

One Piece 131

Chapter 131: Volume 2 – Chapter 33: The Top Five

As Zephyr entered the training grounds, the gathered Marine officers instinctively formed into a neat formation.

Daren noticed Gion quietly stepping in behind him to take her place in line. He allowed himself a faint smile.

Soon enough, Zephyr reached the front of the formation.

Standing before the legendary former admiral and chief instructor, every Marine straightened their posture and raised their hands in a unified salute.

"Zephyr-sensei!!"

No matter how proud or defiant they had been before arriving at Marine Headquarters, in front of this man—this living legend who had trained generation after generation of "monsters"—they all offered their sincerest respect.

"Not bad! Spirited and imposing!"

Zephyr scanned the row of youthful, determined faces and the eyes burning with ambition. A satisfied smile crept onto his face.

Every time he saw young people like this, striving to walk the path of justice under his guidance, he felt a deep pride that words could hardly express.

It was that same feeling that kept him here, teaching, even after he'd lost faith in the institution itself.

In some quiet corner of his heart, Zephyr understood that the satisfaction of raising the next generation helped dull the grief and pain he still carried.

Adjusting his sunglasses, he began to speak.

"Before the training officially begins, I'd like to offer my congratulations."

His voice was deep and steady, echoing through the training grounds and settling clearly into the mind of every trainee.

"Congratulations on being officially accepted into the Marine Headquarters Officer Training Camp."

As his warm smile spread, many of the students couldn't help but smile along with him.

"You come from all corners of the world. Some from the peaceful East Blue, some from the wealthy West Blue, others from the chaotic North Blue..."

"Before today, your lives were vastly different. Some of you were high-ranking officers in control of entire sea regions. Others were ordinary soldiers..."

"You've all walked a long, hard road to reach this place. I know it hasn't been easy."

"And you should be proud of yourselves."

At those words, the trainees instinctively stood straighter.

Daren noticed that Kuzan's eyes were glowing, his clenched fists trembling with excitement.

"But!"

Zephyr's tone suddenly sharpened.

"All of that ends now!"

"Your past identities, honors, achievements—they no longer matter. Here, in this camp, you are nothing!"

"From now on, you will rebuild your lives from the ground up."

"You're about to live through the best and the worst year of your lives."

"You will be pushed to your physical and mental limits on every front..."

...

At the same time, atop a building overlooking the training ground stood three tall figures, side by side.

Their long coats, symbolizing their rank as Rear Admirals, fluttered behind them in the wind.

"Here we go again... a new beginning,"

Borsalino said with a lazy grin, hands in his pockets as he watched the scene below.

"Thinking back, those really were good days."

A flicker of nostalgia crossed Dragon's eyes before he gave a small smile.

"Still, this is the third batch now, and Zephyr-sensei's speech hasn't changed a word."

Borsalino shrugged.

"What I want to know is—who's going to take the top spot this time?"

"No one managed to claim it last time. That was a shame..."

He glanced sideways at Sakazuki and Dragon.

Sakazuki remained silent.

He studied the crowd below for a moment, then turned away without a word.

"Oh? Not staying to see how it plays out? I heard that kid Kuzan has talent like ours—monster-level, they say."

Borsalino sounded genuinely surprised as he watched Sakazuki's retreating back.

"No need."

Sakazuki didn't stop walking.

"'Monster-level' isn't special. Everyone here carries that title."

"He won't beat my adjutant."

With that cold response, Sakazuki vanished from their sight.

"Man... cold as ever."

Borsalino scratched his head with mock helplessness, then turned to Dragon.

"What about you? What's your take, Dragon?"

Dragon paused in thought, then spoke slowly.

"That Kuzan kid... I've read his file. He's impressive."

"If Daren weren't here, he'd crush the competition without even trying."

Borsalino smiled.

"That's a real shame, huh?"

...

"...Now, open your eyes and take a good look around. Say hello to your competitors—and your future comrades."

Back on the field, Zephyr was nearing the end of his speech.

Everyone remained laser-focused.

"It doesn't matter whether you were successful or failed in the past, whether you were glorious or forgotten, strong or weak... none of that matters now."

"Because the moment you stand before me, your life's starting line is reset."

"I will give you everything I've learned—without holding anything back."

"This is your stage."

"And whether your story ends in triumph or failure... is up to you."

"Now, before we officially begin the camp, let me ask—"

"Does anyone here wish to withdraw? If you do, speak up now."

Zephyr's sharp gaze swept across the crowd.

Fifteen trainees met his eyes with unwavering determination.

There was no way anyone would give up a chance this rare—one that countless Marines would fight for.

Zephyr's smile deepened.

"Very well. Then I hereby declare..."

He drew a deep breath, and his voice rang across the field.

"The Third Elite Officer Training Camp of Marine Headquarters—officially begins!"

"Next, as per tradition, the new trainees will engage in randomized combat. Based on strength, the top five positions in the camp will be determined."

Tokikake raised his hand, curiosity written on his face.

"Zephyr-sensei, is there a reward for making the top five?"

Zephyr shook his head.

"No. In terms of teaching resources, all students are treated equally. No exceptions."

He grinned, a spark of amusement in his eyes.

"But the top five list itself—that's the biggest reward, isn't it?"

The moment those words landed, a fiery battle spirit ignited in everyone's eyes.

He was right. The list itself was the reward.

Every one of them had been handpicked from across the world—elite, exceptional, and confident. None of them were willing to fall behind.

For a Marine, honor is the highest prize!

To stand among the top five in a camp full of the best...

To claim the title of number one!

...

Chapter 132: Volume 2 – Chapter 34: Drawing Lots and the First Battle

Top of the class.

It didn't come with any material rewards, but for the Marines present, that title was more valuable than any prize.

After all, just by entering the Officer Training Camp, they were already halfway through the door to becoming high-ranking officers. Their futures were set to be pillars of Marine Headquarters.

What they lacked—was recognition.

Think for a moment about who had taken the "top of the class" title in previous years, and its weight became clear.

The first training camp had two joint top graduates: Borsalino and Sakazuki, both now Rear Admirals, both referred to as "monsters."

The second: "Hero's Son" Monkey D. Dragon, also a Rear Admiral.

If someone could seize that title now, they'd instantly be placed on equal footing with those legends.

Even if they didn't take the top spot, the ranks below—second, third, all the way to fifth—were still worth fighting for. No one wanted to be left unnamed.

Everyone here was a genius, a carefully selected elite from Marine branches across the world. And being in their early twenties, they were at the peak of youthful pride—none of them willing to play second fiddle.

With that in mind, glances began to shift toward Daren and Kuzan. Some subtle, some bold. But all full of challenge.

"Alright, time to draw lots,"

Zephyr took in their stares and posturing with a faint smile.

He pulled a bundle of small, crumpled slips from his coat and opened his broad, calloused palm.

"There are fifteen of you. These slips are numbered one through seven. If you draw the same number as someone else, you'll face off. Fourteen of you will fight in the first round."

"That also means one of you will get a "pass" and move on directly."

No one objected—after all, luck was part of strength.

Especially on the battlefield, where a stray shell could decide your fate at any moment.

"Daren, I hope I get to fight you in the first round!"

Kuzan clenched his fists, eyes sparkling with excitement.

Daren smiled. "Same here."

He was genuinely curious about Kuzan's strength.

Right now, Kuzan wasn't yet the powerhouse Admiral he'd become. His power was still developing—this might be one of the few opportunities to give him a hard time.

Nearby, Tokikake had his arms crossed and was muttering softly to himself:

"Please not Daren, please not Daren..."

He hadn't forgotten how he and Gion had been tormented in the North Blue. Daren's style of combat was brutal—like fighting a wild beast.

That memory still made him shudder.

