

One Piece 161

Chapter 161 - 161: Volume 2 – Chapter 63: The Great Treasure

White seabirds soared through the clear blue sky, letting out sharp cries as they passed overhead. Two pirate ships—one large, one small—lay quietly on the sea, as if listening to the ocean's stillness.

"...The Poneglyphs?"

Whitebeard raised an eyebrow after hearing Roger's words. Casually tilting back his head, he took a swig of strong sake and spoke in his deep voice.

"That stuff's just a bunch of stones nobody can read. What's it got to do with the end of the sea?"

Roger, already flushed with drink, swayed slightly as he shook his head, the red in his face deepening.

"No. After that war back then, I used the Eternal Pose we found on the battlefield in God Valley... and it led me to Lodestar Island."

"But when we got there, the island was empty. The pointer went haywire and stopped working entirely. Rayleigh and I both believe there's another island beyond Lodestar Island. Only by reaching it can the voyage truly be considered complete."

"All these years, I've been searching across the sea. And finally—I found a clue to the final island. It's in the Poneglyphs."

Roger lowered his voice, a faint smile curling his lips.

"The Poneglyphs record the secrets and truths of history. After some investigation, I discovered that four ancient red stones—the Road Poneglyphs—mark the way to the final island."

"I call them 'Road Poneglyphs'—because only by gathering all four can you find the legendary island at the end of the Grand Line."

"And there..."

Roger's eyes gleamed with boundless longing.

"—is where 'ONE PIECE' lies!!"

But Whitebeard, seeing Roger so fired up, just shrugged with disinterest.

"So what?"

Roger's eyes widened.

"What do you mean, 'so what'!? Aren't you even curious about what's at the end of the sea!?"

"That's the final island! Isn't that the reason we set sail? To uncover the world's secrets?! That's what true freedom and dreams are about!"

Whitebeard rolled his neck and took another swig.

"Roger, I've got no interest in some so-called great treasure."

"If you want to find it, go find it yourself."

His sharp, intense gaze drifted toward the deck, where Marco and the others occasionally peeked over in curiosity. Beneath the haze of drunkenness, a gentle smile quietly surfaced in his eyes.

"I've already found my ONE PIECE."

A soft breeze swept across the deck as Whitebeard's long golden hair danced in the sunlight.

Roger stared silently at the satisfied smile on Whitebeard's face, suddenly at a loss for words.

"I see..."

After a moment, he exhaled a long breath of sake, chuckled, and shook his head.

"I really envy you... getting to live your dream so soon."

Whitebeard smiled faintly and looked away. A strange red glint flickered deep in his eyes.

"You should go, Roger."

Roger nodded.

Through his Observation Haki, he could already sense two Marine ships entering the nearby waters. Powerful, ominous presences pulsed faintly from within.

Garp and Sengoku... had finally caught up with the main force.

So Roger raised his sake bowl and flashed a radiant grin.

"Well then, next time we meet—let's have a proper fight!"

Whitebeard laughed and picked up the sake jar.

"No problem."

The two men exchanged smiles.

Clink!

Their bowls and jars met high in the air, colliding with a crisp ring. In that moment, under the sunlight, the clash carried the flavor of freedom and dreams.

And then they downed it all.

...

Boom—!!

A low rumble of cannon fire echoed from the distant sea. Black cannonballs rained down around the two pirate ships, sending towering plumes of water into the air.

"Enemy attack!!"

"Oyaji!! It's the Marines!!"

"Captain Roger!! The Marines are here!!"

...

The sea churned violently as both pirate ships rocked under the assault. Cries of alarm rang out from the Whitebeard Pirates and Roger Pirates alike.

"Wahahaha! Newgate... until next time!"

Roger burst into laughter as he stood up.

Whitebeard also rose from the deck, watching Roger's retreating back as he stepped onto the gangplank.

"Don't let Garp catch you," he chuckled.

Roger looked back with a scoff.

"Like that's gonna happen! I'm plenty strong."

He flexed an arm, showing off his biceps.

"Oh?" Whitebeard raised an amused eyebrow, a mischievous glint in his eye.

"But I heard some brat from the Marines gave you a real beating... even ripped your pants off?"

As the words left his mouth, Roger stumbled and faceplanted on the deck of his ship.

"Newgate, you bastard!! That never happened!!"

He jumped up, face flushed green with rage.

Whitebeard chuckled and gave a side glance to the plastic button on Roger's belt.

"Looks pretty real to me."

"Damn you!! I'm not letting this go!!" Roger howled, reaching for his sword—only to be tackled by his own crew.

"Captain Roger, we have to run!!"

"If we don't leave now, the Marines will surround us!!"

...

As Roger flushed crimson and struggled wildly, the Roger Pirates were sweating buckets trying to hold him back.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

The cannon fire grew heavier, shells bursting across the sea in towering sprays of water.

Marco had already transformed into his phoenix form, soaring through the sky as he shot down cannonballs one after another.

In the distance, Garp's voice boomed like thunder across the waves.

"Roger! Don't you run! This time, it won't just be your pants you lose! Bwahahaha!"

Roger's face instantly darkened like scorched iron.

"Gurararara... let's go, Roger."

Whitebeard chuckled and shook his head.

"I'll send you off."

As soon as he spoke, Rayleigh gave the order without hesitation to retract the gangplank.

Whitebeard turned around. His deep eyes locked onto the two Marine warships surging toward them across the sea. His long golden hair danced wildly in the sea breeze.

On the deck of the approaching ships, the figures of Garp and Sengoku at the prow became steadily clearer.

"It's not time to fight you yet, Garp, Sengoku..."

Whitebeard muttered with a faint smile and took a deep breath.

His fists clenched tightly, the muscles on his arms bulging like stone, crossing firmly in front of his chest.

"Oyaji... don't tell me..."

Marco's pupils contracted, and his face fell.

The other crew members quickly grabbed onto whatever they could on the Moby Dick, holding on for dear life.

"Gururarara!! Marines, here's a little parting gift for you!!"

Whitebeard roared, his eyes flaring with explosive intensity.

A milky-white aura wrapped around both his fists as he hurled them forward with full force!

Boom!!

His fists slammed into the air itself. Crackling sounds erupted, and visible fractures spread out across the void like shattered glass.

For a moment, the world fell into a deathly silence.

Then—

In the stunned eyes of Garp, Sengoku, and the assembled Marine elites, the sea suddenly exploded into chaos!

A deep, rumbling roar surged from the depths of the ocean, growing louder and louder until it became deafening.

Boiling waves surged upward layer upon layer, transforming into a towering tsunami hundreds—no, thousands—of meters high, blotting out the sky.

Amid the crashing fury, the Oro Jackson was tossed into the air like a toy flung by a giant, vanishing into the distance with shrill, pig-like screams echoing behind it.

The tsunami thundered skyward, its roar threatening to tear the world apart.

...

Three full minutes later.

The mountainous waves finally began to settle.

Across the churning sea, fragments of ships and broken debris floated everywhere.

On the two battered Marine warships—mastless and wrecked—survivors gasped for breath, their faces drained of color.

"Damn it!! They got away again!!"

Soaked to the bone, Garp cursed at the empty ocean before him.

The Oro Jackson and the Moby Dick had completely vanished—clearly taking advantage of the tsunami's cover to make their escape.

"With a tsunami like that... even if the Moby Dick wasn't hit head-on, they must've taken heavy damage."

Sengoku panted heavily, his brows furrowed as he muttered,

"Who knows where the current swept them off to..."

His breath was unsteady—clearly a lingering effect of clashing with the overwhelming force of the tsunami.

"So this is the power of the world's strongest man... terrifying, isn't it?"

A calm, unhurried voice rang out as dazzling golden light descended from above.

Countless photons gathered beside Sengoku, forming a human figure. Borsalino appeared without so much as a wrinkle in his coat, lazily stroking his stubbled chin with a grin.

Sengoku glanced at Borsalino—bone-dry and utterly untouched—and twitched at the corner of his mouth.

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Meanwhile—

On the Grand Line.

A ruined town smoldered in silence.

Bodies lay strewn across the ground, while the shattered remains of buildings burned with thick, black smoke billowing into the sky.

A bloodied military boot crushed a fallen pirate flag underfoot. A towering blond youth in a black military uniform held a pirate up by the neck, hoisting him into the air with one hand. His eyes burned with defiance and disdain.

"This guy's worth 80 million Belly?"

He sneered, a flicker of disappointment in his eyes.

"Pathetic."

Crack!

With a twist of his thick fingers, the pirate's neck snapped cleanly, sending the head soaring into the air.

