

One Piece 121

Chapter 121: Volume 2 – Chapter 23: Sakazuki

Clad in a blood-red, sharply pressed uniform and black, polished boots, the man strode forward. A wide cloak fluttered gently behind him with each step.

Though only in his twenties, the deep, chiseled lines of his face gave him a cold, rock-hard presence, like a sheer cliff face. The brim of his military cap cast a shadow that hid his eyes.

A suffocating sense of pressure swept into the room.

"R-Rear Admiral Sakazuki!"

Tokikake, jolted by the oppressive killing intent, snapped upright, dropped the half-eaten apple from his mouth, and hastily saluted.

Gion followed with a salute of her own.

The two exchanged subtle glances, each catching the shock in the other's eyes.

It had only been a month, but Sakazuki's aura—his sheer murderous presence—had intensified dramatically.

That persistent smell of smoke and blood clinging to him was frighteningly heavy.

Sakazuki didn't even glance at them.

His dark, brooding gaze shifted slowly—pausing briefly on Dragon—before settling on Daren, who was still hooked up to tubes and machines.

Daren met his eyes calmly, the two locking stares.

"I heard Roger cut you down. Almost cost you your life."

Sakazuki spoke suddenly, his voice low and hoarse like grinding metal.

Daren nodded.

"Yeah."

"Was he strong?"

"Like something out of hell."

"Did you fight back?"

Daren's lips curled into a cocky grin.

"What do you think?"

Sakazuki paused.

Then a slight smirk began to tug at the edges of his stone-cold face.

Dragon blinked, visibly surprised.

Sakazuki—smiling?

Tokikake, meanwhile, flinched.

That smile... somehow made him even scarier.

Drip.

A drop of crimson blood slid from Sakazuki's black leather glove, landing on the floor.

"Good. You didn't embarrass the North Blue."

Noticing the blood, Daren frowned.

"You're injured?"

In this timeline, Sakazuki was still only in his twenties. But with his monstrous strength, the number of people capable of wounding him could be counted on one hand.

"I just got back from the New World," Sakazuki said flatly.

"Got into a fight with that lunatic, BIG MOM—Charlotte Linlin."

Tokikake and Gion's pupils shrank in shock.

BIG MOM—Charlotte Linlin. Former crew member of the Rocks Pirates. After the God Valley incident, she founded her own pirate crew and rapidly expanded her influence through arranged marriages. She had already carved out a strong foothold in the New World and gained widespread infamy.

It was said she was born with strength rivaling that of giants, and her body was terrifyingly durable. When a giant slashed her with a blade at the age of five, the sword snapped instead. Bullets and cannon fire couldn't even scratch her. She was like an "iron balloon."

That natural-born strength earned her the title "Evil Spirit," feared across the seas.

Thinking of this, both Tokikake and Gion glanced at Daren.

An iron body impervious to blades and bullets... he had that too.

But they also understood the difference: Charlotte Linlin was born that way.

Daren had fought his way to it—through countless battles, near-death encounters, and hellish training. The two were not the same.

"Charlotte Linlin..." Dragon muttered, frowning as a thought struck him.

"Wasn't there news recently that she was arranging a marriage with the prince of the Bada Kingdom?"

Sakazuki shot him a look.

"That's right. I went to the New World specifically to stop it."

"The Bada Kingdom is a major economic power, and a major manufacturer of firearms and artillery. A strategic location like that can't be allowed to fall into Charlotte Linlin's hands."

Dragon narrowed his eyes.

"But with your strength, you couldn't take on Charlotte Linlin. How did you stop the marriage?"

Sakazuki raised an eyebrow, a cold sneer forming on his lips.

"At the wedding, the Marines and the Big Mom Pirates clashed. Heavy casualties on both sides."

"In the chaos, the Bada Kingdom's prince was unfortunately caught in the crossfire... and died on the spot."

Gion and Tokikake gasped as they grasped the implication.

Dragon's eyes narrowed.

Daren chuckled quietly.

Yup. That's Sakazuki, all right.

Direct. Brutal. No hesitation.

There were many ways to sabotage a marriage alliance. He had chosen the simplest, most violent, and most effective one.

—Kill the groom. No groom, no wedding.

"You bastard! Sakazuki, what you did is an insult to justice!" Dragon roared.

"Do you realize the political storm you've unleashed!?"

As two of the Navy's most gifted officers, Dragon and Sakazuki had always been at odds.

Professional rivalry aside, their core conflict was rooted in their beliefs—how justice should be upheld.

Dragon had always hated Sakazuki's cold-blooded, ends-justify-the-means approach.

Sakazuki's sneer deepened.

"Compared to letting the entire Bada Kingdom fall under Big Mom's rule, what's one prince's life?"

As he spoke, more blood seeped from his sleeve, dripping steadily onto the floor.

"I'll report to Fleet Admiral Kong myself. I'll take full responsibility. That's not your concern, Dragon."

He shot him a mocking glance.

"At least I completed my mission."

"Better than some people who think they're strong... but can't even handle a basic escort job."

That jab was pointed—and it hit hard.

Gion and Tokikake went stiff, tension crackling in the room.

Cold hostility flooded the ward in an instant.

"What are you trying to say, Sakazuki?" Dragon growled. His clenched fists began distorting into visible whirlwinds of wind.

"You know exactly what I'm saying," Sakazuki replied. "I read the battle report."

His bleeding arm began melting into molten lava. The terrifying heat bathed the room in a red glow.

"Vice Admiral Garp was held back by Roger. Fine. But you—you were on the deck of the Oro Jackson, fighting Rayleigh."

He looked up, eyes gleaming beneath his cap with killing intent.

"With your strength, even facing the Dark King Rayleigh, you could have sunk the Oro Jackson."

"If that ship had gone down, none of Roger's crew would've escaped."

Dragon's voice shook with anger.

"There were hundreds of Marines aboard! If we'd sunk the ship, they would've all died!"

"So what?" Sakazuki scoffed.

"A few dozen lives to wipe out Roger's entire crew? Sounds like a great trade to me."

"So in your eyes, your comrades are just pawns!?"

"On the battlefield, everyone is a pawn."

"You're insane, Sakazuki!!"

Their rage boiled over. Power erupted from both bodies.

Two waves—one red, one green—burst forth like tangible auras, crashing into each other in the middle of the room. Their cloaks whipped violently in the crosswind.

The atmosphere was explosive.

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Chapter 122: Volume 2 – Chapter 24: The Lively Ward

"These two... what terrifying presence..."

Tokikake shivered as he watched Dragon and Sakazuki glaring at each other, their auras clashing violently.

"Dragon, your foolish mercy is holding you back... Even Daren sees things more clearly than you do," Sakazuki sneered. His entire right arm had melted into crimson magma, bubbling and dripping onto the floor, scorching deep black pits into the tiles.

"Justice gained at the cost of comrades' lives isn't justice at all!" Dragon snapped, his clenched fist swirling with a rising hurricane.

"Sakazuki, you've been wrong from the very start!"

Crack!

Waves of crimson and greenish-blue energy collided, shaking the walls and splitting the floor with jagged cracks.

"I'm just saying... can you two maybe spare a thought for the guy who's actually injured here?"

Daren sighed from his bed, rubbing his aching forehead.

Right then, a slow, deliberately irritating voice drifted in from outside the door.

"Sure is lively in here..."

Everyone turned, startled.

Borsalino had somehow appeared at the door without anyone noticing. Hands in his pockets, shoulder leaning against the frame, a smirk playing at the corners of his mouth.

