

One Piece 141

Chapter 141 - 141: Volume 2 – Chapter 43: The Fifth Seat Revealed

Sshk!!

Blood sprayed into the air, scattering into crimson droplets mid-flight.

The towering flame flared only for an instant before quickly extinguishing.

Embers peeled away from the broken blade, revealing cracks running along its battered surface.

Everyone on the training field stood frozen.

They stared at the figure still wreathed in lingering flame, their hearts filled with an emotion too complex to name—something that stung the eyes and threatened to spill tears.

"Hahahaha! That was amazing!!"

Tokikake bellowed, eyes blazing with excitement.

"So damn cool!!!" Kuzan's eyes sparkled with admiration.

The others couldn't help but clench their fists, exhaling deeply with a sense of raw, cathartic joy.

"A hell of a strike."

Daren looked down at the blood-soaked Yamakaji in front of him, a satisfied smile tugging at his lips.

The red-hot broken blade was lodged tightly between the iron-hard muscles of his chest, blood gushing steadily from the wound.

That strike—was impressive.

The sheer force, the refusal to yield, the will to press forward—it was all poured into that slash. An unbreakable spirit forged into steel.

To put it bluntly, that one attack had already surpassed even Gion's post-training level.

If it had hit any other Marine officer here, they'd likely be gravely wounded—internal organs pierced clean through. Even with the best medics from Marine Headquarters, survival would've been uncertain.

And even with his own steel-forged body, immune to blades and bullets...

Daren frowned slightly. He could feel his breathing was uneven.

...it would still take at least half an hour for the wound to start scabbing.

That was only because his physique had improved yet again recently—especially after the fights with Byrnni World and Roger.

If it had been earlier...

Yeah, it would've taken two hours, minimum.

No doubt about it—Yamakaji really was one of the future pillars of Marine Headquarters, a true champion of justice.

Sure, he had pulled his punches a bit. And yes, he'd wanted to help this likable hothead sharpen his swordsmanship.

But still, there was no denying it—these Vice Admirals who made their mark in the original story truly earned their place.

Yamakaji looked at the smile forming on Daren's face and froze for a moment—then suddenly grinned, blood staining his teeth.

"I made it to your front."

He smiled with quiet pride, chest out, eyes gleaming.

"You really are... strong..."

He murmured softly, eyelids heavy as they slowly closed.

Daren reached out and caught him.

Everyone rushed over, pulling out their Den Den Mushi to call the medical corps.

Soon, nearby military doctors arrived and carefully lifted Yamakaji onto a stretcher.

"His condition...?"

Zephyr looked at Yamakaji's pale, unconscious face, brows furrowed with worry, and turned to the medic.

After a quick examination, the doctor nodded and said calmly,

"It's not serious. He's just lost a lot of blood and has three hairline fractures in his arm. As long as we perform a transfusion soon, he'll be fine. No life-threatening danger or long-term complications."

Only then did the crowd breathe a collective sigh of relief.

And then, as if they all realized something at once, every head turned toward Daren.

This guy... he held back.

Daren ignored their looks and slowly turned around, narrowing his eyes at Tokikake, a smirk playing on his lips.

"You were shouting pretty enthusiastically just now, Commander Tokikake."

Tokikake flinched as Daren smiled at him, a cold sweat running down his back.

"Ahaha... well... just trying to hype up the moment, you know..."

Daren said nothing, only kept smiling.

"Heh... heh heh..."

Tokikake forced a grin and began inching backward step by step.

Zephyr gave him a withering glare, then stepped forward.

"Doctor, check Daren's injuries too."

"No need, Zephyr-sensei," Daren replied with a shake of his head.

"What do you mean, 'no need'!? You just got out of the hospital from a serious injury, you brat!"

Seeing Daren's careless, unconcerned expression, Zephyr's tone sharpened.

"If you end up with lasting damage, you'll regret it—"

He stopped mid-sentence.

His eyes, hidden beneath his sunglasses, widened in disbelief as he stared at Daren's chest.

The wound... it had already stopped bleeding?

Zephyr's mouth twitched.

Now he understood why Sengoku had looked like he'd seen a ghost when talking about Daren.

Was this guy even human!?

"Zephyr-sensei!! Hurry up and start the next match already! I'm getting impatient!!"

Kuzan suddenly leaned over, flexing his biceps excitedly, eyes shining with anticipation.

Zephyr let out a long breath and nodded.

"Alright."

"The winner of this duel..."

He glanced at Daren.

"Rogers Daren!"

"The top four entering the final round of the training camp are: Kuzan, Tokikake, Gion, and Daren!"

"Before the semifinals, we need to decide the fifth seat!"

"The candidates for fifth are Onigumo and Yamakaji... but due to Yamakaji's severe injuries, he's unable to continue in the competition. Therefore, the winner of this match is—"

Zephyr paused slightly, about to declare Onigumo the victor.

"Zephyr-sensei, I forfeit this match."

Onigumo spoke up without warning.

Zephyr blinked, then looked at him seriously and asked,

"You're sure?"

Onigumo rested his hand calmly on the hilt of his sword.

"Yes. That slash from Yamakaji just now... I wouldn't have been able to take it."

"I'm not his equal."

"That fifth seat—belongs to him."

Zephyr studied him for a moment, then a trace of approval appeared in his eyes.

"In that case, I officially declare Yamakaji the fifth-ranked cadet of the training camp!"

No one raised any objections.

After all, Yamakaji's incredible strike had already proven he was more than worthy.

"Now, let's move on to the final draw."

Zephyr pulled out a set of folded paper slips and laid them out in front of the four finalists.

Kuzan stepped forward eagerly and snatched one up.

Daren and Gion followed in turn, each taking a slip.

Tokikake stared nervously at the last remaining one in Zephyr's hand, sweating bullets like he'd just swallowed a fly.

He glanced at Daren.

Yeah, that'd be instant death.

Then at Kuzan.

Yeah... not dead, but pretty close.

Then at Gion.

Yeah... worse than death.

"Uh... Zephyr-sensei? Can I just forfeit now?"

Tokikake shrank back, raising his hand with a sheepish grin.

"No!" *4

Zephyr, Daren, Kuzan, and Gion all shot him a flat, unanimous reply.

Firm and merciless.

Tokikake: ...

Shivering, he picked up the last slip and slowly unfolded it.

Number: 2.

"Too bad, Tokikake."

A teasing voice came from behind, full of amusement.

Tokikake's face went pale. He stiffly turned around.

Standing there was the Marine Commodore, holding a crumpled slip of paper marked with the same number—2.

He looked at Tokikake with a half-smile.

"Weren't you just shouting real loud earlier? Something about 'taking down this bastard,' right?"

Chapter 142 - 142: Volume 2 – Chapter 44: I've Got a Condition That Keeps Me Off the Field

"The winner of the first match is... Kuzan!!"

Zephyr stood at the edge of the training ground, arms crossed as he made the loud announcement.

The match between Kuzan and Gion, who had drawn number "1," ended with zero suspense.

Just as Onigumo had said earlier—without Armament Haki, none of them had the slightest chance against a monster like Kuzan.

The early-stage dominance of a Logia-type Devil Fruit user was undeniable. The passive ability to become intangible was enough to make one virtually untouchable.

Even with Gion's swordsmanship—among the strongest in this year's camp—she had no way to counter it.

And even without his Devil Fruit, Kuzan's natural strength still far exceeded hers.

In less than a minute, the battle ended with Gion's legs frozen solid.

The spectators weren't surprised, but they were still awestruck by Kuzan's overwhelming power.

With that, Kuzan advanced to the final round.

"Next up—Rogers Daren versus Tokikake!"

All eyes turned toward them in anticipation as Zephyr shifted his gaze.

Then a few dark lines appeared on his forehead.

Tokikake stood frozen in place with the look of a man heading to the gallows. His two hairy legs trembled like a pair of maracas.

"What's wrong, Commander Tokikake? Not going to step up?"

Daren walked to the center of the field, rolling his neck until it cracked like popping beans. He looked at Tokikake with amusement and smiled.

"I'm right here. This is your perfect shot to 'take down this bastard,' remember?"

