

One Piece 241

Chapter 241 - 241: Volume 2 – Chapter 143: Return to the North Blue

"Boss, a beer and a cherry pie."

Daren walked into a small tavern, casually picked a seat, and called out to the man behind the bar.

The place was dimly lit. Many of the patrons, still reeking of blood, were tearing into their meat with gusto. But the moment they saw Daren, the room quieted noticeably. A few of the more timid ones even paled and slipped out, trying not to draw attention.

The arrival of a Marine Commodore instantly shifted the atmosphere into something tense and strange.

The first half of the Grand Line wasn't exactly a powerhouse, and any pirate who had made it from the four seas to Jaya was no fool. A Commodore from Marine Headquarters might not be a big deal in the New World, but here in Paradise, he could practically walk on water.

"Hey... that's really him, right?"

"Yeah, no doubt about it..."

"That height, that face..."

"He's the one who took down Byrnni World, the 'World Destroyer'!"

"Rogers Daren, the 'King of the North Blue'!"

"Shit... what's someone like him doing in Mock Town?"

"You think he's here to wipe us all out?"

Whispers spread like wildfire. Every gaze in the tavern turned to Daren, filled with fear and awe.

Ignoring them, Daren grabbed his frothy beer, downed a gulp, then bit into the freshly baked cherry pie.

Not amazing, but at least edible.

As he refueled, his mind started turning.

The Goro Goro no Mi—touted as the "invincible" Logia-type Devil Fruit—was known from historical records to grant godlike power to every user it had ever had. In reality, it absolutely lived up to its title as the strongest Logia.

Lightning-speed teleportation. Cataclysmic destructive power. Innate Logia intangibility...

On top of that, it greatly enhanced Mantra—also known as Observation Haki—boosting it to the point where it could cover an entire island.

Such a terrifyingly well-rounded ability made the Goro Goro no Mi one of the most coveted Devil Fruits among countless transmigrators.

In the original storyline, the Goro Goro no Mi was wielded by Enel, the arrogant man who ruled over Sky Island and called himself "God." But at this point in time, Enel was probably just a little brat not even ten years old yet. The chances of him having already eaten the Goro Goro no Mi were slim.

Which meant that the Goro Goro no Mi was most likely still lying somewhere on Sky Island.

Since he had already eaten the Jiki Jiki no Mi, Daren couldn't possess another Devil Fruit. It was a bit of a shame, but he had no regrets. If he hadn't eaten the Jiki Jiki no Mi back then, he might not have survived this long.

Besides, the Jiki Jiki no Mi had already brought him plenty of unexpected advantages. As long as he kept developing it, its potential wouldn't be any less than the Goro Goro no Mi—maybe even greater.

Still, a power as overwhelming as the Goro Goro no Mi couldn't be left in just anyone's hands. It had to be entrusted to someone with real potential—someone he could trust.

Fortunately, Daren already had the perfect candidate in mind.

And beyond the Goro Goro no Mi, there was another immense treasure waiting for him on Sky Island—Shandora.

An entire city made of gold!

How much was Shandora's treasure worth?

Daren didn't know the exact figure. But even the tiny amount the Straw Hat Pirates had taken from Shandora had sold for 200 million Belly.

Sure, that was partly due to inflation and currency devaluation after the Great Pirate Era began, but the number was still staggering.

After a quick calculation, Daren arrived at a thrilling conclusion—if he could strip Shandora of all its gold, the city's reserves could easily expand the North Blue Fleet to more than ten times its current size!

Hundreds of refitted heavy warships, equipped with cutting-edge tech, heavy artillery, and a 30,000-strong elite combat fleet...

Just imagining it got his blood pumping.

The North Blue Fleet was still small for now. But because of all the investment in advanced tech and weaponry, plus soldier salaries, ship refits, and maintenance, even with Daren raking in money nonstop in the North Blue, he was just barely managing to break even.

But if he got his hands on all of Shandora's gold...

He wouldn't have to worry about military funding for the next five years—at the very least!

With such a massive gold reserve backing him, Daren could push the North Blue Fleet even further, rolling out plans that didn't exist in this world but had once existed in reality!

His eyes lit up at the thought.

What, the Marine Headquarters is short on funding too?

Well, that's Fleet Admiral Kong and Admiral Sengoku's problem.

The North Blue Fleet's payroll doesn't come from the headquarters anyway.

...

Three days later.

North Blue.

321 Branch.

Base Commander's Office.

"Are the gifts ready?"

Momonga, draped in a Marine Captain's cloak, looked up from a mountain of paperwork, his expression stern.

The young Marine nodded respectfully.

"Yes, everything is ready. Two hundred million Belly in gold and silver, along with a variety of high-end tobacco and liquor. The total value exceeds 300 million Belly. It's all been arranged and will be escorted directly to Rubeck Island by a warship."

He hesitated for a moment, then cautiously asked,

"But Admiral Momonga, the Donquixote family is just an underground force in the North Blue. Do we really need to show them this much respect?"

Momonga shot him a flat glance, then suddenly asked a seemingly unrelated question.

"Tell me, how does the North Blue Fleet treat you?"

The soldier blinked, then quickly straightened and answered honestly,

"Very well..."

"Our pay is more than triple the standard at headquarters, with generous bonuses and incentives. It's enough to provide a comfortable life for any Marine and his family."

"On top of that, we're given the best meals, the most advanced weapons, and the finest instructors. Honestly, there's no other military force on this sea offering anything close to this kind of treatment."

Momonga nodded slightly, then asked,

"Do you know why the North Blue Fleet gives you such generous treatment?"

The young Marine immediately snapped to attention and saluted.

"To carry out orders from our superiors without question!"

He froze mid-sentence, then seemed to realize something. His face flushed red as he stammered,

"Apologies, Admiral Momonga. I spoke out of turn."

Momonga gave a faint smile.

"There's a lot in this sea that doesn't follow reason. Just like I once followed Admiral Daren's orders without hesitation... For a soldier, the most important thing isn't thinking—it's absolute execution."

"Understood! Thank you for the guidance, Admiral Momonga!"

The young Marine stood tall again and saluted once more.

"Ah, right, Admiral..."

He picked up a document and added,

"For the next three days, we have three charity banquets, two card games, and an auction scheduled... Will you be attending?"

Momonga waved his hand dismissively.

"Decline all of them for me."

This time, the young Marine knew better than to ask further. He simply nodded and left the room.

"Sigh..."

As the office door slowly closed, Momonga leaned back in his chair, looking utterly drained.

He lit a cigar, took a long drag, then rubbed his temples.

"This North Blue Admiral position... It's a bigger headache than I ever imagined," he muttered to himself.

Then a voice rang out, laced with amusement.

"Oh? Funny you say that. Tokikake was practically on his knees begging me to let him transfer to North Blue and be your deputy."

Startled by the sudden voice, Momonga's expression sharpened as his hand instinctively went to the hilt of his sword.

