

One Piece 171

Chapter 171 - 171: Volume 2 – Chapter 73: The Torture Begins

The man who arrived was tall and powerfully built, exuding a calm, mountain-like presence.

Every inch of his body, including his face, was covered in black. A mask and visor concealed his features, giving off a cold, menacing aura. A long blade hung from his waist, while red flames curled around the black wings on his back and the nape of his neck.

He was none other than the Beasts Pirates' All-Star, "The Conflagration" King.

Sensing the gloom and fury on Kaidou's face, King immediately realized the recruitment hadn't gone smoothly.

Kaidou shook his head, his voice laced with anger.

"Those two are full of pride. They're not ones to surrender easily."

"But..."

He paused for a moment, then suddenly chuckled.

"One's a killing machine who wiped out an entire country's army. The other's a Marine monster who took down Byrnni World and even gave Roger trouble..."

"If they gave in that easily, it'd just be boring."

King could clearly see the admiration in Kaidou's eyes and couldn't help but frown.

"Kaidou-san, if they won't submit, keeping them alive may not be a wise move."

He spoke up cautiously, his tone laced with unease.

At just seventeen or eighteen years old, King already displayed a level of composure, precision, and maturity far beyond his years.

As second-in-command of the Beasts Pirates, he knew exactly what his most important duty was:

To stop their captain from making reckless, foolish decisions.

Even if it was precisely Kaidou's fondness for doing stupid things that made King willingly follow him in the first place.

Like getting captured by the Marines on purpose, or trying to ignite the world's largest war... Call it manly idealism if you're being generous. If not, just call it madness.

"Those two are both fiercely independent. They won't bend so easily."

"If anything goes wrong during their confinement and they escape... the location of our base could be exposed."

Kaidou laughed.

"Arber, I'm lucky to have you as my right-hand man."

He used King's real name, something only the two of them shared.

"But I'm sure they'll come around."

His voice radiated overwhelming confidence and Haki.

"Especially Rogers Daren, that 'scum of the Marines.' With his personality and methods, he was born to be a pirate!"

"What a waste, choosing to be a Marine instead!"

"He'll eventually realize the free seas are where he truly belongs!"

"And as for Douglas Bullet... I saw it in his eyes—the burning hunger to grow stronger, the ambition. That'll make it even easier."

"I'll give him a few days to recover. Once he's healed, I'll give him a fair fight!"

"And then—I'll show him, no, show them both... just how terrifying the 'strongest creature' on this sea really is!"

"With overwhelming, absolute strength... I'll conquer their hearts!!"

"Wororororo!!"

Kaidou threw his head back and let out a thunderous laugh, raising his massive kanabō high into the air.

His booming laughter echoed across the sky, making the very ground tremble.

King gazed at the exuberant Kaidou in front of him, eyes filled with reverence, his heart surging.

But silently, his hands clenched into fists.

'I hope you're right, Kaidou-sama...' he murmured to himself.

...

A dark prison.

"Muhahaha..."

A sinister laugh echoed through the dim cell. Queen, the oversized man in overalls, danced gleefully as he looked over the two new "toys" he now considered his.

Under the flickering firelight, his round, pudgy body displayed a surprisingly unnatural flexibility that clashed with his size—so much so that Daren and Bullet both twitched at the sight.

They exchanged a glance.

'Is this guy seriously an idiot?'

'Who knows?'

Maybe it was the shared misery of being prisoners, but at that moment, Daren and Bullet felt an odd sense of camaraderie.

"What's with those looks?! I saw that! Just because I wear sunglasses doesn't mean I can't see you!"

Queen suddenly stopped dancing and stormed over, his cigar-chomping face squishing grotesquely between the iron bars.

"How dare you look at the great scientist Queen-sama with eyes like that? Looks like I'll have to teach you a little lesson."

With a twisted grin, he unlocked the cell with a loud click.

"Even if you two inmates can't stir up much trouble, this will make the next experiment more convenient..."

He carefully picked up a pair of shackles with his modified mechanical limb and clamped them onto Daren and Bullet.

Neither of them had the strength to resist. They could only watch helplessly as Queen did as he pleased.

Clack!

The moment the shackles snapped shut, Daren's face changed. His pupils shrank sharply.

A wave of weakness crashed over him like a rising tide, stealing away his senses. He grabbed the iron bars tightly, like a drowning sailor clinging to floating wreckage.

Bullet collapsed outright, completely motionless.

Seastone shackles.

And without a doubt, they were high-purity Seastone shackles!

"Hehehe, even among us Beasts Pirates, there aren't many of these beauties..."

Queen chuckled smugly, patting his massive belly.

"Now then... let's begin."

Clack. Queen's mechanical arm suddenly shifted, transforming into a syringe. A long, gleaming needle flickered coldly in the dim light.

Daren and Bullet's expressions changed as their hearts sank. Cold sweat beaded along their backs.

Trapped, powerless, being watched by a perverted fat man in overalls holding a needle... even their ironclad nerves couldn't suppress a shiver of horror.

Their scalps tingled.

"Relax. I'm not going to let you die that easily."

"I'm the greatest scientist in the world—not some cheap knockoff like those losers from Germa 66."

Queen cackled and pulled out rows of sealed test tubes from a nearby toolbox.

"See this? This is the latest Mummy Virus developed by the great Queen-sama."

He held up a test tube filled with glowing green liquid, lifting it high for Daren and Bullet to see clearly. His face was practically glowing with mania.

"I'll dial the toxicity down just a bit... so you can fully experience the hellish torment! You won't be able to live, but you won't be able to die either! Muhahaha!!"

Without giving them a chance to react, Queen drew some of the virus into the syringe. Waddling forward step by step, he made his way to Daren.

"Your injuries are a little lighter... so you're up first, Marine."

The needle gleamed in the firelight as it rose, then descended in a flash, reflected in Daren's tightly contracted pupils—

Snap!

The needle broke.

Daren: ?

Bullet: ??

Queen: ?????

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Chapter 172 - 172: Volume 2 – Chapter 74: The Perfect Test Subject

"This... how is this possible!?"

Queen stared, dumbfounded, at the snapped needle. His eyes looked like they were about to pop out of their sockets, his mouth agape.

To facilitate scientific experiments, all his syringes and needles were forged from the toughest metals available. After all, the viruses he created were engineered for maximum potency. His test subjects weren't limited to ordinary humans—he'd experimented on all sorts of ferocious beasts as well.

Some of those beasts had skin and scales as tough as rock, and yet his needles could pierce them with ease.

But now, the needle had just... snapped!?

What the hell is this guy's body made of? Steel!?

Queen, full of disbelief, walked up and began groping Daren all over. Daren shivered, visibly uncomfortable as goosebumps rose on his skin.

"Incredible..."

The more Queen touched, the more shocked he became. His beady eyes lit up with a mix of surprise, obsession, and excitement. Even the rolls of flesh on his face trembled with glee.

"Skin tough as steel, muscles like rock—strong yet still flexible."

"Muhahahahaha!!! Absolutely perfect! This is the perfect test subject!!"

Suddenly, he burst into manic laughter, sparks shooting from his eyes, his face flushed red with excitement.

"Marine! You're the one I've been looking for—my perfect experiment!!"

"Well... if I had to be picky, the perfect subject would be Kaidou-sama. But I can't beat him, so here we are."

Queen muttered under his breath, then looked up sharply, eyes burning as he stared at Daren like he was admiring a priceless work of art.

