

One Piece 181

Chapter 181 - 181: Volume 2 – Chapter 83: Winning People Over

North Blue.

Rubeck Island, base of the Donquixote Family.

"Doffy!"

A sticky, trembling figure stumbled into the lavishly decorated hall.

"Stop panicking all the time, Trebol."

Doflamingo, lounging on a soft leather sofa with a cigar in his mouth and his legs crossed on an expensive marble coffee table, spoke with irritation.

It had been over a month since Daren left the North Blue. In that time, the Donquixote Family had completely seized control over the region's underworld. Their trade caravans and influence had even extended into the Grand Line.

Compared to a month ago, Doflamingo had noticeably grown taller. He had shed the last traces of boyishness and now exuded the swagger and arrogance of a young man.

His presence had become more defiant and imposing. There was already a hint of the spirit befitting a future emperor of the underworld in his gaze.

"I-I'm telling you... something huge just happened!!"

Trebol panted heavily, leaning on his cane, a trail of glistening snot dangling under his nose.

"News from the dark underworld of the New World... Commodore Rogers Daren was captured by Kaidou of the Beasts during a mission. His fate is currently unknown!"

As soon as he spoke, Doflamingo's pupils narrowed behind his sunglasses.

The other Donquixote Family officers—whether standing or sitting—were visibly shaken and sprang to their feet.

"That monster actually got captured!?"

"Well, makes sense... we're talking about Kaidou of the Beasts, after all..."

"He totally had it coming..."

"So if he's dead... does that mean we're finally free of his control?"

"Doffy, this is seriously good news..."

Hearing the news, Diamante and the others first froze, then couldn't hide the joy spreading across their faces.

The Donquixote Family might seem unstoppable now, their power growing fast and even connecting with underground groups in the New World through arms smuggling and similar deals.

But deep down, every single one of them knew—no matter how far their influence stretched, the name "King of the North Blue" still loomed over them like a giant's shadow.

Doflamingo suddenly raised his hand, cutting off the buzzing discussion. His expression turned cold as he fixed his gaze on Trebol.

"Is the source reliable, Trebol?"

Trebol finally caught his breath and nodded carefully.

"Yes. The intel came from "Deep-Sea Currents" Umit... You know, he controls fifty percent of the arms we smuggle out of the North Blue. So we've got a pretty solid relationship."

Silence fell over the room.

Everyone cautiously watched as their young master's face grew darker. For a moment, no one dared to speak.

They all understood just how complicated the relationship was between their young master and that man...

"He... is he still alive?"

After a long silence, Doflamingo asked expressionlessly.

Trebol shook his head.

"Still unclear. According to intel from the spy we planted under "Deep-Sea Currents" Umit, Umit has been working with Kaidou, handling a large share of the Beasts Pirates' arms smuggling and supplying some of their provisions...

"But for every transaction, the Beasts Pirates are extremely cautious. They always arrange meetings on neutral third-party islands—no one knows where their main base is."

Diamante suddenly spoke up, testing the waters.

"Doffy... you're not thinking..."

He hesitated, then gritted his teeth.

"You're not thinking of saving that guy, are you? His survival doesn't benefit the Donquixote Family at all! We're already strong enough—there's no need for his protection!"

"If he's dead, even better. Then the Marines in the North Blue will never be a threat to us again!"

"We can naturally move in on all those businesses we weren't allowed to touch before—human trafficking, slave smuggling, the drug trade..."

"Shut up!" Doflamingo suddenly snapped, cutting Diamante off.

Diamante froze.

Doflamingo slowly stood from the sofa and walked toward him, his expression ice cold.

"D-Do—Doffy..."

Feeling the pressure radiating from him, Diamante broke out in a cold sweat.

"Diamante, how many times do I have to say this?"

Doflamingo stopped in front of him. The pink feathers of his coat swayed gently behind him. A shadow hung over his brow.

"We don't stay away from those businesses because Daren told us not to."

"We stay away because they're outdated."

As he spoke, Doflamingo recalled something Daren had said before leaving the North Blue.

"You know why I look down on those so-called emperors of the underworld in the New World?"

Diamante croaked, "N-No... I don't."

Doflamingo smirked.

"Because they're just sewer rats. Vultures, feeding on scraps."

"Human trafficking, organ dealing, caravan raids, double-crossing, intel trafficking, slave trade, drug running... That's all the dirty work of lowlifes."

"They scurry around in the cracks between big powers, thinking they're clever. But when the real tides of change come, they won't even make a ripple."

He patted Diamante on the shoulder.

"I know you're thinking about the family. You want to make money, grow our influence—I appreciate that."

"But..."

Doflamingo exhaled a puff of smoke.

"Money—just enough is enough. No need to obsess over that kind of disgusting business."

"The true measure of wealth isn't mountains of treasure or grand palaces—it's how many hearts you've won over."

"And right now, it's time for us to win hearts."

"Senor..."

He called out.

"Young master."

A deep voice suddenly rang out.

Ripples shimmered across the wall of the Donquixote Family's hall. From them, a man with slicked-back hair, dressed in an expensive black pinstripe suit and wearing sunglasses, "swam" out.

"You're a fresh face. Your ability suits this mission well," Doflamingo said calmly.

"Yes." The young man named Senor gave a slight bow.

"But you'll likely die," Doflamingo added.

"That's fine," Senor replied with a smile. "The Donquixote Family is everything to me."

Doflamingo was silent for a moment, then walked over, pulled out a pack of cigarettes, and placed one between Senor's lips.

Click.

He lit it for him.

"Go."

"From today, you're a core officer of the Donquixote Family."

Senor took a drag and smiled.

"Thank you, young master."

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Chapter 182 - 182: Volume 2 – Chapter 84: It's a Matter of Attitude

As Senor slowly "slipped" into the wall, Doflamingo exhaled a long breath.

This guy was a new addition to the family—steady, decisive, nothing like a brutish mafioso. In fact, his demeanor was more like that of a well-mannered gentleman.

Doflamingo had taken notice of Senor early on.

His Sui Sui no Mi ability allowed him to freely submerge into liquefied surfaces like the ground or walls, moving through them as if swimming. It was an incredibly efficient power for infiltration, assassination, and intelligence gathering...

So even though Senor wasn't yet a core officer in the family, Doflamingo had still deliberately handed him important tasks—both to cultivate and test his potential.

And Senor hadn't disappointed him.

"Doffy... are you really going to let Senor go save... that guy?"

Trebol, who had been hesitating for a while, finally couldn't help but speak up.

Doflamingo lit another cigar, took a deep drag, and raised his head, scanning the faces of the Donquixote Family officers one by one.

"So... you all think it would be better for us if that guy Daren were dead, huh?"

Diamante grit his teeth, clearly frustrated.

"You're our young master! Of course we follow your orders and trust your judgment."

"But... but..."

He clenched his fists tightly.

"If that guy dies, you can take his place and become the 'King of the North Blue'! Isn't that right?"

Doflamingo blew out a thick stream of smoke.

From the looks on Trebol and the others' faces, it was obvious—deep down, they feared Daren. It was instinctual.

"You might be right... but I don't believe someone like Daren would die that easily."

"You've seen the intelligence we've gathered from Marineford."

"The name Rogers Daren no longer represents just the North Blue."

A flicker of complexity shone behind Doflamingo's sunglasses.