Scalding blood spurted like a fountain from the corpse, painting a cruel streak across the crimson sky.

The blood splashed across the blond youth's face, amplifying the savagery in his twisted grin.

He let go, letting the body crash lifelessly to the ground.

Then, as if sensing something, he turned and squinted toward the sea.

A warship brimming with bloodlust cut through the waves in the distance.

"Marines?"

Douglas Bullet Bullet licked his cracked lips and grinned darkly.

"Perfect timing... I'm just getting warmed up."

...

Chapter 162 - 162: Volume 2 – Chapter 64: One Man Becomes an Army

"Only one warship, huh? Well, it's better than nothing."

Douglas Bullet's eyes gleamed with a savage, arrogant light as he sneered.

"Before I take down that guy named Roger, I'll use you lot to warm up—"

Before he could finish, his expression shifted.

A flash of silver suddenly tore through the sky and slammed into the ground at terrifying speed.

Boom!!

A massive cloud of dust erupted across the ruined town.

Bullet's figure was sent skidding back dozens of meters, his black military boots carving deep trenches into the earth. The swirling dust whipped up by the blast obscured much of his body. His right hand, clad in Armament Haki, clutched a streamlined silver metal skateboard.

"A Devil Fruit user? Now things are getting interesting..."

Bullet licked the corner of his mouth, his eyes igniting with a burning will to fight. He gripped the metal board so tightly it bent in his hand.

Just as he was about to move, a barrage of shells rained down from above, completely swallowing him in wave after wave of explosions and flames.

The blasts roared like thunder, flames shooting into the sky.

The wreckage of collapsed buildings lay scattered under the indiscriminate bombardment. Under the searing shockwaves, stone, glass, soil—and bodies—were blown to pieces.

Aboard the warship, the Marines looked on in stunned silence as the shells, neatly stacked on deck, blanketed the target zone like a tactical array. One after another, massive mushroom clouds erupted.

At that moment, the entire town seemed to transform into a colossal artillery test site. The explosions lit up the sky in a blazing inferno.

They could hardly believe what they were witnessing.

Their eyes instinctively shifted to the tall figure at the bow of the ship—standing shoulder to shoulder with Sakazuki, arm extended flat.

Only now did they understand why the always-proud Rear Admiral Sakazuki had shown such regard for a mere recruit fresh out of the training camp.

He didn't need any heavy artillery.

This man—his firepower alone was enough to rival an entire army!

Even more terrifying was the fact that, thanks to Commodore Daren's Devil Fruit ability, the warship's shells didn't need to arc like traditional artillery. There was no need to adjust their trajectory.

Instead, they rocketed toward the target zone at speeds several times faster than standard cannons!

"So strong..."

"Is he even human?"

"No wonder Rear Admiral Sakazuki personally went to the training camp to get him..."

...

As the Marines stood frozen in shock, Sakazuki's eyes remained locked on the epicenter of the explosion in the distance. He frowned slightly.

"His aura hasn't faded."

A twisted grin spread across Daren's face.

"Of course not. That guy's not going down so easily."

He yanked off the Navy cloak draped over his back, rolled his neck with a few satisfying cracks.

"Guess I'll go have some fun with him."

"Hm."

Sakazuki responded coolly.

As his words fell, faint purple sparks flickered between his fingertips. Invisible magnetic waves rippled outward, then surged into violent turbulence.

In the stunned gaze of the surrounding Marines, the commodore's figure launched from the ship like a cannonball.

His speed peaked instantly, body nearly parallel to the sea as he tore across the surface. The sheer force of his flight split the ocean below into a snow-white trench... racing straight toward the fiery heart of the town!

Before this mission, Daren had already used his connections with the Marine Headquarters Armament Management Department to secretly upgrade his boots and belt, embedding them with metal components.

Now, he no longer needed a metal board—he could fly at full speed on his own!

"Don't just stand there! Full speed ahead!"

Sakazuki's sharp command snapped the Marines out of their daze.

In the next moment, the ship's engines roared like a wild beast... at full throttle!

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"What a pathetic trick... Is that really all the Marines can do?"

From the thick smoke and raging flames, a black military boot stepped forward.

Then, Douglas Bullet's massive figure burst through the smoke. The Armament Haki that had coated his entire body faded rapidly, like ink being drained away. He tore apart the charred remains of his burned and tattered uniform, exposing a body of coiled, rippling muscle.

"Is that so?"

A low voice suddenly rang out.

A strange crimson gleam flashed in the depths of Bullet's eyes.

A black-haired Marine appeared above him like a ghost. His boot, clad in Armament Haki, came crashing down like a raging battle axe with overwhelming force!

Bullet let out a sinister grin.

"Looks like we've got a real monster this time."

He didn't flinch—just threw a punch straight upward.

Boom!!

Boot and fist collided in mid-air, unleashing a thunderous blast like a meteor slamming into the earth.

Douglas Bullet's body was driven downward. The ground within ten meters beneath his feet collapsed, forming a gaping crater.

His pupils contracted—but then he broke into a wild, delighted laugh.

"Kahahaha!! Now that's some power!"

"This is the first time— the very first time on these seas—that someone's matched me in raw physical strength!"

His eyes burned crimson, locked onto Daren's indifferent expression like a demon locking onto prey. Excitement flared deep in his gaze.

And at that moment, Daren finally got a clear look at Bullet's face.

It was almost exactly as he remembered—cold, sharp, emotionless. A face that knew neither pity nor compassion. In his eyes, a madness and obsession that screamed from deep within.

But compared to his memory, the Bullet before him looked much younger—barely twenty.

"You have no idea how vast this sea really is."

Daren sneered.

His body twisted in mid-air, and using that momentum, he drove a punch straight at Bullet's head.

The terrifying force—surpassing even that of the Giants—combined with Armament Haki, tore through the air with a roar. White shockwaves exploded outward, followed by a deep sonic boom.

"Oh yeah?"

Bullet laughed wildly, brimming with fighting spirit as he threw his fists forward.

"Then show me what you've got... Marine!!"

Boom!!

Two jet-black fists collided in the sky with a deafening crash.

At that moment, Bullet's eyes narrowed, and an overwhelming, abyssal aura erupted from his body.

The wind howled—heaven and earth shifted.

Conqueror's Haki!

Without hesitation, Daren unleashed his own Conqueror's Haki at full force.

Boom!!

Purple and red waves of Conqueror's Haki clashed like tangible tsunamis in the sky, colliding and crashing in a storm of crackling lightning.

The violent shockwaves rippled out from the center, sweeping everything in their path.

The ground, shattered buildings, dirt, boulders, mangled corpses—everything was hurled skyward by the sheer force of the Haki clash.

Wave after wave of surging energy rolled out in every direction.

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Chapter 163 - 163: Volume 2 – Chapter 65: The Power of Bullet

A violent storm rippled across the land, spreading in waves. Purple and crimson auras clashed fiercely, making the two wild and overbearing figures seem like demons from hell.

The intensity of their collision sent shockwaves radiating outward at terrifying speed. Cracks split across the island's edges, trees, and the ruins of buildings. The force was so tangible it felt like a solid weight bearing down, bringing even full-speed warships to an abrupt halt.

Many of the weaker Marines aboard collapsed silently, overwhelmed by the pressure of the aura.

Their eyes flew open in horror as they stared at the town, now resembling a hellish battlefield. Black and red lightning streaked across the sky.

"A clash of Conqueror's Haki!"

"Commodore Daren has awakened Conqueror's Haki!"

"This is insane!"

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At the bow of the ship, Sakazuki stood unmoved against the oncoming wave of power, like an unshakable cliff. His white cloak whipped in the wind, and deep in his eyes, a faint glint of light flickered.

"Kahahahahaha! This is the feeling!!"

Douglas Bullet's bloodshot eyes burned with madness. His grin widened in excitement.

"Come on, Marines! Let's have a real fight!"

As he shouted, Bullet's demonic red eyes gleamed even fiercer. His aura surged once more.

"Roar!!"

With a roar like a devil's howl, the muscles on Bullet's right arm, locked in a clash with Daren, bulged violently. A more intense and domineering Haki burst forth.

Daren's pupils shrank.

"Try and stop me, Marine!"

Bullet sneered. His thick, beast-like arm pulsed as a ring of white shockwaves erupted from it. Power exploded out.

Enduring Daren's monstrous strength—greater than even a Giant's—he landed a crushing punch that sent Daren flying!!

Boom!!

A shockwave burst outward. The unleashed Armament Haki tore through earth and ruins, carving a massive trench in its path.