Just that glance—especially with Daren's creepy smile—made Tokikake break into a cold sweat.

He averted the Commodore's gaze, his voice trembling as he turned to Zephyr.

"Uh... Zephyr-sensei, I think I'm sick. I'm really not feeling well."

He clutched his chest and put on an exaggerated look of discomfort.

Everyone: "..."

Zephyr's mouth twitched. He rolled his eyes.

This little brat seriously thinks my Observation Haki doesn't work?

"You sure you're feeling unwell?"

Could this actually work?

Tokikake's eyes lit up. He nodded furiously like a bobblehead.

"Yes, yes, I've come down with a condition! A serious condition that prevents me from dueling!"

Zephyr let out a drawn-out "oh," then casually walked over to a nearby training turret. Without missing a beat, he loaded a shell into the barrel and adjusted its aim.

The dark, ominous muzzle pointed directly at Tokikake.

"Feeling better now?"

Tokikake: ...

Everyone else: ...

"I'm suddenly feeling much better, Zephyr-sensei!! I'm good to go!!"

Seeing Zephyr about to fire, Tokikake scrambled forward, legs shaking as he made his way to the center of the field.

Yep—turning around to check every few steps.

Zephyr shook his head, exasperated.

Technically, forfeiting was allowed. It was part of the rules.

But with a weasel like Tokikake, as his instructor, Zephyr felt it was his duty to push him in the right direction.

The kid needed more backbone.

...Not that Zephyr would ever admit he also really wanted to see Tokikake get his face pounded in.

So deserving of a beating.

"Da-Daren, y-you ready?"

Tokikake stood on the field, keeping a solid ten meters between them, striking what was supposed to be a cocky pose.

His knees were still trembling.

At that moment—

"Tokikake, go for it!! Didn't you just whisper to me that if you got serious, you could pin Daren to the ground and grind him into dust?!"

"That was so badass!!"

Kuzan pumped his fists in the air, cheering at full volume, face glowing with excitement.

Tokikake's expression froze instantly.

Bro, I whispered that to you! Whispered!! That means keep it to yourself!!

That was bragging! Do you even know what bragging is?! Who the hell wants to fight a monster like Daren?!

He screamed internally, face twisted like he'd just swallowed a bug.

"Shut up, Kuzan!!"

He finally couldn't hold it in and snapped.

Kuzan blinked, then his eyes lit up even more.

"Ohh! I get it! You're trying to keep a low profile, huh?!"

"Man, that's so cool, Tokikake! Go for it!! Take Daren down!!"

He gave a big thumbs-up.

"You said it yourself, right? You'd be waiting for us at the top! Now go!!"

Looking at Kuzan's fired-up face, Tokikake wanted nothing more than to leap down and rip that big mouth of his clean off.

He quickly turned to Daren, just about to blurt out a desperate double-take: "I didn't—he's making it up—"

But the moment he turned his head,

A fist was already growing rapidly in his pupils' reflection.

Boom!!

The sound of teeth cracking under a punch rang out, followed by Tokikake's high-pitched, pig-squealing wail that echoed endlessly.

Everyone watching winced, their teeth clenched tight. Their bodies ached just from seeing it.

...

Thirty seconds later.

Rumble...

Smoke and dust filled the air, blanketing the training field in a hazy fog. The ground was left cratered and battered, a complete mess of destruction.

From the settling haze, Daren strolled out, stretching with a lazy smile, looking completely refreshed.

Behind him,

In an absurdly deep pit, Tokikake lay sprawled with his face swollen like a pig's head, his eyes blank and unfocused as he stared at the sky, legs twitching every now and then.

Two shattered wooden clogs lay scattered near his head.

The gathered Marine officers stood stiff as statues, expressions blank, eyes twitching uncontrollably.

Zephyr held his forehead and let out a long sigh.

"Winner: Daren."

He shook his head and announced the result of the match.

"Next, Gion and Tokikake will compete for third place."

He glanced at Tokikake—still sprawled out and motionless—and went ahead with the call.

"Given that Tokikake is no longer capable of—"

"Wait."

A hoarse voice suddenly cut in weakly.

Everyone froze, startled.

Tokikake was slowly rising from the pit, wobbling as he struggled to his feet. Blood trickled from his battered body, a big chunk of his front tooth missing. But his expression was resolute.

"I want to fight this one!"

His voice trembled, but his will was clear.

Blood dripped to the ground beneath him, painting a gruesome picture.

The crowd fell silent, then slowly, a glimmer of respect began to show in their eyes.

Kuzan bit his finger, eyes red with emotion.

"What a man... even after taking a brutal beating, he still insists on fighting till the end..."

Zephyr looked on, a little stunned himself. That look in Tokikake's eyes—resolute, unyielding—it stirred something.

"You sure? Your injuries..."

Daren had pulled his punches, mostly aiming for the face, but even that was enough to break most people.

Tokikake nodded hard, blurting out,

"I'm sure, Zephyr-sensei..."

Maybe I misjudged him...

This kid might actually have what it takes—

"This is my chance to get close to Gion—er, I mean, to spar with her."

...Forget what I said.

Zephyr nearly choked on the spot.

With a face full of irritation, he waved his hand.

"Fine, fine—go fight."

...

One minute later.

Tokikake was carried off on a stretcher, covered in bruises. After a quick exam by the medic, it was confirmed—three ribs, broken.

But his face held only disappointment as he mumbled in a daze,

"S-So close... I almost touched Gion's hand..."

Everyone stared at him in stunned silence.

The entire scene felt like it had just turned reality on its head.

Zephyr felt his chest tighten with frustration.

He yanked out a cigar and took a deep drag.

"The final match begins now!"

"Kuzan versus Daren... their duel will determine the top of the training camp!"

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Chapter 143 - 143: Volume 2 – Chapter 45: Battle with Kuzan

"The fight for top of the class... Rogers Daren versus Kuzan!!"

As Zephyr's voice echoed across the training field, every pair of eyes lit up. All attention turned to Daren and Kuzan, filled with anticipation.

"It's finally happening!"

"This is a clash between monsters!"

"Both of them are insanely strong Devil Fruit users!"

"I don't know why, but Daren gives off a much heavier sense of pressure."

"Still... I wonder if he has any way to threaten Kuzan. Logia-type users are just too hard to deal with."

"..."

The elite Marines gathered from around the world couldn't help but whisper among themselves.

After the previous matches, they were well aware—Daren and Kuzan were no longer on the same level as the rest of them.

Only monsters could fight monsters.

At the edge of the field, Zephyr stood silently, his expression turning grave as he watched both combatants from behind his sunglasses.

Neither Daren nor Kuzan had been pushed to show their full strength so far.

But this duel—this battle for the top—might finally reveal what they were truly capable of.

"Hahahahaha!! Daren!! You ready!? It's finally—finally our turn!!"

Kuzan rushed to the center of the field, his face flushed with excitement, eyes burning with battle spirit.

Daren chuckled at the outburst.

He had to admit, young Kuzan had this odd sort of theatrical flair to him.

But it wasn't the kind that grated on people.

"Come."

He didn't waste any words.

With a flick of his wrist, the metal bracer melted, twisted, and condensed into a metal sphere—then launched forward with a violent blast of magnetic force.

Boom boom boom!!

The sphere erupted forward with staggering speed and power, its passage tearing the air with heavy sonic booms and leaving rings of white shockwaves behind.

Against a monster like Kuzan, Daren had no reason to hold back.

With the magnetic propulsion pushed to max output, the speed of the metal sphere was clearly more than twice what it had been against Yamakaji.

Snap!

Aside from Zephyr, no one else on the field could track the sphere's trajectory.

All they felt was a sudden gust of wind—and then, Kuzan's face... exploded.

Shards of ice scattered into the air. Most of Kuzan's head had been blasted apart, leaving only jagged blocks of ice riddled with cracks.

The fragments reformed into a face once more. Kuzan's expression faltered, clearly caught off guard.

"...Tch!"

Only then did the Marines come back to their senses, all of them sharply inhaling as chills ran down their spines.

"Did... did any of you see it?" Doberman asked, face pale.