"A monster of a man... top of his class at the Officer Training Camp... a genius Marine who once clashed head-on with legends like Byrnni World and Gol D. Roger..."

"A Marine with that kind of potential—there's no way Marine Headquarters would give up on him."

"If I'm not mistaken, even as we speak, Headquarters has already dispatched sufficient forces to the New World to mount a rescue."

He let out a slightly helpless sigh.

"So whether or not we send someone may not make a difference in the end."

At that, Trebol and the others finally understood what was really going on.

"Then why send Senor at all, Doffy?" Trebol asked, frowning.

Doflamingo smirked, a hint of bitter irony in his expression.

"It's a matter of attitude."

"Whether or not Senor actually helps doesn't matter. What matters is that we've shown our sincerity."

"Otherwise... think about it. If that guy really survives and finds out our Donquixote Family did nothing—knowing his personality—how do you think he'll come after us?"

At those words, all the officers shuddered.

That man's brutal methods...

None of them dared to imagine what would happen next.

"And..."

At that moment, Doflamingo shook his head.

"That guy should be arriving any second now."

As soon as he spoke, Trebol and the others froze.

Arriving? Who?

Bang!

The doors to the residence hall were suddenly slammed open, and a blast of wind thick with the scent of gunpowder surged inside.

Before Trebol and the others could react, over a hundred fully armed Marines stormed in, surrounding them completely.

Their expressions changed drastically.

"Marines!!"

"What are you trying to do?!"

"What the hell is going on!?"

"This is the Donquixote Family's base!!"

...

They were just about to act—

Swish!

Dozens of black muzzles were raised in unison, aimed squarely at the Donquixote Family members with cold precision.

Fury flashed across their faces, but confronted with elite Marines wielding stun rifles, flamethrowers, metal entrapment nets, high-explosive spears, and other state-of-the-art weaponry, they didn't dare make a move.

The hall fell into a suffocating silence. The air was thick with tension.

"Doflamigo-sama... the Marines... five warships from the North Blue Fleet have completely locked down all of Rubeck Island..."

Just then, a panicked outer member of the Donquixote Family rushed in, voice trembling as he reported.

Doflamigo chuckled coldly.

"Fufufufufu... making quite the entrance, huh? Guess Admiral Momonga doesn't really care about keeping up appearances."

He looked up toward a figure slowly stepping out from among the Marines.

The troops held their ground warily, opening a clear path through the center.

Momonga, cloaked in a billowing coat, strode into the hall with a frosty expression and said calmly,

"In the North Blue... who would dare disrespect Donquixote Doflamigo?"

He raised a hand and ordered his men:

"Lower your weapons. The Donquixote Family is a vital force for maintaining stability in the North Blue, and they are the most respected and friendly guests of our fleet."

Immediately, the assembled Marines withdrew their weapons and silently stepped back.

Without sparing even a glance at Trebol and the others, Momonga addressed Doflamingo in a low voice.

"Doflamingo, you already know why I'm here. Apologies for the sudden visit, but I'm not in the mood for pleasantries."

There was a faint trace of urgency in his tone... along with a killing intent buried deep beneath the surface.

Doflamingo studied Momonga for a long moment before suddenly chuckling.

"Fufufufu... I see. Now it makes sense."

"Relax. I've already sent someone. We'll have news soon."

"Admiral Momonga, believe me... I'm even more anxious than you."

"Don't forget—he's my godfather... fufufufufu..."

Momonga gave a slight nod, ignoring the sneer hidden in Doflamingo's laughter.

"Good. Then I'll be waiting for your update."

With those words, Momonga turned and left, leading his elite troops out of the base.

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When they reached the port, he came to a sudden stop.

Several enormous warships cruised just offshore, each fitted with rows of silver, large-caliber cannons along their hulls.

"Captain Momonga, what's our next move?"

A Marine Lieutenant Commander asked grimly.

Momonga turned, narrowing his eyes at the skull flag fluttering above the Donquixote base in the distance.

"No. Keep eyes on Doflamingo."

"Wait for the news. If something really has happened to Daren... whether or not Doflamingo sent help to save him..."

Momonga clenched his jaw. Daren's final words before leaving the North Blue echoed in his mind, and his eyes sharpened with resolve.

"We move. Wipe out every last member of the Donquixote Family!"

Chapter 183 - 183: Volume 2 – Chapter 85: Moves from All Sides

"Doffy... Momonga still hasn't withdrawn the North Blue Fleet. What should we do?"

Inside the residence hall, Trebol lowered the Den Den Mushi after receiving a report, his expression uneasy.

The other officers also turned toward their young master, their faces tense.

Rubeck Island was completely sealed off. With five Marine warships pressing down on them, none of them felt particularly confident.

The Donquixote Family knew better than anyone just how powerful the North Blue Fleet was.

This fleet—painstakingly built by Rogers Daren with massive funding—was outfitted with the most advanced high-tech weaponry in the world, modified by Germa 66. Every Marine aboard was an elite among elites.

The result of that astronomical military budget was a highly disciplined, powerful force that operated with absolute efficiency.

In contrast, the Donquixote Family's forces on Rubeck Island were very limited. Most of their outer members were stationed at other strongholds across the North Blue, making it impossible to match the strength of the North Blue Fleet.

"I didn't expect Momonga to move this fast... We underestimated him," Diamante muttered. "We always thought of him as just another one of Daren's adjutants."

Vergo, a chunk of steak still stuck to his cheek, frowned.

"According to covert intel, it seems the North Blue Fleet recently acquired a new type of technological weapon. Something with terrifying destructive power."

Trebol tightened his grip on his cane.

"Doffy... are they planning to go to war with us?"

The officers glanced uneasily at Doflamingo, who sat on the sofa smoking silently.

He took a calm drag from his cigar, crossed one leg over the other, and smirked.

"No need to panic. As long as Daren's still alive, Momonga won't move against us."

"Just do what you need to do."

With that, Doflamingo stood up from the leather sofa and headed into his study.

He walked to a large glass window, pushed it open, and let the cool sea breeze brush against his face, his pink feathered coat billowing behind him.

He understood exactly what Momonga was thinking by keeping his troops in place.

Momonga feared that if something happened to Daren, he wouldn't be able to hold the line... and the entire North Blue would fall into Doflamingo's hands.

Smart. Decisive. Assertive.

No wonder he was the man Daren trusted most.

That kind of vision and judgment alone made the otherwise unremarkable Momonga more than worthy of being the supreme military commander of the North Blue.

Doflamingo gazed out over the sea at the massive warships looming like steel beasts, their sides adorned with fluttering white seagull flags.

A wild grin slowly crept onto his lips.

"Don't you dare die that easily, godfather... because..."

Beneath his sunglasses, his eyes burned with raw ambition and madness. Bulging veins twisted across his forehead like writhing worms.

"The only one who gets to take you down... is me!"

Crack!

His hands clenched suddenly, splintering the wooden windowsill beneath them.

Woodchips scattered into the wind.

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New World.

The sky was bright and clear, white clouds drifting lazily overhead.

Two mid-sized warships cruised at high speed over calm waters, carving long, snowy trails into the sea.

Standing at the bow of one of them was a towering, commanding figure, his brows furrowed as he stared into the distance.

It was Sengoku, dispatched from Marineford to lead the rescue mission.

Boom...

A thunderous explosion suddenly erupted from a distant island. Flames and black smoke shot skyward, painting the horizon in chaos.

