

One Piece 111

Chapter 111: Volume 2 – Chapter 13: Now You Can't Run Even If You Want To

The sea roared with fury.

A colossal tornado, rapidly expanding and nearly linking the sea to the sky, churned with howling winds and crashing waves, splitting open the turbulent waters with a deafening roar.

From afar, the violent currents twisted the black clouds above into a massive vortex that blanketed the sky, like a collapsing wall of darkness pressing down with an indescribable sense of dread.

To the Roger Pirates, it felt as if the storm itself was distorting the very fabric of space around them.

"What is that!? A power that controls the weather!? That's impossible!!"

"No, it's a Logia-type! The power to control storms!!"

"Damn it! A tornado like that—even grazing it would swallow our ship whole in an instant!"

"..."

Panic washed over the crew. None of them had imagined that the Marines possessed such a terrifying Devil Fruit ability.

The towering twister tore through everything in its path, churning the sea into towering waves that crushed all hope.

"No... Even a Logia shouldn't be able to alter the environment on such a massive scale... Not in such a short time!"

Spencer, the navigator, wiped seawater from his face, his soaked body trembling as he gripped the sail rope with one hand.

Staring at the sea twister barreling toward the Oro Jackson at over 30 knots, he gritted his teeth.

"It's just... this area happened to form a massive cumulonimbus system. With the tropical airflow driving it, his Devil Fruit power is being massively amplified!"

Blinding lightning danced through the dark clouds, the sky erupting with flashes that lit up every anxious face.

"Hahahaha!! Roger, this time, you're not getting away!!"

The sound of cannon fire continued rumbling from behind, mixed with Garp's triumphant laughter.

Shells rained down from the sky, forcing the Roger Pirates into constant motion.

"AAAAHH! We're done for!! We're really going to die this time, Captain Roger!!"

Buggy clutched his head in agony.

Shanks's face was pale too, his small hands gripping his knife trembling.

A storm like a bottomless abyss loomed ahead, and behind them, the terrifying might of the Marines—stronger than even the storm. They were completely trapped.

This was an inescapable crisis.

At that moment, every crew member couldn't help but turn toward their captain.

Whether from the sea's chill or the fear in their hearts, all color had drained from their faces.

But their eyes never wavered.

The storm poured down, washing over the deck and their bodies.

Thunder crackled overhead, Roger's silhouette flickering in and out of view.

The cannon fire behind, the storm in front—both closing in.

Light and shadow twisted. It felt like the world itself was starting to fall apart.

Roger stood unmoving.

"Who said we were running?"

A grin tugged at the corner of his lips.

Rayleigh, leaning against the mast, chuckled at the words.

Bang!

Roger stomped onto the bow of the Oro Jackson and slowly reached for the hilt of the long blade at his waist.

He suddenly looked up, water flying from his dark hair, his gaze fierce and unyielding.

He smirked.

"Since there's no other choice..."

The future Pirate King, Gol D. Roger, stepped forward.

The wind billowed his crimson captain's coat as he leapt into the air like a flash of blood-red light.

His blade gleamed with raw power—black and red lightning arcing across its edge like a coiling serpent, erupting in a web of crackling energy that wrapped around him.

"Then I'll just crush you all!!!"

His black hair flared with the wind as he let out a wild, roaring laugh. His figure, defiant like a lone wolf, surged forward, blade trailing red-black lightning—straight into the towering tornado.

He dove headfirst into it!

For a moment, the world stood still—

Then—

Hiss!!

A roaring slash burst out like a crescent moon, slicing through the eye of the storm with unstoppable force, blasting skyward!

Boom!!!

The flying blade strike pierced the sky, detonating the clouds. Bolts of lightning twisted and exploded across the sky like a nest of writhing serpents.

Thunderclouds split and retreated under the sword's explosive shockwave before being shattered completely.

The storm vanished in an instant.

The chaotic battlefield became startlingly clear.

Rain poured down like curtains. Roger, clad in his blood-red coat, held his blade in one hand as an overwhelming aura surged around him like an abyss.

"Hahahahaha!! A tornado storm... that's it?"

"Captain Roger! Watch out!!"

"Above you!!"

Just as the shout rang out, a black-gloved hand lunged out from the swirling wind, wrapped in slicing hurricane winds, and came crashing down toward Roger's head!

The timing was flawless—striking in the gap after Roger's attack, leaving no room to dodge!

"I've been waiting for you, Garp's brat."

Roger grinned.

Dragon's face froze as he emerged from the wind.

"Compared to your old man... you're still too green!!"

A blood-red gleam flashed deep in Roger's eyes. Without even turning, he swung his sword.

Dragon's entire body went rigid.

There were no words to describe the sheer ferocity of that slash.

Savage.

Blinding.

Dominating.

A force that even gods and demons would flinch from—

The blade, wrapped in crackling black and red lightning,

Sliced upward!

The screaming winds collapsed before its force, shattered to pieces.

Dragon's pupils shrank. A frigid dread pierced into his heart like he'd fallen into an ice cavern.

Block it!

Ink-black Armament Haki wrapped around his hand.

Clang!!

A sharp ringing filled the air.

Blocked!

Joy flickered in Dragon's heart—

But in the next instant, his expression crumbled.

"Shit! I still couldn't stop it!!"

He cursed.

Hiss!!

Blood burst from his chest in a crimson spray.

"Kamusari!!"

Boom!!

Dragon's body was flung back like it'd been hit by a speeding warship, blasting through the air and leaving white shockwaves in his wake.

Just then, writhing metal surged from the warship's deck, forming steel plates as buffers.

Dragon crashed through several thick slabs before smashing into the ship.

Bang!

The warship shook violently, a massive crater appearing in the deck as splinters flew.

Daren walked over to where Dragon lay embedded in the wood, gritting his teeth in pain. He smiled and extended a hand.

"Told you you couldn't block it. Now you owe me 100,000 Berry."

"Yeah, yeah... Put it on my tab."

Dragon grumbled as he grabbed Daren's hand and pulled himself free, coughing up blood.

"Looks like we really have to leave this to the old man..."

He glanced down at the gash across his chest and muttered.

Daren chuckled, his eyes falling on the Oro Jackson, now within striking distance.

"But your mission's complete."

A gleam flashed in his gaze.

Then, to the shocked gasps and disbelieving eyes of the Roger Pirates—

The Oro Jackson's sail suddenly tore down the middle... and slowly fell.

As the fabric flapped to the deck, a dagger came into view.

It hovered in the air, blade tip gleaming with a cold light, giving the crew a subtle "nod."

Like a knight returning victorious, bowing with elegant scorn.

Mockery at its finest.

The Roger Pirates' faces turned pale.

"Now... you can't run even if you want to."

Daren's lips curled into a cold, twisted smile.

Purple arcs of electricity danced around his raised index finger.

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Chapter 112: Volume 2 – Chapter 14: Even More Ruthless

"The sail... it's been torn..."

"When did that happen!?"

"How is that even possible!?"

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Aboard the Oro Jackson, the members of Roger's pirate crew stared in disbelief at the sail slowly drooping onto the deck. Their eyes were fixed on the golden wave-bearded skull emblem, now cleanly sliced down the middle. A chill ran up their spines.

Unlike Marine warships equipped with power systems, most pirate ships at sea relied solely on sails and had no engines. These sailing vessels depended on the wind to move, using paddles or oars only for maneuvering during calm winds or while docking and departing.

If a mast or sail was destroyed, the ship would instantly lose its ability to sail. That's why, in most naval battles, the mast and sail were always the crew's top priority to protect.

But now, their sail had been cut—by a dagger that had come out of nowhere.

It was unbelievable.

"My dagger!?"