"Normal test subjects can't handle my viruses or bacteria. Even at the weakest doses, they collapse within seconds."

"But now I have you... hehehehe!!"

Grinning maliciously, the fat man in overalls wiped the drool from his mouth, then turned his attention to Bullet nearby.

"In that case, no need to rush. Let me check out your body structure too."

Queen chuckled pervertedly and walked over to Bullet, starting to grope him as well—pinching here, grabbing there.

"You bastard!! You fat freak!! I'll kill you!!"

Bullet's face flushed red as he yelled in a mix of fury and helplessness. But with serious injuries and Seastone restraints stacked against him, resistance was impossible.

"Hehehe, struggling's pointless. Scream all you want, no one's coming to save you."

Queen proudly puffed out his round belly, blew a cloud of cigar smoke, and flexed his arms to show off.

"Fat guys have charm too. I got this way on purpose—otherwise, too many people would fall for me, Muhahaha!"

"Your physique's not bad either. Strong like a damn dinosaur."

"Not bad... not bad at all..."

His beady eyes darted back and forth between Daren and Bullet, his laugh growing more sinister. He replaced the broken needle with a new one, then approached Daren again.

With a low shout, black Armament Haki surged over his arm like flowing liquid, spreading down into the syringe. The silver needle instantly took on a gleaming black sheen.

"This should do the trick..."

Queen stepped in, raised the syringe, and jabbed it into Daren's neck. Backed by Armament Haki, the needle paused only briefly at the skin before penetrating through the flesh and slipping into a vein.

Daren let out a muffled grunt.

"Try out my latest virus. You're about to experience a taste of hell... hehehehe..."

Grinning wickedly, Queen injected the glowing green fluid into Daren's bloodstream.

Thump!

Daren's heart gave a heavy jolt.

His pupils contracted to pinpoints as blood vessels burst and a web of crimson threads spread across his eyes.

Thump thump thump!

The dull, rhythmic thudding of his heart echoed loudly through the dark prison.

A tidal wave of pain crashed over him, overwhelming his senses in an instant. Daren dropped to his knees, letting out a beastlike howl.

It was the first time in his life he'd ever heard his heartbeat so clearly.

Under Bullet's wary, grim gaze, Daren's skin visibly reddened. Blood began leaking from his eyes, ears, nose, and mouth. Steam billowed from the surface of his body.

Even more terrifying was the sight of his veiny, trembling chest. With every heartbeat, the skin visibly bulged in the shape of his heart—rhythmic and grotesque.

"Muhahaha! You feel that?"

"This is the Mummy Virus. Once infected, your whole body starts to burn up... the temperature quickly rises beyond what the human body can withstand, making you feel like you're being roasted alive..."

Queen let out a twisted laugh, eyes burning with fanaticism.

"Your blood will begin to evaporate throughout the process. Massive dehydration will cause your organs to dry out and shut down. In the end, your body will shrivel up like a mummy."

As he spoke, he swapped in a fresh needle and jabbed it into Bullet, injecting the Mummy Virus just the same.

Bullet's pained groans gradually echoed as his body trembled uncontrollably.

"Yes... that's it... this kind of pure agony and torment... hehehehe..."

Queen worked quickly, attaching various life-monitoring devices to both Daren and Bullet. He observed their reactions while scribbling down data on a notepad.

"Body temperature rising... already past 50 degrees..."

"Evaporating blood triggering signs of dehydration... five seconds after injection, organ function begins to deteriorate and enters failure..."

"Heart rate over 120 bpm... blood pressure dropping steadily... Tsk tsk tsk, if it were any regular human, they'd be dead by now..."

Now fully in research mode, Queen looked excited, his round face unusually focused.

"Almost there..."

After a full three minutes, he finally put the pen down.

Looking at the pages of densely recorded data, a satisfied smile spread across his face.

Daren and Bullet were both kneeling on the floor, gasping for air, their faces deathly pale. Beneath them, puddles of sweat had already formed.

"Well then, that's enough testing for today."

"We've got nine more days. Make sure you hold out. Don't give in too soon."

Queen grinned smugly, exhaled a smoke ring, locked the cell door, and turned to leave.

Lying on the ground, Daren gritted his teeth, watching the fat bastard's wobbling backside as he left... but then, he suddenly froze.

Wait!!

'This feeling...'

His eyes widened slightly, a flicker of disbelief in them.

His body—his physical condition—it felt like...

If this were a game, and he had a "status panel," then during the process of being injected with the Mummy Virus, he'd be shocked to see something like this popping up:

Physique +0.04, Physique +0.04, Physique +0.03, Physique +0.05...

Seriously... this actually works!?

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Chapter 173 - 173: Volume 2 – Chapter 75: This Makes Sense

What the hell is going on?

Wasn't I just injected by that fat bastard Queen?

No—wait, that didn't come out right.

Wasn't I injected with the Mummy Virus by that fat bastard Queen?

So how is it... that after three straight minutes of this "torture," my body feels even stronger?

That... that doesn't make sense, does it?

Even with all the hardships Daren had faced since crossing into this world—countless life-or-death situations, battles with monsters like Byrnndi World and even the Pirate King Roger—he couldn't help but feel stunned.

A virus... shouldn't it be weakening the body? Tearing it apart?

Queen had just said it himself: the Mummy Virus makes the body overheat beyond what it can bear, spreading a burning pain all over. The blood starts to evaporate, leading to dehydration, and eventually, the organs dry out...

But then, what the hell is going on with me?

Is this... actually reasonable!?

At that moment, Daren's mind began racing.

His body was already near its breaking point...

The virus was damaging him, putting intense pressure on his system...

But the dosage... was low.

Wait a second!

Daren suddenly recalled something Queen had said—

"Don't worry, I'm not gonna let you die that easily."

Could it be...?

A wild and ridiculous idea flashed through Daren's mind, like a bolt of lightning exploding in his skull.

That fat bastard Queen never intended to kill me and Bullet with the virus from the beginning. Kaidou gave him orders, after all...

He just wanted to use us as guinea pigs—to test his virus.

That's why he used a low dose.

That's why he's been constantly monitoring our vitals with those devices, making sure the virus wouldn't push us past the point of no return...

This method—applying external stress and forcing the body to its limit while making sure it doesn't reach lethal levels...

Isn't this the exact kind of training I've been doing all along!?

The moment the realization hit, Daren's expression turned downright bizarre. His mouth twitched uncontrollably.

Could it be... that Queen, completely by accident, is actually helping me break through my physical limits with his virus torture!?

And the craziest, most absurd part of all—

That measly three minutes of "virus torture" actually boosted my Physique stat by almost a full point!

One point might not sound like much, but considering Daren's current stat was already sitting at 70, that was huge. By his own standards, even someone like Kaidou—hailed in his prime as the "Strongest Creature on Land, Sea, and Air"—only hit a 100 in Physique!

Once you get to Daren's level, pushing your stats even a little higher takes a monstrous amount of effort.

This boost? It was on par with half a month of brutal, top-tier training at an elite officer camp!

And unlike regular training, which loses effectiveness as the body adapts...

This—this virus injection—was applying direct metabolic pressure to his internal organs.

In other words, the strength he felt wasn't just about tougher skin, stronger muscles, or denser bones.

It was his organs—his very core—that had grown stronger!

Which meant his internal function, resilience, and ability to recover from damage had all gone up!

This kind of training effect is impossible to achieve through regular impact resistance drills.

After all, it's nearly impossible to directly train the internal organs.