Agonized screams from pirates echoed faintly from the island, only to be swallowed quickly by the crashing waves.

Two seconds later, a streak of golden light tore across the sky from the direction of the island.

The beam split midair, and countless photons gathered behind Sengoku, forming a tall, humanoid figure.

Borsalino stepped out of the blinding golden light, rubbing the stubble on his chin as he muttered,

"Nothing again... just another small outpost. Same as before. Those pirate grunts don't know a thing."

Sengoku's brows furrowed even tighter.

"Sengoku! Any leads?"

Zephyr's voice rang out from the stern, and in just a few flashes, he appeared beside Sengoku.

Sengoku rolled his eyes, clearly annoyed.

"Zephyr, don't you have your own ship? Why are you always hanging around mine?"

Zephyr waved him off impatiently.

"Save it. Just share the intel already, or Garp's going to beat us to the punch."

Sengoku let out a long sigh, then shook his head.

"No new leads... This Kaidou guy is even more cautious and cunning than we expected. Every pirate base we've hit along the way has been nothing more than part of the Beasts Pirates' outer network."

"We still have no idea where his actual base is hidden."

Zephyr's expression darkened at the news.

It had already been seven full days since they'd departed from Marineford.

Seven days might not sound long, but just the journey from Marine Headquarters to the New World had taken them three.

(In this timeline, Vegapunk hasn't yet developed the technology to embed Seastone into the bottoms of Marine warships, which would allow them to cross the Calm Belt freely.)

To reach the New World from Paradise, the first half of the Grand Line, the Marines only had two options: either coat their ships and dive to Fish-Man Island, or apply to the World Government for permission to cross the massive Red Line.

Even so, four days had passed since Sengoku and the others entered the New World, and they'd come up empty-handed.

They had raided seven or eight strongholds tied to the Beasts Pirates, and even cleared out a number of small to mid-sized pirate crews along the way.

But still—no sign, no clue.

Unlike the first half of the Grand Line, which had already been fully charted, large portions of the New World remained shrouded in the "fog of war." Its sea routes were chaotic and insanely complex.

To make matters worse, the New World's extreme weather added yet another layer of difficulty to their operations.

What troubled Sengoku the most was that the closer they got to the waters of Wano Country, the less freedom they had to act. They could no longer conduct operations openly like before. Every move had to be measured, cautious—so as not to provoke hostility or alert Wano to their presence.

Naturally, that made the search even harder.

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Chapter 184 - 184: Volume 2 – Chapter 86: He Must Be Undergoing Merciless Torture

"Isn't there any other way, Sengoku?"

Zephyr's gaze was filled with unease as he stared out at the endless, desolate sea. His voice was heavy with concern.

"You're the 'Resourceful General'... You must have something."

With no leads at all, trying to find a single person in the vast, ever-changing climate of the New World was harder than climbing to the heavens. That's why so many pirate crews, risking total annihilation, still chose to dive 10,000 meters below the surface to pass through the base of the Red Line and enter the New World.

With unclear routes and countless unexplored islands, unless a pirate crew held fixed territory, even the World Government and Marine Headquarters—with all their intelligence networks—struggled to track them in these waters.

"Oh? I thought you said I was brain-dead now?" Sengoku replied, squinting and pouting.

Zephyr's mouth twitched, his smile turning stiff.

Tch, how petty.

Sengoku shook his head.

"Truth is, this search shouldn't have been this difficult."

"Normally, students from the Officer Training Camp are considered key prospects by the Marines. To ensure their safety, they're registered at Headquarters—and they leave behind Vivre Cards."

"With a Vivre Card to guide us, even here in the New World, finding Daren would've been relatively easy."

"But leaving a Vivre Card isn't mandatory. And let's be honest—how many of your students do you think actually left one at HQ?"

His tone was laced with helplessness, and he glanced instinctively at Borsalino standing beside him.

The latter seemed to be completely spaced out, pretending not to notice the look.

Zephyr sighed deeply, pinching the bridge of his nose.

Other students were one thing—most officers still cooperated and followed orders, staying within military discipline.

But expecting guys like Sakazuki, Borsalino, or Dragon to leave behind a Vivre Card that essentially exposed their location?

Those "monster" talents naturally had certain "privileges" that others didn't.

As long as their actions didn't severely impact the Marines or call their loyalty into question, Marine HQ tended to look the other way.

"So now we're stuck going island by island? How long is that going to take?"

Zephyr gritted his teeth, fists clenched tightly.

Sengoku wasn't any less troubled. Hands behind his back, he paced across the deck, brow furrowed in frustration.

Even he couldn't come up with a solid plan in this situation.

"Maybe... we could try looking into the underworld?"

At that moment, Borsalino, who'd been spacing out the entire time, suddenly spoke in his usual slow drawl.

Sengoku and Zephyr both blinked, turning toward him.

"Borsalino, what do you mean?"

Borsalino smiled lightly.

"Just a guess, really... But if the Beasts Pirates' main force is holed up in Kaidou's stronghold, there's no way they can handle all their supplies alone."

"Plus, Kaidou's been fueling wars across the New World these past few years. A lot of war-torn countries are getting weapons he's smuggling. That means he must have some connections with underworld trafficking rings."

"If we can trace that link... maybe we'll find something."

Sengoku and Zephyr's eyes went wide.

"This..."

"Borsalino..."

Without warning, Zephyr clapped Borsalino hard on the shoulder, eyes lighting up.

"You really are a genius!"

He turned to Sengoku with a mocking grin.

"See that, Sengoku? You're always giving Borsalino a hard time, but look who came up with the first solid lead!"

Sengoku's mouth twitched.

Battlefield tactics, strategy, leadership under pressure—those were what earned him the title of "Resourceful General." That was his true strength.

But now wasn't the time to bicker with that loudmouth Zephyr.

With a breakthrough at hand, Sengoku quickly pulled out a nautical chart. Behind his black-rimmed glasses, his eyes gleamed as he scanned the map.

Soon, he locked onto a target.

"This island... it's the nearest transit hub along our current route. Places like this are always crawling with illegal underworld operations."

His voice was low and serious.

"Then what are we waiting for? Let's move!" Zephyr urged.

Just the thought that Daren might be suffering under Kaidou's hand made his heart burn with urgency.

Every hour they wasted, Daren endured another hour of pain—another step closer to danger.

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Physique +0.06

Physique +0.05

Physique +0.04

Physique +0.03...

In the dark, damp prison, Rogers Daren's bloodshot eyes gleamed as he endured the agony of the Mummy Virus. Even through the pain, he could clearly feel his physical stats rising at a rapid pace.

His whole body trembled as he let out a low, guttural growl. Veins bulged across his flushed skin like crawling centipedes.

He clenched his jaw, barely holding back a laugh.

Not far off, Bullet was also steaming, his entire body radiating white heat as if he were about to combust.

"Hehehehe... Feel that? This is a 70% dose of the Mummy Virus! The pain you're feeling now is twice what it was seven days ago!"

The pudgy, suspender-wearing Queen looked down at the two of them sprawled on the ground like dying dogs. His face twisted into a sly, gloating grin as he proudly puffed out his belly—and even broke into a little celebratory jig.

After days of testing, he believed he had finally collected the perfect data.

Queen was convinced that with the results from these experiments, he could further refine and upgrade the viruses he had developed—boosting their toxicity, contagion, and overall destructive impact on the human body.