Then his gaze flicked to Kuzan, who was stretching with wild enthusiasm, and he added:

"Not Daren or Kuzan, not Daren or Kuzan..."

Getting either of them in round one would be immediate elimination.

The humiliation of losing straight away?

"Genius Tokikake of HQ eliminated in the first round!"

Absolutely not.

He stepped forward with trembling hands, stared at the slips for a while, then hesitantly chose one.

"Not Daren or Kuzan, not Daren or Kuzan..."

He muttered as he opened it—just loud enough for Zephyr to sigh.

"I got a pass!!!"

Tokikake suddenly shot both arms into the air, proudly displaying the number "8" on his paper. His grin stretched almost to his ears.

Silence fell.

Everyone turned to look at him. Tokikake froze in place.

"..."

"Ahem..."

He coughed, expression shifting instantly into a solemn mask.

"What I meant was... truly unfortunate."

Hands behind his back, he sighed deeply with the air of a man burdened by fate.

"I had hoped to face masters like Daren or Kuzan right off the bat... but it seems I'll have to wait until the next round."

He swept his eyes over the crowd, cape fluttering dramatically.

"Good luck, everyone. I'll be waiting in round two."

Everyone: "..."

Zephyr: "..."

Gion groaned and covered her face.

Daren's mouth twitched.

"Commander Tokikake..."

Kuzan walked over to Daren, full of admiration, eyes glued to Tokikake's melodramatic pose.

"That was so cool!!"

Daren, Gion, Zephyr: "..."

...

Soon, the results were revealed.

Tokikake had the Pass and advanced directly.

Kuzan drew number "1." His opponent: Doberman, Captain of Marine Headquarters and former East Blue Admiral.

Gion drew number "2." Her opponent: Commander Mozambica from the West Blue.

Daren vaguely remembered Mozambica. He was the poor guy who got controlled by Doflamingo during the Seven Warlords meeting and ended up attacking his fellow Vice Admirals. Among them, his strength ranked low.

Daren quietly opened his own slip.

The number: "5."

"Number 5... Looks like your opponent is me, Commodore Daren."

A deep voice came from behind.

Daren turned to see a tall, well-built man in a cloak, saber at his waist, and draped in spotted dog fur.

Dalmatian. A Commander from the Grand Line. A future Vice Admiral.

"I've heard your name plenty."

"The man who killed Byrnni World. They say you're a monster... I want to see how far I still have to go to reach you."

Dalmatian's gaze burned with focus. His pupils slowly shifted—turning from black to golden-brown slits, like those of a dog.

A feral energy radiated from his body.

Daren remained calm and smiled.

"I won't let you down, Commander Dalmatian."

"Alright, let's begin the duels in order," Zephyr announced once everyone had found their match.

"In these duels, you may use any weapon or Devil Fruit power. There are no rules."

"I expect all of you to fight with everything you've got."

He raised his hand.

"First match—Kuzan versus Doberman!"

"Step forward!"

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Chapter 133: Volume 2 – Chapter 35: The Monster's Strength

As Zephyr's powerful voice rang out, the group of Marines instinctively stepped aside, clearing an open space.

"Ara ara, I'm up first? That really gets the blood pumping!"

Kuzan smiled as he strode confidently into the center of the arena.

Zephyr narrowed his eyes, watching him closely, a faint smile tugging at his lips.

This kid always gave off a lazy vibe, but whenever something piqued his interest, he'd get fired up and passionate. Two completely opposing traits somehow coexisted seamlessly in him.

"So full of energy..." Zephyr murmured to himself.

In the training camp, ranking the top five through duels was tradition. It stirred up competition among the students while also giving instructors a great opportunity to observe them.

Through these fights, students got to know each other better, and instructors could gain a clearer picture of each one's strengths and weaknesses, tailoring their guidance accordingly.

At that moment, Doberman—his face marked by a scar—stepped out from the crowd, wearing a grim expression and staring coldly at Kuzan.

"My original target was Daren. I wanted to see for myself how strong the so-called 'King of the North Blue' really is. I've heard his name way too many times lately... Honestly, I'm sick of it."

"But it looks like if I want to fight Daren, I'll have to get through you first, Kuzan."

Before arriving at HQ for training, Doberman was the highest-ranking officer in the East Blue, holding the title of East Blue Admiral. As one of the Admirals of the Four Seas, he'd heard about Daren's reputation long ago.

In some ways, Daren's excellence as North Blue Admiral had placed tremendous pressure on him—and that pressure bred a deep sense of frustration.

Sure, Daren had taken down the great pirate Byrnni World and walked away unscathed after clashing with Gol D. Roger. His strength was recognized.

But Doberman didn't buy into the hype. After all, Admiral Sengoku and Rear Admiral Borsalino also joined the fight against the World Pirates. And during the skirmish with Roger, Vice Admiral Garp and Rear Admiral Dragon were present too.

Who could say what really happened?

The only way to know... was to fight. Even if he lost, he had to lose with no regrets.

"Sorry, but Daren's my opponent," Kuzan said, scratching his head with a hint of awkwardness.

"Then I won't hold back," Doberman replied, his hand slowly settling on the hilt of his saber as he lowered his stance.

With that movement, a heavy, imposing aura radiated from him.

The wind kicked up sand, sending his white cloak fluttering.

He stepped forward with his right foot, bent his left knee, and took the posture of a taut bow ready to fire.

Kuzan narrowed his eyes.

What a beautiful Battōjutsu stance... Gion's eyes lit up.

"Planning to end this in one strike?" Daren asked, smiling calmly.

The crowd fell silent, holding their breath, eyes fixed on the scene.

No one wanted to miss a thing.

After all, no matter who won, the victor would become a future rival.

A chance to gauge your competition's combat ability? No one was passing that up.

The atmosphere grew increasingly tense.

Suddenly—

The sand erupted into the air.

Doberman lunged forward like a pouncing leopard, his speed nearly impossible to follow with the naked eye.

A brilliant flash of steel exploded forth.

In an instant, his aura shifted from solid to sharp—powerful and unstoppable!

That slash had reached the level of a swordsman capable of cutting steel!

Sssh!!

An exaggerated gash appeared on Kuzan's shoulder—but not a single drop of blood spilled.

Instead, shimmering ice crystals floated into the air, reflecting the sunlight before vanishing in the wind.

Doberman now stood behind Kuzan.

He stared blankly at his saber and hand, both frozen, struggling to process what just happened.

The surrounding Marines were stunned, their pupils contracting.

"A Logia!?"

"That's... ice?!"

"There's no way to win against that..."

"No, look at Doberman's hand and saber—they're frozen!"

"Wait... does that mean...?"

They turned their gazes toward Doberman's hand and saber, expressions shifting from confusion to shock.

Battōjutsu focused on explosive speed and power, channeling the body's full force into a single, devastating strike.

Doberman's slash had pushed those principles to the limit.

Even with Kuzan being a Logia user, the elemental nature of his Devil Fruit alone shouldn't have been enough to freeze Doberman's blade and hand.

There was only one explanation—

Kuzan had tracked the exact trajectory of the strike and activated his Elementalization at the precise moment it landed.

To pull that off required exceptional dynamic vision, lightning-fast reflexes, speed, and flawless control over his Devil Fruit powers.

"Monster..."

"He really is a monster..."

The Marines whispered in awe.

"So strong..." Tokikake muttered, stunned.

He ran a mental simulation of himself in Doberman's position, and his expression immediately sank.

Zero chance of winning!

Even without his Devil Fruit powers, Kuzan was on another level!

"...That was one fast slash."

Kuzan scratched his head and muttered.

Ice crystals slowly crept across the wound on his chest until the skin returned to normal.

"Don't screw with me..." Doberman growled through gritted teeth.

He slowly rose, turned around, and the ice covering his hand and saber cracked and flaked off.