Thinking about that, Daren couldn't help but recall Kaidou's so-called "invincible" body.

Kaidou's strength didn't come just from his ability to take hits—it was a complete, seamless toughness that left no weaknesses. Even masters who had achieved "Internal Destruction" level Ryuo Haki—people like Zoro, Kin'emon, and Killer—might have managed to injure him, leave scars on the surface, or land blows to his organs...

But in truth, their attacks did little more than scratch an itch.

Even if Kaidou took their hits head-on and suffered internal damage, his combat strength never dropped for a second. He could still easily pummel Luffy into the dirt.

That was what true, all-around physical dominance looked like.

Daren had been trying for years to figure out how to train his internal organs, but never made much progress. He never expected he'd actually find the breakthrough... through Queen.

Queen was helping him grow stronger!

But... does that even make sense?

Daren paused to seriously think it through—and soon came to a conclusion.

It made perfect sense.

Training, at its core, was about applying external pressure while keeping the risk of death low—forcing the body to adapt and push past its limits over time.

And Queen's setup hit every single mark.

As a scientist, Queen used the most precise monitoring to ensure Daren's life wasn't in danger.

The virus dosage was carefully measured to push his body to the brink without crossing into long-term damage... especially since Kaidou clearly wanted to recruit him.

Daren let out a long breath.

The feverish, burning pain surging through his body was finally starting to fade. Feeling slightly better, he lifted his head—and suddenly remembered something. He turned to look at Bullet.

He'd gotten stronger under the stress of the virus... what about Bullet?

But the moment Daren looked over, he was met with a face wearing the exact same bizarre expression.

Daren: ...

Bullet: ...

Daren blinked.

Bullet blinked.

Their mouths twitched at the same time.

No words were needed.

'This guy got stronger too...'

Daren and Bullet exchanged a quick glance, then both looked away—each thinking the exact same thing.

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The prison returned to silence.

After resting for a bit, Daren, still feeling weak from the effects of the Seastone, reached out and picked up a food tray that one of the Beasts Pirates had brought in. He casually grabbed something and started eating.

The dry jerky was tough and tasteless, but he didn't care.

Right now, the priority was replenishing energy and speeding up recovery. Taste didn't matter.

Bullet hesitated when he saw this.

As a professional soldier—and someone who'd been betrayed by both comrades and superiors—he'd developed deep distrust toward everyone and everything.

"If they wanted to kill us, they could've done it anytime. No need to bother poisoning the food,"

Daren said between bites, barely glancing up as he chewed.

Bullet froze.

After a long silence, he looked at Daren deeply—then, without saying a word, started eating too.

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Chapter 174 - 174: Volume 2 – Chapter 76: Is That a Secret?

Marine Headquarters, Marineford.

Fleet Admiral's Office.

The air in the office was so heavy it felt like even the potted plants in the corners were holding their breath.

"Fleet Admiral Kong, here's the situation... Kaidou of the Beasts suddenly stormed the battlefield, disrupted our operation to encircle and take down Douglas Bullet, and captured Commodore Rogers Daren."

Sakazuki bit down on a lit cigar, his face pale and grim.

He wore a large Marine cloak, and underneath it, his bare upper body was tightly wrapped in blood-soaked bandages.

"Daren was my adjutant on this mission. That he was captured by pirates under my command is a failure in my leadership..."

His voice was cold as ice.

"I am willing to take full responsibility for this incident."

With the exception of Garp, still in the New World chasing Roger, nearly every high-ranking officer of Marine Headquarters was present.

As Sakazuki gave his report, Sengoku's expression darkened to an unbearable degree.

It had been his idea to pull Daren out of the training camp temporarily and assign him to Sakazuki's mission.

And now Daren had been taken by Kaidou...

Even if Kaidou's sudden appearance wasn't a miscalculation on his part, he couldn't justify it—especially not to Zephyr.

He knew all too well the expectations Zephyr had placed on Daren.

The strongest top graduate in the history of the training camp!

"I understand, Sakazuki,"

A low, rumbling voice finally came from Kong, seated at the head of the room.

His arms were crossed, and the powerful bronze muscles on his body looked like they had been carved from stone—clearly defined and brimming with strength.

Kong's stern gaze swept across the room before settling on Sakazuki.

"You didn't make a mistake in this operation. The responsibility doesn't fall on you."

"It was a chaotic situation—no one could've predicted that lunatic Kaidou would suddenly crash the battlefield."

Sakazuki's injuries alone made the severity of the fight obvious.

He'd already gone through a fierce battle with Douglas Bullet. With his condition deteriorating and stamina drained, it made sense he couldn't take on Kaidou as well.

"As for Zephyr... it's best we don't inform him just yet."

Kong pinched the bridge of his nose, hesitated, then continued slowly.

As both Zephyr's superior and former mentor, he understood the man well—especially his fierce protectiveness toward his students.

Zephyr had poured everything into his cadets, and with the training camp in a critical phase, learning of this now would only destabilize things.

It would be better to tell him after the rescue was carried out.

But just then—

"Damn it!! Out of my way!! Move, or don't blame me for what happens next!!"

An angry roar exploded from outside the Fleet Admiral's office.

"Sengoku!! You bastard!! Get out here!! I trusted you with my student, and this is how you take care of him!?"

The moment that familiar voice rang out, Sengoku's face fell completely.

Damn it!

Who the hell told Zephyr about this!?

His expression twisted. Teeth clenched, his face went through a storm of emotions before something clicked in his mind.

Wait a minute... before the meeting started, didn't Borsalino say he was going out for a walk?

Sengoku's head snapped toward him, eyes locking onto Borsalino—who was now sitting there lazily, calmly picking at his nails.

"Borsalino!! What the hell did you do!?"

The moment those words were shouted, everyone in the room winced.

Borsalino casually raised both hands in a surrender gesture, feigning innocence.

"Sorry, sorry. I ran into Zephyr-sensei while I was out for a walk. He asked how Daren was doing, so I told him..."

He paused, scratched his head, then gave a wide, sheepish grin.

"I didn't know that was something I wasn't supposed to say..."

Everyone: "..."

Sengoku clutched his chest in agony.

Staring at Borsalino's infuriatingly smug face, he felt an uncontrollable urge to smash those damn toad-shaped sunglasses into pieces.

He needs to be replaced.

I have to replace him as my adjutant!

At that moment, Sengoku's internal monologue was screaming. He trembled from sheer frustration.

Boom!

The office door was suddenly kicked clean off its hinges, exploding into splinters midair.

"SENGOKU!!"

Zephyr stormed in, purple hair bristling, sunglasses in place, with furious energy radiating from him. The guards behind him had clearly failed to stop his advance.

His eyes swept the room until they landed on Sengoku—who had instinctively tried to hide behind the others.

Zephyr gritted his teeth and roared,

"I want an explanation!"

Sengoku opened his mouth, but no words came out.

"You bastard... Daren is my student! The top of this year's training camp!"

When Sengoku stayed silent, Zephyr could no longer contain his rage. He rolled up his sleeves, revealing bulging muscles, and stomped forward.

"Zephyr-sensei, please don't..."

"Zephyr-san, calm down..."

"Zephyr-sensei..."

Guards and a few Vice Admirals rushed forward, latching onto Zephyr's arms and legs, trying to hold him back.

"Let go of me! I've had enough of this guy!!"

Zephyr struggled furiously, face turning red.

""Strategic Genius' my ass! He's a damn moron!!"

"Today I'm smashing those damn glasses of his—hell, roast his stupid goat too! Let's split it and have a feast!!"