But when he turned around, his face broke into a look of surprise and joy.

"Daren?"

Chapter 242 - 242: Volume 2 – Chapter 144: Momonga's Dilemma

"Why did you come back?"

Seeing the Commodore of the Marines sitting on the sofa next to him with his legs crossed, Momonga's alert and cold expression instantly disappeared, replaced by surprise.

He let go of the knife handle and said,

"Didn't you just return to headquarters?"

Daren smiled and said,

"What's wrong, aren't you happy to see me back in the North Blue?"

He unceremoniously opened the cigar box on the coffee table and took out a cigar.

With a practiced motion, he cut off the end with a cigar cutter, put it in his mouth, lit it, took a deep puff, and closed his eyes in satisfaction.

"Mm, cigars from the North Blue are still the best."

Momonga said unhappily,

"I thought you were still recovering from your injuries at headquarters..."

He suddenly looked at Daren suspiciously and asked, somewhat puzzled,

"You don't look well. You seem to have lost weight. Are your injuries still not healed?"

Daren's mouth twitched involuntarily, but he didn't respond and changed the subject.

"How is the situation in North Blue lately?"

When it came to serious matters, Momonga's expression became serious again and he said in a deep voice,

"It's still the same as when you left, no major changes."

"Although you left North Blue, your reputation still strikes fear into the hearts of those foolish Nobles and politicians."

"Especially after the news of you becoming the 'Top of the class' at the training camp and destroying the Beasts Pirates' headquarters began to spread over the past two days, I've been extremely busy with social engagements..."

At this point, Momonga paused, a look of helplessness on his face.

"Those fat bastards are like sharks smelling blood, going crazy to give me money and gifts, inviting me to all kinds of drinking parties, card games, and banquets, constantly trying to find out information about you..."

"They're so obsequious, they'd even send their wives and daughters to my bed."

Daren looked at Momonga, who was full of bitterness and sighing, and couldn't help but tease him maliciously,

"That life sounds pretty good..."

"Good my ass!"

Momonga cursed angrily and said with grief and indignation,

"This is not a life for a human being!"

He banged on the desk in righteous indignation.

"I just want to be a proper navy officer!

I want to hone my skills, fight pirates, maintain law and order, and uphold justice!"

"But they use money to corrupt my will and women to destroy my body! They use wine and cigarettes to test the justice of their officers!"

"Bunch of damn bastards!"

"Don't you like it?"

Daren asked suddenly, with a smirk.

Momonga's face turned red, and he opened his mouth but couldn't say anything.

"It's... just that..."

"Hahahaha!"

Daren couldn't help but laugh loudly.

"It's important to have a good work-life balance... But you've just started your job, so it's normal to have such doubts."

He blew a smoke ring from his mouth and said with a tone of someone who had been there before, smiling,

"Those so-called social engagements, you can go if you want to, and if you don't want to, just refuse. There's no need to spare their feelings."

"...In the end, it's strength that matters in this sea."

Momonga nodded.

Daren was right, that was their plan from the beginning.

Although Daren had left the North Blue, the more trouble he caused in the Grand Line, the higher he would climb in the Marines, and the more stable the situation in the North Blue would become.

"As for the underworld, the Donquixote family has already taken control of all the criminal organizations in the North Blue, and they're developing quite well... They've even expanded part of their business into the Grand Line and the New World,"

Momonga continued.

According to their cooperation agreement, a portion of the profits earned by the Donquixote family had to be regularly paid to the North Blue Fleet.

On the North Blue Navy's books, this income was labeled as a "franchise fee."

By hiring high-paid financial experts to handle the accounting, these massive and otherwise suspicious "earnings" had been smoothly turned into legal income within the North Blue's jurisdiction. Even Marine Headquarters couldn't find any fault with it.

"You really have a sharp eye. Doflamingo's shown a maturity and skill that doesn't match his age at all—not just in strength and leadership, but also in business sense and negotiation."

Momonga looked at Daren with a hint of admiration.

Sometimes, he genuinely didn't understand how Daren's mind worked.

Before Doflamingo appeared, there had been a few powerful mafia families in the North Blue.

Their leaders were all quite capable. If Daren had given the word back then, those families absolutely could have unified the underworld.

But Daren never approved any of them.

Not until Doflamingo showed up.

Momonga had to admit, back then, he thought Daren's decision to hand over the North Blue underworld to Doflamingo was a gamble.

After all, on the surface, Doflamingo was just a twelve- or thirteen-year-old brat.

At that age, most kids were still playing in the dirt.

Momonga, thinking rationally, didn't believe a child like that could manage the entire criminal network of a sea.

But out of trust for Daren, he never voiced his doubts. He simply obeyed the order without question.

Looking back now, Daren's foresight was honestly terrifying.

"Hm, that kid Doffy's not bad. I guess all the effort I put into raising him wasn't wasted."

Daren smiled.

"I was able to get out of trouble this time thanks to the officer he sent."

"But Momonga..."

He glanced at him.

"You've started to feel the pressure, haven't you?"

Hearing that, Momonga's eyes narrowed slightly. He pressed his lips together.

After a long silence, he finally nodded, somewhat unwillingly, and let out a sigh.

"He's growing way too fast."

Yes—Doflamingo's growth was far too rapid.

So fast that even Momonga had begun to feel a creeping sense of dread.

Especially the last time he led a team to Rubeck Island for negotiations.

That blond kid had just sat there calmly on the sofa, but to Momonga, it felt like he was being watched by a wild, bloodthirsty beast.

Momonga wasn't too concerned about the Donquixote family's overall growth.

No matter how strong a mafia was, it couldn't stand against the firepower of the North Blue Fleet.

But Doflamingo himself... was another story.

With his exceptional talent and limitless potential, it felt like every time they met, his strength had advanced in leaps and bounds.

That kind of growth filled Momonga with deep unease.

That's why, during the last negotiation, he'd brought an entire fleet to completely surround Rubeck Island—ready to launch a miniature "Buster Call" and level the Donquixote family if things went south.

Because if something happened to Daren in the New World...

Momonga didn't have enough confidence that he alone could keep Doflamingo in check.

Naturally, Daren had sensed his concern.

"That's also why I came back," he said with a smile.

Chapter 243 - 243: Volume 2 – Chapter 145: Like Eating Shit

Daren had long seen through Momonga's predicament.

He understood Doflamingo's talent better than anyone else.

At just eight years old, he had awakened Conqueror's Haki.

The seemingly underwhelming Ito Ito no Mi had been pushed by him into a terrifying power that combined attack, control, self-healing, cloning, and large-scale annihilation.

That kind of innate potential—looking across the entire world of pirates—was one of a kind.

Add to that his cold-blooded, ruthless, and violent personality, and there really weren't many people on this sea who could compare.

Momonga was no slouch either. In the original timeline, he was an elite Vice Admiral at headquarters, a true pillar of justice, handling all kinds of high-difficulty missions.