As for these two? Judging by their near-death states and the overwhelming weakness pouring off of them, they probably couldn't hold out much longer... right?

"Why don't you two think it over one more time..."

Queen lit a cigar with a flourish, taking a deep, satisfied puff.

"If you just agree to join the Beasts Pirates, you won't have to go through this kind of punishment anymore."

Daren, panting heavily, gave a twisted grin.

"Oh? Honestly, this punishment just feels like a mild itch to me."

Bullet sneered, just as defiant.

"If you've got the balls, let us out."

Queen shrugged, snorting with amusement.

"Tch, still running your mouths."

Knock knock knock...

Just then, someone rapped on the iron door of the prison.

A Marine with a horned helmet poked his head in.

"Queen-sama, the transport ship's back. This time it brought a ton of the experimental gear you asked for."

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Chapter 185 - 185: Volume 2 – Chapter 87: Soaring Strength

"Oh? Finally back? Hehehe... the testing equipment and raw materials I've been waiting so long for..."

Hearing the underling's report, the fat on Queen's face trembled slightly as his beady eyes lit up with excitement.

The Beasts Pirates' main base was hidden on an uncharted island unknown to the world.

This barren island was rich in mineral resources. Using them, Kaidou had built several massive weapons factories. With his grasp of military technology, he'd established an enormous arms production line here.

The island was surrounded by unique ocean currents. Without the proper navigational markers and guidance, no outsider's ship could possibly find this place.

This treacherous and isolated environment served as the most critical defense for the Beasts Pirates' base—but it also brought countless inconveniences.

There were no forests or grasslands on the island. And even if there were, pirates wouldn't farm or raise livestock.

After all, the essence of a pirate was plunder.

If they had the patience to grow crops or hunt, they wouldn't have chosen the path of piracy.

As a result, all of the Beasts Pirates' living supplies had to be sourced through underworld connections—acquired through various channels, shipped through multiple transfers, and only delivered here once safety was absolutely guaranteed.

For Queen, who was obsessed with technological research, this had long been a massive headache.

Scientific research was already expensive, and sourcing raw materials and lab equipment was even more of a challenge—they could only be acquired from the underworld.

But the transport ships had extremely limited space, most of which had to be reserved for essentials. So this batch of experimental equipment was something Queen had waited a very long time to receive.

Thinking about this, Queen turned to Daren and Bullet with a grin.

"Did you hear that? The new lab equipment's here. Once I create an even stronger virus, you'll be crying and begging on your knees... pleading for mercy from the great Queen-sama!"

"Muhahahaha!"

Before Daren or Bullet could reply, Queen bounced out of the prison, his massive belly jiggling with every carefree step.

Bang!

The heavy prison doors slammed shut, and silence returned to the dark cell—only the ragged breathing of the two men remained.

One second.

Two seconds.

Three seconds...

The heavy, labored breaths suddenly grew steady.

Daren and Bullet, who had been sprawled on the floor like "dead dogs," slowly sat up from the blood-stained ground and leaned against the wall.

They exchanged a glance, as if the agony they'd just endured had never happened.

"Never thought I, Douglas Bullet, would fall to this point," Bullet muttered, wiping the bloody sweat from his face. He casually tied up his messy golden hair, a bitter smirk tugging at his lips.

Daren chuckled, half-teasing.

"You're not hating it, though, are you?"

Bullet scoffed but didn't deny it.

In the depths of his fierce gaze, a strange light flickered.

He hadn't expected that the powerful virus developed by that fat guy in overalls would have this kind of "side effect."

After enduring the initial agony, once the virus fully entered the body, it triggered a response in the immune system and internal organs, accelerating cellular regeneration and restructuring—boosting physical capabilities and even internal functions.

Of course, as a battle-hardened soldier, Bullet didn't know anything about immune responses or physiological stress. He just vaguely realized that after each injection, if he made it through the worst of it, he came out stronger.

When he first noticed the change, Bullet couldn't believe it.

A method this absurd and effortless could actually enhance strength?

In his experience, every inch of progress meant brutal training and life-or-death battles.

And now? Just a shot, endure the pain, and his body got noticeably stronger?

How was that reasonable?

It wasn't.

Daren noticed the complexity in Bullet's gaze and couldn't help but chuckle to himself, though he felt a tinge of unease.

The viruses Queen had developed—whether it was the Mummy Virus or the Ice Oni Virus—were terrifyingly powerful.

With their infectious nature, these large-scale weapons of mass destruction could be deployed on battlefields or in densely populated areas to annihilate tens of millions without lifting a finger.

In truth, if Queen had used over 50% of the virus's potency on them from the beginning, they likely wouldn't have survived.

But he hadn't.

The triple purpose of "torture," "gathering experimental data," and "recruitment" led Queen to start administering the virus in small doses. The result was that Daren and Bullet gradually developed antibodies within their bodies.

And in the process of resisting the virus, their physical abilities steadily improved—quietly but surely.

With that in mind, Daren instinctively activated his talent to assess his current physical stats.

Physique: 77.112

Strength: 69.339

Speed: 69.591

Fruit: 77.197

Armament Haki: 31.119

Conqueror's Haki: 50.017

Compared to when he was first captured by Kaidou, his Physique had jumped by an outrageous margin—a full 7 points!

As a result, Strength, Speed, and Armament Haki had also seen an increase of around 1 point each, thanks to the overflow effect caused by the surge in raw Physique.

If he hadn't experienced it himself, Daren wouldn't believe that such a drastic improvement could happen in just a few days.

More than 10 points of total stat growth.

The impact this had on Daren's overall combat capability was far from minor.

If this were happening in a Marine training camp, it would've taken at least three to six months of intense drills to achieve such gains.

However, due to the suppressive effects of high-purity Seastone, his Devil Fruit development had come to a complete halt.

"Seems like that fat guy's virus is getting less and less effective on us..."

Bullet rotated his neck and wrists, the heavy Seastone shackles clanking loudly as he moved.

Daren nodded.

"Repeated infections by the same virus cause the body to generate sufficient antibodies, gradually reducing its destructive effects."

At this point, even a full 100% dose of the virus likely wouldn't have much of an impact on them.

That much was clear from the diminishing returns on his stat growth.

At first, even a low dose would grant a "+0.05," sometimes even "+0.09" or "+0.12" boost. But now, even a 70% dose only resulted in minor gains like "+0.03" or "+0.04." It was clear the virus's potency was fading fast.

Bullet nodded slowly, still a bit puzzled.

"But why hasn't that fat guy noticed how much stronger we've gotten? He should be able to tell with Observation Haki."

"Well..."

Daren gave a crooked grin and raised the shackles on his wrists.

"Because of these."

...

Chapter 186 - 186: Volume 2 – Chapter 88: Infiltration... Successful

"This?"

A flicker of doubt crossed Bullet's face. He glanced at the black shackles clamped around the wrists of the dark-haired Marine and frowned.

"Seastone shackles?"

"Exactly," Daren replied, lowering his gaze to the dark, ocean-like shackles. They radiated a chilling, vast presence, and a knowing smirk crept up on his lips.

"Seastone is basically the solid form of the sea—it emits the same kind of energy and has incredible hardness, making it perfect for neutralizing Devil Fruit users."

"When a Devil Fruit user comes into contact with Seastone, it doesn't just cut off their powers—it also severely weakens their physical strength and condition, pushing them into a weakened state."