"You really are a 'monster'—dominant in every way... It's hopelessly overwhelming."

Doberman sheathed his saber, shook his head, and looked at Kuzan with a complicated expression. After a brief silence, he said quietly,

"I lost... Thanks for the lesson, Kuzan."

Kuzan gave him a big, cheerful smile and a thumbs-up.

"Your slash was pretty awesome too!"

Doberman froze. A wave of irritation surged in his chest—was Kuzan mocking him?

But when he met Kuzan's honest and warm gaze, he was stunned.

This guy... seemed completely sincere.

Some words, when said by certain people, just sound like sarcasm.

But coming from someone like Kuzan, so full of youthful passion, they felt genuine.

Doberman pressed his lips together and finally gave a bitter smile.

"Losing to a monster isn't shameful."

"But I'll catch up to you."

His eyes quickly hardened with determination.

Kuzan grinned wide.

"I'll be waiting!"

Doberman smiled wryly again.

This guy... you just couldn't hate him.

Watching the exchange, Zephyr nodded with satisfaction. Then, in a loud voice, he announced:

"First match, winner: Kuzan!"

"The second duel is about to begin... Gion vs. Mozambica!"

"Step forward!"

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Chapter 134: Volume 2 – Chapter 36: Here He Comes

As Zephyr finished speaking, Gion gave him a nod and stepped out from the crowd.

Her tall figure, long black hair tied into a sleek ponytail, slim waist and long legs, along with her black military boots, gave her a heroic and striking presence. Instantly, all eyes were on her.

"Heh heh heh... You see that? That's my childhood sweetheart! Gion's about to accept my confession and become my girlfriend!"

Tokikake grinned like an idiot as he sidled up to Kuzan, chuckling.

"Really? I don't buy it."

Kuzan scratched his head, looking genuinely doubtful.

"She seems pretty cold toward you."

Tokikake's smile froze in place.

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Compared to the attention-grabbing Gion, her opponent Mozambia looked rather ordinary. His dark skin had a tanned hue, his short hair was a deep gray, and a jagged scar ran across his left cheek.

"Give up. I don't cut women."

Mozambia stared at Gion, his tone cold and indifferent.

Gion said nothing.

Her expression calm, she placed a hand on the hilt of her sword and slowly drew it.

As the golden Meito slid free of its sheath, a sharp hiss echoed in the air.

The long, slender blade gleamed brilliantly under the sun.

In that instant, Gion's aura shifted dramatically—becoming cold, sharp, and intense.

Mozambia's face changed slightly. A chill raced down his spine, his skin prickling.

That presence...

Gritting his teeth, he suddenly lunged forward, drawing his saber and gripping it with both hands as he swung it down toward Gion's flawless face.

A powerful gust surged forward, tossing her black hair into a chaotic flutter.

But her eyes didn't waver in the slightest.

In that moment, everything else faded. Countless battle memories flashed through her mind, finally condensing into the image of a black-haired man.

Clang!!

Mozambia's saber was stopped cold by the golden Meito. The blade halted a mere centimeter from Gion's forehead—unable to go any further.

Mozambia's eyes widened in shock.

That strike... was blocked so easily!?

"So slow..."

He thought he heard a cold voice murmur.

A sudden gust roared!

Streaks of silver light burst into view, growing rapidly in his eyes!

"No way!!"

Mozambia's panicked shout rang out.

Then—

A cold command echoed.

A sweeping, crescent-shaped wave of sword energy surged forth, swallowing him whole.

Before the roaring arc of the slash, Mozambia's towering frame looked like a lone wave in a raging sea, flung violently into the air and crashing down dozens of meters away.

He struggled to rise, kneeling on one knee, staring at the distant figure in disbelief.

The fine steel saber in his hand shattered with a crackle into countless fragments—only the hilt remained.

Silence fell across the training field.

Everyone stared, dumbfounded, barely able to believe what they had just witnessed.

Mozambia wasn't one of the top officers, but he was at least mid-tier.

And yet he was utterly crushed—instantly!

If his opponent had been a "monster" like Kuzan, it might have made sense.

But it was Gion...

"Gion's gotten so much stronger... What on earth did she go through in the North Blue..." Dalmatian murmured in disbelief.

He had served at headquarters before and knew Gion.

But the strength she showed now was leagues beyond when they last met!

At the center of the field, Gion silently looked down at her Meito.

The blade's reflection showed her slightly dazed expression.

"I didn't even realize... I've become this strong..."

She muttered.

Back in the North Blue, her only sparring partner had been Daren.

So when Mozambica attacked just now, her mind reflexively pictured Daren coming at her.

Compared to the despair she felt facing Daren—being overwhelmed in every possible way—Mozambica's attack felt riddled with flaws, unbearably slow in her eyes.

"That was way too easy... But man, Mozambica's attack was really slow and weak..." Tokikake muttered, rubbing his stubbly chin.

Daren smiled faintly at his comment.

The training he'd put Gion and Tokikake through was hellish.

After all, Sengoku had sent them to the North Blue hoping he'd keep an eye on them.

High-intensity battles, brutal physical clashes, relentless pressure... combined with their innate, exceptional talent—the speed at which Gion and Tokikake had grown even caught Daren off guard.

But since leaving the North Blue, neither of them had fought at full strength. The opponents they faced were legendary pirates like Byrnni World and Roger, which made it hard to gauge their own progress.

This was one of the realities of this world: power levels weren't always clearly defined.

Unless there was overwhelming disparity, most battles had to be fought out to truly determine the outcome.

"Winner, Gion!"

Zephyr announced without hesitation.

Gion sheathed her sword, gave Mozambica a salute, then turned and walked back into the crowd.

Mozambica clenched his teeth and stood, saluting back with reluctance.

"Next..."

The duels between numbers "3" and "4" concluded shortly after.

The winners were South Blue Admiral and Marine Captain Yamakaji, and Marine Commander from the Grand Line, Comil.

Both duels had impressive moments that earned approving nods from Zephyr.

Yamakaji and Comil were both accomplished swordsmen. Yamakaji's style was heavy and fierce, brimming with explosive determination, while Comil's was steady and methodical, with barely a single opening.

"Next up, contestants for the fifth match—step forward."

Zephyr announced the next duel.

"Daren vs. Dalmatian!"

As the words left his mouth, the entire field lit up with excitement.

Rogers Daren, the "King of the North Blue," the Marine rising star who took down the Great Pirate Byrrndi World!

They'd all heard his name countless times.

Now, they would finally see him in action.

"So... is his reputation deserved, or is it all talk?" Onigumo said coldly.

"Anyone recognized by Vice Admiral Garp isn't going to be weak," Yamakaji said with a warm smile.

"Guess we'll find out. Too bad I'm already out," Doberman said, wiping his saber with a sigh.

As all eyes locked on the field—

The man from the North Blue calmly removed the snow-white cloak from his back and stepped into the center of the training ground.

With each step, the crowd fell quiet.

The air grew heavy.

A subtle pressure rippled out, like a rising tide.

"Here he comes!! That's the opponent I acknowledged! So damn cool!!"

Kuzan's eyes lit up with excitement.

Tokikake, meanwhile, hid behind him, muttering with a twitching mouth:

"Here he comes... That feeling... Is he gonna tear the whole field apart...?"

...

Chapter 135: Volume 2 – Chapter 37: One Punch

"Impressive presence... this Daren kid..."

At the edge of the training field, Zephyr stood with his arms crossed. Behind his sunglasses, his eyes narrowed slightly as he studied the black-haired Marine at the center of the grounds. A satisfied smile curled at the corner of his lips.

He'd already reviewed the combat intel Sengoku had submitted on Daren, but paper reports were one thing—Zephyr preferred to see a man's strength with his own eyes.

Still, if the reports weren't wrong...

Zephyr's body tensed slightly.