"Rear Admiral Borsalino!" Gion and Tokikake saluted in unison.

Borsalino didn't even glance at them. He simply strolled in, smiling lazily. Behind his sunglasses, his eyes flicked between Dragon and Sakazuki, brimming with amusement.

"Man, you both look intense... I wonder what'd happen if you actually threw down?"

"A storm against magma... now that would be a sight."

The moment he spoke, Dragon and Sakazuki fell silent, then simultaneously withdrew their auras.

All the tension in the room evaporated as if nothing had happened.

They were still seething inside, fists itching for a fight—but more than that, neither wanted to let this bastard Borsalino watch and laugh at their expense...

That thought crossed both their minds at the same time.

"What a shame... I was hoping to finally see who stands at the top of the new generation of Marines," Borsalino said, sighing theatrically with mock regret.

Both men stiffened but quickly swallowed their urges.

On the bed, Daren twitched at the corner of his mouth.

Borsalino really couldn't resist stirring the pot.

And now his head was hurting even more.

"But really, Commodore Daren... your injuries are brutal. A normal person would've died long ago."

Borsalino turned his gaze to Daren, scratching at his chin while eyeing his wounds with fascinated admiration.

"You're built like a monster."

"The medical corps actually submitted a request to study your body. I turned it down."

Daren shot him a sidelong glance and gave a half-hearted smile. "Well, thank you, Rear Admiral Borsalino."

Borsalino grinned. "No need to thank me. That kind of research should go to the Science Division, don't you think?"

Daren: ...

"Yeah... thanks a lot."

He forced a stiff smile.

Borsalino waved it off. "We're colleagues—no need to be so polite."

Head's throbbing worse now. Fantastic.

Daren let out a long breath and glanced at the three Rear Admirals—Sakazuki, Dragon, and Borsalino—now sitting in the ward like it was their personal lounge, arms crossed, saying nothing.

"Seriously, you three... why are you all hanging out in my hospital room? Don't you have anything better to do?"

Dragon scratched his head and frowned. "I think... I was supposed to do something. Can't remember. Must not've been important. Hahaha!"

He laughed loudly, pulled a bag of donuts from who-knows-where, and started munching.

Sakazuki crossed one leg over the other, his face cold. "No rush."

Short and sharp—classic Sakazuki.

He pulled out a cigar, tossed one to Daren, then stuck another between his lips.

A faint red glow lit at his fingertip as he lit the cigar and took a slow puff.

Borsalino, meanwhile, pulled a nail clipper from his pocket and casually trimmed his nails, mumbling, "Feels like there was something I needed to do..."

Daren watched them in silence, pressing his fingers to his forehead.

Forget it. I'll just pretend they're not here. I really need rest.

As long as they don't start fighting or yelling, maybe I can still—

Suddenly, a wave of exhaustion crashed over him. The weight of his injuries was catching up fast.

He couldn't hold his eyes open any longer and slowly drifted into unconsciousness.

"Hahahahaha! Daren, my boy! You awake? I came to check on you!"

A booming laugh echoed down the corridor, loud enough to rattle the windows.

Moments later, the door slammed open.

Garp marched in, head held high, a giant slab of roast meat slung over his shoulder—easily half a man tall.

"Here, eat this! It's Sea King meat! Took me forever to catch one!"

"Huh? You guys are here too? Even better—let's throw a party!"

"You! What's your name again—ah, Tokikake! Go grab some booze! What? Money? Does this old man look like he has money? Just ask Daren to pay for it later! It's his party anyway!"

"Alright, dig in! What's that? Daren can't eat yet? That's fine—we'll just eat it all ourselves!"

"..."

Daren stared at the ward, which had instantly turned into a festive chaos of singing, dancing, and shouting.

His eye twitched.

Any trace of sleep vanished completely.

Staring blankly up at the gray ceiling, he let out a long sigh.

He suddenly missed the North Blue.

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Meanwhile, at Marine Headquarters, Marineford—

A broad-shouldered figure with short, vibrant purple hair walked with heavy, steady steps toward the conference room of the Marshal's Office, his presence solemn.

"Admiral Zephyr!"

The Marines standing guard saluted sharply, awe and admiration shining in their eyes.

"I'm no longer an Admiral," Zephyr replied with a smile, patting one of them on the shoulder before heading inside.

He found a seat at random and sat down, quickly frowning.

"Weren't we supposed to be having a meeting, Sengoku?"

He turned to the other side of the room where Sengoku sat.

"Where is everyone?"

Sengoku stared at the rows of empty chairs, his expression darkening by the second.

His fists clenched tight as he gritted his teeth.

"Those bastards!"

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Chapter 123: Volume 2 – Chapter 25: The Grumpy Strategist

"Where the hell did they all go!?"

The conference room of the Fleet Admiral's Office trembled as Admiral Sengoku's furious roar echoed out, startling the Marines on duty outside.

"This is a critical military meeting!"

"Where's Sakazuki!? I haven't even settled things with him over the Bada Kingdom incident in the New World!"

"And Borsalino? There's still a pile of unfinished work for the new Marine Science Division!"

"And what about those two bastards, Dragon and Garp!? They still haven't explained the details of the operation against the Roger Pirates!"

Inside the room, Sengoku's face was dark with rage. He slammed his fist onto the conference table, glaring daggers at the staff responsible for summoning the participants.

With Fleet Admiral Kong off reporting to the Five Elders at Mary Geoise, this meeting had been left in Sengoku's hands—not just as a formality, but to help him transition into the duties and responsibilities of the Fleet Admiral role.

It was his chance to prove to Kong that he was ready for the position.

It was also a vital political opportunity to show the Marine Headquarters' senior officers he could lead.

But now? The first major military meeting he'd called, and besides Zephyr—an old retiree—the only one present was himself!?

If word got out... what would the rest of HQ think of him, an Admiral and future Fleet Admiral?

"The future Fleet Admiral calls a top-level military meeting—no one shows up?"

What kind of joke was that!?

What about his authority? His credibility? How was he supposed to lead from now on!?

"Did you actually notify them about the meeting time and place!?"

He fixed a fierce glare on the administrative officers, still holding onto a shred of hope.

Maybe... maybe they didn't get the message.

Surely they wouldn't just blow him off. Not when he was representing Fleet Admiral Kong himself.

No matter how unruly they usually were, this was still a formal military meeting—they had to show some respect.

Yeah... that had to be it.

The officers looked nervously at the panting, red-eyed Sengoku, not daring to breathe.

They exchanged glances, until finally, a Lieutenant Colonel stepped forward hesitantly.

"Um... Admiral Sengoku, the notices were sent out in advance. We've confirmed they all received them."

Zephyr's eye twitched as he turned his head, clearly fighting back laughter.

Sengoku's face darkened even further.

So those bastards... did this on purpose!?

Veins bulged on his forehead, and two puffs of white steam shot from his nostrils. His teeth ground together with a harsh crackle.

"Find them! Now! I want to know exactly where they are!"

He spat the words out through clenched teeth.

"Immediately! Right now!!"

The admin staff bolted from the room like their lives depended on it.

Zephyr, watching Sengoku practically steaming with rage, couldn't help but chuckle.

"This isn't like you, Sengoku... It's just a meeting. No need to get so worked up."

"Hey, look on the bright side—even if no one else came, I did."

Sengoku slumped into the main seat, rolling his eyes.

"Yeah, you showed up. As if you actually plan on helping. You've got nothing on your plate anyway..."