"Queen might have mastered Observation Haki, but that only senses aura..."

"And thanks to the Seastone, our auras are being suppressed to the bare minimum. Naturally, Queen can't detect the boost in our physical strength."

At this point, Daren's expression turned oddly amused.

"If that fat guy found out that his 'torture' didn't wear us down, but instead quietly made us stronger..."

"...and the only reason he failed to notice it was because he slapped high-purity Seastone shackles on us..."

"He'd probably blow a fuse on the spot."

Bullet twitched at Daren's explanation. He opened his mouth, but in the end, couldn't find any words.

This... is even possible?

"...He really is a genius scientist."

After holding it in for a while, Bullet finally forced the words out.

Daren chuckled, rising to his feet. The heavy shackles clinked crisply as he moved.

He rolled his shoulders and twisted his neck, producing a sound like popping beans.

His movements were smooth and fluid, a far cry from the sluggish, drained state he'd been in when first shackled seven days ago.

"How well have you adapted to the Seastone?"

Bullet let out a savage grin.

"It still feels off—like I'm constantly drained—but it doesn't get in the way of normal movement anymore."

As he spoke, he stood up too, his eyes gleaming with fierce battle intent as he looked at Daren.

Despite losing an arm, he hadn't grown dispirited—instead, the aura he radiated had become even more wild and intense.

And after spending the past few days together in this cell, Bullet had come to a realization.

This so-called "scum" of a Marine actually matched his personality almost perfectly—his obsession with growing stronger, his iron will in the face of hopelessness, his terrifying pain tolerance, and that deep-seated madness buried in his bones.

Kaidou was right. Compared to the rule-abiding Marines, Daren was more like a pirate who lived without limits.

Most importantly, Daren was the only person Bullet had ever seen whose intensity in training and savagery in combat could rival—no, even surpass—his own.

Without realizing it, Bullet had started to accept Daren as a true equal.

Daren grinned, clearly satisfied.

"Good."

Seastone could suppress a Devil Fruit user's powers and restrict their movement.

But physical strength varied from person to person.

Depending on one's physique, the weakening effect of Seastone differed. Some people would collapse the moment they touched it, while others could move just fine even when shackled.

That's the point of Seastone "resistance training."

Both Daren and Bullet had long since trained their bodies to monstrous levels.

And after several days of "injection therapy," their physical resilience had only grown further.

Even under the pressure of high-purity Seastone, they were beginning to regain some combat capability.

It might only be a fraction of their full strength, but it was still far better than lying helpless like dead dogs, waiting to be slaughtered.

"So... what about Armament Haki?"

Bullet slowly raised his hand and suddenly shouted.

"Armament!"

A visible streak of pitch black instantly spread across his palm, but it vanished almost as quickly as it appeared—gone in less than a second.

He grunted and staggered slightly, his dry lips paling.

Daren shook his head at the sight.

"Seastone suppresses our stamina, and using any form of Haki consumes a lot of it."

"Damn it!"

Bullet gritted his teeth and cursed under his breath.

A flicker of thought crossed Daren's eyes.

His condition wasn't much better than Bullet's. Even though his physique had noticeably improved over the past few days, he was still far from being able to break through the Seastone shackles using only brute strength and Armament Haki.

Among all the Devil Fruit users on this sea, the only one who might be capable of that... was probably Kaidou.

Kaidou had been captured by the Marines many times, and thanks to his indestructible body, he'd been sentenced to death forty times.

Beheadings, axes, lightning, fire, poison, alcohol... none of it left so much as a scratch on him. During every execution attempt, the equipment would break down, shackles would shatter...

That's why Kaidou was known as an immortal monster.

Looking back now, it seemed more likely that Kaidou's "indestructible body" had been forged through cruel experiments after being captured by the World Government—perhaps in the hands of someone like Vegapunk.

That thought made Daren clench his fists.

He looked down at his scarred, bloodstained hands—thick with scabs—and a thought slipped into his mind.

How far am I from achieving a body like Kaidou's?

"Hey, stop spacing out. Let's begin."

Bullet's voice snapped him out of it, sounding eager and charged with energy.

"We've only got three days left until our final chance. Time's running out."

His battle-hardened eyes locked on the black-haired Marine before him, his pupils slowly tinged with crimson madness and violence.

Daren grinned, shaking off the clutter in his head.

"Let's go."

The instant the words left his mouth...

The two of them lunged like wild beasts, dragging their Seastone shackles as they clashed head-on!

...

Meanwhile, at the edge of the desolate island—the Beasts Pirates' base—along the coastline...

"Careful with that! Break any of my equipment and I'll butcher the lot of you!"

Queen leapt down from his beast-drawn chariot like a rolling ball, cigar clenched between his teeth, shouting orders.

A pitch-black pirate ship bearing the Jolly Roger of the Beasts Pirates was docked at a crude makeshift port. Pirates in animal skins and horned helmets were carefully unloading heavy crates from the deck.

"What's in this one? Meat? Good, send it to my place."

"And this? Slaves? Male or female? Males go to the factory as labor. Females... hmm, save a few for me."

"These are lab supplies, right? Get them to the lab. All of them!"

Queen barked out orders as he puffed on his cigar, arms folded, strutting around the unloading site.

In less than thirty minutes, everything had been offloaded from the ship.

Satisfied, Queen climbed back onto his chariot and sped off toward his lab, leaving a trail of dust across the brown earth.

The Beasts Pirates crew, tense and exhausted from their days at sea, finally let out a collective sigh of relief. They scattered back to their quarters to rest, leaving only a few low-ranking crew members behind to guard the ship.

But no one noticed...

At the stern of the pirate ship, the wooden wall of the cabin rippled softly, like waves on the surface of the sea.

From the liquid-like wall, a young man with slicked-back hair and a refined suit slowly emerged, his expression cold and unreadable.

"Infiltration... successful."

...

Chapter 187 - 187: Volume 2 – Chapter 89: Sending Greetings

Senor's body was half-submerged in the ship's hull. He quietly pulled out a white handkerchief and wiped the cold sweat from his forehead as he cautiously scanned his surroundings.

Behind him, facing the sea, stretched a seemingly endless expanse of ocean. Waves howled as they crashed against the rocky shore, bursting into white foam.

A few gray-white seabirds glided low over the water, and the setting sun cast the sky and sea in a deep blood-red hue.

I never would've guessed the Beasts Pirates would place their main base in a place like this...

Turning his head, Senor looked toward the island. The reddish-brown earth stretched endlessly inland from the coast, vanishing into the horizon. Far in the distance, tall black chimneys pierced the sky, billowing thick, dark smoke.

From the bow-side port came bursts of raucous laughter. The scent of roasted meat and strong alcohol drifted through the air.

The outer members of the Beasts Pirates who were tasked with watching the ship had already lit a bonfire.

Senor exhaled slowly. His face was drawn, utterly exhausted.

He could really go for a smoke right now.

Three days and nights.

He hadn't slept a wink.

Since departing from Rubeck Island in the North Blue, he'd spent four days infiltrating the New World's underground emperor—the Shipping King, Umit—through Donquixote Family channels.

Relying on his Devil Fruit power, he'd slipped unseen into the lower slave hold of Umit's trading ship during its deal with the Beasts Pirates, never once showing his face.

He'd chosen the slave hold deliberately. Even if his aura accidentally leaked, anyone using Observation Haki would just mistake him for one of the countless slaves.