"No..." Onigumo's voice was raspy, like it had been scorched.

"That was... unreal..." Dalmatian's forehead was drenched in cold sweat.

The others stood frozen, eyes wide with disbelief.

Only now did they realize how much Daren had been holding back in his fight against Yamakaji.

If it had been any one of them standing there in Kuzan's place, that metal sphere would've blown their heads clean off.

And unlike Kuzan, whose body could reform with ice, they wouldn't be exploding into shards—

They'd be exploding into blood and brain matter.

"As expected... you're strong."

A drop of cold sweat slid down Kuzan's forehead. He froze for a second.

But then, the look of shock vanished—replaced by blazing excitement and raw exhilaration.

"Hah! You really are the man I acknowledged!"

"Daren, only someone like you is worthy to be my lifelong rival!"

As the words left his mouth, a wave of visible frost surged from Kuzan's hand, rapidly condensing into an ice spear gleaming with bone-chilling cold.

His grin disappeared. His expression turned serious and focused as he stepped forward, body drawn tight like a fully stretched bow. The ice spear, raised high in his grasp, glinted coldly under the blazing sun.

"Watch yourself, Daren. Let's see how you handle this one."

With his stance locked in, Kuzan narrowed his eyes—then hurled the ice spear with all his might!

Boom!

A white shockwave exploded outward as the spear ripped through the air with terrifying speed.

Daren narrowed his eyes. His bio-magnetic field instantly flared to its limit.

He shifted slightly, just enough for the spear laced with bitter frost to graze past his hair and plunge into the ruined remains of a military fortress.

Swoosh!

In less than a second, the entire structure was consumed in white. Frozen solid into a massive block of ice, the frost spread more than ten meters before finally coming to a stop, leaving the gathered Marines wide-eyed in horror.

The moment he dodged the ice spear, Daren blasted forward like a cannonball.

The sheer force shattered the ground beneath him in layers, kicking up sand like rolling waves.

So fast!

Kuzan's pupils contracted, but his eyes burned with a fierce fighting spirit.

He had known Daren was strong—but facing him head-on, the crushing pressure was on another level entirely.

"Still..."

Kuzan raised his hand, and a white ice pillar shot out from his palm.

"Ice Ball!"

Just then, a metal orb shot out from behind Daren. In the blink of an eye, it expanded into a massive metal shield that smashed into the ice pillar head-on.

Boom!!

The pillar shattered on impact, bursting into a glittering rain of ice crystals.

In the very next instant, Daren pierced through the icy haze like a ghost, appearing midair right in front of Kuzan.

He spun rapidly, building up centripetal force, and with that momentum, his black military boot snapped toward Kuzan's head like a whip!

Kuzan didn't flinch. Another ice spear formed in his hand, and he swung it to block.

But it only held for a moment—then cracked apart.

"I win!" Kuzan suddenly burst out laughing.

Instead of retreating, he charged forward, arms wide open—he wanted to take Daren's kick head-on using his Logia intangibility and then freeze him on contact!

No matter how strong Daren was, he couldn't touch a Logia user without Haki!

"Ice Time—What?!"

Bang!!

Daren's boot, carried by a whirlwind, slammed full-force into Kuzan's face. The crowd watched as Kuzan's long horse-like face twisted grotesquely, his skin rippling from the impact.

That monstrous strength—comparable to a giant—launched Kuzan through the air. He flew over a hundred meters before crashing into a classroom building like a missile.

Rumble...

Everyone stared in stunned silence as the five-story building cracked, buckled, and collapsed floor by floor—until it came crashing down in a massive cloud of dust.

A roaring shockwave followed, sending dust and debris rolling out like a tidal wave.

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Chapter 144 - 144: Volume 2 – Chapter 46: That Move

The earth let out a heavy, strained rumble as clouds of smoke and dust billowed outward, pushed by the shockwave.

Everyone stared, dumbfounded, at the collapsed teaching building, their mouths twitching.

That kick... it hurts just watching.

Wait!

Daren landed a hit on Kuzan!

His attack... actually worked!?

Could it be that Daren...

The delayed realization hit everyone at once. They all turned toward Daren, their pupils shrinking.

The Commodore still held the posture of a follow-through kick. On his heavy, polished black military boots, a swirling, invisible pressure coiled around like a spiraling hurricane.

"Armament Haki!!!"

"Daren has mastered Armament Haki!"

"That kind of talent... he's a complete monster!"

"Unbelievable..."

"..."

The Marines stood in disbelief, struggling to trust their own eyes.

Just then—

"Daren, you little brat! An abandoned military fortress is one thing, but that was the teaching building! Couldn't you have kicked in a different direction?!"

Zephyr roared through gritted teeth, his heart practically bleeding with pain. His face was full of anguish.

Thankfully, the training camp hadn't officially started yet, so no staff had moved into the building. Otherwise, this could've turned into a disaster.

Even so, rebuilding the structure would cost a fortune!

And Sengoku would definitely give him another cold look.

"How much is this gonna cost!?"

The Marines: ...

Zephyr-sensei, is this really the time to worry about that?

"Apologies, Zephyr-sensei. I'll pay double the original cost for all damages caused during the duel," Daren said with a smile as he slowly lowered his hovering boot.

Zephyr froze.

"Alright, then. Carry on."

Everyone: ...

Their mouths twitched again, but then another question struck them.

Wait, is the fight over?

Was that monster Kuzan... finished?

They widened their eyes and looked toward the ruins of the teaching building.

Thick smoke curled and lingered, and from the cracks in the collapsed walls, a glimmer of icy white began to emerge.

Bit by bit, crystalline frost spread from deep within the rubble, blooming into dazzling ice flowers as it moved forward, eventually forming a humanoid shape in front of the ruins.

"Cough, cough..."

A bright streak of blood dripped from the corner of Kuzan's mouth. Half of his face was visibly swollen.

But his gaze toward Daren blazed with excitement.

"Haki... Armament Haki... You really are worthy of being my opponent!"

What a ridiculous physique... Daren couldn't help but marvel silently as he looked at Kuzan's battle-ready expression.

If it had been anyone else here, they wouldn't have been able to take that hit head-on.

Even Tokikake—toughened from Daren's own "special training," with his hardened body and hand-to-hand combat skills—would've been seriously injured or knocked out cold by that kick, which had been infused with Armament Haki.

But Kuzan stood there like nothing had happened.

"Monster-level physical endurance?"

A sudden image flashed through Daren's mind—Sakazuki taking multiple direct hits from Whitebeard's Gura Gura no Mi during the war at the summit.

No, it wasn't just that.

He glanced at the collapsed building and quickly pieced it together.

Normally, his attack delivered damage in three stages.

First was the pure brute strength and explosive force of the kick.

Second was the burst from the Armament Haki.

The third was from Kuzan crashing into the building and getting buried in the rubble.

But it was clear Kuzan had nullified the third impact through elementalization.

No wonder that in the later stages, battles between Admirals and Yonkō-level fighters were measured in days.

Every single one had trained their bodies to inhuman levels. Even in the most savage close-quarters combat, there was no way to settle it quickly.

"Still want to go on, Kuzan?"

Daren smiled.

Kuzan grinned.

"Of course!!"

"But since you've mastered Armament Haki... I've got no choice but to use that move."

He took a deep breath, stepped forward with his right foot, and raised his hand. His gaze turned sharp.

A stream of frost slowly spilled from his mouth, crystallizing in the air.

Crackle... crackle...

Countless ice crystals rapidly spread along Kuzan's arm, and the temperature in the training ground plummeted.

Hot and cold currents clashed, stirring up a biting wind that swept across the field, making the spectators shiver from the sudden chill.

The ice crystals swelled in an instant.

With a fierce shout, Kuzan released a dazzling surge of snow and ice from his hands. It stretched outward, forming a pair of enormous ice wings.

A sharp, piercing cry echoed across the empty grounds.

A massive ice bird erupted from Kuzan's arms, spreading its wings wide as it charged straight toward the Commodore a hundred meters away with unstoppable force!

The extreme cold froze over everything in its path, coating the ground in thick frost and blanketing the entire area in blinding white.