But compared to someone like Doflamingo—a born king of darkness—he still came up a bit short.

Most importantly, without early access to Haki, Devil Fruit users held an overwhelming advantage in the early stages of growth.

Right now, maybe Momonga could barely keep Doflamingo in check with his sharp swordsmanship and rich combat experience. But as time went on, the pressure would only mount—and eventually, he'd be surpassed.

That was a hard truth no one could deny.

As for how to solve the problem, the solution was simple in theory:

Send Momonga to the officer training camp, give him a buffer period, and let him quickly master Rokushiki and Haki to grow stronger.

But there were two big problems with that.

First, the next session of the elite officer training camp was still a long way off—Momonga couldn't wait that long.

Second, while his talent might let him grasp Rokushiki fairly quickly, there was no guarantee he'd succeed with Haki.

Which meant there was only one remaining solution.

"I brought you a gift from the Grand Line."

Facing Momonga's confused look, Daren smiled.

"A gift that'll transform you—a power leap straight into epic territory."

"A gift?"

A flicker of curiosity passed through Momonga's eyes.

"What is it?"

Daren gestured, and a smooth, metallic box floated in through the window on a steady path.

"A Devil Fruit."

As faint blue arcs of electricity danced between Daren's fingers, the metal box began to ripple, then split open from the center, revealing what was inside.

The moment he saw it, Momonga's eyes narrowed sharply.

He stared fixedly at the strange fruit resting in the box, its aura bizarre, mysterious, and even destructive. He tried to make out what it was.

His lips pressed into a thin line, his expression grave.

After a long silence, his eyes suddenly widened. For someone usually so composed, he couldn't stop the shock in his voice.

"This... this is..."

"That's right," Daren said, smiling, "the strongest Logia—Goro Goro no Mi."

Momonga stared at the fruit, completely stunned.

"The legendary Devil Fruit... It actually exists... and you found it..."

He looked at the fruit in disbelief. His hands trembled slightly, and he couldn't tear his gaze away.

It was a golden, pineapple-shaped fruit, etched with lightning-like markings, pulsing with a stormy, volatile, and arcane energy.

The legendary Goro Goro no Mi!

Hailed as the "strongest" among the Logia-class!

If he ate this Devil Fruit, he would gain unimaginable power.

And this wasn't just any Logia.

Lightning was a force of nature—of disaster.

Its destructive power was on the level of a natural catastrophe.

As Daren's second-in-command in the North Blue, Momonga had already seen Devil Fruit catalogs through Daren's channels.

After all, Devil Fruits—hailed as the "Secret Treasure of the Sea"—were rare by nature. For years, they'd tried to collect them in the North Blue.

So the moment he saw this one, he recognized it instantly.

His first instinct was disbelief.

This was the kind of Logia Devil Fruit that could rival the three "monsters" at Marine Headquarters.

And now, Daren was offering it to him?

There was no way Momonga wasn't tempted.

However...

"No."

Momonga suddenly took a deep breath, forced his gaze away from the Goro Goro no Mi, and gritted his teeth.

"This is a legendary fruit. You should keep it for yourself, Daren."

His eyes were bloodshot, but he stared at Daren with firm resolve.

Daren sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Have you forgotten I already ate the Jiki Jiki no Mi?"

"No one can consume two Devil Fruits. The result of greed is death by explosion. That's the unbreakable law of Devil Fruits."

"I have no intention of committing suicide."

Blackbeard might have managed it thanks to some unique trait of his, but as tempting as a second fruit was, Daren wasn't about to gamble his life—at least not here, not now.

Momonga blinked in realization.

In his panic, he had completely forgotten about that.

Still, he shook his head.

"Then you should give the Goro Goro no Mi to someone more suitable..."

A hint of discouragement passed through his eyes.

"I don't think I have the talent or potential to handle it."

There were limits to how much a Devil Fruit could be developed, and that depended greatly on its user.

Even the strongest Devil Fruit, in the hands of someone incompetent, could end up being wasted.

Daren let out a mix of amusement and exasperation.

"I really didn't expect someone to reject a gift like this..."

He shook his head, his tone suddenly serious.

"Don't underestimate yourself, Momonga."

"To me... you're the most suitable person."

Momonga pressed his lips together, thought for a moment, and still shook his head.

"No. It's too valuable..."

Daren looked at him, exhaled a puff of smoke, and then casually said,

"Sea Circle Calendar, Year 1487. I was fourteen. Just joined North Blue's 321 Branch as a Seaman Recruit."

"My physical condition was crap. Even basic training nearly killed me... And on top of that, as a new recruit, I had to do janitor duty."

"That day, I was dead tired, scrubbing toilets when I passed out."

"You found me and carried me to the hospital..."

"When I woke up, the toilets were already clean. I avoided a court martial thanks to you."

Momonga was caught off guard, waving dismissively.

"It was nothing."

But Daren kept going, ignoring the protest.

"Sea Circle Calendar 1488. My first combat mission. We were targeting the Blood Sickle Pirates. I was so scared I couldn't hold my sword straight, almost got split in half by an axe... You pulled me back and saved my life."

"And you took a bullet for it."

Momonga opened his mouth to speak, but Daren continued without pause.

"Sea Circle Calendar 1489. We both got promoted to Lieutenant, full of ambition. Took a 20-man team to clear out underworld forces on some island."

"It was a trap. We got ambushed, cornered in an alley. Everyone in the squad was killed. I took two bullets, three knife wounds, and passed out."

"When I woke up, I was in the hospital."

"And the guy in the bed next to me—was you."

"You looked worse than me."

"The doctor said you carried my unconscious body out of that alley. You took five bullets and six slashes doing it..."

Daren glanced at Momonga's left leg.

"There's still shrapnel in your knee that couldn't be removed. That's why you've been hesitant to put weight on your left leg all these years."

He took another drag from his cigarette and smiled lightly—a relaxed expression, but there was a heavy weight behind it.

"Need me to keep going?"

"No one else remembers. There's no record of those achievements in the files. But I remember."

"It's been five years since I joined the Navy."

"In those five years—counting that toilet incident—you've saved my life thirteen times."

"So tell me... if I were to die, how much would I be worth now?"

"I'm the so-called 'King of the North Blue,' feared across the sea."

"A Marine 'monster,' who killed the 'World Destroyer' Byrnndi World, wiped out the Beasts Pirates' main base, and rose as a shining star of the Navy."

Momonga was silent.

He was starting to understand where Daren was going with this.

In a low voice, he replied,

"Priceless."

"Exactly—priceless."

Daren laughed.

"And you saved that priceless life—thirteen times."

Momonga muttered,

"You've saved me more than that..."

Daren rolled his eyes.

"Is this really the time to argue over that?"

"What I'm saying is, we've fought side by side for years. With that kind of bond... why are you still hesitating?"

"I don't have many friends. And I don't trust easily."