Daren's body shot back like a cannonball, crashing through several collapsed buildings before slamming into the ground, sending dust spraying outward in rippling waves.

Dust filled the air.

Bullet's eyes burned with growing madness. Without a word, he stomped hard on the ground and vanished.

His speed was unbelievable. This maniac, who once wiped out an entire nation's army, had pushed his body to truly superhuman levels!

In the next instant, Bullet appeared at the spot where Daren had crashed.

He drove his fist toward the barely visible silhouette in the dust, face twisted in a snarl.

Since childhood, Bullet had fought on battlefields, surviving countless brushes with death and staining his hands with the blood of many. He understood one thing:

There's no need to hold back in battle. Wasting time with words is idiotic. If you want to kill, strike. Giving your enemy a chance to breathe is digging your own grave.

"Kahahaha! Die, Marine!"

Crack—

Suddenly, the ground split open with a sharp crack.

Bullet's expression shifted. A flash of red light from his Observation Haki flared deep in his eyes as he quickly altered his move.

Boom!!

The ground in front of him erupted. A crimson glow—like a sign of hell and annihilation—exploded in Bullet's eyes.

Lava gushed from the cracked earth. A figure burst out like a beast of magma breaking free, its molten fist glowing with deadly heat as it lunged forward.

The next second—

Bullet's Haki-clad fist and the blazing magma fist collided in midair!

A heavy, dull thud rang out.

Purple Armament Haki and the red arc of magma clashed, creating a violent cyclone that crushed and melted the ground beneath them.

Waves of force swept outward, flinging rubble, twisted metal, and debris in all directions.

The standoff lasted only a second.

With a loud boom, both men grunted from the impact.

The lava-wreathed figure unleashed a spray of molten rock. Bullet stumbled back, instinctively retreating.

Thud, thud, thud...

His feet pounded the ground, each step caving in the earth and leaving deep craters behind.

"Here comes an even stronger one..."

A scorching heat pulsed from his fist. The black gloves had already been charred. Bullet narrowed his eyes, a savage red light flickering deep in his pupils as he licked his cracked lips with anticipation.

The lava, burning at thousands of degrees, had a strange, searing penetration—strong enough that even his Armament Haki couldn't fully block it.

"Looks like I can finally go all out this time."

He stared at the two figures within the drifting dust, cracking his knuckles as he grinned with unrestrained delight.

"What a mess..."

The wind blew the dust away. Daren stepped slowly out of a deep, jarring crater, blood dripping from his right arm.

Bullet's strength was truly overwhelming. In terms of raw physique, power, and martial skill, he might be on par with Daren—but his Armament Haki was clearly a level above, enough to suppress him outright.

"Headquarters' intel was off. Leaving aside the destructive power of his Devil Fruit, this guy's close-quarters combat ability likely already surpasses Byrnni World."

A low, steely voice rumbled out.

The bubbling magma surged across the ground, rapidly rising and condensing into a towering figure.

Rivulets of crimson magma slid down Sakazuki's hard-edged face like sweat, revealing the white cloak beneath as thick black smoke billowed from his body.

Daren wiped the blood from the corner of his mouth and grinned.

"Yeah."

He had once fought Byrnni World one-on-one. Although he'd had the firepower of the North Blue Fleet backing him, there had definitely been some luck involved.

But Sakazuki was right—when it came to hand-to-hand combat, Douglas Bullet, who had grown up on the battlefield, was indeed stronger than Byrnni World.

In truth, much of the fear surrounding Byrnni World, and the reason he was considered a legendary Great Pirate, came from the devastating power of his Moa Moa no Mi.

But from their earlier clash, even though he'd been suppressed by Bullet's Haki, Daren had managed to get a solid read on his strength.

At this point in time, Bullet—only fifteen and not yet part of the Roger Pirates—definitely hadn't reached the level of someone like the Dark King Rayleigh.

That kind of terrifying strength he would come to be known for in later years likely came from Roger repeatedly "feeding him moves" during countless failed challenges... combined with Bullet's relentless drive to improve.

Looking at it that way, maybe Roger really was a pretty good "teacher."

And now, Bullet...

Was his strength just shy of Admiral-level?

Daren spat out a mouthful of blood. A twisted grin tugged at the corner of his mouth.

He could fight!

...

Chapter 164 - 164: Volume 2 – Chapter 66: Team Up

"Don't let your guard down."

Sakazuki shot a glance at Daren, his voice cold.

He stared expressionlessly at the blond youth not far away, whose entire body radiated a demonic aura. A faint gloom flickered in his eyes beneath the shadow of his cap.

Their earlier clash might have forced Bullet back, and on the surface, it looked like a draw—but the dull ache and numbness lingering in his arm kept reminding him of just how formidable this guy was.

A superhuman physique, explosive power, and overwhelming Armament Haki... This mission was turning out to be far more difficult than Sakazuki had anticipated.

Daren stepped forward and came to stand beside him.

With a slight flick of his fingers, tons of steel buried in the town's ruins surged up like coiling dragons, quickly twisting into sharp metallic tendrils that hovered menacingly above his head.

"I've never been one to underestimate my opponents."

Sakazuki narrowed his eyes and suddenly asked,

"When did you awaken your Conqueror's Haki?"

Daren glanced at the side of Sakazuki's face. He didn't see anything unusual, so he chuckled.

"Back in the North Blue."

As he spoke, he clenched his spread fingers into a tight fist.

Shhh!!

Dozens of massive metal tendrils shot forward like rampaging dragons, tearing through the air at breakneck speed, lashing toward Douglas Bullet.

Rumble!!

The countless metal spikes, like giant pillars falling from the sky, crashed down in sequence, stirring violent shockwaves across the ground. Dust and smoke rose like towering columns, and the ground trembled beneath the force.

"Hahahahaha!!"

Bullet burst into crazed laughter. Without even moving visibly, he flickered across the battlefield at terrifying speed, his figure blurring into afterimages.

The metal spikes, sharp enough to pierce a warship, all scraped past his body—yet not a single one landed a hit.

"Is that all? Come on, both of you—hit me together!!"

He grinned wildly, crimson light flaring in his eyes. Then, with a sudden stop, he raised his hand and grabbed one of the spikes flying toward him.

Crack crack crack...

With a squeeze of his fingers, his surging Armament Haki exploded outward. The hundred-meter-long metal spike shattered midair into countless fragments.

The next second—

A crimson figure tore through the cloud of metal debris like a mad beast. The snow-white cloak trailing behind instantly melted into bubbling lava.

Blistering heat surged outward, distorting the surrounding air.

"Inugami Guren!" (Dog Biting Crimson Lotus!)

Sakazuki's voice rang out cold and sharp. Lava erupted from his arm like a missile launch, roaring forward.

A massive magma hound, blood-red and monstrous, opened its gaping jaws like a burning lotus and lunged straight at Bullet!

"Hahahahaha!! That's more like it!!"

Bullet laughed louder than ever. Facing Sakazuki's overwhelming strike, he stepped forward instead of retreating, driving his fist forward with full force.

Boom!!

His overwhelming Armament Haki burst outward, forming a visible arc of force around his fist that slammed straight into the magma hound's jaws, holding them at bay.

Lava splashed violently, scattering in all directions.

At the same time, Daren's figure appeared at Bullet's side like a ghost. He swung a horizontal kick at Bullet's head.

The black military boot glinted in the sun. Bullet squinted, then reached out with his thick arm—his palm wide and muscles bulging—and grabbed.

Bang!

A blast of compressed air exploded outward.

He seized Daren's foot in a firm grip. The shock from Daren's Haki made him grunt, and his body swayed slightly.

"Yeah... this is the feeling..."

Bullet's eyes were blood-red. Grinning madly, he raised his leg and delivered a brutal knee strike straight at Daren's chest.

He was aiming to be the world's strongest!

No matter how many opponents stood in his way, he would never take a single step back!

Daren's eyes narrowed. He lifted his own knee to meet the blow head-on!

This guy's fighting style was brutal and unrelenting—pure battlefield warrior through and through!

Boom!!

A shockwave erupted, blasting wind in all directions.

Riding the momentum, Bullet stepped back. His right foot stomped hard into the ground, shaking it with a loud tremor. At the same time, he grabbed a twisted metal spike beside him and, laughing wildly, hurled a punch.

As he punched, the remnants of the spike seemed to come alive, rapidly coiling around his left arm to form a massive shock cannon.

Dark purple Armament Haki wrapped around it. White steam blasted from the cannon's base like rocket thrusters, dramatically boosting the punch's explosive power.

The force and pressure of the fully unleashed strike were so intense that the air around his swing seemed to collapse, spiraling into a fierce whirlwind.