"Ice Block: Pheasant Beak!!"

In that moment, Daren felt an overwhelming pressure surge toward him.

The ten-meter-tall ice bird barreled forward like a collapsing glacier.

He was about to move—then realized his right foot had gone numb and stiff.

Looking down, he saw a thin layer of frost had formed on his military boot at some point.

That kick just now?

"Kuzan's incredible! Even after taking a major hit, he still managed to freeze Daren's foot!"

"At the very least, he can't dodge this move now!"

"His reflexes in battle are terrifying!"

"..."

The Marines gasped in awe, eyes locked on Daren.

At that moment, facing the immense ice bird, the Commodore's figure seemed impossibly small, as if he might be swallowed up by the snowstorm at any second.

But then—

They saw the corners of Daren's mouth curl into a smirk.

A coin appeared in his hand.

Just a simple coin, cold and metallic.

Buzz—

With a flick of his thumb, the coin spun into the air.

Time seemed to slow.

As it flipped, it reflected the cry of the ice bird, the shocked faces of the crowd, Kuzan's excitement... and the defiant smile on the Commodore's face.

Arcs of blue electricity crackled at his fingertips.

Coin Flick!

"Magnetic Overload: Railgun!"

In the distance, Zephyr's pupils shrank.

The world seemed to fall still for a heartbeat.

Then—

BOOM!!

A colossal orange-red beam, wrapped in crackling electricity, exploded upward from the training ground.

The intense, blinding light cast the entire world into a momentary night.

Amidst the crowd's stunned expressions,

the roaring magnetic beam tore through the giant ice bird without resistance, melting it to slush as it raced toward Kuzan at blinding speed.

"No!!"

"Kuzan!!"

"Get out of there!!"

Shouts of alarm rang out.

Kuzan stood frozen, staring wide-eyed as the devastating Railgun surged toward him, the light engulfing everything in his vision.

BOOM!!!

The beam swallowed his silhouette. A violent shockwave exploded outward, and searing heat turned into a wild, roaring blast that scorched the battlefield.

Kuzan's eyes widened.

Within the engulfing light, a towering figure suddenly appeared before him.

Purple hair whipped in the wind. A snow-white cloak billowed behind him, the word "Justice" boldly emblazoned across it.

He stood like a dragon in mid-flight.

...

Chapter 145 - 145: Volume 2 – Chapter 47: The Title of Top Student

Light and shadow danced before his eyes, and the sacred cloak billowed in the fierce wind.

Kuzan stood there, stunned, staring at the towering figure before him. Something hot surged in his chest.

"Zephyr... sensei..."

The scene carried a kind of overwhelming, soul-stirring force—one that etched itself deep into his heart.

It wasn't until five seconds later that the blazing light finally faded.

The winds died down, and thick smoke began to roll up from the ground.

By now, the gathered Marines had all been knocked to the ground. They braced themselves with their sabers, rising shakily as they looked out across the training field, faces filled with shock.

The smoke clouded their vision.

"What happened?"

"Did they get out of the way?"

"What kind of power was that...?"

"He's one of us from the training camp!?"

"..."

Every face was filled with disbelief.

Soon, a breeze swept through, thinning the smoke and revealing the scene on the field.

Their eyes widened in horror.

A massive, charred trench split across the schoolyard. Flickering embers still glowed within it, stretching from Daren's feet all the way to the far end of their line of sight—stopping right in front of a massive figure.

"Zephyr-sensei..."

"It's Zephyr-sensei!!"

"He protected Kuzan!!"

"..."

The Marines shouted in relief, the heavy weight in their hearts finally lifting.

Zephyr stood in front of Kuzan like an immovable mountain, his presence commanding and unshakable. He held one hand aloft.

His index finger, covered in Armament Haki, was firmly pressed against a spinning coin.

The dark luster coating the coin gradually faded like melting liquid, and white wisps of smoke rose from the friction-heated metal.

"To think of wrapping Armament Haki around a coin... what a brilliant idea."

Zephyr caught the now-powerless coin as it fell, then looked up at the breathless, slightly pale Commodore. After a pause, a rare smile of admiration appeared on his face.

"Daren, how did you come up with that?"

Daren took a deep breath, steadying his labored breathing.

Every Devil Fruit ability, when activated, drains the user's physical strength.

That is an unbreakable law of the sea.

And his Jiki Jiki no Mi was no exception.

This move—what he called "Magnetic Overload"—worked by pushing his body to the limit. By burning through most of his stamina, he overloaded the magnetic field around a coin in an instant, amplifying it to a violent, near-uncontrollable state, achieving the destructive force of a railgun.

What truly caught him off guard, though, was how much more stamina it consumed after infusing the coin with Armament Haki—at least twice as much compared to when no Haki was used.

But judging from the power of that last strike, the concept was definitely sound.

Armament Haki could be coated and wrapped onto weapons, and even after leaving the user's body, it could linger for a short period.

As far as Daren knew, the female warriors of Amazon Lily used this same principle—infusing their arrows with Armament Haki to increase their penetrating power.

However, once the weapon left direct contact with the body, the infused Haki would begin to rapidly dissipate—until it eventually faded completely.

"It was just a shot in the dark—didn't expect it to actually work."

Daren wiped the sweat from his forehead and gave a relaxed smile.

With Zephyr present, he could go all out, even push past his limits, without needing to worry about seriously injuring Kuzan.

The name "Black Arm" Zephyr had once been the stuff of nightmares for countless pirates.

You could tell just by the way he stopped a Railgun with a single finger.

Zephyr chuckled at Daren's words.

What a lunatic...

He turned, patted the still-stunned Kuzan on the shoulder, and grinned.

"What's the matter, Kuzan? You alright?"

Snapped out of his daze by Zephyr's warm smile, Kuzan rubbed the back of his head sheepishly.

"I'm fine. Daren's just way too strong. I lost."

His gaze toward Daren was full of respect and awe.

That moment just now—facing the threat of death...

Kuzan knew there was no way he could have dodged that attack.

And if he couldn't dodge it?

A coin wrapped in Armament Haki... his body would've literally exploded on the spot.

Boom—like that.

"You're already more than good enough. Back then, even Sakazuki and Borsalino weren't any better than you," Zephyr said earnestly.

He glanced toward Daren as he spoke.

That wasn't to say Daren was currently stronger than Sakazuki and Borsalino. Those two had grown significantly since finishing training camp.

Right now, Daren was powerful—but still had a long way to go.

After all, Sakazuki and Borsalino had entered the program earlier than Daren and Kuzan.

Still, given enough time, there was no doubt Daren could catch up.

From what he'd just seen, Zephyr was confident that under his guidance, both Daren and Kuzan would make explosive progress during their time at the camp.

Kuzan's eyes lit up once again at Zephyr's praise.

"Hahaha! You hear that, Daren?"

"I may have lost this time, but I'll catch up soon enough!"

He gave a hearty thumbs-up.

"Don't get complacent!"

Daren smiled.

"Not a chance."

With a monster like you chasing me down, how could I afford to?

...

"Alright!!"

Zephyr beamed.

"All hands—assemble!!"

His voice rang out loud and clear.

At his call, every Marine quickly straightened their uniforms, expressions turning serious as they jogged into formation on the training field.

The golden sunlight poured down, illuminating their young, eager, and passionate faces, each one shining with energy.

Swish!

In perfect sync, they raised their hands in salute.

"Zephyr-sensei!"

A proud smile spread across Zephyr's face as he raised his voice.

"Then let me formally announce the top five placements in this year's Officer Elite Training Camp..."

"Fifth place: Yamakaji!"

"Fourth place: Tokikake!"

"Third place: Gion!"

"Second place: Kuzan!"

"And at the very top..."

He paused, eyes resting on the dark-haired Marine standing at the head of the crowd.

"—Rogers Daren!!"

"Let's all give our congratulations to Daren for earning this honor!"

Thunderous applause erupted. Everyone looked to Daren with admiration and respect.

He had earned it—no doubt about it.

"Well done..."

Zephyr waved his hand, and the applause slowly faded.

"Of course, these rankings are only temporary."

His gaze swept over every face in the crowd.