"Out on this sea, there's only a handful of people I truly trust. You're one of them."

Momonga hesitated.

"But..."

"Goddammit!!"

Daren finally snapped. He didn't even let Momonga react.

With a sharp wave of his hand—

Clang clang!

The metal wristbands suddenly shot out, melted and split apart in mid-air, forming shackle-like restraints that clamped around Momonga's wrists and ankles—pinning him to the ground!

"Daren, what the hell—!?"

Momonga's expression twisted in shock, yelling instinctively.

But before he could move, Daren seized the Goro Goro no Mi—and shoved it straight into Momonga's mouth.

Juice exploded.

Momonga froze.

Eyes wide.

Then—

"Daren, you bastard!!"

"This thing..."

He roared, face flushed, coughing and gagging violently as tears welled in the corners of his eyes.

"...Tastes like shit!!"

Chapter 244 - 244: Volume 2 – Chapter 146: Congratulations, You've Become a Raichu (Lightning Mouse)

"How do you even know what shit tastes like? Don't tell me you've eaten it?"

Watching Momonga lying there, gagging with a flushed face, Daren couldn't help but smirk smugly.

The taste of a Devil Fruit really was unbearable. It was like a mix of sewer stench and foot odor—bitter, astringent, and absolutely disgusting. Anyone who'd tasted it once would never want to go through it again.

"You bastard..."

Hearing Daren lounging on the sofa, casually smoking and mocking him, Momonga's face turned red with fury.

He tried to suppress the acid rising from his stomach as he struggled against the restraints.

But with his limbs pinned to the floor and a powerful magnetic field in effect, he could barely move.

Suddenly—

Momonga felt his mind go blank, as if something incredible had just awakened inside him.

In an instant, the entire office lit up with a blinding flash, as though a thousand birds were shrieking at once.

Stunned, he looked down and watched in disbelief as his body visibly "melted," transforming into a mass of blue plasma.

His limbs, now turned into crackling arcs of electricity, passed effortlessly through the metal restraints—as if they were fluid—and broke free from Daren's bindings with incredible agility.

"What..."

The flickering electricity reformed into Momonga's body.

He stood there, wide-eyed, watching his own hands crackling with lightning. The wild, explosive power coursing through his body left him momentarily speechless.

Clink.

A dull piece of blackened shrapnel popped out of his left knee and clattered onto the floor.

Momonga froze when he saw it. His gaze shifted, becoming complicated.

He could feel it—clear as day.

The chronic pain that had tormented his knee for years... was gone.

"What is this..."

"This is elementalization," Daren said, lighting a fresh cigar with a grin.

"Congratulations—your body's now made of lightning."

Momonga focused, trying to fully process the change.

He felt incredibly light, like he weighed nothing at all.

And yet, at a moment's notice, he felt like he could unleash a force powerful enough to obliterate everything in sight.

Of course, he knew this was likely just a sensory illusion brought on by the dramatic surge of power after consuming the Goro Goro no Mi.

He took a deep breath and focused, trying to rein in the chaotic energy with sheer will.

As he concentrated, the lightning dancing across his body slowly faded, and in no time, he returned to normal.

"Unprecedented... power."

Momonga was silent for a moment, then exhaled slowly and looked up at Daren.

Daren chuckled.

"Still think eating that was a waste?"

Momonga: ...

Taking a drag from his cigar, Daren suddenly remembered something and grinned.

"C'mon, let's head to the training ground. Test it out a little."

A bizarre thought popped into his head—

Momonga had eaten the Goro Goro no Mi...

So didn't that make him a "Raichu (Lightning Mouse)"?

Momonga blinked, then his eyes gleamed with anticipation.

"Alright!"

He wanted to see just how powerful the Goro Goro no Mi really was—

And just how far he could push it.

...

"Hey, who's that next to Base Commander Momonga?"

"That's...That's Daren-sama!"

"Daren-sama is back!!"

"Daren-sama! How's life over at headquarters?"

"I heard you fought Kaidou of the Beasts!"

...

On the way to the training grounds, Daren's arrival immediately caught the attention of the Marine soldiers.

They stared in amazement at the Commodore, chewing on a cigar with both hands in his pockets. Their eyes were filled with adoration and fervor that words could hardly describe.

The name Rogers Daren carried a legendary, irreplaceable weight for the North Blue Marines.

Under his leadership, the North Blue Navy had become the undisputed ruler of the region. Even the lowest-ranking soldiers now enjoyed benefits far beyond what other forces could offer.

It was no exaggeration to say that the North Blue Fleet's current size and strength existed because of this one man.

Every single Marine in the North Blue sincerely admired—and was grateful to—this living legend.

Even though Daren had stepped down from his position as North Blue Admiral and moved to Marineford for advanced training, any news about him that reached the North Blue would immediately stir up excitement among the troops.

Rogers Daren's strength was the strength of the North Blue Fleet.

His glory was the glory of every soldier who served in it.

"Long time no see, everyone."

Daren smiled brightly as he waved to the Marines who had rushed over upon hearing the news.

After chatting briefly with them, he gently waved his hand.

"Back to your posts."

The soldiers saluted in unison and wisely withdrew.

In no time, the training ground was empty again.

A sharp sea breeze swept across the space, stirring up gusts of howling yellow sand.

Daren and Momonga stood facing each other, ten meters apart.

"Come on," Daren said.

"Hit me with whatever technique you can come up with."

Momonga had just eaten the Goro Goro no Mi. He had little to no practical knowledge of how to use its powers, and his mastery of it was virtually zero.

This test was simply to see how well he could grasp the fruit's potential.

Momonga hesitated.

"You sure? The power of the Goro Goro no Mi feels a little... Never mind, I forgot you've got a monster's body."

He slapped his own forehead, gave a resigned sigh, then got serious.

Taking a deep breath, Momonga raised his hand and locked onto Daren.

"Vari: 100,000 Volts!"

The moment the words left his mouth, his entire arm morphed into surging arcs of lightning.

It rapidly condensed into a roaring bolt of thunder and cracked through the air, whipping straight at Daren!

The twisting lightning split the air with a roar. Every place it passed over was scorched black by intense heat.

Even though Daren's physique was inhumanly tough, Momonga still held back, just in case.

Daren didn't dodge.

He let the bolt slam into him.

Zzzzzt...

Scorching electricity instantly wrapped around his body like a net of needles trying to puncture flesh.

His uniform's upper half was fried to blackened shreds in an instant.

"Hmm. Not bad. But if you're holding back, don't bother."

Daren grinned, raised his hand—

—and shattered the lightning as if it were nothing. It dispersed into the air like mist.

Whoosh!

He tore off what remained of his smoking uniform and launched forward like a cannon.

The sheer force of his movement blew open a crater beneath his feet, as if struck by artillery. The whole training ground trembled.

"Looks like I'll need to give you some pressure."

Daren said with a crooked smile.

Momonga's expression changed dramatically.

His pupils contracted.