He needed to be ready to step in at a moment's notice...

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In the middle of the scorching, sand-blown training field, Daren and Dalmatian stood ten meters apart, locking eyes.

"Daren, are you ready? I know you just got out of the hospital today," Dalmatian asked in a low voice.

Daren smiled.

"No problem. Come on—it's not like you'll make me break a sweat."

The calm, almost indifferent tone instantly got under Dalmatian's skin.

"Then don't blame me for going all out!!"

With a beast-like roar, his body underwent a dramatic transformation.

His frame grew taller and more muscular in full view, the uniform ripping apart as thick, bulging muscles swelled beneath it. His bronze skin quickly sprouted fur marked with spotted patterns. His fingers sharpened into claws, and his legs shifted, bursting through his boots and becoming the powerful hind limbs of a canine.

Zoan-type, Inu Inu no Mi, Model: Dalmatian—Hybrid Form!

A wild, primal aura surged from Dalmatian's body.

"So that's how it is..." Daren muttered.

As Dalmatian shifted from human to hybrid, Daren could feel his life-magnetic field spike by more than thirty percent.

"A full-body enhancement from a Zoan-type... can't help but be a little jealous."

Among the three main classes of Devil Fruits—Logia, Zoan, and Paramecia—only the Zoan-type directly boosts physical attributes and close-combat prowess.

In that sense, Zoan fruits were the ideal choice for hand-to-hand specialists.

But before Daren could finish his thought, Dalmatian made his move!

With a slight bend of his knees, the ground beneath him cracked. Shards of stone flew into the air as he exploded forward like a pouncing predator.

He moved so fast he left afterimages trailing in his wake.

"What speed!"

"No wonder he's a Zoan user!"

"He's like a beast on the hunt!"

The surrounding Marines were wide-eyed, some even cheering.

In an instant, Dalmatian was upon Daren.

He raised his clawed hand high and slashed down at the Commodore's chest with a force that could shred solid rock!

Ssssh!!

But the expected sound of flesh tearing didn't come—instead, a harsh metallic screech echoed across the field.

Dalmatian's pupils shrank into needles. His face twisted in disbelief.

His claws, strong enough to gouge through stone, had only sparked against Daren's skin, barely leaving a scratch.

And he wasn't the only one stunned—the watching Marines were equally shocked, eyes wide in disbelief.

That guy... just tanked it with his body?

What the hell is his skin made of?

Steel!?

Zephyr's eyes lit up, heart pounding as he clenched his fists.

It's real.

The intel was true.

That brat actually trained his body to the level of Tekkai—an iron body!

"Speed's decent. Strength? Not so much."

Daren stood motionless, offering a calm critique with a smile.

"No way!!"

Dalmatian snarled, blood rushing to his eyes.

He launched a flurry of strikes, his claws blurring with speed, raining down on Daren like a violent storm.

"Fang Claw Barrage!!"

Clang! Clang! Clang!

Like bullets pounding steel, each strike landed with a dull thud. Daren's uniform was punctured all over, but he didn't budge an inch.

"Damn it! Your body—!"

Dalmatian leapt into the air, twisted mid-air, and lashed out with a crushing roundhouse kick aimed at Daren's neck.

Boom!!

A shockwave rippled out, but Daren's head merely tilted slightly to the side.

Dalmatian's pupils quivered.

The Marines around them stared, frozen.

"Still don't get it?"

"I defeated Byrnndi World—sure, with some outside help..."

Even as Dalmatian's leg pressed against him, Daren slowly turned his head, eyes sharp and looking down on his opponent.

"But that doesn't mean I don't have the strength to back it up."

Boom...

He raised a hand—and grabbed Dalmatian's leg.

Dalmatian's face changed dramatically.

Before he could react, the world spun violently, flipping upside down—

Daren hurled him.

With monstrous force, Dalmatian was sent flying through the air, crashing like a cannonball into the wall of an abandoned military fortress a hundred meters away.

The fortress shook. Stone cracked. A gaping hole opened in the wall as Dalmatian's body embedded itself inside, blood dripping from the corner of his mouth.

But his eyes were locked on the Marine Commodore in the distance. His Zoan instincts were screaming—this man was a threat like nothing he'd ever felt.

"Now... let me show you what real strength and speed look like."

Daren casually tore off the tattered remains of his uniform.

Then, like a knight, he dipped his knees slightly and offered a graceful bow.

And in the next instant, a terrifying sight unfolded—

The ground within thirty meters of Daren crumbled at once. A column of sand and dirt shot ten meters into the air.

The entire training field shook violently, and many stumbled where they stood.

Then—

A massive figure burst through the rising debris like a shell fired from a heavy cannon, tearing through the air.

In the blink of an eye, he was face-to-face with Dalmatian.

The Commodore's presence exploded, his aura wild and unrestrained.

A black leather glove clenched into a massive fist and rose high into the air.

Tokikake covered his eyes, his mouth twitching.

The other Marines could only watch in stunned silence.

Kuzan's eyes blazed with intensity.

Dalmatian's pupils trembled. Under this crushing pressure, it felt like his heart had stopped.

A wave of pure terror surged up inside him.

As the howling wind closed in, it was as if the entire world had vanished.

All that remained... was that comet-like fist, growing ever larger in his vision.

"Daren!!"

Zephyr's shout rang out in the distance.

The punch fell.

BOOM!!

The shockwave brushed past Dalmatian's ear.

Behind him, the wall rumbled with a deep, echoing thud.

The world fell silent.

Dalmatian stood frozen, gasping for breath.

Sunlight poured down from above.

In front of him was Daren's face—calm, confident, and touched with a devilish smirk.

"Well then, Dalmatian... I look forward to working with you."

Daren smiled, lowered his fist, and turned away.

And the next second—

In front of everyone's horrified, speechless stares—

BOOM!!

A massive crater appeared in the center of the fortress, blasting clean through the building.

Then—

The towering, twenty-meter structure...

Collapsed in on itself with a thunderous crash!

...

Chapter 136: Volume 2 – Chapter 38: The Final Eight

Rumble...

In the heavy silence, the collapse of the military fortress thundered through the air.

Shattered walls and the building's entire structure crumbled. Even the thick steel bars inside had twisted and caved in, breaking apart into rubble that crashed down all around.

A storm of dust and wind surged outward, half-burying Dalmatian and whipping his cloak into the air.

He stared blankly at the tall figure of the Marine Commodore in the distance, his expression a tangled mess of shock and disbelief.

Somehow, his back was soaked with cold sweat.

The other Marines were still frozen in place—mouths agape, eyes wide—unable to process what they had just witnessed.

No one knew how long the silence lasted.

"...Monster."

Doberman finally swallowed hard, his voice dry and hoarse like his throat had been scorched.

He remembered boasting earlier that he wanted to challenge Daren—and now, his face burned with embarrassment.

The others exchanged pale looks, each seeing the same mix of disbelief and bitter helplessness in the others' eyes.

"They're not even in the same league..."

"I'm in the same training camp as that monster...? You've got to be kidding..."

"Okay... now I believe he could take on Byrnndi World."

"That strength... it's inhuman..."

...

Tokikake sighed dramatically and tried to comfort them.

"It's fine. You'll get used to it."

"That guy isn't normal anyway."

As if recalling some traumatic memory, he winced and bared his teeth.

The group fell silent again.

Only Kuzan remained full of fire. Eyes shining with excitement, he strode up to Daren and said eagerly:

"That power—and your body... How did you train like that, Daren? That was insane!"

Daren dusted himself off with a smile.

"Compared to your Devil Fruit ability? I wouldn't call it much."

Kuzan clenched his fists, fired up.

"You really are the rival I've chosen for life! I can't wait to fight you!"

"Alright, alright. The winner of this match... Daren!"