Hearing that, Sengoku's temper finally snapped.

Sakazuki's report had made one thing clear—his decision wasn't wrong.

Sending Daren, who could counter Bullet's Devil Fruit, had been the right call.

If it hadn't been for Kaidou's sudden interference, the mission would've been a complete success.

No one could've predicted that twist.

Rage surged. Sengoku rolled up his sleeves and growled,

"Let him go!"

"If he's not thinking straight, I'll knock some sense into him myself!"

The officers trying to hold them back looked ready to cry.

Zephyr: "Bring it! Who's scared of you!?"

Sengoku: "With that soft Haki of yours?"

Zephyr: "Hope you don't end up bawling!"

Sengoku: "Don't make me smack you in front of your student!"

The two old veterans were red in the face, hurling insults as they shoved away anyone who tried to break them apart.

"—Enough!!"

A thunderous slap shook the room as Kong brought his massive palm down on the desk. Stationery flew into the air, and the entire desk shattered with a loud crack, breaking into pieces across the floor.

"This is the Fleet Admiral's office! Not your damn old training yard for brawling!"

His booming voice echoed through the entire building, knocking dust loose from the ceiling. The walls shook, and black-red lightning crackled in the air, stirring up violent gusts that sent papers flying everywhere.

"You two want a fight that badly!? Then come fight me!"

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Chapter 175 - 175: Volume 2 – Chapter 77: Rescue Plan

The Fleet Admiral's fury erupted like a storm, sending tremors through the office and cracking the walls with long, hairline fractures.

Seeing their teacher and superior explode with anger, Sengoku and Zephyr—who had just been butting heads—immediately shut up. They shrank back slightly, exchanged glares, then "obediently" returned to their seats.

"You two idiots... have you no shame?"

Kong finally withdrew his overwhelming presence, rolled his eyes with a huff, and sat back in his chair.

He pulled out a cigar, lit it, took a deep drag, and then turned his gaze to Zephyr. Meeting the man's anxious stare, he let out a long sigh.

"Zephyr, I know you're worried, but calm down... If I'm not wrong, that kid Daren isn't in any immediate danger."

Zephyr blinked, then his eyes lit up.

He had been too caught up in his concern to think clearly, but now that his nerves were calming and with Kong's reminder, things started clicking into place.

"Tsuru, go ahead and explain."

Kong gestured toward Staff Officer Tsuru.

Tsuru gave a small nod, her eyes gleaming with sharp intelligence. She spoke in a calm, steady voice.

"If Kaidou really intended to kill Daren, there was no reason to take him away. He had more than enough time to do it back on the mission island."

Zephyr finally let out a breath of relief, and immediately shot Sengoku a disdainful look, as if to say,

"See? That's what real strategy looks like. And you call yourself the 'Resourceful General'...?"

Sengoku's lips twitched, and he gritted his teeth, but ultimately stayed quiet.

Even if the incident with Daren wasn't directly caused by his orders, there was no denying he owed Zephyr. If he hadn't asked for Daren's involvement, the kid would've still been safe in the training camp, and none of this would've happened.

"So, Tsuru," Zephyr asked suddenly, "what do you think Kaidou's goal is in capturing Daren and Bullet?"

Tsuru considered for a moment, then spoke with cautious seriousness.

"Since the end of that major conflict, the New World's situation has grown increasingly chaotic. Over the past few years, Kaidou has been aggressively expanding—recruiting manpower and consolidating power."

"Right now, his Beasts Pirates have two top officers known as the 'All-Stars'—King the Conflagration and Queen the Plague—and a pirate force numbering in the thousands."

"If my guess is correct, Kaidou intends to recruit both Rogers Daren and Douglas Bullet into his ranks."

"He's spent years targeting powerful individuals with potential, trying to sway them to his side. It's entirely possible he's had his eye on Bullet for a long time."

At this, many of the gathered officers frowned deeply.

"Tsuru, are you certain?" Zephyr asked, his own brows drawn tight.

"I can see why Kaidou would want Bullet. The man wiped out his own country and army—he's a wanted criminal by both the World Government and the Marines."

"Given Kaidou's strength, he might be able to offer him some protection."

"But Daren is a Marine!"

Zephyr couldn't believe it. He shook his head and chuckled in disbelief.

"Kaidou really is an idiot—trying to recruit a Marine?"

"He's my student! The top graduate of the officer training camp! He represents the future of justice! Hahaha—Kaidou's doomed to fail..."

He suddenly stopped, blinking as he realized several people in the room were looking at him with uncomfortable, complicated expressions.

"Um... I heard Commodore Daren didn't have the best reputation in the North Blue..." a Vice Admiral muttered quietly.

Zephyr's smile froze.

"I heard he's... kind of a womanizer. Supposedly had 'inappropriate relationships' with noblewomen and royal princesses from multiple nations..." another Rear Admiral added in a low voice.

Zephyr's eye twitched violently.

"I also heard he throws money around like it's nothing—and owns a fortune no one knows the source of..." another Vice Admiral whispered.

"Yeah, yeah, I heard that too..."

"..."

As they continued chiming in one after another, Zephyr's face had already darkened like the bottom of a scorched pot.

Then Borsalino, still smiling, casually twisted the metaphorical knife with a cheerful remark.

"Well, if you think about it, maybe Commodore Daren is more suited to being an evil pirate than a righteous Marine..."

Zephyr: "..."

He slowly raised one hand and clutched his chest, expression full of silent anguish.

"Alright, that's enough. Cut it out."

Kong pinched the bridge of his nose, his expression twitching as he interrupted the chatter.

"And you—Sengoku! Wipe that grin off your face!"

Sengoku, who had been quietly enjoying the roast, flinched and immediately sat up straight.

"Zephyr, you don't need to worry. I trust that Daren would never betray the Marines,"

Kong said seriously.

"If he were going to fall off the righteous path, he'd have turned pirate back in the North Blue."

"Sure, the kid's... let's say his behavior isn't exactly squeaky clean, but he's a good—well, never mind."

A few pitch-black stress lines floated up on Zephyr's forehead.

Hey, hey, hey—Old man Kong, don't start wavering now.

Kong cleared his throat and shifted the topic.

"Anyway, let's focus on what matters—let's start discussing a plan to rescue them."

He turned back toward Staff Officer Tsuru.

Tsuru gave a small nod.

"We've already begun gathering intel. The Beasts Pirates' territory in the New World—including affiliated forces—spans over thirty islands, both large and small."

Her tone grew more solemn.

"Kaidou is extremely cautious and cunning. The exact location of his base has always been a mystery to us. The only thing we can confirm... is that it's likely not far from Wano Country."

"But as you all know, Wano is a very unique case..."

At that, everyone in the room grew visibly grim. A collective cloud seemed to settle over their faces.

Wano Country—one of the most powerful militarized nations in the New World. A superpower second only to Elbaph, the land of giants.

It boasted a formidable samurai class, was strategically well-defended and nearly impossible to invade, and had remained in an isolationist state for years—openly hostile toward outside forces.

If a Marine warship were to appear near Wano's waters unannounced, it would likely send a very hostile message to the country's leadership.

And that's not even considering the risk of triggering a military clash—the political fallout alone would be enough to make the Navy think twice.

After all, Wano is the world's only producer of Seastone, controlling nearly all its production and processing. The Marines and the World Government's entire supply of Seastone weaponry relies on trade with Wano.

...