His voice dropped into a grumble.

"Zephyr, manpower at HQ is getting stretched thin. You know Fleet Admiral Kong is about to hand over the reins to me... Honestly, I don't feel ready."

Speaking to an old comrade he once trusted with his life, Sengoku didn't hold back.

"I need my old allies at my side again..."

His gaze was steady and sincere as he looked at Zephyr.

"Think about it. How long has it been since we fought shoulder to shoulder?"

Zephyr's expression flickered with nostalgia, but it quickly faded into a trace of disappointment and detachment.

He replied calmly.

"You've still got Garp. And the next generation—Sakazuki, Dragon, Borsalino—they're stepping up."

Sengoku sighed quietly and shook his head.

"But time's running out for us."

"The God Valley incident may be long past, just a part of history now—but the shadow it cast is still here."

"Roger, Whitebeard, Shiki... and now Kaidou and Charlotte Linlin are rising fast."

"You know how Garp is. Orders from above go in one ear and out the other. Even Kong can't control him—what chance do I have?"

"As for Sakazuki and the others... sure, they're as monstrously strong as their reputations suggest. But they're still not at the very top of this sea."

"They'll need more time before they can truly stand on their own."

"The Bada Kingdom incident is proof of that. If you'd been there, it never would've gotten so out of hand... In the end, the problem is that we just don't have enough top-level combat power at Marine HQ right now."

Zephyr fell silent.

"They'll grow."

A moment later, he raised his head and looked at Sengoku.

His smile was oddly calm.

"As for me... I'm just a failure who couldn't even protect his own family."

"These days, I'm just a hot-tempered instructor at HQ. Nothing more. Sengoku, leave the responsibility of being an Admiral to someone else."

Sengoku looked at that calm smile and felt a bitterness rise in his chest.

It was the smile of someone who had long since lost hope—but still bore the burden without complaint.

He knew Zephyr wouldn't be swayed.

"Alright. I understand."

Zephyr offered a reassuring smile.

"Don't worry. It won't be long before our forces grow stronger."

"Sakazuki, Borsalino, Dragon... And I've heard there are some promising new faces in the current officer training camp?"

Sengoku pushed aside his frustration and nodded with a smile.

"Yeah. You know Gion and Tokikake. After that mission in the North Blue, they've come a long way. With some guidance, they'll definitely become pillars of the Marines."

"And this year's recruits include two more who could rival Sakazuki and the others."

"One of them is Kuzan, from the South Blue. Insanely gifted—like a monster. But more importantly, his sense of justice burns with the intensity of a raging fire."

"Oh?" Zephyr's interest was finally piqued, his eyes lighting up.

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Chapter 124: Volume 2 – Chapter 26: Utterly Ruined

"Burning justice?"

Zephyr's eyes lit up with curiosity.

Though he had already trained outstanding talents like Sakazuki—who had become a pillar of the Marines and shone brilliantly across various posts—deep down, Zephyr had never been fully satisfied with any of them.

Sakazuki's personality was too rigid, his methods brutal. To accomplish a mission, he'd stop at nothing, harsh not only on himself but just as unforgiving toward his subordinates. On the battlefield, he frequently resorted to extreme tactics, ruthlessly eradicating pirates and criminals without hesitation.

This clashed directly with Zephyr's belief in "justice without killing."

Precisely because of Sakazuki's bloodthirsty nature, Zephyr had handpicked him as his adjutant after his graduation from the Officer Training Camp, hoping to temper his mindset through mentorship and lead him toward a more balanced concept of justice.

Unfortunately, that effort fell flat.

Sakazuki remained set in his ways—"never repenting," as he proudly claimed.

In the end, Zephyr had no choice but to let him be.

Dragon, on the other hand, was Sakazuki's complete opposite.

Easygoing, compassionate, tolerant, and charismatic—he was the textbook "son of a hero." With remarkable personal charm and leadership skills, he was widely admired among Marine Headquarters' mid- and lower-ranking officers and soldiers, a true rising star under the banner of justice.

But while he inherited Garp's trait of protecting civilians and his subordinates, Dragon also inherited Garp's flaws.

He was careless, often giving off the impression that he wasn't doing anything productive, and had a habit of "freelancing" when it came to orders from above.

To Zephyr, that was a red flag.

In the Marines, orders were absolute. Discipline was a soldier's first duty.

Acting on personal whim rather than following commands was unacceptable.

Because of their polar opposite personalities and views on justice, Dragon and Sakazuki clashed frequently.

Dragon couldn't stand Sakazuki's harsh and merciless execution of justice, while Sakazuki despised Dragon's indecisive and sloppy approach to work.

As for the last supposed "pillar" of Marine Headquarters—Borsalino?

Well, there really wasn't much to say.

That pillar had long since grown crooked.

Every time Zephyr saw Borsalino's sleazy grin or heard that infuriatingly lazy drawl, he felt like his entire legacy had been ruined by this damned brat.

And to top it off, Borsalino had been the first senior disciple in Zephyr's very first Officer Training Camp...

Thinking about all that, Zephyr turned to Sengoku, eyes brimming with urgency and anticipation.

"Sengoku, tell me more about this kid named Kuzan."

Sengoku looked at him with a smirk and teased, "You're not even trying to hide it... Are you really that disappointed in those three?"

Zephyr paused, then chuckled sheepishly.

"Not exactly. You know me—I'm always hopeful when it comes to new students..."

He couldn't exactly admit those three brats were already beyond salvaging...

Sengoku didn't bother poking holes in the excuse. He knew Zephyr too well.

Even with the most unruly recruits, once they came under Zephyr's wing, he would give them everything he had—no holding back, always patient.

Sengoku smiled.

"I've met Kuzan. He's from the South Blue. His talent is definitely on par with Sakazuki and the others. He's got a real passion for justice. Apparently, that's why he joined the Marines in the first place."

Zephyr nodded along eagerly, then asked, "And the other one?"

"There's one more standout in this year's Officer Training Camp..."

Sengoku's expression suddenly shifted, becoming a bit hesitant.

"Well, there's another—he's from the North Blue. Name's Rogers Daren."

Zephyr's eyes immediately lit up.

"Rogers Daren? That name sounds familiar... Wait, isn't he the rising star people at HQ have been talking about lately? The one who went toe-to-toe with Roger and even forced him to take a loss!?"

Having stepped away from active duty, Zephyr had long stopped involving himself in military affairs, focusing solely on training the next generation of Marines. He only attended major meetings out of respect from Kong and Sengoku, so he wasn't up to date on most internal events.

"Yeah, that's the one," Sengoku confirmed with a nod.

Zephyr's excitement grew.

Not even a graduate of the Officer Training Camp yet, and already capable of dealing a blow to a pirate like Roger?

If he could personally teach and guide this young man named Daren... just how far could he go?

The potential was staggering—Zephyr felt like he'd struck gold.

One thing was clear: Daren wouldn't be any less capable than Sakazuki and the others—he might even surpass them.

"Don't get ahead of yourself," Sengoku warned with a chuckle as he saw Zephyr's face light up. "Daren's not exactly a simple one."

Zephyr waved it off with a laugh. "What could be worse than Sakazuki? Don't scare me."

Sengoku's eye twitched slightly as he mumbled, "Well... Daren's from the North Blue, and he used to be Sakazuki's adjutant."

Zephyr froze, his grin fading a little—but he still smiled.

"That's fine. Just because he served under Sakazuki doesn't mean he shares the same ideology."

Sengoku blinked. "True, he doesn't."