He couldn't even see Daren move—

All he saw was a pitch-black fist wrapped in crushing energy exploding in his vision.

Momonga: ¥@%@#%??

Chapter 245 - 245: Volume 2 – Chapter 147: Can You Even Handle It?

What insane acceleration!

That lunatic Daren—how long has he even been at headquarters?

And his strength's already skyrocketed to the point I can't even follow his movements!?

What the hell did he do?

Was he juicing or something?

Momonga's heart pounded wildly, and the corners of his eyes twitched like crazy.

To him, Daren's figure moved like lightning—so fast it was impossible to track. In the blink of an eye, he was right in front of him.

With terrifying, inhuman power behind it, that pitch-black fist tore through the air, every inch of force layered with pressure that seemed to punch straight through the atmosphere.

"You trying to kill—"

Bang!

The fist smashed into Momonga's face. If time had slowed down, you'd be able to see his facial muscles distort under the blow, rippling like waves.

The next moment—

He was launched backward like a cannonball, crashing through several human-shaped stone dummies before slamming deep into the side of a three-meter-high cannon platform.

Boom!

The entire platform exploded into rubble, smoke billowing into the air.

"Only with enough pressure can you learn to adapt and fully master the power of the Goro Goro no Mi..."

Daren grinned as he exhaled a puff of smoke. Every pore in his body felt relaxed, and even the taste of the cigar seemed to have improved.

Nothing beats the satisfaction of smashing a weaker opponent!

The past month had been one long string of fights against enemies stronger than him.

First, he teamed up with Sakazuki to take on Bullet. At the time, his strength was still a tier below, and his Armament Haki was far from refined—Sakazuki had to take the lead in most of the fighting.

Then came getting captured by Kaidou... and tortured by Queen.

After he broke out of prison, he faced off again with Queen and Kaidou, but still couldn't gain the upper hand.

And after escaping, he barely had a break before running into Kozuki Oden and Whitebeard.

Sure, running his mouth was fun for a while, but Daren had to admit—compared to Whitebeard, the "Strongest Man in the World," he still had a long way to go.

All in all, it had been a frustrating few weeks.

Whitebeard and Kaidou were one thing.

But even Gion and Toki joined in on the bullying!

So now that he finally had someone to take it out on, of course he was going to let loose.

If you're my bro, then come try and kill me!

"You bastard... you're seriously not holding back..."

From the smoking pile of debris, a hoarse and pissed-off voice growled out.

Hiss!

Bolts of searing lightning suddenly shot out like a spray of water, piercing through the rubble and quickly coalescing into a humanoid form.

Momonga wiped the blood from the corner of his mouth. His face was visibly swollen as he glared at Daren.

"You call that pressure? That was you trying to kill me!"

"Oh?"

Daren scratched the back of his head and put on a faux-innocent face.

"I wasn't trying to."

Then he grinned.

"But hey—you withstood it, didn't you?"

"And looks like you're getting better at controlling elementalization, too..."

"No shit! If I hadn't turned to lightning fast enough, that punch would've left me with a concussion—"

Momonga suddenly stopped.

He looked down at his hands, palm lines clear, and clenched his fists experimentally.

In an instant, crackling thunder engulfed his hands, only to vanish a second later as they returned to normal. Flesh to lightning, lightning to flesh—he could switch between the two smoothly.

His eyes widened a little in disbelief.

"It's true... The transition between elemental and physical forms is way smoother now. It's not as clunky or stiff as when I first got the fruit..."

"Now you get it?"

Daren said with a straight face.

"This is top-tier training—straight from the Officer Training Camp."

He was absolutely bullshitting.

Momonga stared at Daren, full of suspicion.

"You sure you're not just using this as an excuse to beat me up?"

Daren nodded without hesitation.

"That's definitely part of it."

Momonga: ...

"But it's also training."

Daren added slowly,

"You've noticed how much stronger I've gotten, right? Compared to when I first left the North Blue—it's a massive leap."

"This is the method I used to get there."

Momonga narrowed his eyes. Something felt off.

"What's this training method called, exactly?"

Daren puffed up his chest, looking righteous as he declared,

"You Get Stronger By Taking a Beating."

"..."

"Daren, you bastard!!!"

Momonga's eyes instantly turned bloodshot, crackling with rage. Blue lightning surged across his skin like roaring flames.

He raised his hand high—then unleashed it.

A thunderbolt half a meter thick, like a raging dragon, howled toward Daren with ferocious force.

Unlike earlier, this time he didn't hold back. The scale and power of the attack had increased several times over.

Good. It's even stronger now... and I can feel it—the magnetic field says his energy is growing...

Daren narrowed his eyes, a grin tugging at the corner of his lips.

He didn't fully understand how to develop the Goro Goro no Mi.

But one thing he did know:

Under time pressure, real combat and external stress were the best ways to push human potential!

More importantly...

He was shocked to find that his previously stagnant physique stats—completely unmoved since his last major fight—had actually started to shift again after Momonga's lightning strike!

It was an unexpected windfall.

After enduring all of Queen's "enhancements," Daren's body had reached an almost absurd level of toughness, inching ever closer to Kaidou's "indestructible body."

But ever since his clash with Kozuki Oden, his physical growth had hit a wall. Nothing he did could push it any further.

Now, finally, he'd found a chance to break through again.

No way he was going to let it go to waste!

"Let's go, Pikachu! Charge me up!"

Daren muttered with sparkling eyes—then, under Momonga's dumbstruck gaze...

He threw himself headfirst into the heart of that roaring lightning bolt!

BOOM!!

A blast loud enough to shatter the sky thundered across the training ground. Smoke and heat erupted into the air, forming a blazing red mushroom cloud that soared skyward.

...

Half an hour later.

Daren, his body scorched black all over, kicked at the collapsed and wheezing Momonga with an excited gleam in his eyes.

"Hey, don't stop now. That was only five million volts..."

"You seriously call that your limit?"

Momonga lay flat on the ground, gasping for air.

Completely limp, his limbs refused to move.

His face had gone ghostly pale, his eyes sunken, expression dazed, and purple bruises covered his cheeks.

The training ground around them had turned into a scorched battlefield. Pits and craters littered the earth, smoke rising in lazy plumes from the ruins.

Hearing Daren's words, Momonga shuddered.

"I can't... I seriously can't anymore."

He couldn't even lift a single finger.

His eyes were dead. He was ready to cry.

Chapter 246 - 246: Volume 2 – Chapter 148: I'm Not Interested in Money

"That's all you've got...?"

Daren shot Momonga a disdainful glance, his face full of disappointment.

Momonga: ¥#@¥%#@¥...

I just ate the Goro Goro no Mi! Holding out for half an hour under that kind of intense output is already impressive, alright?

Annoyed, he rolled his eyes and flopped onto the ground of the training field, stretching out comfortably as he half-closed his eyes and tried to steady his breathing.