Suddenly, Buggy shrieked, pointing at the blade with a trembling hand.

"How did it end up there!?"

Everyone froze.

Earlier, under the pressure of the storm, with supplies flying everywhere and the ship nearly coming apart, no one had noticed a single dagger getting swept up in the chaos.

Now they were all staring at it—hovering in midair, giving them a mocking, almost polite bow.

"Why is the dagger moving on its own?"

"Could someone have infiltrated our ship?"

"No... I didn't sense any enemies with my Observation Haki!"

The Roger Pirates quickly regained their composure, faces grim.

"Rayleigh, what do you think?" Roger's expression was no better.

Rayleigh frowned.

Cannonfire continued to erupt across the nearby sea, sending plumes of fire and smoke skyward.

Garp's flagship was drawing dangerously close—less than a hundred meters away.

Suddenly, the hovering dagger began to tremble violently under the influence of some strange force field.

"It's moving!!"

"What the hell...?"

Whoosh!!

The dagger shot out like a silver streak, the air howling as it sliced forward. The sudden burst of speed created a deep, popping boom.

Its target... was an unassuming figure—

That red-haired kid in the straw hat!

"Shanks!!"

"Watch out!!"

Clang!!

A deafening hum rang out as a blast of wind engulfed Shanks.

He stood frozen in place, legs weak and unresponsive, his face pale, completely stunned by what had just happened.

A long blade had blocked the dagger just inches from piercing his forehead.

"First Mate Rayleigh..."

Shanks gulped hard, his throat dry and tight.

Rayleigh, holding the sword one-handed, narrowed his eyes and gestured with the other.

"Shanks, take Buggy and fall back. Watch each other."

With that, he slowly looked up, eyes narrowing with fury as he locked onto the approaching warship.

The trembling dagger suddenly reversed course and shot back in a straight line—landing neatly in the hand of the Marine Commodore.

"A fine trophy," Daren said, weighing the ruby-inlaid blade in his hand with a smile.

He glanced toward the red-haired boy.

Shanks, retreating with Buggy, suddenly froze. He looked up—and locked eyes with him.

That cold, cruel, untamed gaze...

The same icy chill from before surged through him again. Even under the protection of his crewmates, he felt as if death itself was wrapping around him. His body turned to ice.

In front of this man, it felt like his life could be snuffed out at any moment.

"So... it's not going to be that easy, huh..." Daren murmured, letting out a dry chuckle as he looked away.

Taking a shot at Shanks—the future Yonkō—was more of a probe.

Because if they just let this brat grow up unchecked, he'd definitely become a huge problem someday.

Of course, Daren hadn't expected it to work.

Cutting the sails amidst the chaos of the storm and Dragon's distraction was one thing.

But trying to kill Shanks, the "favorite" of the Roger Pirates? That was something else entirely.

"So it was you who cut the sail."

Rayleigh lowered his sword, his eyes sharp as he stared straight at Daren.

"But really... the so-called 'King of the North Blue,' the Marine Supernova who took down 'World Breaker' Byrnni World—this is all the guts you've got? Going after a kid?"

Roger also raised his sword, black and red lightning crackling around the blade, glaring at Daren.

Anyone who dared hurt his crewmates...

Would never be forgiven.

Under their gaze, Daren felt an overwhelming pressure crash down on him—as if the sky was collapsing and the sea splitting apart.

Through his biofield perception, the energy radiating from these two was unlike anything he'd ever encountered.

It felt like two massive shadows from the depths of a dark, twisted sea had slowly opened their blood-red eyes—and were now locked onto him.

As Rayleigh's low voice faded, every crew member on the Oro Jackson turned to glare at Daren, their faces filled with fury.

A thick, tangible killing intent radiated from them all.

The wind and waves across the sea stilled, subdued by the suffocating tension.

"Guts? Sure, I've got that."

Daren's lips twisted into a cruel grin.

"But pirates don't deserve it."

"And as for attacking a child... your Captain Roger didn't hesitate when he wiped out an entire country's military force over a crewmate who'd been insulted."

As soon as the words left his mouth, a wave of furious shouts crashed over him.

"That's bullshit!!"

"Captain Roger would never lay a hand on a child!!"

"Filthy Marine!!"

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Every pair of eyes stared daggers at the Marine Commodore, their hatred burning.

Dragon stepped forward, taking a place beside Daren to share the mounting pressure.

Seeing this, the Marines behind them—Gion, Tokikake, and the others—also stepped forward, drawing the swords at their waists.

The sharp sound of blades leaving their scabbards echoed across the ship. Tensions were boiling over.

"...Alright, maybe I misspoke."

Daren raised both hands in mock surrender, smirking at the crew of the Oro Jackson.

"You didn't lay a hand on the children."

He snapped his fingers.

Behind him, the deck of the Marine warship began to tremble. Countless bullets and cannon barrels floated upward, forming a dense, menacing array in the air.

"But you did slaughter the fathers they had serving in the military."

"And that..."

Daren grinned viciously, dripping with scorn.

"...is even more ruthless."

Chapter 113: Volume 2 – Chapter 15: Connecting the Ropes

"To be honest, killing those children who lost their fathers might've been more merciful."

The taunting voice of the Marine Commodore drifted through the freezing sea breeze like sharp daggers, stabbing deep into everyone's hearts.

The expressions on the Roger Pirates' faces shifted slightly.

They hadn't taken to the seas out of greed or selfish ambition like most pirates. They had followed Roger because of his charisma and vision, willingly venturing across the ocean in pursuit of freedom and purpose.

Even plundering and looting were rare for the Roger Pirates.

But on this journey of passion, vengeance, and romantic freedom...

In the thrill of swinging a sword and the bloodshed of battle...

How often did they stop to think about the consequences each strike left behind?

"So what are you getting at, Marine brat?"

Rayleigh, sensing the subtle change in his crewmates' expressions, coldly cut Daren off.

Daren shrugged, arms spread.

"What I mean is, once you take up weapons and fly the pirate flag, don't talk to me about compassion."

"That red-haired brat who follows you—his hands are far from clean. As far as I'm concerned..."

He sneered, waving his hand.

"He's no clueless, innocent child!"

The moment his words dropped, all the bullets and cannonballs suspended in midair screamed forward at breakneck speed, raining down on the Oro Jackson, now dead in the water without its sails.

"You bastard!!"

Roger roared, slashing into the wind.

A spiraling wave of sword energy burst forth, sweeping up the incoming shells like a massive tornado.

Boom!!

Explosions lit up the overcast sky one after another, thick black smoke billowing upward.

Scorching winds surged across the sea, rocking both the pirate ship and the Marine warship.

Suddenly, the smoke twisted—

And in the next instant—

Roger's unstoppable form tore through it, his blood-red captain's coat billowing behind him, his eyes glowing crimson.

Crack!!

A bolt of blinding white lightning split the stormy sky, illuminating Roger's fierce, domineering face.

He soared high, streaking toward Daren, who stood on the bow of the warship.

A terrifying aura erupted from his body like a mountain crashing down or an abyss rising up.

The Marines below turned pale under the crushing pressure, their breathing caught in their throats.

Roger's overwhelming presence was monstrous—just facing it was enough to paralyze their limbs.

"He's like a demon god!"

Tokikake gritted his teeth, his chest tight with pressure.

Gion gripped her sword with both hands, her face pale as paper.

Daren, the target of that Conqueror's Haki, felt his pupils contract.

The pressure hit him like a warhammer, choking his throat and rattling his ribs.

Instinctively, Daren tried to release his own Conqueror's Haki to resist—but to his shock, it was completely suppressed.

A suffocating darkness pressed in, squeezing every breath.