But for some reason, seeing Zephyr so confident made Sengoku feel like messing with him a bit.

Zephyr smiled again, reassured. "Told you."

"He's even more ruthless than Sakazuki."

"The North Blue under his command runs like a steel fortress. Dozens of affiliated and unaffiliated nations obey his every word. He's eradicated over a hundred pirate crews and criminal factions, large and small. The blood on his hands is immeasurable."

Zephyr's smile froze.

Still forcing a grin, he said stiffly, "Even so... if he's managed to bring order to the North Blue, that at least proves he's capable, right?"

Sengoku nodded with a grin. "That's true."

Zephyr let out a sigh of relief and smiled again.

"Well, as long as he's got the skills and decent character, I'm confident I can get him on the right track."

"Oh, I believe in your teaching ability, Zephyr..." Sengoku said cheerfully. "But... in the North Blue, he's notorious as the 'Scum of the Marines.' Greedy, lecherous, a drunk, a gambler, power-hungry—he's got every vice you can think of."

Zephyr: ...

"Sengoku..."

"What?"

"Can you please finish your sentences all at once? You really make people want to punch you. You remind me of someone."

"Who, Zephyr?"

"Your adjutant. Borsalino."

"...Screw you!!"

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Chapter 125: Volume 2 – Chapter 27: You Already Have Borsalino

"How the hell do I resemble that bastard Borsalino!?"

Sengoku looked genuinely offended, clearly touchy about the subject.

"Whether it's personality, work ethic, or execution—I'm nothing like Borsalino!"

"Go ahead, tell me! In what way do I resemble that guy!?"

Just thinking about Borsalino's smug, half-mocking tone was enough to make Sengoku grind his teeth in fury.

Zephyr thought about it seriously for a moment. Honestly, there really wasn't any resemblance. After a brief pause, he forced an answer.

"You both glow when using your Devil Fruit powers."

Sengoku: "..."

Alright then, this was definitely payback for his earlier teasing.

Watching Sengoku's twitching expression, Zephyr finally smiled with satisfaction, then followed up with another question.

"But Sengoku, if this kid Daren has such a terrible reputation, how did he even get approved to join the Officer Training Camp?"

"Because his talent is simply too overwhelming."

At the mention of business, Sengoku's demeanor shifted into seriousness.

"You've been so focused on teaching, there are some things you're just not up to date on."

"Daren used his connections, influence, and resources in the North Blue to build an incredibly powerful fleet. Combine that with his Jiki Jiki no Mi powers, and he's able to make the entire fleet fly."

"—What!?"

Zephyr's pupils contracted, a shocked expression spreading across his face.

A flying fleet?

As one of the pillars of justice and the youngest Admiral in Marine history, Zephyr instantly grasped the strategic weight of such a capability.

"Exactly. With strategic potential like that, his personal issues become secondary."

Sengoku continued.

"And beyond the Devil Fruit powers, Daren's own talent is at a monster level."

He pulled a dossier from a drawer and handed it over.

"This is intel on Daren's individual combat abilities."

"Monster level?"

Zephyr took the file and began flipping through it, speaking casually.

After all, as the Chief Instructor of the Marine training camp, he'd raised monsters like Sakazuki, Dragon, and Borsalino. The term "monster" didn't impress him much anymore.

No matter how monstrous someone was, could they possibly outclass that smug bastard Borsalino?

"Compared to his Devil Fruit power, 'monster-level' talent doesn't seem that—what!?"

Zephyr's eyes bulged like saucers. He nearly shouted.

"A body comparable to Tekkai, impervious to blades and bullets!?"

"He can launch at Soru-like speeds just using pure leg strength!?"

"Insane healing factor—injuries that would kill a normal man heal in days!?"

"He awakened Armament Haki all on his own!?"

"..."

As he scanned line after line of the report, Zephyr could hardly believe what he was reading.

He couldn't explain why, but from these descriptions alone, his mind conjured up an image of Daren as a horned black demon covered in scales, claws like a beast, towering over ten meters tall.

...It certainly didn't match the photo of the handsome, sharp-eyed black-haired youth clipped to the top of the file.

Seeing Zephyr frozen in disbelief, Sengoku couldn't help laughing smugly.

"Now do you get it?"

"Daren is a monster among monsters."

"And more importantly..."

Sengoku leaned in a little, his voice dropping with a hint of pride.

"That kid's awakened Conqueror's Haki."

The second those words left his mouth, Zephyr's expression changed dramatically.

Conqueror's Haki!

As one of the pillars upholding justice and the Marine Corps, Zephyr knew full well what that meant.

Sure, in the wild, chaotic New World, there were plenty of pirates who'd awakened Conqueror's Haki. All of the legends—Whitebeard, Roger, Shiki, Kaidou, Charlotte Linlin—had mastered it at the highest level.

But among the Marines' elite, those with Conqueror's Haki could be counted on one hand.

Even Zephyr himself, a former Admiral and chief instructor, had never awakened it.

And because of that, during his battles in the New World, he'd often come up short against figures like Roger, Whitebeard, and Shiki—not understanding how to counter the mysterious, long-range killing force of Conqueror's Haki.

His only choice had been to rely on pure, refined Armament Haki to power through.

That experience left a scar—and a mission.

He was determined to raise a new generation of Marines who could wield Conqueror's Haki.

But even with prodigies like Sakazuki, Borsalino, and Dragon under his belt, not a single one of them had managed to awaken it.

That had always been one of Zephyr's biggest regrets.

Now, though... hope had arrived.

A Devil Fruit with immense strategic power. Monster-level talent. The awakening of Conqueror's Haki...

The more Zephyr thought about it, the brighter his eyes gleamed.

He could already see it—the young man named Daren, under his guidance, clashing head-to-head with Whitebeard and Shiki, unleashing Conqueror's Haki that shook the heavens, igniting thunder as the sky and sea split apart.

"Good!!"

Zephyr slammed his palm onto the conference table. His eyes were bloodshot, his breath ragged, but his gaze burned with a fiery determination.

"This kid Daren—he's mine to train! Once he graduates, I'll have him—"

"Hold it!!"

Sengoku's face twitched, alarm bells ringing in his mind.

"Not happening!"

"I've already decided—once Daren graduates, he's going to be my adjutant!"

The moment Zephyr opened his mouth, Sengoku knew what he was up to.

"Bullshit! You already have Borsalino!" Zephyr snapped.

That name alone made Sengoku's face darken.

"You can have him! Anyone can! Hell, I'll transfer him to Fleet Admiral Kong as his assistant if I have to. I just want Daren!"

"...And don't forget, Zephyr—I gave up on Sakazuki back then!"

Zephyr shook his head like a rattle drum.

"No way, Sengoku. Think this through—someone like Daren, a rare gem, will be completely ruined if you take him. Let him follow you, and he'll end up as another Borsalino..."

Sengoku's face instantly turned red with anger.

"Borsalino was always like that—don't pin that on me!"

"And let's not forget—you haven't awakened Conqueror's Haki. If Daren becomes your adjutant... what exactly are you going to teach him!?"

Straight to the weak point.

Zephyr's thick neck flushed red. He slammed his fist on the table.

"Like your Conqueror's Haki is anything special! You, with that timid face of yours—I have no idea how you awakened the will to 'reign supreme' in the first place!"

"Still better than you!"

"Damn it, Sengoku! Looks like it's been too long since you got your ass kicked!"

"You think I'm scared of you? With your tickle-strength Armament Haki?"