That lunatic Daren had actually tanked his lightning bombardment with nothing but raw physical endurance—and the more he got blasted, the more excited he became, with that twisted grin spreading wider across his face each time.

What the hell is up with this guy?

It seriously feels like he came back from the Grand Line even more deranged than before...

Wait a minute!

Could this be the "get stronger by taking a beating" training method?

Was Daren not joking after all?

While Momonga's mind spiraled with random thoughts, Daren let out a regretful sigh and also lay down on the training field to rest.

Using Momonga's Goro Goro no Mi attacks to temper his body wasn't something Daren had initially planned.

But he had to admit—it worked surprisingly well.

In just thirty minutes, under lightning strikes nearing 5 million volts, his physique stats had improved by nearly a full point!

It might not sound like much, but Daren hadn't forgotten how monstrous his current stats were. For someone whose physical attributes had already reached a level ordinary people couldn't even begin to fathom, gaining even one point was no small feat.

After passing 70 points, progress slowed to a crawl. To get any improvement in just half an hour? That was way more effective than any random durability training he'd been experimenting with.

Sure, his body had started to adapt to Momonga's lightning over the course of the session.

But that was only 5 million volts.

As Momonga continued to develop his Goro Goro no Mi, his lightning would only grow stronger.

10 million volts... 30 million... 50 million... 100 million...

Maybe even reaching or surpassing Enel's legendary 300 million volts!

With that thought, Daren looked at Momonga like he was some kind of priceless treasure.

He had a hunch—if he kept forging his body with lightning, he could push his physique closer and closer to Kaidou's "indestructible body."

And maybe... just maybe... there would come a day when he could casually take a thunderstrike from Big Mom like it was nothing, then laugh and shout, "Because I have guts!"

That image made Daren chuckle softly to himself.

His thoughts gradually turned inward as he focused on his stats:

Physique: 79.812

Strength: 70.513

Speed: 70.899

Armament Haki: 37.035

Conqueror's Haki: 52.301

Yeah... the gains in physique had clearly spilled over into his Armament Haki, strengthening it significantly.

The other stats hadn't improved much.

But overall, this had opened up a whole new approach to training.

And Daren was confident—as lightning-forging intensified, the gains in physique would feed back into strength and speed as well.

After all, stronger skin, muscle, and bone were crucial for overall physical advancement.

"Momonga... thought of your Admiral title yet?"

Daren suddenly turned his head, smiling as he looked at the battered Marine Captain lying beside him.

"Admiral?"

Momonga froze for a second, then gave a dry laugh.

"You really think highly of me... We're talking about a Marine Admiral here—the strongest fighting force under the World Government."

"For a monster like you, becoming an Admiral might just be a matter of time. But for people like us..."

He gazed calmly at the blue sky where white clouds drifted lazily. A faint trace of melancholy and longing flickered in his eyes as he muttered,

"That's a dream we might never reach in a lifetime."

"Not necessarily."

Daren smiled, his eyes gleaming with a sharp light.

"Don't underestimate your potential."

In the original storyline, Momonga was one of the few elite Vice Admirals in Marine Headquarters—a true pillar of justice. When it came to talent and potential, he was anything but lacking.

Trusted by top brass, formidable in combat, and among the top in both martial arts and swordsmanship within the Vice Admiral ranks, he mastered both Armament and Observation Haki, and had even been tasked with the mandatory summon of the Pirate Empress.

Now, with the addition of the Goro Goro no Mi... If he could develop it to the level of Enel, reaching Admiral-tier strength wouldn't be out of the question.

After all, even someone like Ryokugyu made it to Admiral.

And besides, Daren could lend him a hand.

"We'll see..."

Hearing Daren's loaded words, Momonga fell silent for a moment. He slowly clenched his fists and murmured.

As he'd said, becoming a Marine Admiral was the dream of every Marine.

If there was even the slimmest chance, he'd fight for it—without hesitation, even if it meant laying down his life.

"How long are you planning to stay this time?"

Daren lit a cigarette, resting his head against his hands as he puffed.

"Wasn't planning to stay long, but now things have changed."

"Why?" Momonga blinked.

Daren winked, smiling.

"Sticking around to help you develop the Goro Goro no Mi."

Momonga: ...

You just want to use me as a lightning generator to help with your training!

His eye twitched.

Now it made sense.

Helping him develop the Goro Goro no Mi? That was just a front.

Maybe that was part of it—but what Daren really wanted was a walking lightning machine for his own body training!

But Momonga had grown numb to it by now.

He knew how unorthodox Daren's training methods were.

No normal person could keep up.

"Ah right, almost forgot this."

Daren muttered as he pulled a Log Pose from his coat and handed it to Momonga.

"What's this?" Momonga frowned.

"It points to an uncharted island," Daren said casually. "I left a stash of wealth there. Planning to use it all for developing and expanding the North Blue fleet."

"A stash of wealth? Why not keep it for yourself? Life at HQ must be expensive."

Momonga shook his head, turning him down.

"The North Blue fleet's current budget is holding up fine... The tax revenue from DoFlamingo's territory is still growing by the month."

"...Besides, expanding the North Blue fleet isn't something you can do with just a couple hundred million Belly."

Momonga seriously doubted Daren could scrape together much money at Marineford.

With that many top officers around, there was no way he could run North Blue-style operations openly in Marine HQ.

"I know the cost of expanding the North Blue fleet is astronomical. That's exactly why I dug up this treasure for you."

Daren replied impatiently.

Momonga gave him a skeptical glance.

"That island... how much money are we talking about?"

Daren shrugged.

"No idea. You know I'm not interested in money. But rough estimate? Could be anywhere from hundreds of billions to over a trillion Belly..."

"—W-What?!"

Momonga's eyes went wide. He couldn't believe what he just heard.

His hand trembled so hard he nearly dropped the Log Pose.

Chapter 247 - 247: Volume 2 – Chapter 149: You're Not Seriously Thinking About Robbing the Heavenly Tribute, Are You?

"Hu-Hundreds of billions!?"

Momonga shot up, eyes wide as he stared at Daren, jaw nearly hitting the floor. He stammered, "Daren... you're not joking, right?"

He cradled the Log Pose in his hands like it was some priceless treasure.

Daren scoffed, "Do I look like the kind of guy who jokes about this stuff? It's just a few hundred billion Belly in gold... what's there to get so worked up about?"

Even as he said that, the corner of his mouth curled up slightly.

"Where did you even get that kind of gold?"

Momonga looked completely dumbfounded, but then his expression froze. Something clearly clicked, and his face suddenly changed.

"Daren... don't tell me you robbed the Heavenly Tribute?"

He lowered his voice, glancing around nervously.

"No, no. Relax, this money is completely legitimate."

Daren shook his head.

"Though now that you mention it, if I ever run short on funds, the Heavenly Tribute actually sounds like a solid option..."

He rubbed the blue stubble on his chin thoughtfully.

Momonga: ...