Yet Daren still grinned.

"I'm not your opponent."

Roger froze.

"Your opponent is me!!"

A deep roar thundered from above.

Through smoke and wind, a flash of white surged into view.

A burly figure in a dog-head Marine cap appeared ghost-like above Roger. A massive fist came crashing down like a meteor, smashing straight into Roger's face!

Blue Hole!!"

Boom!!

Roger crashed down like a cannonball, slamming into the pirate ship and smashing a hole into the deck.

The impact was so immense, the entire Oro Jackson sank halfway, waves exploding outward.

"Dammit... Garp, you're such a pain!"

Roger rose from the shattered deck, sword in hand, wiping the blood from the corner of his mouth as he looked up at the Marine Vice Admiral standing confidently on the bow, arms folded.

"Hahahaha! Roger, there's no way I'm letting you take that kid out."

Seeing Roger's mouth swell and bruise, Garp felt the fatigue of three days and nights vanish, replaced by sheer satisfaction.

That felt good!

He turned to Daren, slapping him on the shoulder with a hearty laugh.

"So, you're Daren, huh? Not bad!"

"Your methods are shady, and you've got a dirty heart... but I like that! Hahahaha!"

Garp had seen everything—how Daren had taken advantage of the chaos to sabotage the sail.

And honestly, just the fact that he provoked Roger enough to create an opening for Garp to land a punch was worth praise.

Now that the Oro Jackson's sail was destroyed, escape was no longer an option.

With that in mind, Garp's gaze toward Daren grew increasingly satisfied.

This kid's got potential... Maybe once he graduates from the academy, I'll bring him in as my adjutant?

The thought started to take root in Garp's mind.

"What about me, old man!? I almost flipped their ship! I blocked a slash from Gol D. Roger!!"

Nearby, Dragon couldn't help blurting it out as he saw Garp focusing all his attention on Daren. He puffed out his chest proudly, like a kid begging for praise after acing a test.

"You?"

Garp raised a brow, lazily picking his nose.

"Yeah, you did okay—but you're too reckless."

He tapped his head.

"When you're fighting, you've gotta use your brain. How many times have I told you? Learn from Daren, would you?"

Everyone: ...

Dragon froze, utterly stunned.

Even Gion and Tokikake could almost hear his heart shattering.

Unbothered, Garp turned around, cracking his knuckles with a sound like popping beans, and grinned at the Roger Pirates.

"Alright then... time for a real fight!"

Boom!

Even as the words left his mouth, Garp's dog-head warship rammed into the Oro Jackson from behind.

The Roger Pirates' faces darkened.

Dozens of hook-laced ropes flew from the warship, latching onto the pirate ship's rails and anchoring tightly.

"Connect the ropes!!"

On Garp's ship, a brown-hatted lieutenant drew his sword and roared.

Clang, clang, clang!!

Hundreds of sabers were drawn, gleaming cold under the flickering stormlight.

Gunfire rang out.

Elite, well-trained Marines climbed the ropes under cover fire, charging toward the Oro Jackson.

Boarding battle—imminent!

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Chapter 114: Volume 2 – Chapter 16: Clash of the Strongest

"Kill!!!"

"For justice!!"

"Take down the Roger Pirates!!"

"..."

With deafening cries of fury, the Marines surged forward, ropes in hand, fearlessly scaling the sides of the Oro Jackson.

Several officers, having mastered the Rokushiki technique Geppo, led the charge by leaping through the air, stepping on the sky itself, providing cover for their comrades below.

Only the finest elites from Marine Headquarters were qualified to fight alongside Garp. Their strength was formidable—even by New World standards.

They knew all too well: under normal circumstances, the most efficient way to crush pirates with minimal casualties was to unleash overwhelming firepower and eliminate the enemy from a distance.

But against a crew like the Roger Pirates—with perfectly balanced combat strength—cannons were nearly useless.

If they wanted to take them down for real, they had to board!

Charge their ship with blood and steel and engage in brutal close-quarters combat!

More critically... in order to push their warships faster and keep up with Roger's crew, the Marines had already jettisoned all their heavy cannons into the sea!

"Repel them!! Don't let them board!"

Rayleigh's expression shifted slightly as he shouted.

Just as he was about to act, a sharp screech sliced through the air behind him.

A streak of crimson light flashed in his eyes—he whipped around and slashed.

A dazzling blade of light arced like a silver moon.

Clang! Clang! Clang!

Several dark green wind blades were cleanly deflected, scattering into the sea and slicing through the water's surface like razors before the waves closed back in.

"Dark King Silvers Rayleigh! Keep your eyes forward!"

A violent gale tore down from above as a gloved "dragon claw" burst from the wind, slashing straight for Rayleigh's face!

Tiny wind blades spiraled around the three-fingered claw, their force so fierce they tore three long white gashes in the air itself.

Boom!!!

A massive shockwave erupted, forcing the nearby Roger Pirates to fall back, raising their arms to shield themselves from the impact.

In the midst of the twisting storm, Dragon's figure emerged—though a flicker of surprise passed across his face.

An index finger, coated in jet-black Armament Haki, was firmly pressed against his Dragon Claw.

"Not bad, junior Marine."

"Garp must be proud to have such a talented son," Rayleigh said coolly, swinging his sword down without hesitation.

"Proud, my ass!"

Dragon cursed as his body dissolved into a gust of raging wind, dodging Rayleigh's strike.

His form kept shifting into wind itself—unpredictable and agile—twisting around Rayleigh from every angle, launching attacks from all directions.

In a straight fight, Dragon couldn't win. His current power still wasn't enough to take on Rayleigh, the Vice-Captain of the Roger Pirates—one of the most fearsome pirates on the seas.

But that didn't matter. All he needed to do was hold Rayleigh back, buy the Marines time to board. That was enough!

Rayleigh, surrounded by swirling gales, was forced on the defensive, blocking Dragon's flurry of attacks with his sword. His brows furrowed tighter—he instantly saw through Dragon's plan.

Crafty kid... using his head in battle? That's not like Garp at all.

"Gaban! It's yours! Get ready!" he barked.

"Already preparing!" came a deep, hoarse voice from outside the hurricane.

In less than ten seconds since Dragon made his move, over a dozen Marines had already boarded the Oro Jackson and clashed with its crew.

In an instant, the deck erupted in chaos—shouts of war, the clash of steel, and the roar of combat filled the air.

"Ha ha ha ha!! With me, men!!"

At the bow of the warship, Garp burst into laughter. His presence surged like a towering mountain, his eyes locked onto Roger, who stood on the bow of the Oro Jackson.

Their battle-hardened gazes met across the gap between ships, clashing like lightning in the void.

In that moment, there was no one else. Only the two of them existed.

"Vice Admiral Garp, I believe our top priority should be to sink Roger's ship. That would give us the upper hand," Daren said quietly, narrowing his eyes as he assessed the battlefield.

From his vantage point, Garp's ship had already locked onto the Oro Jackson. More and more Marines were boarding, and fierce fighting had broken out across the deck.

"Leave that to you. You can command this warship too."

"I finally cornered that bastard Roger... This time, I'm going all out!"

Garp laughed heartily and, without another word, stomped down on the ship's bow—cracking it underfoot—before blasting into the air like a cannonball toward Roger.

Several veins popped on Daren's forehead.

What a reckless brute!

He couldn't help but curse inwardly.

But in the very next moment, the entire sea trembled.

"Roger!!"

"Garp!!"

With twin roars, two powerful figures—one in red, the other in white—leapt into the sky.

RUMBLE!!!

Thunder rolled across the dark heavens like a thousand electric serpents. Blinding flashes lit up the sky, and for an instant, the world turned to daylight.