Zephyr stepped forward at last, unable to hide the grin on his face.

He looked at Daren with absolute satisfaction.

That monstrous strength, iron body, terrifying explosiveness... If this kid mastered Haki under his guidance, he'd be a walking natural disaster.

"Daren, you did well. Your control over your strength is excellent."

Zephyr didn't hold back his praise.

"Thank you, Zephyr-sensei," Daren said with a humble smile.

Zephyr waved a hand and turned to the dazed-looking Dalmatian, offering encouragement:

"Dalmatian, don't be discouraged. I saw your performance—your use of your Devil Fruit, your timing... all very well done. With time, you'll definitely become a pillar of the Marines!"

Hearing such praise from the respected Zephyr-sensei, the frustration in Dalmatian's heart eased. He raised a salute.

"Yes, Zephyr-sensei! I'll keep working hard!"

"What about me? What about me, Zephyr-sensei?"

Tokikake asked, bounding up with a hopeful look.

Zephyr shot him a sideways glance.

"Hm... you did fine too."

"Got lucky."

Tokikake: ...

"Let's move on to the next match," Zephyr announced briskly.

Two more Marines stepped forward.

But after witnessing the overwhelming display from Daren, the following battles felt... dull by comparison.

Only monsters can fight monsters.

That thought echoed in every Marine's mind.

In less than ten minutes, the first round of matches was complete. Zephyr stepped forward and read out the names of the top eight.

Kuzan – Commander, from the South Blue

Gion – Commander, from Marine Headquarters

Yamakaji – Captain, South Blue Admiral

Comil – Captain, from the Grand Line

Daren – Commodore, North Blue Admiral

Onigumo – Captain, West Blue Admiral

Strawberry – Captain, from the Grand Line

Tokikake – Commander, from Marine Headquarters

As each name was called, the corresponding Marine stepped forward, shoulders squared and heads held high, forming a line before Zephyr.

Sunlight poured down, casting a golden sheen across their proud, youthful faces.

What a dazzling group...

Daren looked across their faces and couldn't help but be moved.

Aside from himself—this "line-jumping" transmigrator—every one of the seven beside him would become a future Vice Admiral, legendary names in the Navy's ranks.

Some would go on to command Grand Line branches, others would guard entire seas, or serve at headquarters executing crucial missions like the Buster Call.

Strawberry, the tall, long-skulled, bearded dual-blade swordsman, had even served as Borsalino's adjutant in the pursuit of the Sun Pirates.

"Hm."

Zephyr beamed with pride as he looked across the eight of them, then said warmly:

"Now that the first round is done, you've all gotten a sense of each other's abilities..."

"So let's move on to the draw. We'll decide the matchups for round two."

He brought out a handful of folded paper slips—clearly prepared in advance.

The group exchanged glances before stepping forward to draw.

"Please not Kuzan or Daren... please not Kuzan or Daren..." Tokikake muttered as he picked his slip.

"C'mon, let it be Daren!" Kuzan said excitedly.

The rest of the group looked at the two of them with exasperated expressions.

Soon, the round two matchups were revealed:

Match One: Tokikake vs. Strawberry

Match Two: Gion vs. Comil

Match Three: Kuzan vs. Onigumo

Match Four...

Daren slowly tucked away his slip marked "4" and looked up at the crew-cut man smiling back at him.

"Looks like I'm not too lucky... ended up drawing you."

Yamakaji scratched the back of his head with a sheepish grin.

He pulled out a cigar and offered it.

"South Blue local blend. Probably not as fancy as what you're used to, but it packs a punch. Want one?"

Daren glanced at the unbranded cigar in Yamakaji's rough, scratch-covered hand... and chuckled.

"Sure."

He accepted the cigar.

Fourth match: Daren vs. Yamakaji.

...

Chapter 137: Volume 2 – Chapter 39: Arrogant Tokikake

After a brief exchange, Daren stepped back a few paces, giving the two duelists ample space for their match.

He withdrew his gaze from Yamakaji and glanced down at the cigar in his hand. It was nothing special—cheap, unbranded, clearly low-grade tobacco straight from some plantation.

He hadn't smoked something this poor in quality for ages.

By all rights, Yamakaji, as the admiral commanding the South Blue, should've been living comfortably even if he wasn't as skilled at lining his pockets as Daren. Yet, that didn't seem to be the case.

His boots were polished to a shine, but the creases revealed how long he'd been wearing them. His uniform was clean, but clearly faded from too much washing.

Thinking back to the rumors...

The Marine Headquarters had appointed four admirals, one for each of the Grand Line's four seas—East, South, West, and North—to oversee security and maintain peace.

The North Blue, which Daren oversaw, was the most chaotic.

The East Blue, while the weakest, had Admiral Doberman, who despite being knocked out by Kuzan in the first round, was still considered among the stronger contenders at the camp.

The West Blue was the wealthiest, and Admiral Onigumo's cold, hard stance kept pirates in check.

As for the South Blue's Yamakaji, he was known for being "strong yet gentle."

He cared deeply for his subordinates, even sharing his own salary with those injured or lost in battle. He was a role model for many young Marines.

"A truly good Marine, huh?"

Daren let out a faint chuckle, bit the cigar, lit it, and took a deep drag. The acrid smoke burned his throat like a strong, full-bodied spirit.

He squinted, looking completely at ease.

...

"First match, Tokikake versus Strawberry!" Zephyr called out loudly.

He lit a cigar of his own, clearly in a good mood.

Strawberry stepped out from the crowd with a cold, emotionless expression. He stared at Tokikake, then drew both swords from his waist simultaneously.

A dual-sword wielder—rare and dangerous.

He held one blade upright in his right hand, the other reversed in his left, assuming an offensive stance. A faint, chilly aura spread from him.

"Tokikake, looks like you're out of luck this time."

His tone carried a quiet arrogance.

"Come on, show me what you learned in the North Blue."

The crowd finally registered what was happening and turned their attention to Tokikake.

He had received a Pass in the first round, meaning no one had seen him fight yet. No one had any clue about his combat ability.

But Gion, who'd gone to the North Blue with him, had shown power far beyond her previous level. That alone sparked curiosity about Tokikake.

Yet when everyone's eyes landed on him, they twitched. Black lines formed on their foreheads.

"Guess I've got no choice..."

Out of nowhere, Tokikake pulled out a brown hat, pulled the brim down low to hide most of his face in shadow.

He stuffed his hands into his pockets and struck a desolate pose, letting the sandy wind whip his cloak around him.

With a long, exaggerated sigh, he lowered his voice and said,

"I wanted to live among you as a normal person, but all I got in return was coldness and disdain."

"Seems I have no choice now but to show you the true strength of this genius—"

Bang!!

Tokikake jerked violently, leapt up, and dropped his hat.

A bullet blew a hole in the ground right by his feet.

"Hurry up and get on the field. Don't waste my time," Zephyr said irritably, his pistol still smoking.

"H-hey, come on, Zephyr-sensei!"

Tokikake chuckled awkwardly and jogged onto the field.

Everyone: "..."

Kuzan's eye twitched.

Gion turned away and pressed a hand to her forehead.

Daren sighed and rubbed his temples.

The two fighters faced off from a distance.

Tokikake took a deep breath, lowered his stance, and kept his eyes locked on Strawberry, sweat beginning to bead on his forehead.

Strawberry was a Captain at Marine Headquarters—a rank earned through real combat.

He came from the Grand Line. Unlike Tokikake, who grew up in Marineford, he had rich battlefield experience.

Even though Tokikake felt he'd improved a lot lately, without actual combat as reference, he had no way of knowing his true level.

Up against someone like Strawberry, he felt uncertain.

Still, at least he'd made the top eight thanks to that first-round pass. Not too embarrassing.

"Hope that bastard Daren's training paid off..."