Chapter 176 - 176: Volume 2 – Chapter 78: Volunteering?

As Tsuru finished laying out the intel, a heavy silence settled over the room. The Marine officers present all felt their hearts sink, brows tightening in deep concern.

"So in other words... we can't deploy warships to conduct a large-scale search around the waters near Wano Country?"

Sengoku rested his chin on his clasped fingers, his expression grim.

As the Marines' foremost strategist, Sengoku tended to favor a more cautious approach. Wano was a militarily powerful nation, isolated from the world, and highly sensitive to external interference. Any large-scale operation near their borders could trigger immense political pressure—or even outright conflict.

"No. I disagree."

The voice was sharp, cold, and laced with killing intent. It sliced through the room like a blade.

Everyone turned in surprise.

Sakazuki, wrapped head to toe in bloodstained bandages, slowly rose to his feet. A lit cigarette hung between his lips as he stared directly at Fleet Admiral Kong, face blank and voice icy.

"Fleet Admiral, recovering Rogers Daren is critical to the Marines. Every extra day he stays in Kaidou's hands increases the danger."

"This isn't just about our pride anymore..."

"Let's not forget Daren's Devil Fruit ability."

At those words, Kong and Sengoku's expressions shifted slightly.

That's right.

Daren's Devil Fruit... and the future of the Marines' airborne fleet.

They absolutely couldn't let him fall into Kaidou's grasp.

Kong took a slow drag from his cigar, his gaze fixed on Sakazuki.

"So what's your plan?"

Sakazuki responded without hesitation.

"Send in a fleet. Launch a direct search in the area. Hell—we might as well use this as a chance to wipe out the Beasts Pirates once and for all!"

"Absolutely not!" Sengoku shot to his feet, face dark with urgency. "A full-scale military operation would provoke Wano's ruling regime. If they take it as an act of aggression, we could end up in an all-out war with them—and that's a risk we can't afford!"

Sakazuki let out a cold laugh, glaring at Sengoku with open disdain.

"What, Admiral Sengoku? Are you really that scared of a closed-off country? A bunch of samurai clinging to outdated rules and useless etiquette? Self-important fools stuck in the past... they won't last five seconds against Marine firepower."

"Besides, hasn't Wano always had that whole 'open-the-country' prophecy floating around? If they can't do it themselves, we'll lend them a hand—with cannon fire."

"If we move fast enough and seize control before they know what hit them, the higher-ups will only praise us for our results. They won't care about the method."

Sengoku snapped back.

"Sakazuki! We don't even know the full extent of Wano's military strength!"

"If we get dragged into a prolonged battle, our fleet will be stranded in the New World with no support!"

"If other pirate factions take advantage of the situation to strike, our supply lines and retreat routes will be cut off completely..."

"Enough!"

Kong's shout slammed through the tension like thunder, silencing the room.

Veins bulged at his temple, his head pounding.

"Sakazuki, your plan is far too reckless. The Marines aren't equipped to go to war with Kaidou and Wano at the same time. Our objective is to rescue Daren—not start a war."

"Our duty as Marines is to fight pirates and protect peace—not ignite unnecessary conflict."

Sakazuki clenched his jaw but said nothing more.

Kong let out a weary sigh and continued.

"That said, Sakazuki is right about one thing. Daren is vital to the future of the Marines. Even if there's only a sliver of hope, Marine Headquarters will do everything it can to bring him back."

"However, considering Wano's political sensitivity, this rescue mission must be carried out quietly—covert and discreet."

"In that case, I understand." Sakazuki stepped forward, tone firm. "Fleet Admiral, give the order. I'm ready to depart at any time."

But Kong shook his head.

"No. You're not the one I'm sending."

"Sakazuki. You're still injured—you'd have no advantage in a direct clash with Kaidou."

"And more importantly, your personality and combat style aren't suited for a mission like this."

The room fell silent.

Without adequate military support, infiltrating the New World—into the heart of the Beasts Pirates' territory—was an insanely dangerous task.

Kaidou's power was undeniable. Even Sakazuki had taken a serious beating going up against him. Anyone else trying their luck would be walking straight into death.

"Then I'll go!"

Zephyr's voice rang out as he stood, his presence surging. His tone was firm and urgent.

Kong and Sengoku exchanged a look, surprise flickering in their eyes.

Clearly, Zephyr cared deeply about Daren. Enough to consider breaking the vow he'd kept for years to stay out of frontline affairs.

But Kong still shook his head.

"Zephyr, the training camp needs you more. Don't forget—you've got a whole class of students waiting on your guidance."

Zephyr clenched his teeth in frustration.

"...Then how about I go?"

The voice that broke the tension was casual, almost lazy.

Everyone turned, stunned, to look at Borsalino—still calmly picking at his nails like nothing was happening.

They stared, wondering if they'd just imagined what he said. Even Sengoku's brain seemed to short-circuit for a moment, and he reached up to rub his ear in disbelief.

That guy... actually volunteered?

Sakazuki raised an eyebrow.

"Oh? With your abilities, you might really be the best option," Kong said, clearly surprised, but thoughtful as he eyed Borsalino.

Thanks to his Devil Fruit, Borsalino possessed unmatched speed and maneuverability—exactly what this kind of mission called for. He was uniquely suited for stealth rescues in enemy territory.

Even better, Daren himself had long-range flight capability. Borsalino wouldn't need to fight Kaidou directly. If he could just create an opening, he and Daren could slip away before a real confrontation started.

That was something even Sakazuki couldn't manage.

Kong was just about to give the order when a messenger burst into the room, panting for breath.

"R-report, Fleet Admiral Kong! We've just received word from the New World..."

He struggled to speak through heavy breaths.

"Vice Admiral Garp's ship has veered off its original course... It's heading straight for Wano!"

The room froze.

Zephyr and Sengoku both stiffened, turning to look at each other.

Their expressions twisted into a mix of shock and frustration as the same thought crossed their minds:

Damn it. That bastard Garp beat us to it!

...

Chapter 177 - 177: Volume 2 – Chapter 79: This Lineup... A World War in the Making?

"So fast? That's Garp for you..."

Upon hearing the news, a faint smile appeared on Kong's face as he shook his head.

Garp, Zephyr, and Sengoku—those three were all students he had personally trained. Compared to Sengoku's cautious calmness and Zephyr's stubborn resolve, Garp had always been the type to ignore rules and pull off the unexpected.

He might be reckless at times, but if Garp's the one taking action, then things on Daren's side shouldn't be a problem. Still, Kong hadn't expected Garp to actually abandon his pursuit of Roger for a rescue mission. That was rare.

Just as this thought flashed through his mind, two figures suddenly appeared before him with a swoosh.

"Fleet Admiral Kong! I request to join the mission!"

"Old man Kong, I'm going too—Daren is my student!"

Sengoku and Zephyr stood shoulder to shoulder, both looking serious and jostling to speak first.

Kong: ???

He stared, stunned, at the two of them squabbling right in front of him. For a moment, it reminded him of when they were young, fighting over who got to eat first after training.

"What the hell are you two doing?"

Kong frowned.

"Sengoku, you're the only Admiral at Marine Headquarters. Your position is special and comes with enormous responsibility and countless duties—"

"—That can wait, Fleet Admiral Kong. I've already thought it through. Daren is crucial to the future of the Marines. The top priority now is getting him out of Kaidou's hands!"

Sengoku cut him off without hesitation, his voice firm and decisive.

The conviction in his tone even left Kong momentarily speechless.