Daren's heart pounded, his pupils narrowing.

Two immense and opposing auras surged skyward, colliding head-on.

The churning sea, the torrential downpour, the darkened world—

Everything slowed. Marines and pirates alike froze, their breaths caught.

Instinctively, they looked up—eyes wide in awe.

The two unstoppable titans burst through the storm like enraged gods, unleashing their Conqueror's Haki without restraint.

Black and red lightning crackled around drawn blades. Black-purple thunder coiled around massive iron fists.

A blood-red captain's coat. A pure white cloak of justice. Both whipped violently in the storm.

"Roger!!"

"Garp!!"

The two bellowed in unison, their auras surging to the peak.

Their attacks—launched simultaneously—descended!

"Galaxy Impact!!"

"Kamusari!!"

BOOM!!

A fist came crashing down. A sword came slashing through.

A vortex of pure Haki exploded between them—an orb of violent energy visible to the naked eye. With both men's full strength behind it, it swelled and contracted repeatedly, like a breathing beast.

Black lightning lashed out like a cage, twisting and dancing madly around them.

"Roger!!" Garp roared with laughter.

"Garp!!" Roger's black hair flew wildly.

At that moment, the entire world seemed to shake.

The sky collapsed in layers. Clouds were obliterated by shockwaves.

Waves soared hundreds of meters high. Warships and pirate vessels tossed like paper boats in the storm, on the verge of capsizing.

Gion, Tokikake, and the surrounding Marines were all struck by the shockwaves of Haki. They dropped to one knee, teeth clenched, barely hanging on. Weaker ones collapsed entirely, eyes rolling back as they passed out.

At the bow of the ship, Daren gripped the mast with pale knuckles, his eyes locked on the sky above—afraid to miss a single detail. Deep within his gaze, flames of ambition and desire burned fiercely.

This was... a clash between the strongest in the world!

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Chapter 115: Volume 2 – Chapter 17: Magnetic Overload: Railgun

"A clash of top-tier Conqueror's Haki..."

An overwhelming pressure swept in. The piercing wind bore down on the warship, making its hull and deck creak under the strain as fine cracks began to form with sharp snapping sounds.

In Daren's eyes, the world seemed to tremble violently from the confrontation between the two men.

Space distorted, ripples spreading rapidly.

Everything in sight wavered like reflections on a lake.

"This... this is the peak of this sea!!"

Daren's lips curled into a wild grin as his body began to tremble.

His face was still a bit pale, but his eyes were burning brighter than ever.

As countless thoughts raced through his mind, the clash between Garp and Roger was reaching its climax.

The black and red aura compressed between iron fist and long blade to its absolute limit.

Then—

BOOM!!

A deafening roar, like thunder, erupted. The orb of black and red energy wrapped in lightning exploded, transforming into a massive shockwave that surged outward in all directions.

It was evenly matched.

The two retreated at the same time.

"Hahahaha!! Fighting you really is the most fun, Garp!!"

Roger laughed heartily, looking exhilarated.

"Don't be ridiculous!! I'm here to arrest you!!"

Garp roared, stomping through the air as he charged forward again.

Clang! Clang! Clang!

Their figures clashed again and again midair, each punch and blade strike sending out another burst of terrifying force.

Just then, a figure flashed in Roger's peripheral vision.

"Hm? That Marine brat... What's he up to?"

From the bow of the warship, Daren leapt into the air. Twisted metal instantly molded into a streamlined board beneath his feet, propelling him rapidly skyward.

Roger hesitated for a split second—

And in that instant, Garp appeared beside him like a meteor. His fist tore through the air and swung at Roger with savage force!

"Losing focus in a fight... Do you take me that lightly, Roger!?"

"Damn it!"

Roger cursed, drawing his sword just in time to block Garp's strike.

Clang!

Sparks burst out as Roger's face suddenly darkened.

He saw it—

That young Marine floating high above now had a coin in hand.

With a flick of his finger, the coin spun and flew upward.

That feeling...

Roger's heart clenched. A strange crimson light flared deep within his fierce eyes.

His expression shifted. As if through Observation Haki, he glimpsed a terrifying future.

"Stop that Marine brat, now!!"

His urgent shout snapped the Roger Pirates to attention. Instinctively, they looked up.

And then...

They all saw—

Rogers Daren, suspended high above, grinning menacingly.

He raised his hand.

Zzzzzzt...

Visible arcs of blue electricity crackled between his fingers.

Time seemed to slow.

The sky was pitch black, lightning flashing erratically through the clouds.

The spinning coin reflected off the shocked, confused, and slowly terrified faces of the pirates below.

Hovering above like a god, the Commodore looked down on the Oro Jackson.

—Until the spinning coin descended, stopping just before his palm.

"Sink into the sea."

He sneered.

A flick of his finger.

"Magnetic Overload: Railgun!!"

Before everyone—Marine and pirate alike—could react,

BOOM!!

A colossal pillar of orange-red light blasted from the Commodore's hand.

It lit up the sky, tore through the clouds, and sent waves of white shocklight rippling outward. The beam screamed downward, aimed directly at the Oro Jackson's hull with devastating intent.

"What the hell is that!?"

"A laser!?"

"You gotta be kidding me!!"

"..."

The scorching heatwave hit them before they could speak, stealing the breath from everyone aboard.

Rayleigh's face went pale.

The destructive power of that technique... If it landed, even the Oro Jackson—built from the legendary Treasure Tree Adam—would be pierced, melted, and sunk in seconds.

He was about to move—

But then, from behind, a chilling wind surged in.

Clang!

Rayleigh's blade barely caught Dragon's black dragon claw, sparks erupting.

"You left yourself wide open."

Panting, Dragon grinned.

Rayleigh froze.

"Gale Breath!"

BOOM!!

The explosive wind swallowed him whole.

"It's over..."

Buggy and Shanks, hiding by the cabin, muttered in terror.

In their eyes, the red beam loomed larger and larger with terrifying speed.

"We won't let you destroy our dream ship, damn Marine!!"

A furious roar rang out.

A massive figure burst from the cabin, twin axes in hand, and soared into the air.

The axes flashed with a blinding light as the man met the Railgun head-on without hesitation.

BOOM!!!

A sky-shattering explosion rocked the air above the Oro Jackson. Shockwaves surged violently, shattering the deck.

Flames like twin wings surged into the dark sky, heat rolling like a furnace.

Buggy and Shanks clutched their ears, the thunderous blast threatening to rupture their eardrums.

Their wide eyes stared at the silhouette of the black-haired Marine, half-visible in the flames. A deep, unspoken fear flickered in both their gazes.

This lunatic... He didn't care about the Marines on board—he was ready to destroy the Oro Jackson outright.

Rain began to fall, quickly extinguishing the flames.

At last, they saw Gaban suspended midair.

His twin axes crossed, one blade pressing against the spinning coin.

Spiraling Armament Haki ground it into dust.

Only then did the Roger Pirates breathe a collective sigh of relief.

"Marine brat!! How dare you... I'll never forgive you!!"

A new, furious roar erupted.

Roger's powerful slash forced Garp back. With one foot stomping the deck, he launched himself like a cannonball.

Black and red lightning surged through his Meito and eyes. Killing intent surged from his body like a physical force.

His target... was the Marine Commodore who had nearly destroyed the Oro Jackson.

"Daren, watch out!!"

"Commodore Daren!!"

"Fall back!"

"Daren!!"

"Get out of there!!"

The desperate shouts of the Marines rang in Daren's ears.

High in the sky, he locked eyes with Gol D. Roger charging toward him. His heart felt like it had stopped.

That inescapable pressure—death itself—crashed over him like a wave, drowning his senses.