Just as he muttered this, Strawberry launched his attack.

With a muffled thud, the dual-blade swordsman shot forward like a gust of wind.

He leapt high when only a few meters away, crossing his swords and bringing them down with terrifying force.

In that instant, everything slowed.

Tokikake froze.

So slow...

He could see it all—the arcs of Strawberry's twin blades were completely clear to his eyes!

Why? Had Strawberry gotten weaker?

No...

He had gotten stronger!

The realization clicked in late.

Instinctively, Tokikake stepped back half a pace and pivoted his body.

Clang!

Screeeee!!

The twin blades missed, carving a ten-meter gash into the ground and sending dust flying.

Strawberry visibly froze, his pupils contracting.

"He dodged?!"

"So easy!"

"He saw through the whole attack!"

"Unreal!"

The onlookers shouted in shock.

Even Zephyr's eyes lit up.

"This can't be..." Strawberry grit his teeth, twisted his foot forward, and lunged again.

His oversized twin blades slashed out countless times, creating slender gouges in the ground and completely engulfing Tokikake's silhouette.

But then—something unbelievable happened.

Tokikake dodged every strike.

At first it was clumsy—awkward steps, teetering like he could be hit at any second—but each blow narrowly missed.

Then, as time went on, his movements grew smoother, lighter. Before long, he was even making goofy faces mid-dodge, baring his teeth in smug delight.

"Hahahaha! You see that? This is the true strength of the genius Tokikake!"

He burst into proud laughter, sliding under a slash with a backward lean.

Too slow!

Too easy!

He could read it like a picture book!

Compared to that maniac Daren...

This guy's attacks were like playing tag with a kid!

Seeing everyone's stunned reactions, Tokikake was over the moon. In his mind, the little devil version of himself laughed with arms crossed.

He suddenly realized—those brutal training sessions in the North Blue, the beatdowns that left him broken...

Totally worth it!

"Come on, come on, hit me!" Tokikake grinned, pulling the corners of his mouth into a mocking face.

Even the ever-calm Strawberry finally lost it. His eyes went bloodshot with rage.

With a low growl, he crossed his swords and launched himself like a cannonball.

But once again, his efforts were in vain.

Tokikake easily sidestepped.

As they passed each other, Tokikake stuck out a foot.

Bang!

Tripped and off-balance, Strawberry fell flat on his face, kicking up a cloud of dust.

"Hahahaha!! Remember the name of your conqueror—Tokikake the genius!!"

He laughed heartily, hands on his hips, then raised his head to address the crowd with an air of invincible loneliness:

"You all better work harder. Surprise me. Get stronger... so I might find some joy in watching you. Alright?"

Everyone: "..."

"Hey, can we challenge him directly?" Doberman asked coldly. "For some reason, I really want to punch him."

"Same," Onigumo said, hand on his sword hilt.

"Count me in," Dalmatian added, fists clenched.

"Me too," Mozambica growled.

"..." The others nodded in agreement.

One moment rivals, the next united in shared hatred.

Zephyr's mouth twitched. He announced the result without hesitation:

"The winner, Tokikake!"

Tokikake swaggered down the stairs, nostrils flared, feet marching with outrageous arrogance.

Then—

He stepped into a pothole.

Bang!

Face-first into the ground.

His clogs flew off, hairy legs flailing in the air.

Everyone froze.

Their faces twisted into a single expression:

≥●∪●≤

Wow... the weather really cleared up, huh.

...

Chapter 138: Volume 2 – Chapter 40: Let You Experience... Despair

Under the crowd's glares of "righteous hostility," Tokikake rubbed his face and shuffled offstage with his clogs in hand.

"Second match: Gion versus Comil!"

As Zephyr's loud voice rang out, Gion and Comil simultaneously leapt into the center of the training field with practiced ease.

They exchanged a brief glance, then drew their blades and charged at each other.

Clang! Clang! Clang!

The sharp clash of steel echoed through the air, scattering sparks with each collision.

But it was clear to everyone watching—Gion's swordsmanship and close-combat skill far outclassed Comil's.

Recalling Tokikake's earlier performance, many in the crowd couldn't help but glance toward Daren, who stood calmly at the side, smiling as he smoked a cigar.

It was obvious.

The reason both Gion and Tokikake had improved so dramatically was because of the "King of the North Blue."

The match ended in less than three minutes.

Driven back step by step, Comil was caught by Gion's precise strike. His saber was sent flying, and before he could retreat properly, a gleaming golden Meito was already pressed against his throat.

The cold, razor-sharp aura at the blade's tip made Comil break out in goosebumps.

"I lost," he said with a helpless smile.

Gion sheathed her sword and bowed slightly.

"Thank you for the match."

"The winner... Gion!" Zephyr announced, though no one seemed particularly surprised.

"Next up, the third match... Kuzan versus Onigumo!"

As the words left his mouth—

"Finally, it's my turn!!" Kuzan shouted with anticipation.

"—I forfeit."

A hoarse voice cut through the moment, and the excited smile on Kuzan's face froze before vanishing entirely. His shoulders slumped.

Everyone turned in shock.

Onigumo, face grim and aura oppressive, met their eyes and spoke calmly:

"I have no means of threatening Kuzan."

"Without mastering Armament Haki, a Logia Devil Fruit user... is untouchable."

The surrounding Marines paused, but ultimately nodded in agreement.

Zephyr turned to Onigumo with a stern gaze.

"Are you certain about this, Onigumo?" he asked, voice low.

"Retreating without a fight is not a habit befitting a Marine."

Onigumo's face didn't waver.

"I understand, Zephyr-sensei."

"If I had even a one percent chance, I wouldn't back down."

"But I don't."

His gaze remained steady.

"There's no point in fighting a battle where the outcome is already decided."

"...I see. I understand now."

Zephyr went quiet for a moment, then slowly smiled.

"I'm glad to see you stand by your convictions."

He didn't press further. As a teacher, his role wasn't to force a student's hand, but to guide them toward the right path. He'd never cared for those who claimed to act "for your own good" while trying to control others.

Most importantly, Zephyr knew Onigumo's record and character well.

This Marine Captain who had wiped out pirates in the West Blue through sheer blood and steel wasn't someone who feared death.

It was just that his sense of justice leaned more toward pragmatism—his actions calm and rational.

"Then... the winner of the third match: Kuzan!"

Cheers broke out, though Kuzan himself looked deflated, like a soggy sponge. He slumped to the ground, clutching his head in frustration.

"What a waste..."

Zephyr chuckled and shook his head, then announced the lineup for the final match.

"And now for the last quarterfinal... Daren versus Yamakaji!"

At those words, all eyes turned to Daren and Yamakaji.

The cigar had burned to ash.

Daren snuffed it out and rose slowly to his feet.

His towering figure, like a mountain erupting from the earth, cast a deep shadow under the blazing sun.

A crushing pressure rolled off him like a heavy stone pressing against every Marine's chest.

Silence fell across the field. The Marines exchanged uneasy glances, their expressions complicated as they looked toward Yamakaji.

Everyone knew it—just like Onigumo versus Kuzan, this was a match with a foregone conclusion.

Kuzan's strength could still be grasped, faintly measured.

But Daren was different.

The wreckage of the training fortress still lay scattered, like the corpse of a war beast—an image that haunted the onlookers.

Daren's brutal, feral, and overwhelming display earlier had left a deep mark on everyone.

Kuzan's Devil Fruit power was difficult to counter, but Daren's raw dominance was its own kind of despair.

And he hadn't even used his Devil Fruit abilities yet.

If Kuzan was a towering wall—imposing but still visible—then Daren was a mountain so vast its summit couldn't even be seen.

The training grounds were still.

Everyone stared at Yamakaji, waiting for his choice.

Even if he chose to forfeit like Onigumo, no one would blame him.