"Come on, then! Light up, grow big—today I'm tearing that giant Buddha head of yours off your shoulders!"

The two men were nose to nose, snarling and jabbing fingers, faces scrunched up and twisted with fury.

At that moment, a helpless voice interrupted them.

"I swear... you two—aren't you both a little too old to still be acting like you're back in boot camp?"

A silver-haired but striking figure pushed open the door and stepped in, staring at them both with visible exasperation.

Vice Admiral of Marine Headquarters, Chief of Staff—Tsuru.

...

Chapter 126: Volume 2 – Chapter 28: What a Snake

Staff Officer Tsuru was just over forty, but with the nonstop workload at the Marine Headquarters—and Zephyr and Garp both shrugging off responsibilities—she'd been forced to shoulder part of the administrative duties typically reserved for an Admiral. The constant stress had already turned her long hair gray.

Now, rubbing her temples in frustration, she watched Sengoku and Zephyr wrestling on the ground, red-faced and gasping for air, their uniforms rumpled and tugged out of shape.

"What are you two fighting about this time?"

She'd only been a few minutes late filing intelligence reports for the Staff Department, and these two idiots were already brawling?

Sengoku and Zephyr both glanced at Vice Admiral Tsuru, then promptly went back to grappling like children.

"Don't hold me back, Tsuru! I'm gonna beat this bastard into the ground today!"

"You're just in time, Tsuru! Stand right there and watch—I'm about to break Sengoku's glasses and roast his goat for dinner!"

"Damn it, Zephyr! You touch my goat and it's war!"

"Hahaha, scared now? Fine, I won't touch your goat. But Daren is becoming my adjutant!"

"No way! And besides, Zephyr, that brat Daren has a terrible rep. Aren't you the one who hates Marine scum like him the most?"

"Who said that!? That just means he's got more room to improve! And come on, what Marine doesn't have a few flaws?"

"...You shameless old man!"

"Bullshit! Daren's mine!"

"No, he's mine!"

"Borsalino is yours!!"

Veins throbbed on Tsuru's forehead.

After just a few lines of their pointless argument, she finally figured it out—they were fighting over who would get the rising star Daren as their adjutant.

Well, fair enough.

A political genius who brought order to the North Blue and built its fleet from the ground up...

A "monster" whose talents rivaled even Sakazuki's...

Someone who went head-to-head with Roger and actually made him take a loss in their first encounter... and had already awakened Conqueror's Haki...

Any one of those traits would make a young Marine highly sought after. But Rogers Daren—"King of the North Blue"—had all of them.

Thinking of that, Tsuru looked at the two old fools still scrapping like punks and shook her head with a sigh.

"Look, it doesn't matter how much you argue. Garp already told me not long ago—after Daren graduates from Officer Training Camp, he's joining him as his adjutant."

"Bullshit!"

"He's dreaming!"

Sengoku and Zephyr froze, shouting in perfect unison.

Tsuru crossed her arms, smiling faintly.

"But Garp gave some very convincing reasons."

"First, Daren's awakened Conqueror's Haki, and with that monstrous body of his, it's only natural for Garp to guide and train him."

"Second, ever since the disbanding of the Rocks Pirates, the Roger Pirates have been our primary target... Daren's already faced Gol D. Roger once in battle. Letting him join the campaign against them after graduation makes perfect sense."

Hearing her logical breakdown, both Sengoku and Zephyr felt a very bad premonition.

If Garp had officially made the request, there was no way they could out-argue him. And even if they took it to old man Kong, chances were he'd side with Garp in the end.

In other words...

Sengoku and Zephyr exchanged glances—just a flicker of eye contact, but enough.

"Ahem... you know, I think arguing here is pointless," Sengoku said seriously, as he gently helped straighten Zephyr's crooked tie.

"Agreed," Zephyr replied, just as earnestly, brushing the dust off Sengoku's Admiral cloak.

"As high-ranking officers of the Marines, we're no tyrants. The seagull of justice represents freedom and peace. In the end, Daren should decide for himself who he wants to serve under."

"That's right. We have to respect his personal choice."

Sengoku threw an arm around Zephyr's shoulders. They grinned at each other with exaggerated warmth, quietly reaching an unspoken agreement.

Tsuru rolled her eyes.

She knew these two well enough to instantly see through their little scheme.

"And you talk about others..." she muttered, glancing at the still-empty conference room. She frowned and asked, "By the way, where is everyone?"

Just then, a panicked figure rushed into the room.

It was the admin officer Sengoku had yelled at earlier.

"Re-reporting to Admiral Sengoku..."

He was panting, barely able to catch his breath.

"Did you find them?" Sengoku asked, his expression darkening again.

The officer took a deep breath and stammered, "Y-yes... we found them."

"Among the officers who were supposed to attend... Rear Admirals Dragon, Borsalino, Sakazuki... and Vice Admiral Garp... they're all in the same place."

"All in one place?" Sengoku's brow furrowed. They'd all skipped the meeting... together?

What the hell were they up to?

"Yes, Admiral Sengoku," the officer said carefully, watching Sengoku's face as he chose his words.

"They're all at the military hospital."

"Hospital? What for? Did someone get injured—"

Sengoku trailed off mid-sentence, his expression suddenly changing.

"Sengoku?" Zephyr noticed and asked.

Gritting his teeth, Sengoku snapped, "Damn it! Daren was injured in the fight with Roger—he's unconscious and recovering in the military hospital!"

Zephyr's eyes widened, his face darkening in realization.

They looked at each other again, now fully understanding what was happening.

Damn it... Garp got the jump on them!

In the end, the choice of adjutant was up to Daren himself—and who he felt more comfortable with would heavily influence that decision.

"What a snake... That bastard Garp skipped the meeting and went straight to visit him!" Sengoku growled.

Zephyr clenched his fists, equally outraged.

Without hesitation, both men bolted from the room, racing to the exit.

"Where are you going? The meeting's not over!" Tsuru called after them in confusion.

Sengoku didn't even slow down.

"To the hospital—for the meeting!"

...

Chapter 127 Volume 2 – Chapter 29: Training Camp, Begin!

Sengoku and Zephyr stormed through the gates of the Marine hospital, their oppressive aura so intense it startled the doctors and nurses around them.

"Admiral Sengoku... Admiral Zephyr... and Vice Admiral Tsuru... Why do they all look so serious?"

"Is there some kind of emergency?"

"No wonder they're the pillars of the Marines... that presence is terrifying..."

"..."

The staff whispered among themselves as they watched the two imposing figures stride down the hallway, with Tsuru following calmly behind.

Sengoku and Zephyr quickly made their way through the corridor toward the VIP ward. But after just a few steps, they began to hear bursts of laughter from within.

"Come on! Eat the barbecue!! Hahahaha!!"

"Old man, you're so lame! Just a bit of booze and you're already out?"

"Bullshit!! Fill my cup!!"

"Tokikake, stop stuffing your face..."

"Sakazuki, why do you always look like someone owes you money? Relax!"

"..."

Sengoku stopped dead at the ward door, fists clenched tight without even realizing it. His face had turned pitch black.

Zephyr and Tsuru beside him twitched at the corners of their mouths, dark lines appearing on their foreheads.

A banquet? Seriously?

They'd been summoned to the Fleet Admiral's mansion for a meeting, and Garp and the others were throwing a party in the sick ward!?

Zephyr cautiously glanced at Sengoku and noticed the veins on his forehead looked ready to explode.

"Um... Sengoku..."

He hesitated, trying to say something.

