respect!"

To Gion and Tokikake's utter shock, the once-silent Dragon suddenly threw an arm around Daren's shoulders and burst into hearty laughter.

His face lit up with excitement, and he cracked his knuckles loudly, enthusiasm surging.

"Well then... let's go take down that Roger guy!"

That expression... it looked way too much like a certain infamous Vice Admiral.

Gion's face went stiff with exasperation.

Tokikake groaned and buried his face in his hands.

"Crap... forgot about that too..."

Dragon chuckled at the two of them.

"Alright, I'll drop you both off at the nearby island. You can send up a signal—nearby naval forces will send a warship to pick you up."

"No need!" Gion hissed, her jaw clenched so tight her teeth were grinding.

"Oh?"

Amusement flickered in Daren's eyes.

Tokikake clenched his fists, eyes red as he growled,

"We're going too!"

Now that Daren had said it, could they really back out?

Marines weren't cowards!

Tokikake glared at Daren with gritted teeth and muttered bitterly,

"I knew it... this genius is definitely gonna die because of you, you bastard!"

"Hahahahaha!!"

Dragon laughed again and waved his arm.

"In that case... full speed ahead!"

The warship immediately changed course, accelerating toward the coordinates provided by Headquarters.

With the sea breeze whipping across the deck, Daren's eyes burned with battlelust, nearly crazed in intensity. His cape billowed violently behind him.

Gol D. Roger—the Pirate King!

How could he not go?

...

Two hours later.

The Grand Line.

"Genkotsu Ryuseigun!!"

Countless cannonballs traced dark arcs across the sky, roaring toward the fast-moving Oro Jackson.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

Jets of seawater erupted around the pirate ship, towering skyward.

Blazing red explosions lit the air, followed by plumes of black smoke.

"Roger!! Don't run!! This time I will take you down!!"

At the bow of the dog-headed warship, Garp, sleeves rolled up and wearing his signature silly hat, howled with rage. His arms spun like windmills as he hurled cannonball after cannonball with terrifying force.

"Then stop chasing me already, Garp!! This has gone on long enough!! You've been at this for three whole days and nights!! You maniac! Don't you ever get tired!?"

From the distant pirate ship, Roger's annoyed voice shouted back.

On deck, the Marines were scrambling in a frenzy, drenched in sweat.

They were hauling cannonballs from the hold and lining them up on a custom conveyor system.

Black shells rolled down the line like clockwork, continuously feeding into Garp's relentless barrage.

Garp's adjutant, wearing a brown cap and with a saber at his waist, stood sharply at attention, eyes constantly sweeping the scene.

He watched as the pirate ship rocked in the waves and explosions, the distance between them slowly widening. His mind raced.

The Oro Jackson was made from the core of the Treasure Tree Adam—an extremely rare, unbelievably durable, and incredibly lightweight material.

It was, hands down, the finest shipbuilding material in the world.

Because of that, Roger's ship could outpace even the fastest Marine warships.

This was one of the key reasons Vice Admiral Garp had failed to capture Roger so many times in the past.

We need more speed—fast!

Even with Garp's bombardment slowing them down, it wouldn't be long before the Oro Jackson slipped out of sight.

The adjutant pressed down on his cap and scanned the warship. His sharp eyes quickly landed on the heavy cannons.

They lit up.

The ship had five heavy cannons. If they dumped those, along with some unnecessary provisions, they could boost their speed by at least 30%!

Headquarters had already confirmed reinforcements were en route. Rear Admiral Dragon—Garp's son—was on his way.

Until then, he couldn't allow the Roger Pirates to escape.

"Quick! Dump all the heavy artillery into the sea—now!"

The adjutant gave the order without hesitation.

"But... without the cannons, how are we supposed to bombard—"

A young Marine started to speak, but immediately shut up as every other soldier looked at him like he was an idiot.

Realizing his blunder, he blushed and rushed to dismantle the guns.

"We have to keep on them!"

The adjutant clenched his fists, staring hard at the pirate ship.

As long as they held out until reinforcements arrived, Dragon alone would be enough to force Roger's ship to stop.

Then they could launch a pincer attack from both sides—finally cornering the infamous Gol D. Roger and bringing the Pirate King to his knees.

...

Chapter 110: Volume 2 – Chapter 12: The Battle Begins – Roger's Crew

Rumble...

A cannonball crashed down, exploding against the left side of the ship. The shockwave sent the Oro Jackson tilting to one side as seawater sprayed into the sky and came pouring down onto the deck.

"This is such a headache..."

Roger wiped the seawater from his face. Behind him, his scarlet captain's coat flared wildly in the gusts from the blast.

Despite what he said, a relaxed smile played on his face.

"Rayleigh, what do you say we just settle this with Garp right here?"

His eyes flicked around, then turned to Rayleigh. He flashed a grin, revealing neat, white teeth.

"The Marines ditched their supplies—we're not going to shake them off."

Rayleigh, his hair still a light golden blond and exuding a charming presence, twitched his lips helplessly.

"Garp's still got a long way to go before he catches up to us."