"Unión Armado!"

An enormous, indescribable cannon punch came crashing down on Daren. The sheer force of the wind distorted his face as it tore past.

Daren's pupils shrank.

The power behind this punch...

He crossed both arms in front of his chest, Armament Haki flaring over them, and a faint arc of electricity flickered between his fingers.

Boom!!

It felt like being slammed head-on by a high-speed Buster Call battleship. Daren was blasted backward like a severed kite, coughing up blood as he flew.

"Kahahahaha!! As long as I'm on the battlefield, I'm invincible!!"

Bullet laughed even more maniacally. Relentless, he didn't give Daren a moment to breathe. The metal cannon fused to his arm shifted again, its end morphing into a black, gaping barrel.

As the wielder of the Gasha Gasha no Mi, he could merge any object he touched with his body, rearranging them to forge new weapons. As long as he was on a battlefield, he had an endless arsenal at his fingertips.

A dark red glow rapidly gathered in the cannon's barrel—its aim locked firmly on the airborne Daren.

"Let's finish this—"

Bullet's pupils narrowed. In the corner of his eye, he noticed the Marine who had just been sent flying... smirking.

A chilling grin curled at the corner of Daren's lips.

Realization dawned.

Bullet's eyes went wide.

Suddenly, the cannon fused to his arm crackled with dancing arcs of electricity.

Boom!!

The cannon backfired violently, erupting in flames and thick smoke that engulfed Bullet in an instant.

"What the hell...?"

His body staggered as burns appeared on his neck and arms, his face filled with shock.

But before he could recover—

A surge of molten lava exploded before his eyes like an erupting volcano.

The punch came fast and furious, like a thunderclap, like the last savage bite of a rabid dog let loose from its cage.

Too fast!

This punch...

A crushing sense of danger surged in his chest.

Bullet reeled. He hardened his upper body with Armament Haki, and clenched his left arm, trying to counter with the power of the giant fused cannon.

But more arcs of electricity erupted across the cannon-arm.

A strange, invisible pulling force locked his movements down, dragging him and dulling his reflexes.

"What kind of ability is this?!"

Bullet's pupils trembled violently. He grit his teeth.

"Well done!!"

Sakazuki roared.

He and Daren had fought side by side for years in the North Blue. Their battle-hardened instincts and unspoken trust meant a single glance was all it took to read each other's intentions.

This—this was the opening Daren had created for him!

Now's the moment!

Sakazuki's eyes burned with killing intent.

His lava-coated fist surged with apocalyptic energy and erupted forward!

"Hellhound!!"

...

Chapter 165 - 165: Volume 2 – Chapter 67: The Beast in the Cage

Like the furious punch of a volcanic eruption, a sinister red light surged forth like a hellhound's breath, rapidly expanding in Bullet's pupils!

Sakazuki launched his punch!

Bullet's mind reeled. His eyes instantly bloodshot, veins bulging with rage. A burst of overwhelming Armament Haki exploded from his body. The massive, scorched metal cannon on his arm erupted with more crackling blue electricity and thick smoke.

He actually managed to break free from the strange, oppressive force field and narrowly twisted his body to dodge the attack.

Screeech!!

A roaring pillar of magma blasted upward at an angle, grazing the left side of Douglas Bullet's body. The searing heat charred his flesh, reducing it to blackened carbon.

The excruciating pain twisted Bullet's face into something grotesque, but he didn't flinch. As if he couldn't feel it at all, he swung his arm back and smashed a heavy punch into Sakazuki's chest.

"I'm Douglas Bullet! I'll become the strongest in the world!!"

Boom!

The blast of Armament Haki sent Sakazuki flying like a severed kite. A sharp crack of bones echoed, and he tumbled dozens of meters across the ground before crashing down, kicking up a massive cloud of dust.

At the same time, Bullet staggered back a few steps, swaying, his face turning ghostly pale.

His left side—from shoulder to arm, across his chest and abdomen—had been scorched pitch-black by lava's searing heat, black smoke billowing off his charred flesh.

The horrific burn melted the muscle beneath, turning it into a thick, oozing liquid that dripped to the ground along with molten magma.

Sakazuki's desperate, all-out strike had punched straight through even Bullet's fearsome defenses, leaving him gruesomely wounded.

"You two..."

Bullet's eyes glowed red, glaring like a demon as he stared down Daren and Sakazuki, now slowly rising from the smoke.

"One's just a Rear Admiral, the other a Commodore... How the hell do you have this kind of power?"

He was an orphan, raised by the military from childhood.

The battlefield was his entire life. Combat, his sole creed. He could instantly recognize the ranks on Daren and Sakazuki's epaulets and had a deep understanding of military operations and combat styles.

But these two... They were nothing like any army, soldier, or even Marine he had ever encountered.

Unheard-of Devil Fruit abilities—one bizarre to the extreme, the other possessing unprecedented piercing force.

They didn't even seem to communicate, yet in the chaos of life-and-death battle, they executed near-perfect coordination.

Even more terrifying was—

Their combat style: fierce and wild to the extreme. To gain the slightest edge or find an opening, they'd gladly trade blows, fighting like two emotionless beasts...

They were the polar opposite of the by-the-book, rigid Marines he'd dealt with in the past!

As he spoke, Bullet disengaged his ability. The tattered metal cannon fell from his hand with a heavy thud, creating a crater in the ground.

But just as he moved to act—gunfire erupted!

Clang! Clang! Clang!!

The Marines, finally arriving from afar, raised their rifles and opened fire. A hail of bullets rained down on Bullet, but every shot was deflected by his Armament Haki, scattering dirt across the sand.

At that moment, Daren's weary voice came through the smoke.

"What a shame... I really thought we had him."

He slowly emerged from a deep crater, blood streaming from his arms, a vivid trail dripping from the corner of his mouth.

Lifting his blood-soaked hand, Daren fumbled in his pocket for a cigar.

It was damp and stained red, but he didn't care. He bit down on it and lit it up with a lighter.

As the acrid smoke filled his lungs, some color returned to his pale, drained face.

"His Armament Haki is ridiculously strong. As long as it's powerful enough, it can resist—or even nullify—outside Devil Fruit effects."

On the other side, the smoke was blown away by the wind, revealing Sakazuki's figure.

One hand braced against the ground, blood streaming from his mouth, his ribcage sunken inward at an unnatural angle.

While speaking, he reached for his ribs, eyes flashing with ruthless resolve.

His gloved hand pressed down hard—

Crack!

A sharp snap echoed as the fractured ribs snapped back into place.

He said flatly,

"But... things won't be so easy from here on out."

Daren's last strike had caught Bullet off guard—a move meant only to seize a fleeting opening.

Now that Bullet was alert, he'd likely maintain a constant flow of Armament Haki to counter Daren's Devil Fruit abilities.

Hearing this, the fully armed Marines stationed at the harbor, eyes sharp and on high alert, were left dumbfounded.

Wait—

That entire battle that nearly leveled the town... was just a "light" test run!?

Daren grinned at Sakazuki's warning, blood-stained teeth bared. Despite being seriously injured, his aura kept rising.

"Of course I know."

As he spoke, the twisted metal scraps around them suddenly lifted into the air, rapidly condensing into three high-density metal spheres. Their surfaces gleamed like mirrors as they hovered, orbiting Daren's body.

High-level battles are always drawn out wars of attrition.

Especially against a monster like Bullet—someone molded by the battlefield itself. Physique, strength, speed, technique, martial arts—he had pushed every aspect of combat to superhuman extremes. There was no quick resolution against an opponent like that.

Purely in terms of individual combat power, Daren admitted he was weaker than Bullet. Sakazuki, on the other hand, was evenly matched with him.

Working together, they could apply real pressure, even take the upper hand—but it was far from enough to dominate the fight.

Sakazuki gave a slow, cold smile.

He stood up.

Magma flowed beneath his feet, flames flickering and swirling around him.

Though the internal bleeding hadn't stopped, at least his broken bones wouldn't hinder him anymore.

He wiped the blood from the corner of his mouth and rose fully, thick black smoke once again billowing from his right arm.

Adjusting his military cap, his eyes glinted from under the shadow of the brim—dark, cold, and full of menace. Staring at the battered, blond-haired Douglas Bullet, a cruel, mocking grin crept across his face.

"Rank means nothing."

...

At that moment, all three exploded into motion from where they stood, murderous grins twisting their faces as they launched themselves at each other!

Magma blasted out, metal screeched and warped, blood splattered in the air...

The clash of Haki sent shockwaves through the land, shaking the very ground.