After all, fighting someone like Daren came with the real risk of injury, which could impact future matches.

Daren was guaranteed a spot in the top four. But the fifth place? Still up for grabs.

At this point, Yamakaji and Onigumo were the most likely contenders for that fifth seat.

So stepping aside now to preserve strength was clearly the smart move.

Yamakaji sat quietly as everyone watched.

One second.

Two seconds.

Three seconds.

Then, to everyone's surprise, he lit a cigar and took a long drag.

Next, he rested a hand on his saber...

And stood—resolute against Daren's crushing presence.

A murmur rippled through the crowd. Though stunned, they felt an odd sense of relief. Some even clenched their fists without realizing it.

"Sorry to keep you waiting..."

Yamakaji looked up at Daren, his smile as gentle as ever, eyes crinkling with warmth.

Scratching his buzz cut sheepishly, he said:

"Fighting a monster like you... takes some serious mental prep."

Daren replied calmly.

"So, are you ready?"

Yamakaji nodded with a genuine smile.

"I really want that fifth seat. It's a huge honor."

"If I get it, I can go home and make the old man proud. He's always wanted me to become a 'hero' like Garp-san."

"But then I thought—if I want to be a hero, I can't back down now, can I?"

"Even if I know I've got zero chance of winning..."

Daren looked at the sun-darkened man in front of him, and after a pause, said slowly:

"Yeah. Being a hero is a losing game... It means doing a whole lot of stupid things."

Yamakaji's smile only grew brighter.

"That's why I want to fight you. And I hope you go all out."

He drew his saber, gripping it with both hands, and took an offensive stance. His face shone with anticipation.

"Because one day, I'll face those so-called 'monster' pirates..."

"And in the name of justice, I'll fight them to the death!"

His eyes burned with determination.

"So I might as well get used to this kind of despair now, right?"

The words rang out with force.

In that instant, everyone's eyes widened, their hearts shaken.

Something indescribable welled up inside them—hot and heavy, pounding in their chests.

Zephyr smiled with deep pride.

Kuzan's eyes blazed as he threw a fist into the air.

Tokikake clenched his fists, grinding his teeth.

Gion pressed her lips together, quietly moved.

...

Yellow sand danced across the ground. The passion of youth burned hotter than the midday sun.

In that moment, the young Marine with the buzz cut stood tall, stood straight, stood stronger than anyone else.

His presence seemed to tower even higher than the "monster" standing before him.

"What an amusing fool."

Daren suddenly chuckled.

It wasn't a big laugh, but it was genuine.

He saw something in Yamakaji that reminded him of himself.

So, he slowly raised his right hand.

Under some invisible force, the metal bracer on his forearm melted and twisted, forming three smooth, silver spheres that began to orbit his body.

"Then come."

"Let me show you..."

"Despair."

...

Chapter 139: Volume 2 – Chapter 41: Appearing Before You

"Let you experience... despair."

As the Commodore's words fell, a chilling pressure swept over everyone present, sending shivers down their spines.

Smooth, metallic spheres spun endlessly around Daren's body, reflecting the Marines' stunned expressions in the refracted sunlight.

"What kind of ability is that...?"

"Is he controlling metal?"

"A Paramecia-type Devil Fruit...?"

...

Uncertainty flickered across the Marines' faces, replaced by a deep wariness. Even though they knew Daren wasn't targeting them, something about those eerily orbiting metal spheres sent a wave of dread through their hearts.

Not far off, Zephyr squinted beneath his sunglasses, muscles tensing.

He had read about Daren's Devil Fruit ability in a report from Sengoku.

If it's that technique... I'll need to stay sharp.

"So then..."

Daren looked calmly at Yamakaji, standing several dozen meters away with both hands gripping his sword.

"Try coming to me, Captain Yamakaji."

Yamakaji clenched his teeth. His billowing cloak of justice flared behind him as he stomped the ground, launching forward like a white arrow released from a bowstring, streaking toward Daren at high speed.

The pressure Daren exerted was suffocating... Yamakaji knew if he didn't attack now, he wouldn't get another chance!

Even if Daren didn't strike first, his own hesitation—or even a trace of fear—would be enough to crush his resolve!

But just as Yamakaji charged, the rising sand across the field was abruptly torn apart. A howling blast surged forward like a tornado.

So fast!

Yamakaji's pupils shrank, his body flaring with instinct as a surge of danger overwhelmed him. He slashed forward with full force!

Clang!!

His saber crashed against something hard moving at incredible speed, sending out a shockwave of explosive air.

Yamakaji was struck with overwhelming force, his body flung backward like a kite with its string snapped.

The blast shredded his uniform sleeves into countless fragments.

Gasps erupted from the surrounding Marines.

None of them saw what happened—one moment Yamakaji had charged, the next, something invisible had slammed him away.

Twisting mid-air, Yamakaji barely managed to stabilize himself before hitting the ground, skidding backward as his worn military boots carved two long grooves into the earth.

His chest heaved violently, each breath rasping like a bellows. His eyes were bloodshot, and he dropped to one knee.

Drip...

A bright drop of blood fell from the hand gripping his blade.

Everyone could clearly see the torn flesh at the base of his thumb—his palm split open.

One blow. Devastating.

Their gazes slowly shifted.

A deep groove, nearly a meter wide, stretched from Yamakaji's position all the way to Daren's feet, cutting across the entire field—a shocking sight.

At that moment, a metallic sphere with a mirror-like surface drifted back through the air to Daren's side, rotating in sync with two others already orbiting him.

The Marines seemed to realize something all at once and collectively sucked in a breath.

That trench in the ground... was caused by the sheer air pressure from the sphere's flight!

Just how fast was that thing moving to carve through solid earth like that!?

"Still going? You might not be so lucky next time."

Daren looked at the panting Yamakaji, his face expressionless.

He stood in the middle of the training field, his bare upper body gleaming under the scorching sun, every muscle sharply defined like it had been carved by the gods themselves.

Three silver spheres, each the size of a clenched fist, floated silently beside him like ghostly wraiths, casting a cold glint that sent a chill through the air. Their quiet presence alone radiated a terrifying pressure.

Just one of those orbs had shown overwhelming power—enough to rival, maybe even surpass, a warship's main cannon.

What if all three were fired at once?

Combined with the Commodore's body covered in gruesome scars, those abyssal black eyes, and the thick stench of blood and war that clung to him...

From a distance, this man from the North Blue looked like a demon god risen from hell.

Elegant. Cold. Grim. Commanding.

Yamakaji knelt on one knee, his tattered uniform stained with dirt and grime, his face smeared with dust. Blood dripped from his palm, and his right arm trembled uncontrollably from the blow he'd just taken.

The contrast between them was stark—like a battle-worn god and a battered beggar.

He stared at Daren's steady, unshaken eyes and suddenly took a long drag from his cigar.

Then, without a word, he tore off the remnants of his shredded uniform and tossed it aside, revealing a muscular body etched with old scars.

From the torn fabric, he pulled out a strip and wrapped it tightly around his wrist, tying it off with his teeth and yanking the knot firm.

Then he stood up again, bracing himself.

With the cigar clenched between his teeth, he grinned.

His eyes burned like wildfire.

"Of course."

Daren paused for a beat.

"Good."

He raised his hand again.

Boom!!

A silver orb exploded from his side, propelled by a violent magnetic field. In the blink of an eye, it tore through the air, engulfing his figure in a howling vortex of wind.

Here it comes!!

Yamakaji's bloodshot eyes snapped into focus. The pressure barreling toward him felt like a tsunami about to crush his remaining will.

He forced his eyes wide, trying to track the orb's path.

No... too fast...

In that instant,

Just as a blur of metal streaked past his vision, his instincts—honed through countless battles and relentless training—took over. He swung his blade!