"During your time here at the camp, all of you will have the right to challenge the top five. If you win, you'll take their place—no exceptions."

"No complaints. That's life."

"This is true in the academy, and even more so out there in the real world. The moment you slack off, someone will overtake you."

"So..."

"Keep growing stronger!"

"Keep moving forward!"

"Keep fighting!"

"I'll always be behind you. No matter what you go on to achieve across the seas—whether you become pillars of the Marines or even rise to the rank of Admiral..."

Zephyr took a deep breath, his voice echoing like thunder.

"As long as you continue to fight for the justice in your hearts—I will always be proud of you."

He grinned.

"...my students."

...

And so, on that day...

The third Officer Elite Training Camp at Marine Headquarters officially began.

And the one who temporarily claimed the title of "Top of the Class" —

Was Rogers Daren, the Marine from the North Blue!

...

Chapter 146 - 146: Volume 2 – Chapter 48: What Kind of Person Is Daren?

That night.

Late into the evening.

Training camp, administrative building, Head Instructor's office.

A kerosene lamp glowed softly, casting warm light that pushed back the shadows in the room.

Zephyr sat at a time-worn desk, pen in hand, head down as he worked through a stack of documents. The lamp's glow stretched his silhouette across the wall, tall and broad.

As he flipped through the pages, it became clear they were the personal files of the new training camp recruits.

Beside him sat a green glass bottle of liquor, already uncorked.

Pheh...

After a long while, Zephyr finally closed the file in his hand, exhaling a deep breath. A satisfied smile slowly formed at the corners of his mouth.

This year's recruits were impressive—so much so that, overall, they even outshone the first and second sessions. Their excellence was enough to leave even Zephyr, the head instructor, astonished.

As he looked at the brilliant names printed in the files, his heart swelled with anticipation.

In high spirits, Zephyr couldn't resist lighting a cigar. He took a slow, satisfied puff, then raised the bottle and took a drink.

Knock, knock, knock...

A knock came from outside the door.

Zephyr froze, quickly stubbing out the cigar and tucking it away.

Before he could hide the bottle, the door swung open, and Gion stepped in, holding a file.

"Zephyr-sensei..."

She was about to speak, but her sharp nose twitched at the smell of cigar smoke.

Her eyes swept over the clearly guilty Zephyr. She frowned slightly.

"Didn't the doctor advise you to quit smoking and drinking? It's not good for your condition."

Now that the camp had officially begun, and with staff running thin, Staff Officer Tsuru had suggested Gion serve temporarily as Zephyr's assistant to help with administrative tasks.

Caught red-handed, Zephyr chuckled shamelessly.

"Gion, come on—today's been a good day. I was just celebrating."

"You said the same thing yesterday."

"Uh... well, I was in a good mood yesterday too."

"..."

Gion sighed in exasperation.

She knew Zephyr's personality all too well—stubborn and hardheaded. Advice just didn't stick with him.

"Whatever, whatever... hahahaha!!"

Zephyr laughed, raising the bottle labeled "Sherry."

"My body isn't that fragile. And this is the boldest booze around! If I go a day without it, I feel all out of sorts!"

"That's called alcohol dependency," Gion said dryly.

Zephyr: ...

He put the bottle down with a defeated sigh, silently regretting ever agreeing to Tsuru's suggestion. He shot Gion a begrudging look.

"Alright, what brings you here?"

Gion stepped forward and placed the folder on his desk.

"This is the finalized construction list and budget for rebuilding the teaching building."

Zephyr gave it a glance, but the dense columns of numbers and fine print made his head spin. He waved it off.

"You handle it."

Then, after a pause, he looked at her seriously.

"I trust you completely!"

You're just trying to get out of it... Gion's mouth twitched, but she kept her composure.

"As for funding, headquarters hasn't allocated any specific budget..."

Zephyr raised an eyebrow.

"Didn't that Daren brat say he'd cover the damages?"

Gion blinked, instinctively replying, "Yes."

Zephyr grinned.

"Then it's settled! Sengoku told me that kid's loaded."

Gion's eye twitched slightly, but she nodded with resignation.

"I'll take my leave then, Zephyr-sensei."

"Alright, get some rest... Gion—wait."

Zephyr suddenly called after her.

She stopped, turning back with a puzzled expression.

"You spent some time stationed in the North Blue, right? You probably know that kid Daren better than most... In your opinion, what kind of person is he?"

The question caught Gion off guard. She fell silent for a moment.

What kind of person was Daren?

Images flashed through her mind.

Her fury during their first encounter, triggered by Lady Yadis, the Governor's wife.

Her own confrontation with Daren when she learned he was taking bribes.

The sycophantic respect he showed the Celestial Dragons.

The weeping father selling flowers in the hospital.

The death of the Celestial Dragons.

The wild, unyielding battle against Byrnndi World...

"Daren... is a very complicated person."

After a long silence, Gion finally spoke, her voice low.

"On the surface, he looks like a shameless scoundrel. But in reality..."

"In reality?" Zephyr leaned forward slightly, his eyes full of curiosity.

"...he's also a shameless scoundrel," Gion said coldly.

Zephyr: "..."

"But..."

Gion suddenly sighed, sounding reluctant as she continued.

"Even if his methods and approach are questionable, for reasons I can't explain, he somehow always manages to resolve the most troublesome situations with ease."

"And under his administration, North Blue did achieve peace. The lives of ordinary people improved significantly."

"I see..." Zephyr murmured thoughtfully. "Then in your opinion, what's that kid Daren's view on justice?"

Gion was silent for a long time, then slowly shook her head. Her expression was complicated.

"I don't know, Zephyr-sensei."

I really don't know.

What kind of person is he, truly?

...

...

"Commodore Daren, this is the residence arranged for you by the training camp."

In front of a small, weathered house, a young Marine Lieutenant spoke respectfully.

The house wasn't luxurious—clearly aged, with faded walls and ivy creeping up the corners. Still, it had been cleaned thoroughly inside.

It came with a 40-square-meter garden. A typical detached villa, the style was common in the civilian quarters of headquarters. Usually, officers with the rank of Commander or higher were assigned one for personal use or for their families.

"Thanks."

Daren smiled and nodded.

He wasn't picky about where he lived.

With his wealth, he could easily afford a grand mansion in Marineford, but since the headquarters had made arrangements, it saved him the trouble.

"By the way, are the other trainees also housed nearby?"

He suddenly thought to ask.

The lieutenant nodded.

"Yes. Aside from Commander Tokikake and Commander Gion, who already own homes here, everyone else has been assigned to this neighborhood for easier camp management."

"Many trainees brought their families and moved in as early as a month ago."

That was standard practice for the training camp. It was only due to Daren's unique circumstances—his extended delay in North Blue and being hospitalized by Roger—that he was just moving in now.

"Alright. Appreciate it."

Daren smiled and casually slipped the lieutenant a wad of cash.

"N-no, Commodore Daren, that's not necessary!"

The young man's face turned red as he looked at the thick bundle of bills and quickly stepped back.

"Go ahead and take it. I don't like having my kindness refused. Besides, I've got a favor to ask."

Daren smiled as he pushed the cash into the lieutenant's hands.

"Tomorrow morning, go buy a fresh fruit basket and have it delivered here, alright?"

Before the young Marine could respond, Daren patted him on the shoulder and headed inside.

The lieutenant stared blankly at Daren's back, then down at the tip—easily worth over half a year's salary.

Suddenly, his face flushed with excitement. He snapped to attention and saluted.

"Yes sir! I'll carry out the task without fail, Commodore Daren!"

Daren waved back.

"Get some rest."

...

Chapter 147 - 147: Volume 2 – Chapter 49: Dragon's Dream

"So the rumors are true—you really are loaded."

Daren had just stepped into the yard when a low, amused voice called out from ahead.

Beneath the shade of an oak tree sat two beach chairs. One of them was occupied by a figure lounging without a care in the world.

"Breaking into someone else's yard isn't exactly polite, you know," Daren said with a light laugh.

Dragon shrugged, grinning.

"Don't be so stingy. A house this big? You're not gonna use all of it anyway."

Daren could only shake his head at this shameless guy.