From afar, the three were drenched in blood, eyes wild—like beasts trapped in a cage, fighting for survival!

...

Chapter 166 - 166: Volume 2 – Chapter 68: I... Lost

The town trembled. The earth groaned beneath them.

Three figures, like maddened beasts, clashed wildly in the ruins—wherever they passed, the ground collapsed, magma burst forth, and shockwaves tore through the air.

The earth itself howled under the strain, metal spheres screeching through the sky, followed by towering waves of dust.

Hundreds of Marines had withdrawn to the harbor, trembling as they clung to their rifles, sweat soaking their palms as they guarded the warships against the surging tremors.

One minute...

Five minutes...

Ten...

Thirty...

An hour passed...

From stunned horror to numb silence, they watched as the three men fought like monsters trapped in a cage—none dared so much as breathe too loud.

This level of combat was beyond them.

Charging in now would do nothing but hinder Commodore Daren and Rear Admiral Sakazuki... and throw away their own lives.

"This is insane!"

"They're like three damn monsters!"

"It feels like the whole town's about to be ripped apart!"

...

Then—

Boom!!

A towering pillar of lava erupted into the sky.

"Kahahahaha! Now that's what I call a fight! Marines!!"

Douglas Bullet burst from the smoke like a rampaging beast, body torn with cuts and drenched in blood. His long golden hair was matted and soaked with gore, his entire appearance disheveled and brutal.

But his eyes—burned red with unrelenting fighting spirit.

"This ends now!!"

Sakazuki's cap was long gone, revealing his rigid, cropped hair. His face was smeared with blood, twisted into a savage grin.

"Chasing after the title of the strongest...? You're nothing but a deserter who betrayed your own army!"

Boiling magma exploded from his arm as he let loose a roaring punch.

Boom!!

Bullet's fist, cloaked in dark, purple-black Haki, slammed into his erupting magma strike!

A surge of explosive force erupted from between them, rippling outward like tidal waves across the land. The dust rose in rings, pushed by the raw pressure.

The ground beneath them finally gave way, unable to bear the force of their blows. Dozens of massive fissures split open in a crisscross pattern, dark and bottomless.

Dark red magma gushed from the cracks. Sakazuki dove straight into it, his figure emerging from the molten depths like a demon forged in fire—unleashing an apocalyptic force as if wielding nature's wrath itself.

"Inugami Guren!!!"

Bullet roared with laughter, stepping forward without hesitation. Every ounce of Armament Haki in his body surged into his fist.

Wherever it passed, the air exploded into rings of white shockwaves.

BOOM!!

A thunderous roar shattered the air. A crushing blast radiated outward, tearing up chunks of the earth and hurling building debris through the air.

The wind howled in chaos.

Both Douglas Bullet and Sakazuki spat blood at the same time, their faces instantly drained of color as they stumbled backward.

"Daren!!"

Just then, a cruel grin tugged at the corner of Sakazuki's mouth as he roared out.

Bullet's pupils shrank.

Clink!

In the chaos of the battlefield, the crisp sound of a coin being tossed rang out—piercingly sharp.

"Go to hell, pirate."

Sakazuki sneered down at Bullet.

The next moment—

His body suddenly erupted with a hole of magma—he had voluntarily turned into magma to let something pass through.

Active elementization.

Time seemed to slow to a crawl.

Through the gaping hole in Sakazuki's body, Bullet's blurred vision locked onto a distant figure. His heart pounded violently.

He saw the coin, flipping in midair.

That silver coin reflected the flames, the magma, the blood, the ruins, and the thick smoke... and the blue lightning crackling between the bloodied fingers of Commodore Daren.

No way...

A chilling sense of danger flooded Bullet's senses. Cold sweat broke out across his back.

From the Marines' point of view in the distance, Bullet, Sakazuki, and Daren were perfectly aligned in a straight line.

And Rear Admiral Sakazuki—stood directly between Commodore Daren and Douglas Bullet.

The coin left Daren's hand.

The wind howled, lifting his blood-soaked black hair.

Click!

The silver coin was instantly cloaked in dense black Haki...

And then it shot forward like a bullet!

"Magnetic Overload: Railgun!"

After a month of intense training, Daren had drastically improved both his Haki and Devil Fruit abilities. Now, he poured every last ounce of his strength into this single strike!

Boom!!

The coin, wrapped in unimaginable kinetic force, accelerated within the near-boiling magnetic field and shot forth at a mind-bending speed.

It tore through the air, through the flames, through the smoke, through shattered ruins, through Sakazuki's body...

It pierced every obstacle in its path and, in less than a millisecond, transformed into a blazing orange-red beam, hurtling straight toward Bullet!

That speed—there's no time...

Bullet's eyes widened in fury. Blood dripped from the corners of his mouth as he gritted his teeth and roared, slamming a punch forward.

"Don't underestimate me, Marines!!!"

Already on the verge of collapse, his body riddled with injuries, he pushed everything aside and activated his Gasha Gasha no Mi once more. Scraps of steel and stone surged up from the ground like living creatures, wrapping around his right arm and forming a massive-caliber impact cannon.

The last remnants of his strength were converted into Armament Haki, coating the weapon in black.

Hiss!!

Scalding steam blasted from the cannon's vents like an overloaded steam rocket, driving his fist forward with violent force.

"I will become... the strongest in the world!!"

The next instant—

Boom!!

The sound of the impact lasted only a moment.

A blinding white light engulfed Bullet's twisted face.

His nearly depleted Haki armor shattered.

The impact cannon forged by the Gasha Gasha no Mi shattered.

His enormous clenched fist shattered.

The flesh and bone of his forearm disintegrated...

BOOM!!

A torrent of flames erupted skyward, almost piercing the clouds.

The ground trembled violently.

Daren dropped to one knee with a thud, face pale as death, gasping desperately for air.

He felt completely drained—as if every fiber of strength had been wrung from his body. Even lifting a finger was impossible.

His eyes remained locked on the heart of the inferno.

Sakazuki didn't fare much better. His breath was ragged, and fresh blood streamed from his nose and mouth, his organs ravaged by the battle.

All the Marines stood frozen, stunned by what they'd just witnessed.

"Did it work...?"

"Maybe..."

"There's no way anyone could survive that..."

...

Soon, the sweltering winds scattered the smoke, and a figure slowly emerged.

Bullet was back in view, kneeling amid the destruction, his body covered in wounds. Blood pooled at his feet.

His left hand gripped his right shoulder tightly—because his entire right arm... was gone.

Blood streamed through his fingers in an unending flow.

The world fell silent.

Only the sound of ragged breathing and the crackling fire remained.

"I... lost..."

Bullet rasped.

He slowly raised his head to look at Sakazuki and Daren, then suddenly burst into maniacal laughter.

"Kahahahahaha!!!"

"What an exhilarating fight!!!"

His crazed, unrestrained laughter echoed across the sky like the howl of a blood-soaked demon.

"Before we finish this... tell me your names, Marines!!"

Sakazuki stepped forward, blood dripping from the torn leg of his uniform with every step as he approached Bullet.

Thick black smoke coiled once more around his arm. Molten magma bubbled, seething with lethal heat.

"You're not worthy of our names... scum pirate," Sakazuki said coldly.

He raised his fist and loomed over the kneeling Bullet. The magma raged with killing intent, surging at its peak.

Then—suddenly—

"Wororororo! What a blood-drenched battle this turned out to be!"

A deep, thunderous laugh echoed from the distant sky.

The moment the voice rang out, dark clouds as black as ink rolled in across the once-clear sky.

Winds surged. The clouds churned. Lightning crackled nonstop across the heavens, each bolt roaring louder than the last.

It was as if night had fallen in an instant.

The sky-splitting thunderbolts lit up the pale, terrified faces of the watching Marines.

Sakazuki and Daren's pupils shrank into pinpricks. A chill ran down their spines.

...

Chapter 167 - 167: Volume 2 – Chapter 69: Not Knowing if They Will Live or Die

Rumble...

Thunder roared endlessly through the clouds as fierce winds howled between the sky and earth.

"What's going on!?"

"Something's getting closer!!"

"In the sky..."

"Damn it... what is that..."

Rip!!

A blinding white bolt of lightning tore through the black sky, illuminating the pale, wide-eyed faces of the Marines frozen in fear.

"This feeling... No way..."

Daren's eyes filled with a dread he had never felt before. He gritted his teeth, trying to stand, but his body wavered, drained of strength.

Within his bio-magnetic field perception, deep in the storm-churned sea of clouds, a terrifying, oppressive presence surged forth—an overwhelming aura that radiated the dominance of a higher being.

"A troublesome one has arrived."