Clang!!

A deafening metallic scream rang out in front of him.

The trajectory—was off!

Yamakaji's eardrums throbbed painfully. The orb screamed past his shoulder, tearing open flesh and spraying blood into the air.

The deflected orb didn't stop. It smashed into a nearby training cannon, ripping straight through it before triggering an enormous explosion. Fire and debris burst outward as the structure collapsed in flames.

Dust surged in all directions. The flames flickered wildly.

Everyone watching froze in shock, hearts pounding. Even the onlookers silently broke into a cold sweat for Yamakaji.

That thing didn't just tear through flesh—if it hit a warship, it would rip through the hull and send it straight to the ocean floor!

The wind howled as yellow sand whipped across the field.

His shoulder throbbed with searing pain, but Yamakaji ignored it and burst forward again.

If he stayed still, he'd just be a sitting target for Daren.

Maybe he could block once. Maybe twice. But three times? Four? Five? Six?

Attack was his only chance!

No matter what—

Even if he lost—

He was going to reach Daren!

...

Chapter 140: Volume 2 – Chapter 42: Am I a Villain Now?

Charge!!

Yamakaji roared, leaving behind plumes of smoke and fire as he surged forward.

Buzz... buzz... buzz...

The piercing sound of air being torn apart closed in again. Yamakaji's pupils shrank.

It's coming again!

The shifting dust, the boiling air...

He could finally make out a faint outline!

His eyes flew open, and in the depths of his vision, he caught a fleeting glimpse of a silver blur.

He swung his blade with all his might!

A brilliant arc of light cut through the smoke and struck a metal sphere dead-on.

Clang!!

Sparks scattered faintly in the swirling dust. Yamakaji's face went pale as a numbing shock surged through his right arm, swelling it with pain. The force of the impact lifted him off the ground.

Boom!!

The deflected orb smashed into the earth at an angle, unleashing towering waves of dust across the training field with explosive bursts.

The ground trembled violently. The surrounding Marines dropped their stances instinctively, bracing themselves against the shock.

Yamakaji's boots slammed back down. And once again, his unwavering steps pressed forward.

Gritting his teeth against the searing pain, he swung again.

Clang!!

The sheer force of the impact nearly burst eardrums.

Another howling metal sphere was knocked slightly off course. It grazed Yamakaji's left side, carving a charred, bloody trail across his waist.

The recoil from the blow reverberated up his arm. Blood welled in his mouth, spilling from the corner in a crimson streak.

And still, he advanced.

Not even the storm-force winds could halt him.

Even the howling sandstorms seemed to rally behind him.

One after another, the metal spheres came crashing down like relentless artillery fire.

Each hit sent him skidding back several steps.

He didn't have the strength to knock them away completely.

All he could do was rely on his battle-hardened instincts and finely-honed swordsmanship, nudging the orbs just enough to deflect them away from vital spots.

Even so, wounds multiplied across his body. Every near-miss burst open sprays of blood.

From afar,

Yamakaji looked like a lone figure pressing through a violent storm, blood streaking further across his body with every step forward.

The blinding silver trails of high-speed orbs flashed in and out of existence around him—appearing, vanishing, reappearing—like a hail of stray bullets.

Behind him, gaping holes riddled the ground, the buildings, and the artillery platforms.

The distance between Yamakaji and Daren was only thirty meters.

Just thirty meters...

But right now, it felt impossibly far.

Like a path with no end.

A path built to crush hope.

At that moment, as they watched that battered, silent figure pressing forward with everything he had, everyone fell silent.

Zephyr's expression was hard to read. His jaw clenched, fists tightening and loosening over and over.

Thirty meters...

Twenty...

The blood on Yamakaji's body grew heavier. The blade that had served him for years was now chipped and cracking with every swing.

Still, he didn't stop.

Ten meters...

As he entered within ten meters, his steps slowed noticeably.

Everyone could feel it—Daren's rate of attack had increased.

A storm of metal orbs poured down like bullets, completely enveloping Yamakaji's blood-soaked figure.

His sword swung faster and faster, every motion sharper, more urgent—but his blade was breaking down.

Daren squinted slightly.

So this is what makes him one of the Marines' strongest future Vice Admirals.

That indomitable will and unshakable combat instinct... more than enough to stand just below the Admirals themselves.

Yamakaji stepped again.

Five meters.

Daren gave a faint smile and reached out.

Suddenly, the barrage intensified.

A downpour of silver light.

Yamakaji couldn't move forward anymore.

Streams of light tore past his body, slicing open wounds and exploding into blood mist, swirling violently in the wind.

The clang of steel rang out again and again, sparks bursting endlessly.

Massive columns of dust erupted across the field, waves of sand rising like a storm-tossed sea.

Blood poured freely from Yamakaji's mouth.

He could barely keep his grip on his blade.

His entire palm was torn and mangled—bone faintly visible beneath the mess of blood and flesh.

If not for the strip of cloth binding the hilt, the sword would've flown from his hand long ago.

Is this... where it ends?

Yamakaji struggled to keep his heavy eyelids open. His vision began to blur...

Just then—

"Go for it, Yamakaji!!"

A voice like a pig being slaughtered suddenly tore through the air.

The entire training field fell into stunned silence.

Everyone turned toward the source of the outburst, faces filled with disbelief.

Tokikake stood there, face flushed with excitement, neck strained as he yelled at the top of his lungs:

"Take down that bastard Daren!!!"

Everyone froze for a beat.

Then—

"Go, Yamakaji!!" Doberman shouted, gripping his blade with both hands.

"Go." Onigumo's voice was cold and firm.

"Hang in there!" Dalmatian growled through gritted teeth.

"You look seriously cool right now!!" Kuzan pumped his fists with passion.

"..."

In that instant, the entire crowd erupted in a chorus of roars.

They shouted from the heart, rallying behind the crew-cut youth who fought on without fear, defying a force far greater than himself.

United against a common foe!

'Wait, wait... why do I feel like I've suddenly become the villain here...?'

Daren's mouth twitched awkwardly.

But before he could react—

"Yamakaji, you little punk!! Get your ass up there!! Slash Daren right now!! If you don't give him a cut, I swear I'll never let you off!!"

Zephyr's furious roar echoed from afar, hair practically bristling with rage.

Daren: "..."

...

Surrounded by the thunderous cries of support, Yamakaji felt like his chest was about to burst open—his body surged with scorching heat.

And in the split-second distraction that flickered across Daren's expression, he seized the moment!

Clang!!

Sparks exploded as a burst of blood mist bloomed from his left shoulder.

Crack—crack—crack...

His battered military saber finally shattered, leaving only a broken half!

Countless shards rained down like glass.

The fractured blade, heated by the sheer force of impact and relentless strikes, now glowed red-hot!

Yamakaji clenched his cigar between his teeth, then let out a fierce roar as he stepped forward!

Drawing on the last ounce of strength in his body, he thrust the broken tip forward—

The roaring sand split apart.

The howling winds were torn through.

In the chaos of the storm, a tiny flicker of fire sparked to life.

Faint. Dim.

Like the ember at the end of a cigar in the wind, or the final glow before it burns out.

A single flash of crimson erupted, sending waves of blistering heat across the air.

It screamed through the battlefield like a wildfire, bursting forth in a brilliant arc.

It streaked across the ground, crossing what had once felt like an unbreachable gulf.

Only then did the crowd finally see—

It was a broken blade.

A blade ignited by the friction of its final charge!

It was shattered.

Riddled with cracks.

Just like the one who wielded it.

But still...

It moved forward.

Always forward.

That flame burst from the storm and sand, surging with unyielding resolve—

And drove straight toward the figure that stood like a demon in their path!

Ssshk!!

The sound of steel piercing flesh rang out, followed by a surge of flame roaring into the sky.