A few black lines formed on his forehead as his thoughts spiraled in panic:

Wait—are you seriously considering that!?

"Hm, now that you say it, that really is a brilliant idea. You're truly worthy of being my adjutant."

Daren suddenly gave Momonga a satisfied pat on the shoulder, grinning from ear to ear.

Momonga: ...

That wasn't me! I didn't say that! You're making things up!

Seeing the usually serious Momonga looking completely dumbfounded, Daren couldn't hold back a laugh and said,

"Don't worry. The money came from a legendary place."

"You've heard the legend of the City of Gold, Shandora, right?"

Momonga nodded.

"Yeah, Shandora... it's said to exist high in the sky, thousands of meters above sea level, but it's just a myth... Wait! Don't tell me—you actually found the legendary City of Gold!?"

His eyes widened as he stared at Daren.

"Where else do you think your Goro Goro no Mi came from?"

Daren casually blew a smoke ring.

It finally dawned on Momonga.

"So Shandora really does exist... No wonder..."

Now it all made sense.

No wonder Daren had found the Goro Goro no Mi, which had vanished for over a hundred years.

No wonder he suddenly had access to such an immense fortune...

If he'd found the legendary City of Gold, then everything added up.

The Goro Goro no Mi had been hidden on a Sky Island ten thousand meters above sea level—that's why it hadn't resurfaced in over a century.

"Anyway, when the time comes, take a trusted crew and a few warships to the island. Keep it as low-key as possible. Avoid leaks and bring all the gold back."

Daren spoke slowly.

Momonga raised an eyebrow, hesitating.

"You're not seriously worried that someone in the North Blue would dare steal from the North Blue Fleet, are you?"

Daren shook his head, massaging his temples.

"That's not it. I'm not worried about pirates or mafia groups..."

"What's giving me a headache is this—if headquarters finds out we've got that kind of money, Sengoku'll probably show up at Division 321's doorstep the very next day."

"He'd be lurking around like a broke beggar. Even going to the bathroom would be a hassle—he'd just crouch outside, grinning. You wouldn't even be able to take a dump in peace."

Momonga: ...

He mulled it over, the corner of his mouth twitching slightly. After a pause, he said slowly,

"You've got a point."

Daren may have exaggerated, but he wasn't wrong.

If headquarters found out the North Blue Fleet had access to that kind of fortune, they'd never let it go.

They probably wouldn't seize it by force—Daren's strength and position saw to that.

But with Sengoku's methods, they'd find a way to claim a big chunk of it.

And once headquarters made a move, there was no way they could resist without consequences. Holding out completely would basically mean breaking ties with HQ...

"Anyway, once you've got the funds, move fast. Expand the fleet. Within a year, get the North Blue Fleet up to at least twenty warships."

Daren narrowed his eyes.

"And if I'm not mistaken, Borsalino should've already deployed some of the latest tech weapons to the North Blue, right?"

Momonga nodded.

"Yeah, the laser weapons developed by the Science Division have already been equipped on some of our warships..."

As he spoke, his eyes began to glow with excitement.

"The power of these laser weapons is like nothing we've seen before. According to initial tests, a single blast is enough to easily destroy a ship that can carry a hundred people."

It was exactly because of these laser cannons that Momonga had the confidence to blockade Rubeck Island without restraint, ready to wipe out the Donquixote Family at any moment.

Fear always comes from a lack of firepower.

"The problem is, these laser weapons consume a massive amount of energy, and their charging mechanism is extremely complex. We haven't been able to figure out the specifics—how to charge them or what powers them..."

Daren frowned.

"So, in short, while these things are powerful, the core tech is still firmly controlled by Borsalino and his science team?"

Momonga nodded again.

"Exactly. That's why, for now, the North Blue Fleet still relies mainly on traditional heavy artillery, with some of Germa 66's tech weapons as backup."

"...Also, to keep the true size of the fleet under wraps, we only filed a purchase request for five warships with the Science Division."

"Hm... got it."

In the original timeline, laser weapons only saw real, practical use when they were mounted on Pacifistas—but the way they were charged was never revealed.

After thinking for a moment, Daren suddenly said,

"Dismantle one of the laser cannons from a warship and hand it over to Vinsmoke Judge. Have him work on modifying the charging mechanism."

"You sure he can handle that?" Momonga asked, hesitating a bit. "As things stand, Germa 66's tech weapons are far less powerful than the Science Division's laser cannons."

Daren nodded.

"Vinsmoke Judge used to work with Vegapunk. The tech held by the Marine Science Division is basically just scraps from Vegapunk's cutting-edge research..."

"With Judge's skills, cracking and modifying the laser cannon's power system shouldn't be a big deal."

"The reason Germa 66's weapons seem so lackluster is because Judge hasn't been focused on weapon development. His real focus has always been on genetic modification."

Daren had noticed signs of Lineage Factor engineering the moment he saw the newborn Vinsmoke Reiju.

Of course, if this were just about tech know-how, that fat guy Queen would actually be a better choice.

After all, Daren had personally seen him fire off a laser cannon back at the Beasts Pirates' main base.

But that suspenders-wearing fatty wasn't one of his subordinates.

"No problem. But if you're going to modify the charging mechanism... what energy source do you plan to use?"

Momonga pressed again.

Daren didn't answer. He just looked at him with a sly smile.

Momonga thought about it—and his face instantly turned pitch black.

"...#¥...@¥%@¥!!"

Chapter 248 - 248: Volume 2 – Chapter 150: The North Blue Gathering

Daren casually picked his ear, completely ignoring Momonga's complaints.

This trip to Sky Island had gone far better than expected. Not only had there been no real obstacles along the way, but the haul had exceeded even his most optimistic estimates.

First, he'd found the Goro Goro no Mi inside a long-abandoned temple. Then, heading straight to the legendary golden city of Shandora, he used the Jiki Jiki no Mi to clean the place out, moving all the gold away in one sweep.

As for the other Sky Island specialties, like weapons made from Impact Dials and the like, Daren couldn't care less.

To the strong, they were practically useless—and as military gear for the North Blue Fleet, there simply weren't enough of them to matter. Too niche, too limited.

For an army, only standardized, mass-producible equipment had real value.

Which was exactly why he'd set his sights on modifying the Navy Science Division's laser cannons.

When it came to critical military tech, you couldn't afford to be at someone else's mercy.

Otherwise, every time a laser cannon ran out of juice, they'd have to go crawling back to the Science Division for a recharge. It was a pain—and a risk.

As for solving the recharging problem after the modifications? That used to be a headache.

But now that Momonga had the Goro Goro no Mi, that issue was basically off the table.

"Besides that, we can start upgrading the warships even further."

Daren narrowed his eyes as the thought struck him.

"Upgrade the warships? You mean switching the keels to metal? The North Blue Fleet's already been doing that."

Momonga blinked in surprise before answering.