I have to stay sharp...

Senor took a deep breath, forcing his breathing to stay light and steady.

Back in the North Blue, he might be considered strong—but here in the New World, that meant little.

Even a regular officer in the Beasts Pirates could easily wipe him out.

His only real advantage... was his Devil Fruit ability.

With that thought, Senor quickly surveyed the surroundings once more.

So... where would the young master's esteemed godfather be held?

He quickly locked onto a target direction, and his body once again melted into the wooden hull of the ship—like a droplet vanishing into the sea.

...

At the port.

Below the pirate ship moored in the dockyard, a dozen or so pirates in animal pelts were sprawled out, drinking and devouring meat, loudly laughing and humming crude songs.

"This time, Queen-sama really hit the jackpot..."

"Oh? Something as important as the supply run, and King-sama didn't handle it himself? Wasn't he always the one in charge?"

"Can't be helped. Sounds like there's some new development in Wano, so Kaidou-sama left the island with King-sama."

"No wonder Queen-sama's in such high spirits."

"What's it matter to us? That kind of stuff is way above our heads."

"You got that right. Come on, drink!"

"Hey, wait... felt like something weird just flashed by..."

"Hahahaha! You're wasted! If you can't hold your booze, go sit with the kids."

"..."

...

Prison.

Bang!!

Two fists bound by Seastone shackles slammed into each other's faces at the same time. Daren and Bullet staggered backward, crashing into the stone walls of the prison and sending chunks of rubble flying.

Their lips instantly swelled, blood trickling from the corners of their mouths.

Daren wiped the blood away with the back of his hand, panting with a grin.

"Hell of a punch."

Bullet, equally out of breath, gave a savage grin.

"You're not so bad yourself."

They locked eyes, and a sharp gleam flashed between them like a bolt of lightning.

They stepped forward in unison.

Crack!

Their right feet hit the floor at the same time, leaving shallow craters. Their fists, thrown with full force, struck each other's cheeks again almost simultaneously.

Sweat and blood splattered into the air.

In that narrow cell, the two figures moved like wild beasts in a storm, unleashing an onslaught of brutal, close-quarters combat—the highest level of hand-to-hand technique found anywhere across the seas!

Daren, hailing from the North Blue, had fought his way up from the bottom ranks of the military. He'd spent years trading blows in close combat with Sakazuki, and after joining the training camp, refined his techniques further under Zephyr's guidance. His fighting style was ruthless and unrelenting.

Bullet had been clearing minefields since the age of eight. Calling his life a path paved in blood wouldn't be an exaggeration. He had no set style—only the purest, most lethal killing techniques. Every move was direct, efficient, and deadly.

And through the last few days of intense "sparring sessions," both men had begun to absorb elements of the other's combat style, each benefiting immensely.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

Fists collided like thunder. Kicks sliced through the air like gales.

Suddenly—

Both Daren and Bullet's eyes narrowed at once, sensing something off. Without hesitation, they launched attacks toward the side wall of the cell.

A hammering punch.

A razor-sharp whip kick.

"Wait!!"

A panicked voice suddenly cried out from the rippling wall.

Boom!!

The wall exploded into debris and dirt. From within it, a figure embedded in the stone was violently ejected.

Daren's hand shot forward like an iron claw, seizing the intruder by the neck and yanking him out of the wall, lifting him high into the air.

Dust clouded the cell.

"Someone actually made it through the mountain and into this prison... Who the hell are you?"

Bullet narrowed his eyes, menace gleaming as he spoke with a cold sneer.

"I... I'm..."

Senor choked out the words. The strength gripping his throat wasn't overwhelming, but the Seastone shackles on their wrists had brushed against his body. The moment it did, a crushing sense of weakness washed over him like a tidal wave.

As the dust settled, Daren finally got a clear look at the suited young man before him—and the image instantly matched a figure in his memory.

"I know who you are."

He released his grip.

"Nice to meet you, Senor," Daren said with a calm smile.

Senor's face turned pale as his breathing grew ragged. His pupils shrank in shock.

How did he know my name? We've never met—and I've only been part of the Donquixote Family for half a month!

Could it be...

A chilling thought gripped him.

There's a spy... planted by Daren within the Donquixote Family!?

A shiver ran through his body, but he didn't dare dwell on it.

He glanced at Daren and Bullet—bloodied, ferocious, still radiating a pressure that felt suffocating, even while bound in Seastone shackles.

How is that even possible...?

"Daren, who's this guy?"

Bullet eyed Senor with visible hostility.

Senor took a deep breath, forcing himself to stay calm.

He looked at the black-haired Marine in front of him, then slowly dropped to one knee.

"Daren-sama, I'm a member of the Donquixote Family—Senor."

Lowering his head, he said solemnly,

"Young master Doflamingo-sama sent me... to deliver his sincerest regards."

Chapter 188 - 188: Volume 2 – Chapter 90: You've Worked Hard

"Young master Doflamingo-sama sent me to deliver his sincerest regards."

Senor knelt on one knee, speaking in a deep voice.

Before Daren could respond, Bullet raised an eyebrow.

"Doflamigo? Never heard of him..."

He shot Daren a questioning look.

"Hey, Daren, this guy isn't from the Beasts Pirates, is he? Putting on a whole act just to trick us..."

His gaze toward Senor grew increasingly hostile, murderous intent leaking out.

A cold, brutal pressure surged forth. Senor felt like his skin was being pricked with needles, a chill creeping up his spine as his muscles instinctively tensed. He had never encountered a war monster like Bullet in the North Blue.

"Bullet, ease up on the killing intent."

Daren gave a faint smile as he spoke calmly.

"Doflamigo is my godson."

"And besides..."

His smile twisted slightly, tone laced with mockery.

"Do you really think a bunch of muscleheads like the Beasts Pirates could come up with something this elaborate?"

Bullet froze.

Faces of the Beasts Pirates he'd seen before flashed through his mind... He nodded in agreement.

After a pause, he shot Senor a warning glance, then turned and walked to the far side of the room, slowly sitting down against the wall.

As the suffocating aura—like that of a violent beast stalking its prey—gradually faded, Senor couldn't help but let out a breath of relief.

These two men were terrifying.

And that was with Seastone shackles on.

Senor couldn't even imagine how overwhelming their presence would be if those shackles were removed.

"Get up, Senor," Daren said calmly.

He helped Senor to his feet and straightened his wrinkled collar.

"It's clear you've been through a lot and traveled a long way to reach me..."

He patted him on the shoulder, his smile fading as he let out a sigh and spoke with sincere warmth.

"...You've worked hard."

Senor froze.

Looking at the solemn, sincere expression on the black-haired young man before him, he felt momentarily dazed.

This man—wounded, imprisoned in the Beasts Pirates' stronghold, his life constantly in danger—still greeted him, upon learning his identity, with heartfelt appreciation.

In that instant, Senor felt that every hardship and risk he'd faced for this mission had been worth it.

Clenching his fists, he quietly suppressed the surge of emotion in his chest and shook his head.

"I'm fine, Daren-sama."

Daren smiled.

He had a good impression of Senor.

In the original storyline, despite everyone's ridicule, Senor gave up his favorite luxury suits and put on a ridiculous, ugly baby outfit—just to make his comatose wife smile again.

That was a kind of romance unique to men.

Gutsy, and undeniably cool.