Sakazuki's face darkened to its limit.

The crushing pressure blanketing the land made every muscle and nerve in his body tighten to the extreme. He glanced at Daren, who was too weak to rise, then quickly assessed his own injuries. His heart sank.

"Worororo... Didn't expect to stumble into something this interesting."

That raspy, rumbling voice echoed again from afar, like muffled thunder pounding the ears.

Furious winds whipped the sea into monstrous waves.

And then...

From the thick, pitch-black clouds, a massive, ominous shadow—more terrifying than the storm itself—rapidly loomed larger before their frozen gazes.

That colossal silhouette, like something blotting out the sky, slithered through the sea of clouds, dragging bolts of lightning visible to the naked eye.

The wind howled violently, kicking up clouds of dust from the ground.

Under the stunned gazes of the Marines...

A head the size of a mountain slowly emerged from the clouds.

Sharp, curved horns. A dark, coarse beard. Lantern-sized, amber vertical pupils. Enormous claws tipped with four razor-sharp talons. Jade-green scales gleaming like armor under the flickering lightning...

"A dragon!!!"

"The legendary creature!! The Azure Dragon!!"

"Kaidou!! One of the Great Pirates of the New World!!"

"Kaidou of the Beasts!!"

"No way... How could Kaidou be here!?"

A chorus of panicked cries erupted from the Marines as they stared at the monstrous figure rising above the clouds, faces pale with fear, throats dry, cold sweat breaking out across their bodies.

The enormous Azure Dragon narrowed its eyes, scanning the ground. Its gaze paused momentarily on Daren and Douglas Bullet, then fixed on Sakazuki.

It let out a menacing grin.

Boom!!

An overwhelming surge of aura, as deep and vast as the abyss, exploded from the dragon's towering form.

The force was almost tangible. Black and red lightning crackled through the air, flashing down from the sky in an instant.

Bzzz...

The sheer pressure distorted the space itself, causing ripples to shimmer across the void between heaven and earth.

To the Marines, it was as if the very world—the ground, trees, ruins, harbor—was splintering before their eyes.

The spiritual impact and soul-crushing pressure made it hard to even breathe, as if the sky were collapsing.

Bang... Bang... Bang...

One by one, many young Marines rolled their eyes back and collapsed, unconscious.

Daren's breathing caught at the same time, his thoughts turning to chaos. He let out a pained grunt, his near-broken body trembling as he grit his teeth and forced himself to remain upright.

If he were at full strength, no matter how powerful Kaidou's Conqueror's Haki was, it wouldn't have affected him this badly.

But now, his body was in terrible shape—riddled with wounds, completely drained of stamina. He could barely stay conscious, let alone resist.

Not far away, Bullet—gravely wounded and near death—couldn't even groan before collapsing face-first to the ground.

A gale of almost solid force swept across the battlefield, filling the air with smoke and dust.

And amid the flames, Sakazuki stood firm like a reef against a cliffside storm, his snow-white cloak billowing behind him...

"Worororo!! Die, Marines!!"

The dragon let out a deafening roar, slowly opening its massive jaws.

Between the rows of razor-sharp fangs, as Kaidou took a deep breath, a suffocating dark red light began to gather rapidly within the dragon's mouth.

A hellish aura of destruction spread from the sky above.

The blood-red glow bathed the land, swallowing everything in its path.

An overwhelming sense of despair crept into the hearts of every Marine present, making them tremble uncontrollably. Yet none of them moved, like puppets whose strings had been cut.

There was nowhere to run from the attack of a legendary creature.

"Tch..."

Sakazuki suddenly exhaled a long breath.

He calmly removed his black leather gloves, revealing his bloodied hands, then adjusted the vivid blood-red rose pinned to his chest.

From his pocket, he pulled out a cigar, clenched it between his teeth, and lit it using his own power.

"This never ends..."

He muttered softly.

The sky was pitch black, lightning crackling, wind howling.

Facing the enormous dragon that seemed to blot out the heavens, the future Marine Admiral—who had long since shed the title of "monster"—looked so very small.

At that moment, the searing flame gathering in the dragon's maw reached its peak.

"Bolo Breath!"

Roar!!

A torrent of blazing red dragon breath erupted from its mouth.

The sheer recoil sent its mountain-sized head lurching backward.

The pillar of red fire ripped through the sky and came crashing down.

Light swallowed the land in an instant.

Sakazuki raised his head without expression. His cold, steely eyes reflected the dragon's ferocious and dominating figure.

The corner of his blood-smeared lips curled into a sinister grin.

"Dragon slaying... isn't out of the question."

Then he took a heavy drag on the cigar.

The force of it burned the entire cigar down in one go.

Huff...

Thick smoke poured from his mouth like a dragon's breath, and at the same time, molten magma exploded from beneath his feet. The earth cracked and shook as Sakazuki shot into the sky like a cannonball.

Half his body turned into magma blazing at thousands of degrees, yet that broad, heavy snow-white cloak still billowed behind him, sacred and imposing against the blood-red glow of the lava.

Like a defiant mad dog, he charged straight into the incoming wave of dragon fire—straight toward the apex of the food chain—and threw a heavy punch.

"Great Eruption!!"

Time seemed to freeze in that moment.

Volcano-like magma collided violently with the surging breath of the dragon in midair!

But the clash only lasted an instant.

"Magma... is superior to flame!!!"

Sakazuki's voice rang out cold and grim through the sea of fire.

Boom!!

The explosive magma pierced straight through the dragon's breath!

The pillar of fire shattered into a sky full of fireballs, falling like a meteor shower across the land.

As the magma surged toward him, Kaidou—still in his dragon form—narrowed his pupils. That lethal heat made him instinctively twist his body to dodge.

Sssh!!

The magma grazed past his scales, leaving scorched black marks in its wake.

"Damn Marines!! Then how about this one!?"

Bellowing in rage and pain, the massive dragon shrank in a flash into a demonic humanoid form. Under the force of gravity, he plummeted with terrifying speed.

Gripping a colossal black kanabō in both hands, black and red lightning wrapped around the spiked club as he brought it crashing down toward Sakazuki's head.

"Kosanze Ragnaraku!"

Boom!!

Too drained to react, Sakazuki was slammed into the earth like a meteor, blasting open a massive crater. The ground caved in, sending shockwaves rippling outward.

The entire island trembled as deep cracks split across the land.

It was as if the sky itself were collapsing...

...

The raging wind gradually died down.

Flames still curled across the scorched earth, thick black smoke rising into the sky. From the cracks in the ground, dark red magma surged out and quickly formed the shape of a person.

Covered in blood, his face deathly pale, Sakazuki staggered forward like a man drenched in gore, barely keeping his footing. He roughly shoved aside the Marine soldiers who tried to help him and stared at the desolate land ahead...

His cold eyes were laced with feral, bloodshot veins.

"Inform headquarters. Kaidou of the Beasts appeared. The mission to arrest Douglas Bullet... has failed."

"The target, Douglas Bullet, and..."

Sakazuki growled the words through gritted teeth.

"Commodore Rogers Daren of Marine Headquarters... was taken by Kaidou."

"...His fate is unknown."

...

Chapter 168 - 168: Volume 2 – Chapter 70: Cellmates?

Drip...

Drip...

The steady sound of water dripping echoed in Daren's ears—that was the first thing he became aware of.

A strange stench filled his nostrils.

Damp and rotten, thick with blood and decay... yet somehow laced with the sharp scent of strong liquor.

With great effort, Daren pried his eyes open a sliver. The flickering firelight cast a dim, almost eerie glow across the space.

Agonizing pain shot through every inch of his body. When he tried to take a breath, he ended up choking, coughing up a large mouthful of blood and mud.

I'm still alive...

At that moment—

"You're awake..."

A low, hoarse voice echoed through the darkness. Daren shuddered as every muscle in his body instinctively tensed, but he was far too weak—he couldn't even lift a finger.

He forced himself to stay conscious, straining to open his eyes and focus through the blur.

Bloodstained, blackened walls. Rust-covered iron bars. Moss-covered, damp stone floors...

This was a prison.

Outside the cell, a massive, imposing figure sat on the ground. Long, wild black hair draped over his shoulders. Sharp horns jutted from his head, and a beard like dragon whiskers framed his mouth.

He was bare-chested, with faint burn marks still visible on his left side—already scabbed over. A purple top was tied around his waist, golden chains hanging from its hem. He wore baggy, dark green pants, a shimenawa tied at the waist, and a purple cloak draped over his shoulders.

The fire on the wall cast enormous, shifting shadows of his figure across the ground and the walls, flickering and distorted—like a demon had descended into the world.