He was going to die.

If he took that strike head-on... he'd be dead for sure.

The thought struck him—and every muscle in his body began to shake.

He was definitely... going to die.

...

Chapter 116: Volume 2 – Chapter 18: No Retreat

His body trembled—violently.

Death clutched Daren's heart like a nightmare, nearly suffocating him.

The freezing rain lashed against his cheeks and bounced off.

It felt like every muscle, tendon, and even cell had been drained of energy, wrung dry by the surge of adrenaline flooding his body.

Reflected in his pupils, the face of the future Pirate King rapidly expanded—a furious, untamed, and overwhelming presence, dragging a supreme grade blade crackling with black and red lightning...

If he didn't retreat, he would die.

He would die for sure.

The man before him was none other than the future Pirate King—Gol D. Roger. The one who killed the Overlord Rocks and stood at the peak of the world's power!

Even a monster-like genius such as Dragon had been seriously wounded by this single slash!

He hadn't yet mastered Armament Haki.

He didn't have the elemental buffering power of a Logia-type Devil Fruit.

There was absolutely no way he could take this head-on!

Trying to block it meant certain death!

He had to retreat.

He needed to retreat.

Did he... really have to retreat?

No!!

Daren's body suddenly stopped shaking.

His eyes narrowed, and his black pupils flooded with frenzied, bloodshot veins.

A surge of murderous will exploded from his chest and twisted into a savage grin.

He'd survived countless near-death battles.

He'd endured day after day of hellish training.

He'd worked for years in the North Blue, cautiously building his strength.

He'd finally earned a spot in the Officer Training Camp—finally stepped out of the North Blue onto the world stage...

Wasn't it all for this?

To clash with world-class monsters like Roger, Whitebeard, and Shiki?

And now... the future Pirate King, Gol D. Roger, was standing right in front of him!

"I'm not backing down!!"

Daren roared, eyes blood-red.

An overwhelming aura burst from his body, clashing against Roger's Conqueror's Haki.

Two cyclonic spheres of force collided in midair, grinding violently against each other!

Daren's long-suppressed Conqueror's Haki finally erupted!

Crackling lightning filled the sky.

Roger paused slightly, his pupils contracting.

"Conqueror's Haki!?"

Below, Garp and Dragon shouted in unison.

"A 'King's Will,' huh? Pretty rare in the Marines... but your will is way too weak, brat!!"

Roger burst into laughter and gripped his sword with both hands.

From afar, it looked like he was dragging a torrent of black and red lightning as he swung down hard!

Crack!

Daren's Conqueror's Haki shattered like glass under the tyrannical strike—completely obliterated.

"Daren!!"

Tokikake screamed, eyes bloodshot.

Gion clenched her fists tight.

Garp launched into Geppo, cold sweat pouring down his brow.

Dragon's heart sank.

"It ends here!!"

Roger roared.

Death... descended.

In that moment, Daren's heart stopped.

Countless memories flashed through his mind.

Strength... Physique... Haki...

Every punch Byrnni World had thrown in that legendary battle replayed clearly in his head.

It was like a beam of light pierced through the darkness in his mind.

The rush of breaking through, of standing at the summit, caused his tense, trembling muscles to instantly relax.

Suddenly, everything made sense.

He should've realized it sooner—

A physique stat of over 60 meant a defense as hard as Tekkai.

Agility over 60 meant explosive speed on par with Soru.

And strength over 60...

A blinding light erupted in Daren's eyes.

It meant...

"Armament Haki... Hardening!!" he roared.

As blood surged and power flooded through him, the Commodore's right fist was suddenly wrapped in a pitch-black, metallic sheen—an invisible armor with a steel-like gleam!

There was no time to savor this newly grasped power.

Face twisted in murderous glee, Daren threw a punch straight ahead.

Toward that world-shattering Kamusari slash... without flinching!

—Head-on with the Pirate King!!

CLANG!!

The sky boomed like a struck war drum, a violent shockwave exploding outward with them at the center.

The sea raged with monstrous waves once more.

In everyone's stunned gaze—

CRACK!

The Armament Haki on Daren's fist shattered instantly, cracks crawling across it before it exploded.

His Armament Haki broke.

His steel-hard skin broke.

The tough muscles underneath broke.

His entire arm burst into a cloud of blood and torn muscle.

"Kamusari!"

With Roger's roar, a blinding arc of blade light smashed into Daren's chest!

The slash tore from the left of his neck down to the right of his abdomen—nearly splitting him open entirely, ribs laid bare.

Blood erupted in great torrents, spraying across Roger's face.

Daren looked like he'd been struck by lightning.

All color drained from his face.

Everyone aboard the Oro Jackson saw it clearly—

With Roger's slash, the Marine Commodore's body folded sharply in half, collapsing like a broken doll as he plummeted downward.

"Roger, you bastard!!"

Garp finally arrived, his punch wrapped in black lightning and descending like a meteor toward Roger.

Roger moved to counter—

But just then, the rapidly falling Daren clenched his teeth, forced his arm up with great effort, and grinned wickedly:

"At least... I'm taking some interest back!"

As he made that move, he suddenly saw a tall figure leap from the warship—and in the next moment, he crashed into a warm embrace.

At the same time, Roger froze, suddenly feeling a strong tug at his belt.

But under Garp's pressure, he had no time to react and raised his sword to block.

CLANG!!

BOOM!!

Fist and blade collided—sparks flying, shockwaves erupting.

Roger's face suddenly turned beet red.

His lower body felt... strangely cold.

He looked down.

What he saw nearly made him faint.

His belt—metal buckle and all—had been yanked down by the force, along with his black trousers...

All that remained on his lower half was a bright red pair of underpants.

"Bwahahaha!! Roger, your pants fell down!!"

Garp burst into laughter.

...

(50 Chapters Ahead)

p@treon com / PinkSnake

Chapter 117: Volume 2 – Chapter 19: Your Pants Fell Down

Vice Admiral Garp's gloating laughter cracked through the air like a cold iron whip, lashing across Roger's face with a searing sting.

"Garp, you bastard!!"

As the stunned stares of Marines and pirates alike locked onto him, Roger's face flushed red, then paled. His eyes were bloodshot, and he nearly coughed up blood.

"Looks like you really do like red... Roger! Bwahahahaha!!"

Garp winked exaggeratedly as his fist, cloaked in wild Haki, smashed mercilessly toward Roger's face.

Roger fumbled awkwardly to pull up his pants while frantically swinging his sword to block.

Caught off guard, Roger met Garp's meteor-like punch head-on with his famed blade. The force of the second impact surged through him—his mouth filled with a metallic taste as his body shot back like a cannonball, crashing into the Oro Jackson.

BOOM!!

The pirate ship lurched violently. A massive crater tore open the deck, sending wooden splinters flying.

"Bwahahahaha! Roger, your pants fell down!!"

Garp dropped like a meteor, roaring with laughter.

CLANG!!

Through the swirling smoke, sparks flared as fist met blade. A fierce shockwave blasted out from the clash.

"Shut the hell up!!"

Blood trickled from Roger's mouth. His bloodshot eyes locked onto the grinning Vice Admiral, teeth grinding in fury.

Even for someone as rough-edged as Roger, having his pants fall in front of everyone was utterly humiliating.

"Am I wrong? They did fall down! Bwahahaha!!"

Garp suddenly vanished.

Using Soru—one of the Rokushiki—his explosive movement speed was easily ten times that of any average officer!

He moved like a phantom. Neither Marines nor pirates could react in time, and even their Observation Haki barely caught him before he appeared right beside Roger.

"Your underwear's red!"

A punch!