Zephyr's mouth twitched. Sengoku shot him a smug glance.

Kong's brow furrowed deeper as he turned to Zephyr, speaking with weight:

"Zephyr, you're the chief instructor of the training camp. Teaching is your most important task—"

"—Those brats at the camp are already doing well. I've taught them everything they need. If they still can't get it, there's nothing more I can do!"

Zephyr snapped back, firm and to the point.

Sengoku: "..."

Kong: "..."

Zephyr raised an eyebrow at Sengoku.

The surrounding Marines were left dumbfounded, unable to believe what they were seeing.

Seriously... Even if Daren was important, he was still just a Commodore!

Was he really worth this kind of scramble from three Marine legends?

Garp, Zephyr, and Sengoku mobilizing together for one rescue mission into the New World... not even Roger or Whitebeard ever got that kind of response!

This lineup didn't look like a rescue at all—it looked like the start of a world war!

Even when the Celestial Dragons were in danger, Garp, Zephyr, and Sengoku weren't this worked up...

Vice Admiral Tsuru sighed and pinched her forehead, exasperated.

Others might not see it, but she knew exactly what was going through those three's heads.

"What a spectacle... If I ever got captured, I doubt I'd get the same treatment,"

Borsalino chuckled, clearly enjoying the show.

"Yeah. I definitely wouldn't go,"

Sakazuki said flatly.

Borsalino's smile froze, then stiffened as he forced a grin.

"Sakazuki, talk like that and you'll end up friendless."

Sakazuki ignored him, calmly puffing on his cigar.

"You guys..."

Kong suddenly let out a long sigh.

"If all of you run off on this rescue, who's going to be left to guard HQ?"

Hearing his tone, both Sengoku and Zephyr felt a jolt in their hearts. They were about to argue again, but what Kong said next left them both speechless...

"Then I'll let you all go."

Sengoku and Zephyr: ???

"Are you serious, Fleet Admiral Kong?" Sengoku's eyes lit up as he asked, unable to hold back his surprise.

Zephyr also looked completely stunned.

"Why not?" Kong replied with a smile.

He stood up from his seat, expression turning serious as he issued the order.

"For this mission, Admiral Sengoku of Marine Headquarters will serve as the commander, Zephyr as deputy commander, and Rear Admiral Borsalino will accompany you. Choose appropriate personnel and proceed to the New World to carry out the rescue operation."

"During the operation, absolute secrecy must be maintained. Avoid provoking sensitivity or hostility from Wano Country as much as possible."

"Understood?"

As his decisive words fell, all the Marine officers present stood at attention and responded in unison.

"Yes, Fleet Admiral Kong!!"

They saluted sharply before turning and marching out of the office.

"Fleet Admiral Kong, are you sure about this? Letting both Sengoku and Zephyr head out on a rescue mission at the same time..."

Once everyone had left, Staff Officer Tsuru—who had deliberately lingered—could no longer keep her doubts to herself.

Fleet Admiral Kong had always been known for his strict command and unshakable decisions. This just wasn't like him.

Kong chuckled softly at her words.

He leaned back into his chair, turned to face the tall floor-to-ceiling windows, and gazed down at the ground outside.

In the blazing sunlight, the backs of Sengoku and Zephyr—clearly in high spirits—stood out brilliantly.

"Tsuru, do you see that?"

Following his gaze, Tsuru looked out and couldn't help but twitch the corner of her mouth.

She caught a faint glimpse of the two men jostling and tugging at each other, clearly slowing each other down with their antics.

Kong let out a light laugh as cigar smoke curled around his weathered, rock-like face.

"It really isn't the best idea."

"The trainees at the camp still need Zephyr's guidance. For him to leave and rescue one student—it's not exactly fair to the rest."

"And as the only Admiral in headquarters, Sengoku really does have a heavy burden to carry."

As he spoke, Kong's aged but sharp eyes drifted slightly, as though lost in distant memories. A soft smile slowly crept across his lips.

"But... it's been a long time since I saw the two of them fight side by side."

Tsuru froze for a moment, then silently nodded.

After a while, she smiled and shook her head.

"I understand."

Garp, Sengoku, Zephyr...

No matter how high those three had risen—even though they were now admired, revered, and followed by countless Marines—

To this seventy-year-old former Fleet Admiral, those three unruly Marine uncles...

Would always be the same rebellious brats they were back then.

Yes, it really had been a long time since they'd fought together... Tsuru couldn't help feeling a little nostalgic.

"So for now, the training camp and headquarters duties are in your hands, Tsuru," Kong said with a grin.

"..."

Tsuru immediately stopped feeling nostalgic.

Chapter 178 - 178: Volume 2 – Chapter 80: Weapons Shouldn't Have Freedom

New World, waters near Wano Country.

Prison.

The stifling air condensed into droplets on the jagged stone ceiling, dripping down one after another with a sharp, echoing sound that rang out harshly in the deathly silence of the empty prison.

Two figures, both covered in blood and grime, sat in a darkened cell. Their wounds had mostly stopped bleeding.

"Never thought I, Douglas Bullet, would end up locked in the same prison as a Marine."

Bullet leaned his back against the cold, blood-streaked wall, head slightly tilted up as he stared blankly at the ceiling above.

His long blond hair was a mess, clumped together with dried blood.

Daren gave a weak scoff and rolled his eyes.

The high-purity Seastone shackles drained him, leaving his body weaker than ever before.

"Yeah, well, I never thought I'd be a Marine locked in a pirate's prison either..."

He licked his cracked lips.

"I figured if I ever got locked up, it'd be because I pulled off something earth-shaking—got put on the World Government's most wanted list—and ended up in Impel Down."

Bullet glanced at him.

"Heard Kaidou say you're a 'monster' in the Marines... With someone like you, they'd go all-out to train and raise you. Given time, becoming an Admiral wouldn't be out of reach. How would someone like that get captured by the Marines?"

That brutal battle had left a deep impression on Bullet.

Technically, it was that guy Sakazuki who had fought him head-on.

But Daren's bizarre Devil Fruit powers, his spot-on reading of the battlefield, and his ruthlessness in combat made him even more troublesome to deal with.

People like that tend to thrive in war and military life.

Because Bullet was the same kind of person.

"Who knows?"

Daren grinned faintly.

Whether it was the Mummy Virus still working through his body or just the aftermath of his injuries, his mind felt hazy.

"Weren't you a national hero too? And yet you ended up on the World Government's wanted list... Who can make sense of this world?"

Bullet fell silent at those words.

Daren didn't speak again either, simply leaning against the wall and resting.

"I'm not a deserter."

Bullet suddenly broke the silence.

His voice was hoarse.

"Sakazuki called me a deserter—but I'm not."

His remaining arm clenched into a fist, veins bulging across his hand.

Maybe it was a sense of shared fate, or maybe it was because he knew Kaidou would eventually kill him. Whatever the reason, there was a calmness in his eyes, and he actually started opening up to Daren, the man he'd once fought as an enemy.

"I joined the military at eight years old. Did everything they asked. Achieved countless merits."

"As a soldier, I fought until the last battle, wiped out the enemy alone."

"I won that war for them. I cut down the enemy general and offered his bloody head to our General and our king. I thought I'd earned my freedom."

"But when I stood atop the honors platform, holding the head of the imperial general... I wasn't met with flowers, cheers, or approving glances from the royals or my superiors..."

"All I saw were cold, empty gun barrels aimed straight at me."

A cold sneer tugged at the corner of Bullet's lips.