He laid back in the other beach chair, gazing silently up at the star-strewn sky. His deep eyes slowly lost focus.

Seeing Daren say nothing, and unable to keep quiet for long, Dragon quickly looked for a topic.

"Hey, I never congratulated you—top of the class at this year's training camp!"

"It's only just begun. Don't forget, Kuzan's not called a 'monster' for nothing," Daren replied, glancing over at him.

"But tell me, Rear Admiral Dragon... you really not going home?"

Dragon shook his head.

"Nope. Just had a big fight with the old man. Don't feel like going back to stare at that sour face."

"Oh?" Daren asked casually. "What'd you fight about?"

Dragon laced his hands behind his head, staring at the stars as he sighed.

"I told the old man, all excited, that I want to become an Admiral someday."

"But he just flipped out—like a cat with its fur on end. Told me to give up on that dream. Said I should just aim to be a Vice Admiral like him, live a carefree life. Said my personality isn't suited for being an Admiral."

As he spoke, Dragon's tone turned bitter and a little indignant.

"Just because he doesn't want a promotion doesn't mean no one else does, you know?"

He turned his head to look at Daren.

"Daren, you get it, right? I grew up hearing about him—everyone calling me the son of the Marine 'Hero,' talking about how I inherited his heroic blood..."

"You don't like hearing that kind of praise?" Daren suddenly cut in.

Dragon was taken aback. He hesitated.

"Not exactly..."

Then he frowned, annoyed.

"It's just... everyone throws expectations at me, but no one ever asks what I want."

Daren rolled his eyes.

Typical rich kid problems. Honestly, he's just got too much time on his hands.

He couldn't help but complain inwardly.

"So what do you want?"

At that, Dragon's eyes lit up. He sat up a little, his voice full of enthusiasm.

"Great question!"

He suddenly shouted, startling Daren enough to nearly jump out of his chair.

"Daren, you know what? I've had a dream since I was a kid."

In his eyes, the stars seemed to glow even brighter, and on his face was that reckless, youthful arrogance only the young could pull off.

"I want to change the world!"

"Change the world?"

Daren raised an eyebrow, teasing lightly.

"I can't speak for others, but the world's treated you pretty well, hasn't it?"

"Bathed in the glow of a 'hero's' name, living a life most people couldn't even dream of."

"As far as I know, you were already a flashy Lieutenant Commander in Marine Headquarters at fifteen. When I was fifteen, I was still a lowly Seaman Recruit in the North Blue—scrubbing toilets and doing grunt work for my superiors."

"You had the admiration of high-ranking officers and trained alongside the elite of the Marines;"

"I spent my days either dealing with foul-mouthed soldiers or risking my life against mobsters and pirates."

"So do us all a favor—spare the complaints."

Dragon's face flushed red. He stammered awkwardly.

"Th-that's not what I meant, Daren..."

Daren waved it off.

"Then go on. Why do you want to change the world?"

Dragon took a deep breath.

"Back when I was little, I lived in the East Blue. A place called Foosha Village. Like the name says, there were windmills everywhere—you've heard of it, right?"

Daren nodded, thinking to himself, Of course I have. Probably know more about it than you do.

"My mom died when I was really young. The old man was always busy with his duties, so he didn't have time for me. The villagers basically raised me."

He paused, eyes softening with memory.

"It was a peaceful place. No wars, no disasters. Life was good."

"Until one day, a wave of refugees washed up from the sea..."

His voice dropped.

"I'll never forget it. Their bodies were nothing but skin and bone—barely human. They looked like walking skeletons."

"They came from a country ravaged by famine. Then the pirates came and made it worse. Over half the population starved to death."

"The villagers tried to help them, but their bodies were too far gone. They didn't last long."

"Do you know, Daren... their homeland was only two days away by sea from Foosha Village. Just a few hundred nautical miles, yet it felt like a world apart—heaven on one side, hell on the other."

"I remember thinking... if only I had more power, more resources, maybe I could've saved them. Right?"

"If I became an Admiral—no, even a Fleet Admiral—I'd have the authority and manpower to truly protect justice. Wouldn't I?"

Dragon clenched his fists, voice tightening with conviction.

"I'm not saying the old man's way is wrong. Cracking down on pirates is important."

"But maybe—just maybe—there's more we, as Marines of justice, should be doing."

"Protecting the weak. Defending the people... Isn't that what the Marines are supposed to stand for?"

"That's my dream!"

He stood up suddenly.

"I want to use Marine justice to change the world!"

"To make it a better, happier place!"

Daren said nothing for a while.

He turned and looked at Dragon's young, idealistic profile... and something clicked.

So this version of Dragon still believed in Marine justice...

But Dragon, do you really think that country's suffering was caused only by famine and pirates?

Do you really believe... the Marines can change the world?

"Maybe Vice Admiral Garp was right."

Daren's words caught Dragon off guard.

"You really aren't suited to be an Admiral. Let alone a Fleet Admiral."

"Go home. It's late. I need some rest."

With that, Daren rose from the chair and headed into the house.

Just as the door was about to close, he added one final line.

"Dragon, this world is far crueler than you think... One day, you'll understand."

Young and full of ideals—some people only learn after they've hit the wall hard enough to bleed.

Until then, no one's words can change their minds.

Bang!

The door closed behind him without hesitation.

Leaving Dragon standing alone in the yard, stunned.

And silent for a long, long time.

...

Chapter 148 - 148: Volume 2 – Chapter 50: Winning Hearts

Clear sunlight streamed through the window, casting dappled patterns of tree shadows across the walls. The air was calm, the scene peaceful.

Daren opened his eyes and slowly sat up in bed.

The room was small, but tidy and well-kept.

He sat up straight, instinctively checking his condition.

As his finely honed physical perception activated, his "personal attribute panel" appeared in his mind:

Physique: 65.131

Strength: 63.135

Speed: 63.591

Fruit: 74.167

Compared to last time, all his stats had noticeably improved.

Physique had increased the most. That near-deadly Kamusari strike from Roger hadn't been for nothing—it had pushed his physical resilience up by at least two points.

The other three—Strength, Speed, and Fruit—had all gone up by over a point each.

Hard to believe all of that came from just a single battle.

Daren did a rough estimate. Using the old training methods he'd relied on back in the North Blue, even pushing himself to his absolute limit every day, it would've taken at least three months to see the same gains.

And this had come from just one brief exchange.

Then again, it made sense.

A hundred practice drills still couldn't compare to the impact of real combat.

That rush of adrenaline in a fight for survival, the suffocating pressure where every cell, every muscle, every nerve is pushed to its limit... regular training just couldn't replicate that feeling.

Only battles against true powerhouses could fully unleash his body's potential—and shatter his limits.

"If I could go through that a few more times..."

The thought sent a jolt through Daren, and he muttered it aloud—then quickly chuckled at himself.

One slash had nearly killed him. The only reason he'd survived was dumb luck... and the fact that Roger hadn't gone all out.

If that had been a real, serious fight, there was no way he'd have walked away alive.

That slash... the one even gods and ghosts would flee from...

Daren instinctively clenched his fists.

Huff...

Several seconds passed before he let out a deep breath and got up to wash.

Following the training camp's duel, the cadets had been given three days of free time.

Part of it was to allow injuries from the matches to heal. The other part was to give the cadets—who had come from all corners of the world—some time to get used to life in Marineford.

After a quick wash, Daren got dressed, threw on his Marine cloak, and stepped outside.

Golden leaves drifted through the yard—the crisp breath of late autumn had quietly arrived, tinting even the air with a faint chill.

As he looked down, Daren spotted Dragon sprawled across the beach chair, limbs flung every which way, a big bubble puffing from his mouth as he snored.

He couldn't help but rub his temples.

"What a mess..."

Daren shook his head and strode out of the courtyard.

A nervous-looking young Marine lieutenant was already waiting outside, carefully holding a fresh fruit basket. The moment he saw Daren, he jogged over respectfully.

"Commodore Daren! Here's the fruit basket you asked for!"

The young man gave a sharp salute.

Daren accepted the basket with a smile.

"Thanks for the trouble."