But then came Dragon's drunken, slurred voice from inside the room:

"Wait... I think I just remembered... weren't we supposed to do something?"

Garp's voice chimed in:

"Hm? Yeah, that sounds familiar... Lemme think..."

One second later.

"Ah, forget it! Can't remember! Hahahaha! Whatever, if I can't remember it, it probably wasn't important! Hahahaha..."

BANG!!

Sengoku could no longer hold back. With a furious roar, he kicked the ward door off its hinges.

"What the hell do you think you're doing!?"

His eyes blazed red with fury as he roared.

Then he froze.

Silence fell.

The room was a complete mess, littered with empty bottles.

Everyone froze on the spot.

Garp and Dragon were clearly drunk, necks flushed red, arms slung around each other. Garp still had a piece of sizzling roast meat in his mouth, and Dragon was holding a bottle of whisky.

Sakazuki sat cross-legged on the floor, face calm, cleaver in hand, and a charcoal grill blazing in front of him.

Borsalino lounged with his legs crossed, smiling mockingly.

Gion stood there with a blank expression.

Tokikake clutched a microphone, standing next to a speaker of unknown origin, still in the middle of an emotional performance.

The air froze.

Sengoku: ...

Zephyr: ...

Tsuru: ...

Everyone else: ...

"——You bastards!!"

Sengoku's roar thundered through the entire Marine hospital.

...

A few days later.

"Your body is incredible, Commodore Daren. It's like you're made of steel."

The voluptuous blonde doctor set down the medical report, looking at Daren with unconcealed amazement.

She had never seen anything like it. In just a few days, this young Marine Commodore's severe injuries had nearly healed completely. If she hadn't seen it herself, she wouldn't have believed it.

"Thank you for the compliment, Dr. Maria."

Daren, freshly out of his check-up, picked up his new uniform and buttoned it up, covering the wild, scar-covered torso underneath.

He flashed the blonde doctor a charming smile.

"Thanks for taking care of me."

Maria's face flushed slightly at his smile, and she quickly shook her head.

"No, not at all... Commodore Daren, you can just call me Maria."

Daren chuckled.

"No, I still prefer calling you Dr. Maria."

He gave her a playful wink.

At his words, Maria recalled the little secret between them—and those mortifying positions. Her eyes grew even more flustered.

"Ahem..."

A perfectly timed cough shattered the mood.

Maria turned toward the sound and saw a figure standing in the doorway of the newly repaired ward. Her smile vanished, and she nodded flatly.

"Lieutenant Colonel Tokikake."

Tokikake's mouth twitched.

"Later, Dr. Maria."

Daren waved casually at the departing doctor, then turned to Tokikake, who had entered with a face full of exasperation, and grinned.

"Promoted, huh? Commander Tokikake—congrats."

Tokikake shot him a glare and dropped into a chair with a huff.

Thanks to the operations against Byrnndi World and the Roger Pirates, both he and Gion had gotten promotions—despite doing almost nothing.

"Looks like you've had a great time lately. The nurses and doctors were lining up to take care of you."

He spoke with barely concealed jealousy.

Daren glanced at the bruises and swelling all over Tokikake's face, arms, and hands and laughed.

"Looks like your days were pretty full too."

Tokikake snorted, ripped open a fruit basket, and began munching noisily.

That so-called "banquet" had been busted by an enraged Sengoku. Everyone had to submit a written reflection and face punishment.

Of course, in the end, he was the only one who actually suffered.

Gion was Tsuru's god-sister—Sengoku wouldn't dare be harsh with her.

And Dragon, Garp? Please. They couldn't even be bothered to show up for a meeting. Punishment? That went in one ear and out the other.

"You ready?"

Tokikake mumbled around a mouthful of apple.

Daren straightened his tie, grabbed his cloak of justice from the rack, and smiled.

"Been waiting."

The sea breeze drifted through the window, and the broad cloak on the Commodore's back billowed in the wind, carrying with it a quiet yet commanding presence.

Tokikake narrowed his eyes.

Was it just his imagination, or had this guy gotten even stronger since fighting the Roger Pirates?

"I thought you were supposed to be seriously injured..."

He muttered.

Daren ignored him and asked instead:

"Everyone else here?"

Tokikake stood up and nodded.

"You're the last one."

Daren smiled, lit a cigar, took a deep drag, and looked out with a defiant gleam in his eyes.

"Then let's go."

"The Third Officer Training Camp... begins."

...

Chapter 128: Volume 2 – Chapter 30: The Concept of Aerial Assault Operations

Marine Headquarters Marineford was the largest military base Daren had ever seen.

As he stepped out of the military hospital, warmly seen off by the doctors and nurses, he was immediately greeted by the sight of the massive central fortress—towering like a mountain, dominating nearly his entire field of vision.

The gray-black stone walls loomed imposingly. On either side, massive black cannons were mounted, giving the fortress the appearance of a monstrous war beast, its jaws slowly parting to swallow any enemy that dared approach.

Across the ramparts of the fortress, the word "Justice" was boldly painted in jet black, its calligraphy wild and forceful, exuding an overwhelming sense of pressure.

In front of the fortress lay a vast, oval-shaped military port. Numerous multi-deck Buster Call-class warships were docked there, while other vessels came and went constantly on patrol. The sea was filled with white seagull flags, so dense they nearly blocked out the sun.

Daren scanned the area. On either side of the port and throughout the military buffer zones stood rows of towering gun turrets, their black metal surfaces gleaming under the sunlight. Compared to them, the Marines patrolling or repairing equipment below looked as small as ants.

He also noticed a number of Marine guards whose aura alone marked them as hardened veterans, soldiers who had clearly survived countless battles.

"See that? This is Marine Headquarters."

Next to him, Tokikake puffed contentedly on a cigar he'd "borrowed" from the hospital's gift basket. Noticing Daren's slightly surprised, flickering gaze, he puffed out his chest proudly and grinned.

"Well... I'll give you this—your North Blue Fleet is impressively trained. But the strongest force of justice in the world is still the ground you're standing on."

"Since the formation of the Marines, no one has ever broken through Marineford."

Tokikake looked proud, one hand on his hip, as if giving a grand tour.

He wore the expression of a city slicker proudly showing a country boy around his hometown.

"This kind of military power isn't something your little North Blue can compare to... Hey, hey, hey, what are you thinking about?"

He frowned as he noticed Daren simply squinting at Marineford, unmoved.

"Oh... nothing,"

Daren blinked and smiled, brushing it off.

"I was just thinking... if it were me, could I find a way to take Marineford down?"

"Don't be ridiculous—wait, what!?"

Tokikake whipped his head around, staring at the Marine Commodore in disbelief.

"Just kidding, just kidding..."

Daren chuckled and raised both hands in mock surrender.

"Come on, Tokikake. Isn't the training camp about to start?"

Tokikake narrowed his eyes suspiciously, then after a brief pause, couldn't help but ask:

"If it were you... could you actually do it?"

Daren paused.

"If I were leading the North Blue Fleet, and used its mobility to avoid the heavy artillery zones and carry out an aerial assault..."

"Aerial assault? What's that supposed to mean?"

Tokikake interrupted, his face full of confusion.

"Oh, right... I forgot," Daren said. "An aerial assault is a large-scale attack launched from the air."

He added the explanation casually.

In this world, people still had a very primitive and crude understanding of warfare.

Without any real aerial military capability, the very concept of an air raid simply didn't exist in their minds—let alone the vast array of tactics that could evolve from such operations.