A bloody tooth shot out of Roger's mouth. His face visibly swelled and turned purple as his body crashed into the cabin.

Rayleigh's pupils narrowed slightly.

Garp's taunts had shaken Roger's mindset, weakening his Observation Haki!

"Gaban!" he barked.

"Ready!" came a low voice.

The moment it rang out, Rayleigh shot forward, skimming close to the ground as he charged at Garp.

"Your opponent is me!!"

Behind him, Dragon—bleeding from the mouth—appeared and hurled a fierce, twisting hurricane.

Shiiiiing!

A cross-shaped axe slash tore through the air, shredding the hurricane.

Wielding two massive axes and wearing sunglasses, Gaban surged from the storm like a tiger. His bulging arms swung down hard toward Dragon.

This guy....! Dragon's eyes narrowed.

The threat he gave off was overwhelming. The aura from those twin axes wasn't any weaker than Rayleigh the Dark King's!

"Damn it!"

Dragon had no choice but to back off. He elementalized into a gust of wind and retreated.

He was already badly wounded from Roger's earlier strike, and after clashing with Rayleigh, his body was at its limit. There was no way he could face a prime Gaban head-on.

"You're not getting away, Roger! Today, I'm bringing you in!"

Garp roared, bulldozing through charging pirates as he rushed for the cabin.

Rayleigh zipped past him, slashing at Garp's lower back with his silver longsword.

CLANG!

Garp reached back and grabbed the blade with a hand clad in Armament Haki, sparks erupting on contact.

"Stay out of this, Rayleigh!!"

Sweat trickled down Rayleigh's forehead. He said coldly,

"This battle ends here, Garp."

"Bullshit!!"

Garp roared, but just then—a figure burst out of the cabin.

"GARP!!"

Roger's black hair flew wildly. His eyes burned red, and in both hands he gripped one of the Twelve Supreme Grade Meito. Black and red lightning crackled around his body, flaring and fading.

A streak of black-red lightning flashed across the deck.

The blade gleamed.

CLANG!!

A blindingly fast slash struck Garp's arms, which were raised in defense.

Garp was sent flying, blood seeping from his lips.

Under the combined force of Rayleigh and Roger's assault, he was blown off the deck with a splash into the sea.

"Retreat!!"

Rayleigh shouted without hesitation, then leaned closer to Roger and spoke urgently.

"Roger, we have to pull back. If we keep fighting, Marine reinforcements could show up any moment."

"Retreat my ass! I'm not satisfied yet!!" Roger shouted, fuming.

Rayleigh ignored the fool and turned back, shouting again:

"Hurry, use it now!!"

"——It's ready!!"

Spencer's voice rang out.

He blinked into view at the stern of the Oro Jackson and pressed a hidden button.

Click, click—

With heavy mechanical groans, planks unfolded at the back of the ship, and a massive cannon slowly extended.

Garp's head broke the surface of the churning sea. As soon as he saw the cannon, a bad feeling washed over him.

His eyes shifted—then he burst into exaggerated laughter:

"Hahahaha! Roger, your pants fell down!!"

Roger's eyes turned blood-red. Steam hissed from his nostrils.

"Damn it! Rayleigh, don't stop me! I'm killing that bastard today!"

Rayleigh, face flushed with frustration, pushed down hard on his captain and roared:

"Fire it—NOW!"

As the words fell...

A white glow built up around the stern cannon of the Oro Jackson.

In the next instant—

With Garp screaming "Jump ship!!" at the top of his lungs, a massive blast of compressed air erupted from the cannon.

The sea directly ahead split open, leaving a massive trench over a hundred meters long.

Fueled by the insane propulsion, the entire pirate ship shot into the air, breaking free of the Marine blockade and soaring off toward the open sea.

...

Splash, splash...

Waves crashed and churned.

Soon, heads began surfacing one by one—drenched Marines gasping and dazed.

"The pirate ship... flew?!"

"What... just happened?"

"This is insane..."

...

They stared dumbfounded at the speck vanishing into the distance sky.

Only after a long while did they snap out of it.

They looked down at their battered, nearly wrecked warships—then clenched their jaws, pounded the water, and cursed:

"Damn it! We were this close!!"

So close, yet so far.

...

Chapter 118: Volume 2 – Chapter 20: Laughing Out Loud

"Damn it! He didn't fall for it!"

Garp gritted his teeth in frustration and let out a disgruntled snort.

Ever since the fall of the Rocks era, he'd been chasing Roger across the seas—from the East Blue to the Grand Line, and from there into the New World.

There were several times on land when he had cornered Roger into a desperate position, but each time, the carefully crafted battle plans by Tsuru and Sengoku had been ruined by Rayleigh's timely interventions.

Unlike Roger, who always lost himself in the heat of battle, Rayleigh remained calm and level-headed, analyzing the flow of combat and pulling Roger back from recklessness when it mattered most.

Garp had to admit: in many ways, Rayleigh—the Dark King, Roger's right hand—was even harder to deal with than Roger himself.

With that thought, he shook his head, let out a heavy sigh, and reached for the lifeline thrown down from the deck of the warship, finally hauling himself out of the sea.

The other Marines who had jumped ship at his command before the Oro Jackson took flight were also clambering aboard the lifeboats one by one.

"Where's that kid Daren?! How is he?!"

Garp hadn't even set foot on the deck when he asked, urgency in his voice and pace quickening unconsciously.

They had nearly captured the entire Roger Pirates this time—Daren had made a huge contribution. With his potential, talent, and achievements, Garp didn't want anything to happen to him.

But then he stopped in his tracks, stunned.

His jaw clenched. His fists tightened without realizing.

The warship was deathly quiet.

No one said a word.

The sea howled endlessly, and cold, hazy rain fell from the pitch-black sky.

Raindrops pelted the sails, the wreckage, and the pale, grief-stricken faces of the Marines, turning them into unmoving statues, as if they had lost their souls.

On the deck before Garp, the Marine Commodore lay there like a man made of blood. His uniform had been shredded into tatters.

A horrifying wound stretched from the left side of his neck all the way down to his right abdomen, nearly splitting his body in half.

Torn flesh and gleaming bone were exposed, and the faint pulsing of internal organs behind the ribs could be seen.

His right arm was mangled—skin torn open, large swaths of flesh gone, blood pouring out.

The Commodore's face was deathly pale, his eyes tightly shut.

His breathing was faint—like a dying flame.

Tokikake and Gion knelt beside him, eyes red-rimmed with emotion.

Through the breeze, Dragon staggered into view, blood trailing from the corner of his mouth. He looked like he was in terrible shape too.

"Doctor, what's his condition?"

Dragon's voice was low and ice-cold, brimming with barely suppressed fury.

The military doctor, already at Daren's side, was desperately working to save him. Cold sweat drenched his forehead as he pressed hard on Daren's arterial wound, struggling to speak.

"Commodore Daren's wounds are critical—he's suffered massive internal injuries. The aorta's been severed, and the blood loss is severe. Compared to that, his arm is nothing."

"But with this much blood loss... if we can't stop the bleeding soon, I'm afraid..."

He didn't finish the sentence.

But the sorrow in his voice was enough for everyone to understand what he meant.

"No—you will save him!! Or I swear I'll make you taste my Iron Fist!"

Bloodshot eyes blazing, Garp grabbed the doctor by the collar, growling.

"Vice Admiral Garp!!"

"Old man!"

Gion and Dragon both pulled him back.

Dragon let out a long breath, then turned to the doctor and bowed slightly, his tone earnest.

"Doctor... is there anything else that can be done?"

"Please... do everything you can."

The doctor froze for a second, moved by the sincerity in Dragon's eyes. He furrowed his brow and thought for a moment before saying,

"Right now, there's no real way to save him... These kinds of injuries aren't something a normal human can survive."