And in truth, Daren was deeply impressed by Senor's capability.

After several days of observation, Daren had a rough sense of how dangerous and well-hidden this Beasts Pirates base was. If it weren't, the Marines would have found it already.

For someone from the North Blue like Senor to make it all the way here through the Grand Line... he had no doubt the man had endured incredible hardship.

"Daren-sama, the young master ordered me to come here this time..."

Senor cautiously observed the young master's godfather, lowering his voice as he began to speak, only to be cut off by a wave of Daren's hand.

"Doffy was thoughtful... but what I'm more curious about is how you managed to get here."

Senor paused, then answered truthfully.

"The Donquixote Family has trade ties with the underworld's emperor, 'Shipping King' Umit. Through intelligence from our agents embedded in Umit's trade fleet, we learned that you had been captured by Kaidou of the Beasts during a mission..."

"And Umit, the 'Shipping King', happens to be one of the Beasts Pirates' supply channels."

"Using that connection, I managed to infiltrate Umit's fleet. During a cargo transfer, I used my Devil Fruit powers to hide aboard one of the Beasts Pirates' ships. That's how I finally arrived here."

"I see..." Daren fell silent for a moment, then asked, "Do you know the exact location of this prison?"

Senor shook his head, his expression serious.

"I'm sorry, Daren-sama."

"While on the pirate ship, I didn't dare show myself for fear of exposing our trail, so I couldn't determine the exact route."

"All I know is that this prison is located beneath a massive mountain. Unless you blast through the entire mountain, the only exit is the main gate, which is heavily guarded."

"...The island itself is surrounded by countless tangled sea currents, and the terrain is extremely complex. There are several large-scale arms factories here as well, likely part of Kaidou of the Beasts' weapons production line."

"As for the island's precise location... judging by the ship's speed, direction, and travel time, I believe this Beasts Pirates base—the island we're on—should be somewhere in the waters near Wano Country."

Such an impressive man...

Listening to Senor's calm and detailed analysis, Daren couldn't help but admire him internally.

Even Bullet, who usually looked down on everyone, was visibly impressed. He grinned and said straightforwardly,

"Hey, Senor, right? You're damn good. I like you..."

"Forget about that Doffy guy. Come work with me instead."

Senor glanced at him but said nothing.

Naturally, he had looked into Douglas Bullet's reputation on his way here.

This monster of a man—mad as a demon—had wiped out an entire country single-handedly.

In fact, Daren-sama's original mission had been to deal with this very guy.

And yet, from what he was seeing now, the relationship between Daren-sama and Bullet... seemed surprisingly friendly?

"Don't joke around, Bullet. I thought you believed in the 'power of being alone'?"

Daren looked at him with a faint smirk.

Bullet scoffed.

"I don't need him to fight. I just want him as my assistant."

Chapter 189 - 189: Volume 2 – Chapter 91: That Kid Doffy Has Grown Up

"That's a shame. Senor is a loyal subordinate of my godson Doffy, which means he's loyal to me too."

Daren spoke to Bullet with a half-smile.

"You're out of luck."

Bullet glanced at Daren, then at the silent Senor, clicking his tongue in annoyance.

"Save that line for when you actually manage to escape alive."

Daren shrugged and turned his gaze to Senor.

"So, Senor... tell me, what's Doffy's plan to get me out of here?"

Staying here didn't pose much threat to his life, and he could keep enjoying "Queen-sensei's" guidance. After all, Luffy's past experience served as a warning.

But Daren hated being at someone else's mercy.

More importantly, as his physique strengthened and his internal organs became more resilient, his resistance to viruses was steadily increasing.

At this point, even if Queen injected a high dose of virus into him, the side effects had become barely noticeable.

Senor didn't respond immediately. Instead, he shot Bullet a cautious, sidelong glance.

Seeing that, Bullet rolled his eyes in irritation.

"What's your problem? This cell isn't exactly spacious. Say it or don't. What, you think I can plug my ears!?"

He waved his only remaining arm, the Seastone shackles clanking loudly.

"Don't forget, I've only got one arm—I can't cover both ears!"

Still holding a grudge over losing that arm to my Railgun, huh... Daren looked at Bullet's sharp-eyed, gruff demeanor and couldn't help but chuckle.

That battlefield-born ferocity was so intense, it was easy to forget this guy was just a kid, no older than fifteen or sixteen.

"Go on, Senor. At least for now, this one-armed guy and I are allies."

Daren said with a grin.

Allies?

Senor blinked in surprise.

Daren-sama was a Marine, a rising star in the Navy who had garnered a lot of attention... and yet he was claiming to be allied with Douglas Bullet, the "Nation-Destroying Pirate"?

But then again, the man before him was also the godfather of the North Blue's underworld emperor. That thought made it easier for Senor to accept the situation.

He took a moment to gather his thoughts, then spoke seriously.

"Daren-sama, young master Doflamingo knows I don't have the strength to get you out from under Kaidou of the Beasts on my own. So he gave me two tasks."

Oh?

Daren raised an eyebrow, his interest clearly piqued.

Doflamingo's performance during the Dressrosa arc hadn't been great—honestly, kind of a mess. Not only did he toss the real Mera Mera no Mi into the coliseum, but he let Trafalgar Law slip away more than once, pushed Admiral Fujitora to turn against him, and in the end got completely overturned by Luffy.

But in truth, the guy's cunning and strategic thinking were among the best in the pirate world.

From seizing control of the North Blue, to gradually dominating the underworld's resources, threatening the World Government by leveraging the Heavenly Tribute to gain the title of Shichibukai, and stealing power in Dressrosa...

All of it, while undeniably connected to his lineage as a Celestial Dragon, still showcased his exceptional capabilities.

"Go on."

Daren said calmly.

Senor spoke in a low voice.

"First, use my Devil Fruit ability to locate your position. If possible, coordinate with you to aid in your escape... The young master said his godfather would never just sit around and wait to die."

Daren smiled.

That brat sent someone to rescue me because he doesn't want me dying by someone else's hand.

He wants to be the one to kill me.

Daren could see right through Doflamingo's petty ambition.

A self-absorbed, prideful kid born of the "bloodline of the gods" wouldn't tolerate someone else constantly standing above him.

But it was precisely that arrogance and pride that fueled his burning desire to take Daren's life.

Maybe one day, if Doflamingo really did get the chance to kill him—and succeeded—his Conqueror's Haki would break through to an entirely new level.

"And the second thing?"

Daren didn't comment on the first plan and went straight to the point.

Senor looked up, eyes locked onto Daren, and said gravely,

"Notify the Marines."

At that, Bullet frowned.

A satisfied smile appeared on Daren's face.

So, that brat Doffy's grown up after all...

If it weren't for me, with that arrogant personality of his, he'd never have thought to use the Marines to his advantage.

"Before I left the North Blue, I received intel through covert channels—Marine Headquarters has already dispatched enough combat power to come rescue you."

Senor instinctively reached for a cigarette but held himself back.

"...The lineup includes Marine Admiral Sengoku the 'Buddha', former Admiral 'Black Arm' Zephyr, Vice Admiral 'Hero' Garp, and Rear Admiral Borsalino, known as the 'Monster'..."

At this, Bullet couldn't hold back anymore.

"Oi, oi, oi, are you serious!?"

He sprang forward, eyes wide and twitching, staring at Daren in disbelief.