"Ohhh, I see now... I mean, of course I knew that. Just slipped my mind for a second."

Tokikake tilted his chin up proudly.

"So? What's your point?"

Daren didn't call out the obvious bluff. He simply rubbed his chin, thought for a moment, then said calmly,

"If we can find a way to keep Borsalino and Dragon occupied... I'd say there's a thirty percent chance I could cripple Marineford's key military facilities. Maybe a ten percent chance I could flatten the entire island."

"Yeah, I figured—wait, what!?"

Tokikake's eyes went wide as he stared at Daren like he'd seen a ghost.

"Hahaha, just kidding."

Daren winked and gave him a pat on the shoulder.

"This is the heart of the world's might—Justice itself. Like anyone could ever bring it down..."

With that, he turned and began walking briskly toward the training camp.

"Just... kidding?"

Tokikake stood frozen, staring at Daren's tall silhouette. The morning sun sliced through the sky like a blade, illuminating him from behind—and casting a long, heavy shadow on the ground.

Even the word "Justice" emblazoned across his back suddenly felt chilling and solemn.

Tokikake dazedly looked up at the sky.

The sky was a brilliant blue, clouds drifting lazily. White seagulls soared past, letting out cheerful cries as they glided above.

But in Tokikake's mind, a different image suddenly surfaced—

Warships, cold and metallic like beasts of iron, emerged slowly from behind the sea of white clouds, like dragons of war descending from the heavens. At the sound of a chilling command, a rain of cannon fire streaked across the sky like burning tails, crashing down upon Marineford in a relentless storm... until endless flames swallowed everything, including that lone figure standing tall amidst the chaos.

"...Commander Tokikake... Commander Tokikake?"

Daren's voice snapped him out of the vision. He blinked and saw Daren standing a short distance away, wearing a half-smile that wasn't quite friendly.

"Aren't you in a hurry to get to the training camp?"

Tokikake jolted, instinctively catching up as he replied,

"Right, right."

But a cold shiver ran down his spine.

Daren had said it was a joke... but something about the way he had been thinking felt all too serious.

Daren paid no attention to Tokikake's strange reaction.

Observing terrain, analyzing strategic value... it was just second nature to him.

As the admiral in charge of an entire sea region's military affairs, his thinking was always grounded in practicality and warfare. It was the mindset he'd spent years honing.

Where others might look at a grand military fortress and think, "Damn, this is incredible," someone with Daren's mind would instinctively ask, "If it were me... how would I take this place down?"

He was certain that when Sakazuki had first left the North Blue and set foot in Marineford, he'd had the exact same thought.

...

In under fifteen minutes, Daren and a distracted Tokikake had passed through the core of the military zone and arrived at its edge.

They stopped in front of a secluded area of buildings.

A modestly repaired gate was set into an ivy-covered wall.

In front of the gate stood a massive stone slab, etched with a solemn inscription.

"All glory and life belong to justice."

The signature read: Zephyr.

...

Chapter 129: Volume 2 – Chapter 31: The Hot-Blooded Youth Kuzan

Golden sunlight poured down from the sky as ivy on the speckled wall rustled softly, lush and vibrant.

Bathed in the light, the stone tablet gave off a sense of solemnity and grandeur, calming the heart.

"I heard... we're the last class of the elite Officer Training Camp."

Tokikake had more or less recovered by now. He stubbed out his cigar and looked at the words engraved deeply into the stone in front of him as he spoke slowly.

"Zephyr-sensei has already submitted a proposal to Headquarters. After our class graduates, the Navy will establish an official academy to expand recruitment and better train mid-level officers for Marine Headquarters."

Daren also put out his cigar.

Though he wasn't someone who usually cared much for rules, some things went beyond rules.

"That's a good idea."

During his stay at the military hospital, Daren hadn't just been playing silly games with Doctor Maria. He'd been handling business, too.

From casual chats with doctors and nurses, combined with the intel he'd gathered back in North Blue, he'd pieced together a rough understanding of Headquarters' current military and political structure.

Unlike the timeline from the original story, by the end of Sea Circle Calendar 1492, the "Golden Generation" of Marine Headquarters hadn't risen yet.

Vice Admiral Garp, wanting the freedom to chase Roger across the seas, had repeatedly refused promotion to Admiral.

Zephyr, disillusioned with the Marines after losing his wife and child, had stepped away from the front lines and devoted himself to educating the next generation.

Sakazuki, Dragon, and Borsalino were still in their early twenties, at the peak of their growth, but not yet among the true top-tier forces of the sea.

And the future core of Marine Headquarters—the elite Vice Admirals like Yamakaji and others—were still in training camps, stuck in the lower ranks, or hadn't even joined the Marines yet.

It was a period when the Marines were at their weakest. The five existing Vice Admirals, aside from Garp and Tsuru, had essentially risen through years of service and seniority rather than exceptional combat ability. Few among them could truly stand alone.

As the Chief Instructor of the Marines, Zephyr had clearly sensed the flaws in Headquarters. That's why he pushed to found a full naval academy and expand the training system.

And Daren, knowing the story, understood perfectly—Zephyr's decision was absolutely spot-on.

It was thanks to that decision that he raised the most brilliant "Golden Generation" in Marine history, ushering in a golden age that elevated the Marines to global dominance.

Of course, it was also that same generation that ultimately dug his grave and buried him.

The world, as always, was full of irony.

...

"Ahhh... I've been waiting so long, and finally... it's time."

A lazy voice suddenly drifted out from behind the stone tablet.

Tokikake's expression shifted. He glanced warily at the tall figure slowly stepping out from behind the monument.

Someone was hiding there—so close—and he hadn't noticed at all!?

"Who are you?"

He instinctively looked toward Daren, only to find that the man's expression hadn't changed at all. Clearly, he'd already noticed the stranger.

The newcomer had black, curly hair and wore a loose white shirt. There was an unexplainable air of laziness about him.

"Excuse me, are you Rogers Daren from the North Blue? The 'King of the North Blue' who fought alongside Vice Admiral Garp and clashed head-on with the Great Pirate Gol D. Roger?"

The black-haired young man didn't spare Tokikake a second glance—his eyes were locked on Daren.

Daren smiled.

"That's what they say. And yeah, I'm Rogers Daren."

The moment the words left his mouth, the young man's laid-back expression vanished, replaced instantly by visible excitement.

"Hahahaha! I knew it was you!"

"You took down Byrndi World and went head-to-head with Roger... That's incredible, Daren!"

He rushed forward like a fan meeting his idol, eyes burning with admiration.

"Oh! Almost forgot to introduce myself—Kuzan, from the South Blue. I'm about to enter the third Officer Training Camp. My short-term goal is to graduate as the top trainee! As for the long term..."

He clenched a fist and swung it through the air proudly.

"My dream is to become an Admiral! A hero, like Vice Admiral Garp!"

His voice rang with certainty.

Silence fell.

Caw, caw, caw...

A few crows flapped overhead.

Tokikake's mouth twitched violently.

This guy... is he an idiot?

He couldn't help but complain in his head.

Daren looked at the bursting-with-energy newcomer and rubbed his temples, a few black lines forming on his forehead.

Yeah, he recognized this uninvited guest at a glance.

The future Marine Admiral. The guy who would later champion "Lazy Justice"... Kuzan.

He'd known that, at this point in time, Kuzan still clung to "Burning Justice" and had joined the training camp in the same year as him—but he hadn't expected Kuzan to be this... fired up.

"Nice to meet you, Kuzan," Daren said flatly.