"No, no trouble at all!" the lieutenant said, waving his hands frantically.

Daren casually slipped another wad of bills into his hand.

"Commodore Daren, sir, you already paid me... I haven't even used all the money from earlier..."

The lieutenant instinctively stepped back.

"Take it. And grab me some breakfast," Daren said firmly, stuffing the cash back into his hands.

He pointed at Dragon, still sprawled out snoring on the beach chair.

"Nothing gets the day started better than a warm breakfast, right?"

With that, Daren turned and walked off with the fruit basket in hand, leaving the flustered lieutenant standing there, holding more cash than his salary for half a year, utterly baffled by the turn of events.

"This is... way too much..."

...

The morning mist had lifted, and a crisp breeze brushed across his face—cool and refreshing.

Daren walked down the street at a relaxed pace, expression calm and unhurried.

He wasn't the type to use people for free—especially those who weren't part of his core team.

Back in North Blue, a region tangled in mafia power plays, he'd seen more than a few so-called crime bosses end up dead in a ditch, killed by the very underlings they looked down on.

The nobodies they used to order around with disdain... often ended up being the ones to stab them in the back when their luck ran out.

The human heart is complicated.

That wad of bills was nothing to Daren.

But to that young lieutenant, it was a small fortune.

Real wealth isn't measured by piles of gold, or the numbers in your bank account, or your mansion or yacht...

It's in the hearts you've bought.

Daren might never need anything from that Marine in his lifetime, but having that goodwill tucked away? Better to have it and not need it than the other way around.

A few hundred thousand Belly to make a Marine lieutenant—someone who handled the daily affairs of the training camp—indebted to you? Worth every coin.

Why not just give him the money directly?

Of course not. That would look bad.

Bribery? Breaking military regulations? Daren would never do such a thing.

He simply asked the lieutenant to help buy a fruit basket. And breakfast.

Simple.

Following the directions, Daren soon reached his destination.

Even before he stepped through the gate, he heard shouting from the courtyard—accompanied by the sound of something being swung and rapid footsteps.

"You little brat! You're injured and still dragging home stray cats! There are already too many animals in this house! The pets eat more than the people!"

"Ahhhh! Dad, stop chasing me! You can't see—what if you fall?!"

"I may be blind, but I can still hear just fine! Don't run, you brat!"

"..."

Listening to the noise, Daren couldn't help but chuckle.

He stepped forward and pushed the gate open.

Two figures froze in place.

One, mid-sprint, had a buzz cut and was wrapped in bandages head to toe—still frozen in a running pose.

Behind him, a blind middle-aged man stood panting, gripping a wooden stick.

Both of them slowly, awkwardly turned their heads toward Daren.

He raised the fruit basket in greeting.

"Looks like you're healing well, Captain Yamakaji,"

Daren said with a smile.

...

Chapter 149 - 149: Volume 2 – Chapter 51: The Name of the Blade

Yes, Daren had come to visit Yamakaji.

The resolve Yamakaji showed during the training camp battle had left a deep impression on Daren. Besides, he was the one who injured him—coming to check in was only natural.

"Commodore Daren!?"

Yamakaji stared at Daren, who stood there holding a fruit basket. He froze for a second, then quickly recovered. Smiling a little sheepishly, he introduced the visitor:

"Commodore Daren, this is my old man."

"Dad, this is Commodore Daren."

Daren gave a polite smile to the gruff-looking man.

"Hello, sorry to intrude."

...

A maple tree stood in the courtyard, its fiery red leaves drifting down in the cool breeze—breathtakingly beautiful.

"Why didn't you stay in the hospital a few more days?"

Daren set down the fruit basket and casually sat on the steps, glancing at Yamakaji, who was wrapped in bandages like a dumpling.

The Marine Headquarters offered free medical care to all its personnel, and Field-grade officers and above enjoyed even better treatment—private rooms and specialized recovery plans, for instance.

Yamakaji scratched his head with a smile.

"It wasn't that serious. I didn't want to trouble the doctors and nurses."

He jerked his chin toward the kitchen.

"And I don't feel comfortable leaving the old man here alone. You saw it—his eyesight isn't great."

Daren nodded.

His eyes swept briefly over the tidy yard. A few scruffy kittens napped lazily in the shade under the wall.

Just then, a yellow mutt bolted out of the house, ran up to Yamakaji, and started licking his hand, its tail wagging like a fan.

Daren suddenly understood where those claw marks on Yamakaji's arm had come from.

"You like animals?"

Yamakaji rubbed the dog's head and smiled.

"Not especially. But when I see them out there, barely surviving... I just feel bad."

Daren stayed silent for a moment, then pulled out a cigar and handed it to Yamakaji.

"Can you smoke?"

Yamakaji stared at the gold-embossed cigar for a moment, then calmly took it.

"Sure."

The two of them sat on the steps, smoking together in silence.

"Young man, stay for dinner. It's already ready," came a voice from the kitchen. The blind old man stepped out and called to Daren.

"It's rare for this grumpy brat to have a friend over. Don't say no."

Daren smiled and didn't turn him down.

"All right."

The dishes were simple, just home-cooked food. But Daren enjoyed it—it was a kind of warmth he'd never experienced before.

After dinner, Yamakaji took the initiative to do the dishes, leaving Daren alone with his father at the table.

"My boy's probably caused you a lot of trouble, hasn't he?"

The blind man suddenly broke the silence as he pulled out a crumpled pack of cigarettes and offered one to Daren.

Daren shook his head.

"Actually, it's the other way around. I've caused Captain Yamakaji quite a bit of trouble."

As he spoke, he studied the man in front of him—roughly fifty, but with a face deeply marked by the years.

His skin was tanned, his hands covered in thick calluses, and a vicious scar ran from his left eye diagonally across his face to the right cheek.

Noticing Daren's gaze, the old man pointed at the scar and grinned. There was a sharpness behind that smile—something fierce, something deadly.

"Don't worry. I didn't let that pirate off easy."

Daren couldn't help but chuckle.

"You sound like someone decisive and tough... That's a good thing."

The blind old man took a drag from his cigarette and sighed.

"My son's too soft. I mean, he's a Marine, but he keeps bringing in stray cats from the street. I've thought about throwing them all out more than once... Tell me, young man, with a temper like his, can my brat really kill pirates?"

Daren exhaled a puff of smoke.

"You're overthinking it. Captain Yamakaji is an outstanding Marine."

"His resolve to hunt down pirates is stronger than anyone's."

He paused, then added with a smile,

"And I bet you didn't know—this year, in training camp, Captain Yamakaji ranked fifth."

The old man fell silent.

Just then, Yamakaji returned, having finished the dishes.

"You two go ahead and talk."

The blind old man threw the words out stiffly, then stood up from his chair and walked out of the house.

Yamakaji gave an awkward smile.

"Sorry, my old man's temper... it's a bit weird."

Daren smiled and waved it off.

"No worries, I think he's got a good personality."

Yamakaji went quiet for a moment, then suddenly asked,

"Daren, during that fight... you weren't going all out, were you?"

He stared at the Commodore, eyes burning with anticipation.

"No," Daren replied bluntly, not bothering to hide it.

Yamakaji let out a small sigh, clearly disappointed.

"I thought I'd finally grasped a new sword technique... thought I could keep up with you monsters."

"You will."

Daren answered seriously, not holding back his praise.

Anyone brave enough to draw their blade against the strong deserves respect.

"That slash was already impressive."

"Really?"

Yamakaji's eyes lit up.

He paused for a second, then seemed to remember something. With renewed excitement, he said,

"Hey... you know my dream is to become a hero like Garp, a true, full-fledged man!"

"Every hero has some cool name for their moves, but I've been racking my brain these past few days and still can't think of one... Daren, could you help me name that slash?"

His eyes sparkled with the fiery passion and innocence of youth, making Daren chuckle despite himself.

When it came down to it, Yamakaji was still just a kid—not even twenty yet.

"How about this..."

Daren thought back to the fierce, blinding flames that lit up the training ground. After a moment, he smiled.

"Let's call that slash 'Mountain Fire.' How's that?"

...

After chatting for a while, Daren didn't linger much longer and said his goodbyes.