"You just want to fight, don't you?"

Caught red-handed, Roger scratched his head and laughed.

"What else can we do? That bastard Garp's been chasing us for three days and nights—we haven't gotten a wink of sleep!"

He gestured toward the worn-out Shanks and Buggy. Both kids held tiny daggers, watching the distant Marine warship with wide, tired eyes. The bags under their eyes looked like they'd been punched in the face.

"If this keeps up, we old folks will be fine, but those two are hitting their limit."

Rayleigh frowned at Roger's words and took a moment to think.

It was true—for someone like him, fighting for ten days and nights wouldn't be a problem.

But Shanks and Buggy were still young. Staying awake and alert for three days was already pushing them to the brink.

"I'm fine!! Captain Roger!! I can still hang in there! Not a problem at all!!"

Suddenly, Shanks stomped forward with determination. He bit his tongue to jolt himself awake, fighting the crushing wave of exhaustion.

"Right, Buggy!?"

He turned to the barely-standing Buggy beside him.

Buggy forced open his heavy eyelids, grumbled, and rolled his eyes.

"Yes, yes, yes..."

Like I can say no after that.

Suddenly, a high-pitched hum rang out overhead. From the smoke-filled sky, more black cannonballs rained down—dense and endless, like a storm covering the sky, bearing down on the Oro Jackson.

"Roger!! You won't escape!!"

Garp's roar echoed from the distant warship.

"You're so damn loud, Garp!!"

Roger snapped back, clearly irritated.

At his side, Rayleigh gripped the hilt of his sword at his waist and leapt into the air with agile grace.

In an instant, he was airborne.

Clang!

His blade flashed out—a dazzling burst of steel like a glittering galaxy. The sword's brilliant arc unleashed a roaring whirlwind of slashing force, weaving into a spiraling tornado of sword energy that surged skyward.

The blade storm engulfed the descending barrage of cannonfire.

Countless sharp cuts danced across the shell casings—then, all at once, over a hundred shells exploded midair!

Boom!!

Massive fireballs lit up the gloomy sky. The orange-red explosions painted the heavens crimson, like a grand fireworks show.

Just as Garp was deeply familiar with the Roger Pirates, the crew had long mastered ways to handle the Marines' large-scale bombardments.

As long as the ship's hull was intact, they could always find a path to escape—even from a full-on naval encirclement.

"This never ends..."

Rayleigh landed steadily, but just as he spoke, his expression shifted.

Crack—

A faint pop came from the mast of the Oro Jackson. The forward-leaning sail suddenly collapsed backward.

The golden, curly-mustached skull emblem twisted out of shape.

Rayleigh's face darkened.

"What the...?"

Whooooosh...

A sudden, fierce wind swept through.

The sea roared as massive waves surged and howled.

Caught in the gust, the Oro Jackson's speed plummeted.

"What's going on!?"

"The wind's changed!?"

"No way!"

"Spencer! What's causing this!?"

All eyes turned to the navigator, Spencer. Clinging tightly to the sail rope, his high ponytail whipped in the wind. His usually composed face was tense with worry.

"This wind isn't natural! It has nothing to do with weather patterns!!"

At his words, everyone's pupils narrowed.

If the wind wasn't caused by climate changes... then it could only be man-made.

Could it be...

Rayleigh seemed to realize something. He let out a sigh and spoke in a low voice,

"Everyone, prepare for battle."

The crew froze for a beat before springing into action.

No one wasted words—they grabbed their weapons and moved into position, eyes sharp with rising battle spirit.

Rayleigh looked at Roger and gave a weary smile.

"You really did it this time... there's no running now."

Roger blinked in surprise, then activated his Observation Haki. His eyes quickly lit up with excitement.

Rayleigh narrowed his gaze and turned toward the sea beyond the bow.

Waves whipped into towering peaks, churning like sea dragons.

Amid the raging waters, a colossal Marine warship surged forward at full speed, cutting through the waves with overwhelming force.

The bold, black kanji for "Justice" blazed on the ship's massive white sail, glaring and unyielding.

"Garp's reinforcements... have arrived,"

Rayleigh muttered.

As he spoke, two tall figures slowly emerged on the warship's prow.

Their pristine white cloaks flared behind them in the wind. Rayleigh could feel their fierce, heavy presence through his Observation Haki—they stood there, silently staring down the Oro Jackson with sharp, defiant eyes.

"That kid... looks like Garp's son?"

Rayleigh furrowed his brows, his grip on the sword tightening.

Splash...

The sea roared.

Through narrowed eyes, Rayleigh watched as a young man with long black hair—Dragon—grinned at them across the distance.

He stepped forward and raised a flat palm.

A dark green wind orb rapidly gathered in his hand, clearly visible even from afar.

Then—

He hurled it with force!

The wind orb flew through the air, swelling rapidly mid-flight.

It stretched, twisted, expanded, and spun—morphing as it traveled.

In just seconds, it transformed into a massive sea tornado, spiraling skyward from sea to sky!

"Hurricane: Grand Funeral!"