Whether he was mocking that country's arrogance—or laughing at his own foolishness—was impossible to tell.

"It turns out they never planned to give me freedom. I was just a weapon in their hands."

Daren slowly forced open his heavy eyelids, glanced at him, and said calmly,

"To those so-called elites, weapons aren't supposed to have thoughts—much less freedom."

"Especially powerful weapons... If they can't keep them under control, they'd rather destroy them."

"Because no one knows what might happen if a weapon gains freedom. One day, it might just turn the muzzle back on them."

"Exactly!!" Bullet grinned wildly, eyes flashing with madness.

"So I acted!"

"They finally saw for themselves just how powerful the weapon they created really was!"

He suddenly lifted his arm, dragging the cold, heavy shackles with a loud clatter.

"And then I realized—this so-called mighty empire... was nothing but fragile!"

"Without me, that country was nothing!"

"Kahahahahaha!!"

Bullet laughed with bloodshot eyes, his whole body trembling as tears spilled from his eyes.

Daren said nothing.

He couldn't be sure, but somewhere within Bullet's manic laughter, he seemed to hear a faint trace of sorrow and pain.

To destroy the very nation he once fought for... to butcher comrades he once bled alongside... that couldn't have been easy.

"...Ha ha hah..."

Bullet's laughter gradually quieted.

"What a shame... I was really hoping to see the power of legends like Roger, Whitebeard, and Shiki..."

Daren replied calmly,

"We're not dead yet. Kaidou wants to recruit us."

Bullet snorted and shook his head.

"That's only temporary. I won't bow to him. And once he realizes that, he'll kill me without a second thought."

"If a powerful weapon can't be controlled, it must be destroyed'... You're the one who said that, right?"

"But you're different. With your potential, the Marines will come for you."

"Me? This is the end of the line."

He murmured hoarsely.

Daren didn't argue.

To Bullet, falling into Kaidou's hands or the Marines' made no difference.

Either way, it meant being imprisoned for life—or executed outright.

Sure, someone like Bullet—former soldier, immensely powerful—could be an asset to the Marines if recruited.

But that was impossible.

Completely unrealistic.

This was a man who slaughtered his own country and comrades. Politically, there was no way the Marines could accept him. Otherwise, their "justice" would be a complete farce.

And someone like Bullet, betrayed by the military once before, would never submit to an institution like the Marines.

"...So Daren, is it true?"

Bullet suddenly looked up and asked,

"You fought Roger... and actually made him suffer? Is that real?"

Meeting Bullet's gaze, Daren gave a small smile.

"Yeah. It's true."

"Was Roger... strong?"

"Strong like a demon. Compared to him, Kaidou's not even worthy of tying his shoes."

A fierce light burst in Bullet's eyes, brimming with fighting spirit as he stared intently at Daren.

"So what kind of loss did you make him suffer?"

Daren blinked.

"I pulled his pants down."

Bullet froze.

One second.

Two seconds.

Three seconds.

"Kahahahahaha!!!"

His booming laughter echoed through the dark, eerie prison.

...

Chapter 179 - 179: Volume 2 – Chapter 81: Alliance

"Interesting! So damn interesting! Kahahaha!"

Bullet stared intently at the Marine in front of him, eyes burning with excitement as he burst into laughter.

"You're a hell of a lot more fun than your average Marine!"

Daren smirked.

"You heard it yourself—I'm not your average Marine."

As he spoke, he pressed his hand against the blackened wall, using it to brace himself as he slowly stood up.

Under the effect of high-purity Seastone, every movement looked painfully difficult. It was as if a mountain was crushing down on him. Just standing brought a cold sweat to his forehead, and his breathing grew ragged.

"Hey, hey, take it easy. What the hell are you doing?"

Bullet frowned, watching him with confusion.

"In that condition, I've got no interest in fighting you."

"Who said anything about fighting?"

Daren replied calmly, sweat trickling from his forehead and collecting on the stubble along his chin.

"Then what are you doing?"

Bullet couldn't help but ask.

The next moment, his eyes widened in disbelief.

In the dim prison cell, lit only by flickering torchlight, the bloodied Marine dragging those heavy Seastone shackles suddenly flashed a grin.

"Obviously..."

A wild, beastlike light flared in Daren's eyes.

He clenched his jaw, and the muscles on his bare upper body surged as veins thick as cords bulged across his skin. His joints cracked audibly, and he spread his legs shoulder-width apart...

Hiss!!

Two sharp bursts of steam sprayed from his nostrils as he lowered his body with a fierce growl.

"—Training!!!"

His body dropped low.

Then rose again—steady and firm.

A perfectly executed squat.

Bullet's pupils shrank into slits.

This lunatic...

With the debilitating effects of high-purity Seastone and his serious injuries, even standing was a struggle—

And he was using this moment to train!?

Before Bullet could finish the thought, Daren dropped into another squat.

This one looked even harder than the first. His posture trembled under an invisible weight, like he was truly shouldering a mountain.

"Two!"

Daren's roar erupted like a beast from deep within his chest.

"Hey, hey, at this rate, your body's gonna give out."

Bullet flinched, unable to hide his concern.

"Three!"

Daren didn't seem to hear him. His heart thundered, pumping blood into every muscle. His skin visibly flushed red.

"Bullet, if you're bored, you can help me count."

Bullet's face twisted. He gritted his teeth and shouted,

"Who the hell do you think you're looking down on!?"

With that, he slapped a hand against the wall, snarled through clenched teeth, and forced himself to stand.

He joined in the training.

Two blood-soaked figures roared under the swaying light, eyes glowing red as they resisted the crippling effects of the ultra-high-purity Seastone. Together, they began a hellish workout.

Every squat felt like their lungs and hearts were going to explode. The pain tore through them.

The agony twisted their faces into something monstrous, veins bulging across their bodies.

Clank, clank...

The Seastone shackles rattled with each motion, a sharp metallic rhythm to their punishment.

Four!

Five!

Six!

Seven!

Each squat, so simple in theory, was a battle against their limits.

But as he kept pace with Daren, Bullet grew more and more alarmed.

Raised in the military since childhood, trained under brutal conditions, hardened by battlefield slaughter—he thought no one could be harsher on themselves than he was.

His obsession with becoming the strongest had forged an iron will.

Yet now...

To his shock, he realized that Daren—the Marine—was every bit his equal in willpower and self-discipline.

No. I won't lose to anyone.

Not when it comes to training.

I, Douglas Bullet, won't be outdone.

Bullet's nose flared. Two streams of blood trickled down—but his eyes burned with a crazed, crimson light.

Nine!

Ten!

Eleven!

...

Unknowingly, the two had locked eyes—each recognizing the fighting spirit in the other—and started silently competing.

Three minutes later...

Clang!

Both collapsed heavily to the ground, gasping for breath.

"Tw-twenty-five... I... didn't lose..."

Bullet's chest heaved like a bellows as he panted out the words.

Daren's face was ghostly pale, but he licked his cracked lips and let out a laugh.

"Didn't expect you to actually keep up with my training pace..."

Bullet snorted between gulps of air.

"So... this is your... limit...? I'm still... hah... doing just fine... cough, cough!!"

He suddenly choked on his breath, erupting into a violent fit of coughing, face flushing red.

Daren said nothing, just kept breathing deeply. His chest and heart felt like they were about to burst.

He'd been meaning to start resistance training with Seastone for a long time.

But Seastone was rare—especially in the North Blue.

And with the constant grind of military duties, he never found the time to begin.