As he reached the courtyard gate, he saw Yamakaji's father walking out of the kitchen, holding a steaming pot of chicken and rice. Grumbling under his breath, he bent down to divide the food among the stray cats and dogs.

Daren smiled at the sight, then turned to wave goodbye to Yamakaji.

"Daren!"

He had only gone a short distance when Yamakaji's voice suddenly rang out behind him.

Daren turned around.

There stood the young man, still bandaged head to toe, beneath the blazing red maple tree. Facing the sun, he raised his fist and punched the air with all his strength.

"I'll keep pushing forward! One day, I'll catch up to all you monsters!"

His eyes blazed with determination, glinting with sweat and sunlight.

"I'll make that slash—and my name—resound across the world!"

Daren froze for a beat, then broke into a wide, unrestrained grin.

"All right, I'll be waiting."

...

Every brilliant and glorious life, every soul weathered by time, once belonged to a young man sweating beneath the blazing sun, throwing punches with all his might.

It's because of youth this passionate and dreams so pure that this vast ocean shines so brilliantly.

...

Chapter 150 - 150: Volume 2 – Chapter 52: Not a Life for Humans

During the two or three days of downtime, Daren took the chance to casually explore all of Marineford, the Marine Headquarters.

Strictly speaking, Marineford wasn't a single island, but rather a cluster of landmasses resembling an archipelago. Through administrative planning, it was divided into civilian and military zones.

The military zone mainly included large-scale defensive structures like the central military fortress and elliptical harbor, along with major armories, the administrative offices of various Marine divisions, training grounds, and the offshore areas patrolled by warships.

The civilian zone—also called the residential and commercial district—was home to Marineford's local residents and the families of Marine personnel. Most high-ranking officers' homes were also located here.

Even though Marineford served as the center of justice for the entire world, the residential area still had a fairly bustling commercial street to support daily life and leisure.

For supplies and trade, the Marine Headquarters issued trade licenses to well-established merchant caravans. These caravans transported goods, food, and various necessities from all over the world. Once they arrived, their ships had to undergo strict inspections to ensure no dangerous goods were onboard before being allowed to deliver cargo to the civilian zone.

Daren sat in a beach chair in his courtyard, puffing on a cigar and lost in thought.

"Blub-blub... blub-blub..."

A sudden ring from his military Den Den Mushi pulled him out of his thoughts.

He pulled the device from his coat, and upon seeing the signal, a faint smile tugged at the corner of his lips as he connected the call.

"Well, well—what an honor that the esteemed Admiral of the North Blue, Momonga-sama, has the time to call me."

Momonga's weary voice came through the line.

"Don't joke around... This Admiral job in the North Blue? It's not a life for humans."

Daren chuckled.

"Now you understand the pressure I was under before, don't you?"

On the other end, Momonga sat alone in the office of the 321st Branch's Base Commander. His eyes were sunken with fatigue, and he looked absolutely drained. He took a long drag from his cigar and gritted his teeth.

"I don't know how you held up before. Forget internal Marine affairs—training, procurement, budgeting, drills, pirate clean-up... I'm used to those. I can manage that."

His voice suddenly pitched up, filled with frustration.

"But what's with all the endless banquets!?"

"Every single day—it's parties, dinners, drinking sessions, auctions, wine tastings! Do those nobles and politicians not have actual work to do?!"

"Invitation after invitation... Especially after they found out you ranked top of the class in the headquarters training camp, the social invitations just exploded."

"They're like sharks that smell blood—rushing in one after another. The base has ten Den Den Mushi set up for communication and civilian distress calls... and they won't stop ringing!"

Momonga's eyes were bloodshot, his breath reeking of alcohol. He looked utterly miserable.

"Daren, do you have any idea what my last two weeks have been like?"

"Every day, it's either booze or food—cabarets, private gambling dens, endless gifts of luxury cigars and fine liquor. I can't even refuse. If I do, they drop to their knees on the spot... My office can't even hold all the gold and silver piling up!"

"They keep throwing beautiful women at me, and even when I play a measly pair of threes at the card table, they're like, 'Oh no, that's too big, I fold'..."

"I don't know how much longer I can keep this up."

He slammed a fist onto the desk, eyes red and breath ragged.

"What do they think I am!?"

"I'm a righteous Marine!!"

Hearing Momonga's complaints, Daren's smile only deepened. He couldn't help but tease:

"Captain Momonga, you do realize you're living the dream life—something most people can only wish for."

"—I'd rather be out risking my life against pirates!"

Hearing Daren's gloating, Momonga nearly lost it, gritting his teeth in frustration.

Daren couldn't stop laughing.

Power was the ultimate shortcut.

In the face of absolute strength, all authority, status, fame, and wealth had to step aside.

Back in the North Blue, his influence didn't come from political maneuvering—it came from overwhelming power strong enough to suppress the entire region.

Those smiles and flattering words were all just masks of submission under his might.

After arriving at Marine Headquarters and seizing the title of "Top of the class," it was clear that the strength of Rogers Daren wasn't confined to the North Blue. Even across the entire world's Marine forces, he held unmatched dominance.

Naturally, once the nobles, merchants, and officials from the North Blue caught wind of it, they swarmed like bloodthirsty sharks, throwing themselves at Momonga—Daren's deputy and successor—in a frenzy of flattery and pandering.

And that had been Daren's plan all along.

The more noise he made at headquarters, the more unshakable his influence in the North Blue became.

Still, this kind of social scene was a poor fit for someone like Momonga, whose nature was serious and composed...

"In truth, you're just too wound up. Relax a little, Momonga. Don't let it weigh on you."

Daren chuckled.

"Those so-called banquets and dinner parties? Just turn them down if they're not necessary. We're Marines—there's no need to waste time entertaining a bunch of bloated drunks."

"Focus on developing your hard power. That's what really matters. Of course, if it gets too stressful, there's no harm in unwinding at a cabaret now and then."

Daren gave him a wink.

Momonga rolled his eyes.

Socializing really wasn't his strength, and Daren's words gave him some relief.

"How's things going with Germa 66 lately?"

Daren asked.

The mention of business instantly shifted Momonga into work mode. His tone turned serious.

"Not much movement for now. Our collaboration with Vinsmoke Judge is still proceeding as usual."

Daren nodded.

"And how's my adorable godson?"

Momonga exhaled a long puff of smoke and replied in a low voice.

"Doflamingo's influence is still expanding, and his power is growing fast. A few days ago, he got into a fight with a pirate who had a bounty over thirty million. Didn't even take a full minute—he shredded the poor bastard into pieces."

"But overall, he's still keeping things under control in the North Blue, sticking to your rules."

"Good."

Daren smiled in satisfaction.

"But speaking of which, you still haven't congratulated me on becoming top of the class."

Momonga snorted.

"Wasn't that a given?"

"Anyway, I've got work to do. A new shipment of weapons from Germa 66 just arrived at the port. I need to inspect it."

"Alright, thanks for your hard work. When I'm back in the North Blue, I'll treat you to a drink."

Daren said with a grin, earning an exaggerated eye-roll from Momonga.

The military Den Den Mushi call ended.

Just as Daren put it away, a head suddenly popped up in front of him, blocking the sunlight.

Grinning ear to ear, full of shameless flattery.

Daren: "..."

"I swear, you guys have no manners at all. Barging into someone's yard without knocking—aren't you afraid I'll beat you up?"

Daren let out a helpless sigh.

He'd already noticed this guy eavesdropping by the wall.

Tokikake chuckled awkwardly and rubbed his hands together.

"So... Daren, can I ask you for a favor?"

Daren raised an eyebrow.

"No."

Short and firm.

Tokikake's face immediately fell.

Then—

With a thud, he dropped to his knees, clinging tightly to Daren's legs, and burst into dramatic sobs.

"Please, Daren!!!"

"I want to transfer to the North Blue! Isn't there a vacancy for Vice Admiral? Let me be Momonga's deputy!"

"I want that life too!"

"A life not fit for humans should be shouldered by me, Tokikake—the selfless genius! Please!"

His cries were absolutely gut-wrenching.

Daren: "..."

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