"We'll try a transfusion. It might buy time to close the wound and stop the bleeding. Does anyone here have S-type blood?"

Everyone glanced at each other.

S-type blood was extremely rare on these seas.

"I do."

A cool voice suddenly cut through the silence.

Everyone turned to see—Gion.

"I'm S-type. Please, doctor—do it."

She rolled up her sleeve, revealing her pale arm.

Dark red blood slowly flowed from her veins through the tube and into Daren's body.

They lay side by side on the shattered deck—one unconscious, the other gazing at the falling rain with a complicated expression.

"It's no good... I'm sorry."

The doctor stopped stitching, shaking his head. His gloves were soaked red.

Hearing this, Garp, Dragon, and the others lowered their heads, jaws clenched tight.

"His injuries are too severe. Even if we close the wounds... it's unlikely he'll..."

"...What?"

The doctor suddenly widened his eyes in disbelief, voice trembling.

"The... the bleeding... it stopped?! That kind of wound... it actually—?!"

"A fatal wound, huh...?"

A faint, hoarse voice laced with a smile rose up.

The Marines, who had already lost all hope, looked up in shock—only to see the Commodore slowly crack open his heavy eyelids and give them a weak, strained smile.

Gion stared at him in disbelief.

"Lieutenant Commander Gion, judging by your stunned look, it seems you were really hoping I'd just die off..."

Daren's voice was barely a whisper, but he still managed to joke.

"But now we've got the same blood running through our veins. We're closer than ever."

"Oh, and when you were saving me just now..."

He blinked slowly.

"You were really soft."

A faint blush flickered across Gion's normally cold face. She scoffed, turned away, and snapped,

"You're such a scumbag. Of course you'd survive."

Dragon rubbed his temples. "Daren... your body..."

Daren shook his head slightly, signaling he was fine.

With effort, he turned his head and looked out to sea.

In the direction the Roger Pirates had vanished.

"What a shame, Vice Admiral Garp."

He murmured.

Garp was silent for a long while before replying softly,

"Daren, it's thanks to you... This was the first time I've ever cornered Roger like that on the open sea."

"...Just didn't expect his ship to have some high-speed propulsion hidden in it."

"It's fine,"

Daren smiled.

"Next time, he won't get away."

The Commodore was drenched, his body wracked with pain and exhaustion—so heavy it felt like the world itself was collapsing.

But he remained still, lying quietly, letting the rain wash down his face.

Then...

Slowly, trembling, he began to raise his hand.

The wind roared. The waves crashed.

The rain poured in sheets. The sky grew darker.

Rain streamed over his wounded hand, the white of his finger bones faintly visible.

Rip!

A bolt of pale lightning tore through the darkness, illuminating everything for a moment.

On the deck, Garp, Dragon, and the others widened their eyes, as if seeing something terrifying.

A reckless, fierce, and arrogant smile crept up from the corner of the Commodore's lips.

"I'm still alive," he muttered.

His bloodied hand clenched into a fist.

"Hahahahaha!! After fighting Gol D. Roger—I'm still alive!!!"

The ship rocked violently beneath the crashing waves.

Rain poured endlessly from the skies.

Amid the flickering thunder, a tattered seagull flag fluttered wildly.

The Commodore who defied death—

Laughed. Loud and free.

...

Chapter 119: Volume 2 – Chapter 21: Make It Plastic

"I'm not exactly sure how, but after some basic stitching and bandaging, Commodore Daren's condition is already showing signs of recovery..."

In the warship's infirmary, the doctor reported to Garp with a puzzled expression.

As he spoke, he couldn't help glancing curiously at the unconscious Marine Commodore lying in bed, hooked up to an IV drip.

"Commodore Daren's physical resilience is like nothing I've ever seen in all my years of medicine. His organ vitality, muscle durability, and recovery rate far exceed standard human limits."

"But Vice Admiral Garp, I recommend that once we return to Marine Headquarters, we have the military hospital conduct a full examination on him. These injuries were truly life-threatening."

At that last sentence, both the doctor and Garp twitched at the corners of their mouths.

Just a minor fatal wound...

"Mm. Thanks, Doctor," Garp nodded. Then he paused, scratched his head awkwardly, and added, "You know... earlier, I was just panicking. I wasn't actually going to hit you."

The doctor smiled, waved it off, and left the cabin.

Garp let out a long breath and stood silently, arms crossed, gazing at the unconscious man.

"Old man, the route's been set. We should reach Marineford in about three days."

Dragon entered the room, pushing the door open.

He wasn't in uniform—just draped in a wide Justice cloak. The wound from Roger's slash across his chest had been wrapped in bandages, still stained with fresh blood.

Garp gave a noncommittal grunt and didn't respond. His eyes stayed fixed on Daren.

"What's wrong, old man?"

Dragon stepped beside him, frowning.

"Didn't the doctor say Daren's stabilized?"

"I've just been thinking," Garp said quietly, eyes still on Daren. "Why isn't my son as talented as this kid?"

Dragon: "..."

Suppressing the urge to snap, he forced a strained smile.

"Daren really is something."

He took a deep breath, his expression turning reflective.

"If it had been me, before I learned to use Haki... I'm not sure I would've dared to face that slash from Roger head-on."

Staring at Daren, he muttered, "He's truly remarkable..."

"The North Blue really does produce monsters, huh?"

Garp chuckled.

"Sakazuki's not bad either. That chaotic sea breeds a lot of ruthless fighters. Why do you think Sengoku assigned Tokikake and Gion to the North Blue?"

"At least now, after this trip, they've shed some of that naivety."

"Good thing Daren didn't back down when it mattered."

Conqueror's Haki...

Garp narrowed his eyes slightly.

Seeing his father analyze a young Marine so seriously, Dragon couldn't help but grumble.

"I'm not that bad either, you know, old man..."

As if remembering something, he suddenly posed proudly like he was presenting a treasure.

His index and middle fingers came together, as did his ring and pinky. All five fingers curled slightly into a claw-like form.

"This is a new technique I developed. Like a dragon's claw—rips through anything with devastating piercing power!"

Jet-black Armament Haki instantly coated his hand, making his dragon-claw slash look like it had indestructible talons. He clawed through the air with force.

CRACK!

A sharp snap echoed through the room.

Garp narrowed his eyes. Internally, he approved—but outwardly, he stayed calm.

"Hmm. Not bad, but a little flashy."

"Listen, brat. As long as your fist is hard enough, there's nothing in this world that can stop you."

He raised his own fist for emphasis.

Dragon flushed red and quickly defended himself.

"That move was Daren's idea!"

There were countless fistfighters on the sea—but the only one known as "Iron Fist" was Garp himself.

"Oh?" Garp raised an eyebrow, then suddenly chuckled as if everything made sense.

"Daren came up with it? No wonder. I knew from the start it wasn't ordinary... If you combine it with a second burst of Armament Haki, it could deal serious damage instantly."

Dragon froze.

Now it's extraordinary?

Didn't you just call it flashy!?

Clutching his chest, he turned around, full of resentment, and silently left the cabin.

Garp shrugged at his son's back, plopped into a chair, leaned back, and crossed his legs comfortably.

With a wide yawn, he closed his eyes.

"Ryusoken... he really is my son."

A proud smile slowly crept onto his face.

...

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

The sea was calm, and seabirds drifted lazily overhead.

"Damn Garp! Damn that brat Daren!!"

Aboard the swaying Oro Jackson, Roger sat cross-legged on the deck like a sulking child, angrily chugging from a bottle of booze.

Rayleigh leaned against the mast, sighing as he rubbed his temples.