Originally, he had planned to apply for low-purity Seastone cuffs after training camp, gradually increasing intensity over time.

What he didn't expect... was to get captured by Kaidou—and end up getting the "premium treatment" right here.

That thought made him chuckle wryly as he finally caught his breath.

Realizing he couldn't even lift a finger, he sighed and said slowly,

"Bullet, you were right. Once Kaidou realizes he can't recruit us, he won't hesitate to kill us."

Bullet glanced over.

"So what? The Marines will come for you."

Daren exhaled sharply, narrowing his eyes.

"Maybe. But betting my life on someone else? That's not how I do things."

Bullet paused, then lowered his voice, as if something had clicked.

"What are you planning?"

Daren turned his head with effort, looked Bullet in the eyes, and took a deep breath.

"Let's team up."

Bullet frowned.

He stared hard at Daren. Then, the corners of his mouth curled into a wicked grin.

"Alright."

Now it was Daren's turn to be surprised.

He hadn't expected Bullet to agree so easily.

"Don't look so shocked. It's just an arm."

As if reading Daren's thoughts, Bullet laughed coldly.

"When we make it out of this alive... we'll have ourselves a proper fight."

Their eyes locked—sparks seemed to fly in the air.

Clack... Clack...

At that moment, the prison door creaked open.

"Hehehe... Well now, don't you two look lively today..."

The fat man in overalls strolled in, cigar between his lips, grinning lecherously.

"Very nice, very nice. Let's begin today's experiment—hm?"

Queen stopped mid-step, a bit confused.

Because as he stepped in carrying the experimental kit, those two beaten-down inmates looked at him like they'd been waiting all day.

Their eyes... were literally glowing.

Chapter 180 - 180: Volume 2 – Chapter 82: With Such a Small Dose, What Is This, a Wellness Treatment?

Physique +0.02

Physique +0.03

Physique +0.03

Physique +0.02...

"Aaaargh!!"

Pained growls echoed through the eerie prison like the roars of wild beasts.

Daren and Bullet were curled up on the ground, trembling uncontrollably from the searing pain. A blazing red glow radiated from their bodies, their temperatures spiking rapidly as if engulfed in fire. Every cell and every muscle felt like it was burning alive.

"Hehehehehe... what perfect test subjects. I even increased the Mummy Virus dosage, and they're still alive and kicking."

"Incredible... just incredible..."

The obese Queen bit down on his cigar, eyes gleaming manically as he watched the vitals on the monitor spike. Shaking with excitement, he scribbled furiously in his lab log:

'Body temperature has exceeded 55°C...'

'At 30% Mummy Virus dosage, cellular activity shows signs of rapid division...'

'This suggests extreme overdrive of organ functions, with mounting metabolic pressure...'

'All this data proves just how powerful the Mummy Virus really is...'

'But there's something odd—these two almost look like they're enjoying it. Yet the pain index is off the charts. A normal person would've passed out by now...'

'Could the Mummy Virus cause hallucinations... or even be addictive?'

Queen paused and glanced suspiciously at Daren and Bullet, both writhing in agony.

'No... unlikely. But I can't rule out addiction just yet. Then again, maybe they're just freakishly strong-willed and pushing through by force.'

...

Two minutes finally passed.

As the burning pain faded, Daren and Bullet collapsed like heaps of sludge, panting hard. White steam hissed from their skin.

"Hehehehe, well? What do you think now?"

"Know how awesome I am yet?"

Queen swaggered over, towering above them with his round belly puffed out in pride. He let out a shrill, twisted laugh.

"It's not too late to beg. Just swear allegiance to Kaidou-sama, and this all ends."

"Otherwise, I'll pump you full of an even higher dose of the Mummy Virus... and the pain will multiply!"

"So, how about it—join the Beasts Pirates—"

"—I refuse!" 2x

Daren and Bullet shouted in perfect unison, then exchanged a subtle glance.

Queen: ???

He stared at the two crumpled figures in front of him, dumbfounded.

Are they insane?

When he mentioned a higher dose, he could've sworn he saw a flicker of anticipation in their eyes.

'Don't tell me...'

A sudden realization struck Queen like a bolt. He shuddered.

'These two... are masochists, aren't they?'

As the thought hit him, a cold chill ran down his back. He instinctively stepped back, putting distance between himself and these lunatics.

Daren, still gasping for breath, suddenly let out a wild, defiant grin as he felt his "physique" stat climbing higher.

"You fat bastard. You really think junk science like yours is enough to make me kneel? You're dreaming!!"

He thrashed violently, making the Seastone shackles clang against the floor.

"This is your so-called masterpiece? The Mummy Virus?"

Blood streamed from Daren's eyes, nose, ears, and mouth as he sneered with disdain.

"This tiny little dose... what is this, some kind of wellness treatment?"

Queen was momentarily stunned.

Next to him, Bullet stared at Daren in disbelief.

Daren gave him a subtle wink.

Bullet blinked, and suddenly, it was like a light clicked on in his mind.

Immediately, his expression changed. Then he suddenly burst into maniacal laughter.

"Is that all you've got, fatty!?"

"This pain is nothing—barely a tickle! Kahahahaha!!!"

As the words left his mouth—

"You damn fools with no sense of self-preservation!! How dare you look down on my scientific achievements!!!"

Queen's beady eyes instantly turned bloodshot with rage, and he roared like distant thunder.

"You forced my hand! You're asking for death!!"

He furiously grabbed a test tube from the medical kit. The liquid inside shimmered with a bright, crystalline turquoise.

"It's time... for you to witness... the pinnacle of my research—'Plague' Queen's ultimate creation!!"

His mechanical arm spun rapidly, parts locking and assembling until a massive syringe extended from it.

The needle pierced through the rubber seal, drawing up the thick, glowing blue liquid.

"It may not be perfected yet... but it's more than enough for the two of you!!"

"Let's see how you handle this!!"

Queen cackled as he coated the needle in Armament Haki, then plunged it into Daren and Bullet's arms one after the other!

The moment the virus entered their bodies, an entirely new and overwhelming sense of impending death surged through them like a tidal wave.

Daren and Bullet froze on the spot, their minds going blank.

Extreme cold...

An icy chill surged through their veins, their cells, their muscles—as if they'd been thrown into a frozen hell. Their blood felt like it was turning to ice.

Their skin and muscles turned visibly blue, frost seeming to coat their bodies. Their joints stiffened, movement sluggish and rigid, like frost-covered demons.

The cold gripped their entire bodies, and then came a pain so fierce it could crush nerves and shatter willpower. It poured in endlessly.

Overwhelmed by the agony, a savage, primal urge to kill—wild and irrational—rose uncontrollably from the depths of their minds.

Bang!!

A heavy fist smashed into Daren's cheek, swelling it up instantly.

His pupils shrank. What he saw was Bullet—now like a frost-covered demon—roaring like a crazed beast. He was dragging his body forward step by step, moving toward him like a predator.

"Hehehehe... This is the Ice Oni Virus! Go ahead and tear each other apart!!"

"Enjoy it! The supreme masterpiece of genius scientist Queen!!"

Queen let out a twisted laugh, turned around, slammed the cell door shut, and left the prison.

As the fat man's silhouette disappeared, Daren's eyes gradually turned blood-red, consumed by the urge to fight.

The next second—

Boom!!

The two figures collided in the cell like cannonballs, locked in a brutal, frenzied battle.

Physique +0.07

Physique +0.09

Physique +0.10

Physique +0.13