"Kaidou of the Beasts..."

Daren's gaze sharpened as he locked eyes on Kaidou's back.

"If you don't want to die, you'd better stay down..."

Kaidou's voice rumbled like distant thunder.

As he spoke, he extended a heavily muscled arm covered in dragon-scale tattoos and took a swig from a sake gourd marked with the character "天" (heaven). His eyes flicked subtly toward the scar on his left side.

"That lava bastard's something else."

Daren froze, and in that instant, everything clicked.

He'd been captured by Kaidou!

A splitting headache pulsed through his skull, making his memories feel hazy and jumbled.

He vaguely recalled Sakazuki leaping from the ground, his fist blasting apart a dragon's fiery breath—then Kaidou, in his human form, slamming him into the ground with a single blow.

After that, his body gave out. He lost consciousness—and when he woke up, he was here, in this dark prison.

Where is this place?

Wano Country?

No... In this timeline, Kozuki Oden hasn't even left to sea yet. Kaidou wouldn't have teamed up with Kurozumi Orochi to seize control of Wano.

That means... this place isn't Wano Country.

Daren gasped for air, forcing himself to stay calm as his mind raced.

He was still alive—meaning Kaidou didn't intend to kill him, at least not yet.

Whatever Kaidou's motive was, if Daren was still breathing, then escape was still on the table.

First things first, he needed to figure out Kaidou's strength—and the prison's defense.

With that in mind, Daren sneaked a glance at Kaidou. His eyes paused momentarily on the scar on Kaidou's left side, then quickly shifted away.

The Magu Magu no Mi... It really lives up to its reputation as the most powerful offensive Devil Fruit. Sakazuki's punch didn't just blow away the Bolo Breath—it even wounded Kaidou's supposedly invulnerable body.

And judging by the power behind that final blow Kaidou landed on Sakazuki... Daren started piecing things together.

At around thirty years old, Kaidou had likely already reached admiral-level strength—probably even stronger than Sakazuki at this stage, given the age difference.

Still, Kaidou clearly wasn't on the level of legends like Roger or Garp.

Of course, "admiral-level" was just a rough estimate.

There were differences even within that tier.

For instance, in the original storyline, the newly appointed admiral Ryokugyu—brought in after the World Military Draft—was clearly a notch below Sakazuki, Kizaru, and Aokiji.

Having admiral-level strength was necessary to become an admiral... but it wasn't enough on its own.

As Sakazuki once said, rank doesn't mean much.

Some Marine Vice Admirals could chase the Pirate King across the entire sea.

And for true monsters, until they actually clashed in battle, no one could truly predict the outcome.

Maybe that's why Kaidou chose not to keep fighting Sakazuki.

No one knows how savage a cornered mad dog can get...

Even one that's already badly injured.

Just as Daren's thoughts spiraled, a painful groan rang out in the darkness.

Startled, Daren turned toward the sound.

The flickering fire cast light on the far corner of the cell. There, slumped against the wall, was a wretched, battered figure slowly coming to.

His body was covered in wounds, though none still bled. The jolting ride and road dust had dried them out. On the left side of his body, massive burn marks crisscrossed like a network of rivers—blackened, dried streaks of blood.

One of his arms was gone—only a gruesome stump remained.

Douglas Bullet!!

He'd been captured by Kaidou too!

Daren's pupils narrowed sharply.

And then, a ridiculous thought popped into his head—one that made him want to laugh despite everything.

He and Douglas Bullet... were cellmates now?

"Where... is this place..."

Bullet rasped, his voice strained as he lifted his head and caught sight of Daren and Kaidou. He paused for a moment, then quickly realized the situation he was in.

"Both of you are awake. Good."

Kaidou grabbed the sake gourd and tilted his head back, downing the last of the liquor in a single gulp.

He slowly rose to his feet, reeking of alcohol, and began walking toward the cell.

Each thunderous step made the ground tremble beneath his massive frame.

Looking down at Daren and Bullet, Kaidou's dark, vertical pupils gleamed with untamed ambition. Then, he suddenly grinned wide.

"Worororo... Brats, become my subordinates!!"

"I can give you everything you've ever wanted!!"

"Power, wealth, status, strength—whatever you desire, I can make it yours!!"

He extended a massive, dragon-scale-tattooed hand toward them.

"This world is far too boring... I can see it in your eyes—you two aren't the type to play by the rules!!"

"Join me, and I'll lead you to tear this whole sea apart!! Wororororo!!"

Kaidou's booming laughter shook the entire shadowy prison. Dust rained down as the stone walls trembled, as if the whole world was quaking.

...

Chapter 169 - 169: Volume 2 – Chapter 71: Kaidou's Recruitment

"Wororororo..."

Kaidou's wild, echoing laughter rang through the gloomy prison.

It echoed...

And echoed...

And echoed...

For quite a while.

Then, gradually, the laughter faded—until it vanished completely.

The grin frozen on Kaidou's face started to stiffen.

Because the two battered brats in front of him—mangled beyond recognition—were staring at him with the kind of look you'd give a complete idiot.

Totally unmoved.

Kaidou: "..."

"You... didn't hear me or something?"

He grit his teeth, eyes narrowing as his vertical pupils locked onto the barely-breathing Bullet. His tone turned feral.

"Douglas Bullet. I know you. I know exactly what kind of man you are."

"You were born in the Grand Line, in a place known as the 'Nation of Endless War'—Galzburg. But after being betrayed by your homeland and your military commanders, you wiped that nation off the map in a fit of rage. Ever since, the World Government's been after you."

"The Marines already have their eyes on you. They even sent two 'monsters' to take you down..."

Kaidou glanced at Daren, then turned back to Bullet and continued, voice low and persuasive.

"There's no place for you on this sea anymore."

"Even if you survive this time, next time the Marines will send someone even stronger."

"Only I can offer you the protection you need..."

"Become my subordinate. Neither the CP divisions of the World Government nor the Marines will be able to touch you."

"Well? What do you say?"

"Join my Beasts Pirates. I'll give you the title of All-Star. I know what you crave—battle, bloodshed, the pursuit of strength!"

"And I'm going to start the biggest war this world has ever seen. That battlefield will be the perfect stage for your power—let your blood paint the ground and make the whole world remember the name Douglas Bullet!"

Kaidou's voice rose with excitement, and his laughter rumbled again like distant thunder.

This guy's done his homework...

That was the first thing that came to Daren's mind after hearing Kaidou's impassioned attempt to recruit them.

Kaidou might look like a reckless brute on the outside, but in truth, he was sharp and cunning.

In the original storyline, he manipulated Wano Country's shogun, Kurozumi Orochi, to destroy the Kozuki clan and seize control of Wano—a land rich in resources and nearly impenetrable, which he then turned into his military stronghold.

To lure in and recruit members of the Worst Generation, he even faked "accidental" encounters—like jumping off Sky Island in a suicide stunt—just to showcase his strength.

Daren's heart stirred slightly.

If Kaidou knew this much about Bullet's past, then his appearance on that island... might not have been a coincidence at all.

"Become my subordinate, Bullet!!"

Kaidou extended his massive hand toward him.

But what he met... was a pair of scornful eyes.

Bullet, slumped like a broken heap against the wall, body mangled and breathing shallow, was grinning.

Blood-streaked teeth bared, his smile still held an undeniable pride.

"I refuse."

He sneered.

Kaidou paused, stunned.

"Why?"

His voice already carried a simmering rage.

"Why?"

Bullet gasped for breath, each inhale like it was dragging him closer to death. His pale face twisted into a grimace, crimson eyes burning with demonic ferocity and defiance.

"Your presence and strength may surpass anyone I've ever faced... but this power isn't enough to make me, Douglas Bullet, kneel!"

He let out a mocking laugh.

"My goal is Gol D. Roger!"

"Kaidou of the Beasts, strong as you are—are you stronger than him?"

Kaidou's expression froze.

His face shifted slightly before he simply turned his head away, acting as if he hadn't heard the question. He looked instead to Daren.

"Rogers Daren!!"

"I know you. I know exactly the kind of person you are!!"

Hey, hey... you're not even switching up the script?

Daren's mouth twitched in annoyance.

Kaidou, oblivious in the darkness, launched straight into another round of "persuasion," growing more fired up with every word, clearly regaining confidence.

"In the North Blue, you were known as nothing but scum—garbage!"

"Craving power, hoarding wealth, building your own army, lecherous and depraved... Someone like you is far better suited to be a pirate than a Marine!"

"Wororororo... Join me, Daren brat!!"

"Whatever the Marines can offer, I can give you more!"