"The Marines' three legendary powerhouses... all deployed just to save you!?"

Sengoku, Garp, Zephyr—these names echoed like thunder across the seas.

Each one was a force strong enough to send countless infamous pirates running scared.

They were the pillars of world justice.

Normally, Sengoku, as the sole Admiral, would be stationed at Marineford.

Zephyr had long since retired from his position and devoted himself to training new recruits.

And Garp? Everyone knew his one obsession was chasing Gol D. Roger.

Yet now, these three legends—each with crucial responsibilities—had all mobilized just to rescue a single Marine Commodore?

If he hadn't heard it himself, Bullet wouldn't have believed it.

"Daren... don't tell me you're a Celestial Dragon or something?"

Daren scoffed.

"Besides a shared taste for money, women, power, and status, I've got nothing in common with those pig-headed, self-proclaimed 'gods'."

He turned back to Senor with a grin.

"So, you left behind your Vivre Card, didn't you?"

Senor's pupils shrank.

He took a deep breath to steady himself, then reached into his suit and pulled out a crumpled slip of paper, handing it to Daren.

"Yes, Daren-sama."

"This is half of my Vivre Card. I gave the other half to an informant in the Underworld—someone we bought out from the Donquixote Family."

"If everything went according to plan, the other half should already be in the Marines' hands."

...

Chapter 190 - 190: Volume 2 – Chapter 92: This Is Part of the Job

New World, a transfer island along one of the shipping routes.

The city buzzed with life, the streets packed with traffic and the noise of a crowd in constant motion. Shops lined both sides of the busy roads, their displays overflowing with all sorts of goods. Merchants hurried by, and in the shadowy alleys, curses were muttered under breath.

Ships from all over the world came and went at the harbor. Sailors fought over docking space, sails flapped like waves in the wind, and the air rang with shouting voices.

Zephyr, Sengoku, and Borsalino, dressed in civilian clothes, walked down the cobbled streets. All three wore hats and trench coats, their bodies and most of their faces concealed.

"Are you sure this is the right place, Sengoku?"

Zephyr scanned their surroundings with caution, lowering his voice.

Just then, a rough-looking group passed by on the other side of the street, bursting into loud, unrestrained laughter. Swords hung from their waists, and their fierce expressions marked them clearly.

"Pirates!"

Zephyr's eyes went wide, and he was about to charge forward, but Sengoku grabbed his arm and hissed through gritted teeth,

"Let it go, Zephyr—keep it low profile! Don't forget why we're here!"

Zephyr watched the pirates disappear down the road, muttering bitterly under his breath.

"Then hurry up and lead the way!"

When Sengoku didn't move, just stood there frozen, Zephyr suddenly narrowed his eyes.

"Wait... Don't tell me you don't know where it is?"

Sengoku's face twitched. Then, all of a sudden, his face turned red.

"I've never been to a place like that! How would I know where it is!?"

"And what, you have? If you're so familiar with it, why don't you lead the way!"

Zephyr immediately clammed up, stumbling over his words.

He hadn't been there either.

"Let me handle it..."

Borsalino, who'd been watching the whole exchange with an amused smirk, finally spoke up with a lazy grin.

Sengoku and Zephyr stared at him in surprise.

They watched as Borsalino casually strolled off and stopped in front of a man wearing a flashy gem-studded ring. Looming over him, he asked casually,

"Say... where's the best geisha house around here?"

"Who the hell are you!?"

The man snapped instinctively after being grabbed.

He was overweight, his expensive suit stretched taut like a balloon. But the moment he saw the tall figure towering over him, he was overwhelmed by a suffocating pressure that chilled him to the bone. Cold sweat broke out across his back.

Especially the face of the man in front of him—obscured in shadow, with that creepy, sidelong stare—it was enough to make anyone feel uneasy.

"S-Sir... the best geisha house is over there,"

The fat man stammered, his face twitching as he pointed in a direction.

"A-A couple minutes' walk that way."

Only then did Borsalino release his grip and smile, even helping the man tidy up his wrinkled collar.

"Much appreciated..."

How polite... The fat merchant barely finished the thought before turning and fleeing for his life.

"All sorted."

Borsalino turned back to the stunned Sengoku and Zephyr with a grin.

...

Two minutes later.

In front of a traditional Japanese-style building.

Sengoku and Zephyr stood stiffly, faces stiff with discomfort, staring up at the elegant, old-fashioned structure that looked more like a miniature palace than a brothel. Every muscle in their bodies tensed up.

"Welcome, honored guests."

A young woman in a black and red cheongsam, her figure graceful and alluring, bowed deeply with a warm smile. The motion made the snowy curve of her chest even more tempting.

Soft, seductive music drifted from inside. The air was thick with the rich scent of alcohol, food, and heavy perfume. The dim lighting gave the place a hazy, indulgent feel.

Sengoku and Zephyr both twitched at the corners of their mouths.

They exchanged a glance.

Zephyr's eye twitched.

"Hey, Sengoku... we're really going into a place like this?"

Sengoku didn't look much better. His face had darkened.

"If we're talking about intel and connections in the underworld, places like this are usually our best bet."

He let out a heavy sigh, his tone serious.

"Just bear with it. Don't forget, our mission is to rescue Daren. As long as we can get him out, a little sacrifice on our end isn't worth fussing over."

"And we're just here to gather information. We're not even drinking—no need to be so tense."

Thinking about his top student still stuck in the depths of danger, Zephyr's expression turned grim.

He took a deep breath and clenched his fists, like he was steeling himself for battle.

"Well... I guess there's no choice."

Borsalino scratched his head in confusion as he watched the two of them struggle.

Seriously? This is a lively geisha hall, not an execution site. What's with the doom-and-gloom?

Shaking his head, he stepped forward, lit a cigarette, and casually wrapped an arm around the waist of the cheongsam-clad hostess, smiling smoothly.

"Big room. Upstairs."

Then, as if remembering something, he turned to the dumbfounded Sengoku and Zephyr with a grin.

"Oh, and don't forget to give a good butt squeeze on the way up—otherwise you'll look totally out of place."

Squeeze... a butt?

Sengoku and Zephyr froze, faces blank with disbelief. Then, as if they'd just been punched in the gut, they groaned, covered their faces, and followed behind him like reluctant shadows.

...

Three minutes later.

"Hahahaha! Come on, don't stop now!"

In an extravagant private room, Sengoku puffed on a gold-trimmed cigar, face flushed and beaming with joy as he raised his drink high.

"Keep the music going! Keep the dancing!"

On stage, graceful dancers spun elegantly. On either side, heavily made-up geishas in ornate kimonos strummed delicate notes on the guzheng and koto.

"Come on, Zephyr, drink! Old man Kong gave us an operational budget, didn't he? So... this counts as part of the mission!"

He threw an arm around Zephyr, who sat in the corner of the room clearly on edge.

Zephyr gritted his teeth.

"Sengoku, don't forget why we're here!"

He then whipped his head toward Borsalino, shouting,

"And you! Why the hell are you so familiar with this kind of place!?"

Still puffing on his cigar, Borsalino raised both hands in a mock surrender, putting on an innocent look.

"Back in the North Blue, Commander Tokikake used to bring me here all the time..."

Zephyr: ...

He stared at Borsalino's pervy-looking face, recalled Tokikake's notoriously sloppy personality, and for a brief moment... he almost felt sorry for the poor geisha entertaining those two.