"Hey there, Kuzan! I'm Tokikake, a well-known genius at Marine Headquarters."

Tokikake had also recognized who Kuzan was. As a future classmate, he stepped forward and offered a friendly hand.

"I'm sure you've heard of me, right? I also fought Byrnni World and Gol D. Roger—and made it out alive. I—huh?"

The smile on his face froze.

Kuzan didn't even acknowledge him. He walked right past, slung an arm around Daren's neck, and beamed with curiosity and excitement.

"So, Daren! Is it true you caught Roger off guard?"

Daren's eye twitched slightly, clearly not used to such enthusiasm. He casually slipped out of Kuzan's grip and replied,

"Kind of."

Tokikake sheepishly withdrew his still-outstretched hand and muttered bitterly,

"...he just pulled Roger's pants down, that's all."

Kuzan's eyes lit up like stars.

"Seriously!? You actually pulled Roger's pants down? That's..."

"That's amazing!"

Tokikake: ...

Daren: ...

...

Chapter 130: Volume 2 – Chapter 32: A Lifelong Rival

The moment Daren stepped through the gates of the Officer Training Camp, he inexplicably gained a tagalong.

Kuzan followed close behind like an overexcited fanboy, practically glowing with admiration as he trailed Daren's steps, voicing one awestruck comment after another.

"I heard during the operation against the World Pirates, you faced the great pirate Byrnni World all on your own, right?"

"And, and... I heard you built an unbeatable fleet in the North Blue...!"

"That's just so cool..."

Faced with the overly enthusiastic Kuzan, Daren found himself with a headache. He could only respond now and then with half-hearted replies.

"I've made up my mind!!"

Suddenly, Kuzan rushed forward and stopped Daren in his tracks.

He raised his arm, puffed out his chest, and pointed straight at Daren. His eyes blazed like fire, and a determined smile spread across his thick lips as he clenched his fist tightly.

"Daren! From this day forward, you are my one and only... lifelong rival!!"

"Are you ready to face my burning fighting spirit and justice!?"

Daren: ...

Tokikake: ...

Daren's mouth twitched.

Looking at the hot-blooded youth standing in front of him, Daren had a strong feeling that his time in this training camp was going to be anything but peaceful.

...

Since the Officer Training Camp hadn't yet been expanded into a full Naval Academy, each class had only a small number of trainees, and the overall grounds weren't that large.

Daren, Kuzan, and Tokikake quickly located the main drill field.

It was midday, and the sun was scorching. The air shimmered with heat as yellow sand blew across the grounds. Even the sea breeze couldn't ease the sweltering temperature.

Over a dozen Marine officers of varying builds had already arrived. Some were quietly polishing their swords, some flexed in preparation, some stood in silence, and others leaned against the tall wall's shadow, calmly smoking.

The arrival of the three newcomers quickly drew attention, triggering waves of whispered conversation.

"That's him, right?"

"Rogers Daren..."

"The one they call the 'King of the North Blue'... the one who took down Byrnndi World?"

"He really does give off a powerful vibe..."

"..."

All eyes locked onto the tall figure walking at the front. Their expressions varied, each harboring their own thoughts.

"Who are the two with Daren? You know them, Dalmatian?"

Someone asked a young officer whose face bore Dalmatian-like markings beneath a military cap.

Dalmatian responded slowly,

"The guy with the brown cap is Tokikake, from Headquarters—talented... As for the yawning guy with the curly black hair? No idea."

"You know him, Yamakaji?"

"Yeah, that's Kuzan. He's from the South Blue, same as me. Total monster,"

The buzz-cut officer with a square face named Yamakaji smiled as he spoke, a lit cigar between his lips.

Despite his rugged features, his grin radiated a calm, approachable warmth.

"He's absurdly strong. Headquarters made a special exception to let him in."

"...A monster, huh?"

Not far away, a gloomy man who'd been polishing his saber looked up at that word.

His dull-toned skin reflected a cold sheen, and his eyes brimmed with icy battle intent. His reddish-brown hair hung messily like spider legs.

"Careful, Onigumo. This isn't West Blue vacation time," spoke a young man with a cross-shaped scar on his cheek. His stern gaze was laced with teasing.

"Even if West Blue's relaxed, it's still better than your so-called 'weakest East Blue,' Doberman," Onigumo shot back coldly.

Doberman snorted.

"Still bitter? We can go another round. I doubt yesterday was satisfying enough for you."

Onigumo sneered.

"Forget it. I'm not interested in weaklings."

As he said that, his sharp gaze shifted from Kuzan to focus directly on Daren.

...

While the rest of the trainees assessed the three newcomers, Daren was also taking stock of those present.

Though they all looked at least twenty years younger than in the original timeline, their defining features were easy to recognize.

The one with the Dalmatian spots was Dalmatian, a Zoan-type user of the Inu Inu no Mi, Model: Dalmatian. A future elite Vice Admiral who would one day severely injure Luffy during the Summit War of Marineford using Soru and Shigan.

The buzz-cut man with the beard and gentle smile was Yamakaji—a future elite Vice Admiral as well. He would one day watch over Vice Admiral Tsuru during the war, known for being both strong and kind. A role model for young Marines, and one of the five Vice Admirals in the Enies Lobby Buster Call. He would take part in two such missions in total.

The one with messy reddish-brown hair and a sinister look was Onigumo. Another future elite Vice Admiral, known for his ruthless personality. He wouldn't hesitate to sacrifice his own subordinates during missions. A hawkish enforcer and participant in the Buster Call initiative.

The man with the scarred face was Doberman. A hardliner and elite Vice Admiral who, during the latter stages of the Marineford War, would help Sakazuki pursue the remnants of the Whitebeard Pirates. He was infamous for directly berating the Red-Haired Yonkō when Shanks requested they stop dishonoring the dead—Whitebeard and Ace.

As for the others, Daren didn't recognize them.

After all, the original plot didn't delve too deeply into Marine personnel. But one thing was certain—anyone who passed Headquarters' selection process and entered this training camp was bound to become a pillar of the Marines in the future.

Unlike the mass recruitment drives of later generations, the early Officer Training Camp only accepted the cream of the crop—rightfully known as the "cradle of Admirals."

"Hey, hey, hey, Daren, Kuzan... They're looking at us kinda weird..."

Tokikake shifted uneasily under the weight of the surrounding stares.

"The fire in their eyes... It's getting me pumped!!"

Kuzan adjusted his sunglasses and grinned, full of spirit.

Tokikake rolled his eyes and ignored the overly excited youth, turning to Daren instead.

Daren waved him off and chuckled, "Tokikake, take two steps to the side."

"Huh? Okay... How's this?"

"Two more."

"Alright."

"Still uncomfortable?"

"No... actually, I feel fine now!"

Tokikake looked surprised.

"What changed?"

Daren said flatly,

"Because they're only looking at me and Kuzan. Not you."

Tokikake: ...

"Hahahaha!! So, everyone's here, huh!?"

A booming, hearty laugh echoed from the training grounds' entrance.

Everyone stood at once, straightening their caps, sheathing their weapons, and turning toward the voice with solemn expressions.

The wind kicked up yellow sand as a towering, broad-shouldered figure strode in with steady, powerful steps.

Short purple hair, bronze skin, and bulging muscles straining against his uniform. He wore black sunglasses, and a gold-fringed Admiral's cape flared dramatically behind him.

A heavy, awe-inspiring presence swept over the entire field.

Former Marine Admiral of Headquarters—Zephyr. Marine codename: "Black Arm."