"Money, influence, an army, territory... and of course, more women than you can count! Whatever you desire—I'll make it yours!"

"I see it in your eyes... that fierce ambition!"

"And most importantly, as a pirate, you'll no longer need to hide behind some phony uniform. You'll be free to take what you want—boldly and openly!"

"No one will chain you down! You can destroy, conquer, seize, possess—"

"That is the ultimate freedom of a pirate! That is the true right of piracy!"

Kaidou's piercing, slitted eyes gleamed with a scorching intensity in the dark.

"Join me! The title of All-Star in the Beasts Pirates—it's yours!!"

"The open sea is waiting for you!!"

He stretched out a massive hand toward Daren, pride beaming across his face.

Daren stared at him, expression growing increasingly strange.

Gotta admit, Kaidou really doesn't discriminate—even Marines are on the recruiting list.

Then again, it kind of made sense... his own reputation wasn't exactly clean.

"I won't lie, everything you said... it's tempting."

Daren let out a long breath and spoke slowly.

Bullet gave him a surprised look.

"So... you're accepting?"

Kaidou's eyes lit up with anticipation.

A smile broke across his face.

"No. I refuse."

Daren shook his head.

Kaidou's smile froze.

"Why!? What's wrong with being a pirate!? Are those bad habits just an act!?"

His furious roar shook the prison walls.

"No, they're real."

Daren raised his head, voice calm and firm.

"Money, power, troops, land, women... I want all of it."

A few black lines popped up on Bullet's forehead.

"Then why!?" Kaidou growled through clenched teeth.

"...But I'd rather take them as a Marine."

Daren's eyes burned with unwavering conviction.

"That just makes it more thrilling."

Bullet: ...

Kaidou: ...

"You damn brat!! You're messing with me!!"

Kaidou froze for a moment—then the realization hit.

He'd been played.

An explosion of rage roared from his chest, shaking the very air. The pressure of his presence cracked the walls and iron bars.

"You're all messing with me!!"

He grabbed his massive kanabō, the "Hassaikai," in one hand. His vertical pupils blazed with crazed red light.

The moment he gripped it, the air around him crackled with black and crimson lightning.

Under the crushing force of Kaidou's Conqueror's Haki, Daren and Bullet both turned pale, their bodies swaying. Blood trickled from the corners of their mouths.

"Kaidou-sama! Calm down, calm down!!"

A huge, rotund figure stumbled into the room, panic written across his face as he clung to Kaidou's arm.

"With the state they're in, one hit from that thing and they'll drop dead on the spot!"

The plump man chomped on a cigar, flailing dramatically. He wore dark sunglasses and had golden hair tied into a bouncing whip-like braid.

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Chapter 170 - 170: Volume 2 – Chapter 72: Conqueror's Haki

Amid the howling wind, black and red lightning crackled wildly. The sheer force of the Conqueror's Haki was so intense it seemed like it could tear apart the damp, steel prison.

The big, blond man with a whip was drenched in cold sweat, struggling under the overwhelming pressure of his boss's Haki. His huge, blubbery body clung to Kaidou's arm, his trembling jowls quivering as he pleaded:

"You went through so much trouble to capture them—don't waste it all with one swing!!"

"Kaidou-sama, calm down!!"

Daren braced himself against the slick, bloodstained floor, gasping for air as he lifted his gaze toward the ridiculous figure.

Aside from the whip, the man's head was bald with just a golden mustache above his lip. He wore sunglasses, and with his rotund frame and exaggerated expression, he looked absurd.

His left arm was a mechanical prosthetic, and his right bore dark tattoos reading "QUEEN" alongside the Beasts Pirates' emblem. He wore black-and-white overalls, and even in urgency, his tone carried a rhythmic, almost "rap-like" cadence.

This was Queen the Plague—one of the All-Stars of the Beasts Pirates.

Like Vinsmoke Judge, he had once been part of MADS, an illegal research group led by Vegapunk. In addition to his formidable combat power, he was also a mad scientist known for creating deadly mechanical weapons and horrifying pathogens.

Hearing Queen's desperate words, Kaidou glanced at the two blood-spitting, barely-conscious men—Daren and Bullet. He gritted his teeth and growled in fury:

"Damn brats!!"

Breathing heavily, Kaidou withdrew his Conqueror's Haki. Then, in a burst of frustration, he slammed his kanabō into the ground, leaving behind a massive crater.

As Kaidou's Haki receded, both Daren and Bullet collapsed, their bodies slumping like sacks of wet mud against the wall.

Yet in that moment, Daren was surprised to notice... after taking several consecutive hits from Kaidou's Conqueror's Haki, his own perception of his Haki's strength had become slightly clearer.

At the same time, within his "Perception" talent, a new entry appeared on his self-compiled "attribute panel":

Status: Extremely Weak

Physique: 70.112 (+0.777)

Strength: 68.339 (+1.891)

Speed: 67.991 (+1.310)

Fruit: 77.197 (+0.915)

Armament Haki: 30.119 (+1.851)

Conqueror's Haki: 50.017 (+0.630)

The boosts to Physique, Strength, Speed, Fruit, and Armament Haki were gains from his fierce battle against Douglas Bullet.

But now, injured and drained, he was in an extremely weakened state.

As for the Conqueror's Haki stat, Daren had estimated it based on the power of Kaidou's multiple outbursts, as well as his own past observations of Garp and Roger. It wasn't entirely accurate.

Yet what truly caught him off guard was the fact that each time he endured a blast of Kaidou's Haki, his own Conqueror's Haki seemed to strengthen—bit by bit.

Was it possible that he was gradually adapting, building resistance to its impact?

That thought made Daren's expression turn strange as countless ideas flashed through his mind.

Seeing his boss finally cool off, Queen let out a long sigh of relief...

He glanced at Daren and Bullet, his beady little eyes shifting quickly before he suddenly chuckled.

"Kaidou-sama, why not leave them to me?"

"With my methods, I doubt it'll take more than a few days before they're howling in pain and begging to give in. By then, they'll be the ones pleading to join your crew."

Kaidou's fierce, vertical pupils fixed on Queen with suspicion.

"You sure about that, Queen?"

Queen let out a cackling laugh, nodded, lit the cigar clenched in his teeth, and took a satisfied puff. He struck a pose to show off his muscles.

"Don't worry, I always get results!"

His tiny eyes gleamed like he was looking at a couple of fascinating toys. Inwardly, a thought crossed his mind:

These two might actually make excellent test subjects.

"Fine then."

Kaidou paused for a moment, then gave a nod of approval.

The New World's situation was shifting rapidly, and there was no end to the matters piling up.

Daren and Bullet both had immense potential and strength. If brought over to his side, they'd no doubt become powerful assets in his quest for domination. But Kaidou couldn't afford to pour all his time and energy into these two brats.

According to the latest intel, that bastard Roger had recently made contact with Whitebeard, prompting top-tier Marine forces to move into New World waters. Several of the Beasts Pirates' outer forces had been caught in the crossfire, suffering unnecessary losses.

Kaidou needed to quickly reorganize his forces and territories, and more importantly, find out what exactly Roger and Whitebeard had been discussing.

Compared to him, those two knew far more about this sea's secrets.

Back in the day, it was Whitebeard who passed on Rocks' invitation to him, leading him to join the Rocks Pirates as an apprentice.

The battle at God Valley had broken out far too suddenly. There were still many secrets about Rocks he hadn't had time to uncover... Maybe Whitebeard and Roger knew more than he did.

If they got there first and uncovered the legendary treasure...

That thought made Kaidou's face grow dark. He hoisted his massive, spike-covered kanabō and turned to his two "prisoners," his voice cold.

"In ten days, I'll return."

"By then, brats... give me your final answer."

With that ultimatum delivered, Kaidou lifted the kanabō and, dragging his massive body, stomped out of the prison—each step echoing with a heavy boom.

He climbed the crooked stairs, passing through tunnels carved out of the mountainside. Along the way, numerous pirates dressed in animal pelts and wearing horned helmets bowed respectfully as he passed, though his expression remained grim and unreadable.

Kaidou ignored them entirely, making his way past heavily guarded checkpoints until he finally reached the surface.

Before him stretched a barren wasteland. Not a single blade of grass grew, and yellow-brown dust whirled in the wind.

In the distance, massive black structures and furnaces glowed with fiery red light. The clanging of metal and the hiss of bellows echoed faintly, while thick black smoke spiraled into the sky.

Suddenly, a dark figure dove from high above, gliding swiftly through the air. Black wings flared and beat gently as it landed in front of Kaidou.

"Kaidou-san, those two didn't agree?"