"How bad's the damage to the ship?"

He turned to Moon Isaac Jr., their scientist—an odd-looking man with a huge hooked nose.

Isaac shook his head.

"The hull's taken over thirty percent damage. It's still seaworthy for now, but we need to find a place for repairs soon. Also, the Cannon's fuel is completely spent—we'll need to restock as soon as possible."

Rayleigh's expression darkened.

"The King of the North Blue..."

This was the worst position the Roger Pirates had been in since the battle at God Valley.

And the main reason?

A Marine named Rogers Daren.

"Ruthless and shameless... Those kinds of tactics don't belong in a Marine's playbook,"

Gaban muttered coldly, still polishing his twin axes.

He had taken the brunt of Daren's Railgun at the crucial moment—so he knew exactly what he was talking about.

That shot hadn't been aimed at any crewmate—it was aimed straight at the ship itself.

Forget being cunning or low—Daren's judgment and execution had been precise and terrifying.

"I looked into it. That guy's infamous in the North Blue—everyone knows him as a scumbag."

Rayleigh gave a dry smile.

"A strong hero with a devious brain... When an unstoppable fist is paired with sharp thinking—that combo's practically unbeatable."

He and Gaban exchanged a glance, both catching the caution in each other's eyes.

"Hey, hey, Rayleigh, Gaban... when are we getting to land!?"

Roger, face flushed and reeking of alcohol, staggered over with a jug in hand, slinging his arms around their shoulders with a grin.

Rayleigh and Gaban groaned, covering their faces.

"What is it now?" Rayleigh muttered.

Roger burped, then suddenly scowled as if remembering something.

"I need to get a new belt buckle... yeah, make it plastic!"

...

Chapter 120: Volume 2 – Chapter 22: I'm Alive

The first thing Daren felt was a cool breeze brushing past him.

Distant cries of seagulls blended with the rhythmic cadence of military drills, echoing faintly in his ears.

He struggled to lift his heavy eyelids, cracking them open just enough to let in a sliver of blurry light.

Am I dead...?

It hurts...

His thoughts were hazy, dulled by the long coma.

Every bone in his body ached like it had been crushed. His chest burned with an unbearable, searing pain.

He lay still for a long time, barely adapting to the suffocating agony. His throat, dry as sandpaper, rasped with each breath.

"I'm alive..."

He murmured hoarsely.

Yes—he was alive. He'd actually survived... survived a clash with the man who would become the Pirate King.

Flat on his back in a soft hospital bed, Daren was wrapped in blood-soaked bandages, with tubes inserted in several places. His face was ghostly pale.

Yet he laughed.

It hurt like hell, but he laughed—loud and freely.

Even though, at the last second, his battered, exhausted body hadn't been able to inflict any damage on Roger, he'd still managed to scrape back a little dignity. A little payback.

"What's so funny?"

A cool female voice cut through the silence.

Daren turned his head stiffly toward the sound—and was met with an exceptionally beautiful face.

Wavy black hair pulled into a simple ponytail, sharp crimson eyes angled just enough to give her an air of fierce authority.

"Of course I'm happy—waking up to such a pretty face? Who wouldn't be?"

He grinned at Gion, who clearly had been sitting there for a long time keeping watch, looking a little worn out.

Gion quickly averted her gaze and gave a dismissive snort.

"If you still have the energy to talk like a pervert, you're clearly not dying anytime soon."

Daren chuckled. "Just seeing you makes me feel a whole lot better, Lieutenant Commander Gion."

The words had barely left his mouth when—

"Me too, me too! Hahaha! Daren, aren't you happy to see me?!"

A wildly unkempt face suddenly leaned in, grinning wide. In one hand, he held a half-eaten, peeled banana.

"Daren, did you know? You're practically famous in Marineford now! I mean, you're not quite as well-known as yours truly, the genius, but everyone's talking about you!"

"The Marine rising star who clashed head-on with the legendary pirate Gol D. Roger and even managed to get the better of him!"

"And that's not all—"

"Um... Lieutenant Commander Tokikake?"

Daren cut him off before he could go any further.

"Huh? What is it?!"

Tokikake blinked, then leaned closer with concern.

After everything that had happened with Byrnndi World and Roger, even if he didn't say it out loud, Tokikake had already come to fully recognize Daren.

"You feeling off? Should I get the doctor? Or are you hungry? They said you need to fast for a few days—your internal injuries were pretty bad..."

"Could you move your face back a little? You're too close."

Plop.

A chunk of banana snapped off and hit the floor.

Tokikake: ...

He blinked.

Daren blinked back.

"You're just jealous I'm this handsome," Tokikake muttered bitterly, stomping off to the corner to sulk while angrily tearing open a new fruit basket.

Watching him, Daren couldn't help but laugh again.

Yeah. His mood really had lifted.

He looked back at Gion.

"This is... Marineford Headquarters?"

He scanned the room.

White walls. A ceiling fan. The scent of disinfectant and blood hung in the air. Vital sign monitors blinked softly, pulsing with steady beeps.

It was all very familiar.

Gion nodded.

"That's right. This is the military ward at headquarters. We arrived just a few hours ago."

Daren frowned.

"How long was I out?"

"Three days."

He fell silent, then let out a dry laugh and shook his head.

"So I almost didn't make it..."

Ever since his Physique stat had hit 60 and his body had become as tough as steel, he'd never suffered such serious injuries.

Three whole days unconscious.

"I'm still far from strong enough..." he muttered.

Against Roger's devastating slash—if he hadn't triggered Conqueror's Haki at the last moment, and if he hadn't awakened Armament Haki in time—his body alone wouldn't have been enough. He would've been cleaved in two.

More crucially, at the very instant Roger attacked, Daren had secretly used the repulsion force of the Jiki Jiki no Mi on Roger's Supreme Grade Meito, weakening the force of the slash without anyone noticing.

In hindsight, it made one thing clear—Byrnni World, for all his destructive power, was nowhere near Roger's level in pure combat ability.

And that also shed light on how terrifying the likes of Vice Admiral Garp, Whitebeard, and Shiki must be—those who could go blow for blow with Roger for days on end.

The apex of this sea...

Daren's eyes flickered with determination.

"Hahahaha! Daren! Heard you finally woke up!"

A hearty voice rang out from the hallway.

Dragon stepped into the room with a fruit basket in hand, smiling as he pushed open the door.

"Rear Admiral Dragon!"

Gion and Tokikake—mouth still full of apple—jumped up and saluted.

Dragon waved them off.

"No need to stand on ceremony." He turned to Daren, still smiling. "How're you feeling?"

"Better," Daren said, glancing at Gion and Tokikake. Warmth stirred in his chest.

"That's good to hear. On the way back, Lieutenant Commanders Gion and Tokikake took turns watching over you. There were too many injured on board, and the ship's doctor was overwhelmed."

"As for me and the old man... well, you know we're not exactly the nurturing type."

He scratched his head awkwardly.

Truth was, Garp and Dragon had spent most of the voyage back asleep.

"I really appreciate it," Daren said sincerely.

"Glad to hear it. Rest up. The Officer Training Camp's opening ceremony is in two days. That's not an event the 'King of the North Blue' can skip. You're kind of a big deal in Marineford now."

Dragon grinned genuinely.

Then his expression shifted.

"Well, speak of the devil—here comes someone you know well... someone annoying."

Daren blinked.

Footsteps echoed from outside the room—steady, strong, precise.

Cold. Mechanical. Imposing. Just the sound of them alone felt like the ticking of some unyielding pendulum.

And then a tall, heavy presence filled the doorway.

The man didn't speak. Didn't need to.

Just standing there, he radiated cold, ironclad authority.