The North Blue Fleet, in collaboration with Germa 66, had long begun reinforcing their ships. They were replacing the traditional wooden keel structures with alloys—lightweight, some even with shape-memory properties. The result wasn't just tougher defenses, but also synergy with Daren's Devil Fruit, enabling a full-blown airborne fleet.

Sure, the process was expensive. Each ship, with all its upgrades, heavy artillery, and advanced tech weapons, was costing upwards of 300 million Belly. But every coin spent was worth it.

Daren's blueprint for the North Blue Fleet wasn't just about ruling the seas—it was about ruling the skies too.

"No."

Daren shook his head.

"That's part of it, but what I want to upgrade now is the propulsion system."

"The propulsion system?"

Momonga stiffened. A creeping sense of dread welled up inside him. His mouth twitched as he said, half in disbelief,

"Don't tell me you're planning to..."

Daren grinned.

"Electrification is the future. Switching to electric power means a massive speed boost—at least double that of conventional warships of the same size, maybe even more. It'll give the North Blue Fleet a serious combat edge."

"Plus, we can scrap the old propulsion systems entirely—get rid of masts to reduce weight... That'll make the fleet more nimble, more responsive. I don't need to spell out the tactical advantages, do I?"

Momonga: ...

His expression wilted like a frostbitten eggplant. He looked like he was on the verge of tears.

"You're a devil..."

Sure, he'd eaten the Goro Goro no Mi—but that didn't make him some kind of living battery!

At this rate, he'd end up spending day and night powering the entire fleet by himself!

Just imagining that kind of brutal, inhumane routine made him want to curl up and die.

Still, he had to admit—Daren's vision for the North Blue Fleet was nothing short of brilliant. It was bold, ambitious, and packed with potential.

"Why do you think I gave you the Goro Goro no Mi in the first place...?"

Daren smirked, unable to hold back a laugh.

...

North Blue, Rubeck Island.

Flowers and balloons filled the pristine harbor as ships flying all kinds of flags slowly pulled in.

The entire island was lit up with decorations, lanterns swaying in the breeze, and the atmosphere was festive and vibrant. Shops along the main streets flaunted "50% OFF" signs, and crowds surged through the alleys in waves.

Leaders and representatives from major trade caravans had arrived early. Even royals and nobles from various nations had sent their envoys to attend the birthday celebration of Donquixote Doflamingo, the young head of the North Blue's Donquixote family.

"What a spectacle... Who would've thought a kid barely in his teens could build up such a massive force..."

"Shh! Keep your voice down. You got a death wish?"

"Don't be fooled by his age—Doflamingo's strength and tactics are top-tier in the North Blue. I heard his fleet and influence have already spread into the Grand Line..."

Small groups of people huddled together, whispering in hushed voices.

Some were impressed, some scoffed, others mocked, and a few even idolized him...

But suddenly, a distinctively shaped ship sailed into view, drawing all attention in an instant.

It looked like a floating fortress, with turrets and towers lined up on its deck. A flag bearing a bold "66" flapped in the wind.

"That's... that's Germa 66's ship!"

"The Vinsmoke family's here too!?"

"Damn it! Stay out of their line of fire!"

"..."

The once-bustling crowd quickly parted, cautiously clearing a wide path.

Soon enough, Vinsmoke Judge, golden-haired and clad in armor, disembarked with a squad of genetically enhanced soldiers in sleek black suits.

"That brat Doflamingo... he's actually done a decent job managing this place."

Judge ignored the wary, fearful looks from the crowd, casually sweeping his gaze across the streets before curling his lips into a cold smile.

"Lord of the Vinsmoke family, my young master has been expecting you. This way, please."

A low, composed voice echoed in front of him.

Judge paused, surprised, as a refined young man with slicked-back hair and a gentlemanly demeanor slowly "rose" from the ground.

"I'm Senor, an officer of the Donquixote family."

Wearing a sharply tailored suit and a neatly folded pocket square, Senor gave a graceful bow.

Judge's eyes narrowed subtly.

He hadn't sensed this man's arrival.

Not bad...

"Hmm. It's been a while since I've seen your young master."

With a faint, insincere smile, Judge raised a hand. Behind him, a few black-suited soldiers stepped down from the ship, carrying a large, heavy chest.

"A birthday gift from the Vinsmoke family."

Senor returned the smile.

"Thank you for the Vinsmoke family's gift. On behalf of the young master, I accept it."

"This way, please..."

He gestured forward.

Judge gave a small nod, lifting his foot to move—only to pause and lower it again.

"No rush. Looks like more guests are about to arrive."

He slowly turned, eyes narrowing toward the distant sea.

From that direction, a massive, heavily armed warship was cutting through the waves, heading straight for Rubeck Island.

Chapter 249 - 249: Volume 2 – Chapter 151: Quite the Guest List

"It's the Marines..."

"The North Blue Fleet's here too?"

"Doflamingo really pulled it off... Even the North Blue Fleet sent someone to celebrate!"

"What are you, stupid? You think the Donquixote family could've taken over the North Blue underworld so easily without the Fleet's silent approval?"

"Don't tell me..."

"Hmph... there's no official proof, but they say Doflamingo had a rather 'special' relationship with the former North Blue Admiral..."

"The former North Blue Admiral... You mean the 'King of the North Blue'!?"

"..."

At the mention of that legendary man, many of the guests instinctively swallowed hard, their eyes filled with dread and awe.

But not all reactions were fear—some noble ladies and princesses, who had accompanied their husbands or fathers, subtly licked their lips, eyes glinting with suggestive curiosity as they got... other ideas.

Less than thirty seconds later...

Under the breathless attention of the crowd, a massive warship—steel-plated and almost absurdly grand in design—slowly sailed into the harbor.

The boarding ramp was lowered, and a unit of sharply dressed elite Marines marched down in perfect formation, each step radiating an oppressive, disciplined energy.

Leading them was a man who looked no older than twenty, yet his presence was cool and composed. The mustache on his upper lip gave him a more mature air, and a military sword hung from his waist.

This was the current North Blue Admiral, Captain Momonga of Marine Headquarters.

"Admiral Momonga, it's been a while."

Vinsmoke Judge approached with a polite, insincere smile and extended his hand.

Momonga grasped it, returning the gesture with a calm smile.

"Mr. Judge, it has been some time."

They both exchanged the kind of half-lidded smile only seasoned politicians and power players could pull off, waiting just long enough for nearby reporters to snap a few photos before releasing their handshake.

It wasn't hard to guess one of tomorrow's headlines in the North Blue press: "Friendship Between the North Blue Fleet and the Germa Kingdom Endures!"

Momonga then turned toward Senor, offering a nod of approval.

"You must be Senor? Hmm, Doflamingo certainly knows how to pick his people."

Senor blinked in surprise.

He hadn't expected Momonga to recognize him. A bit flustered, he pursed his lips and gave a respectful bow.

"Admiral Momonga, good afternoon. My young master is waiting for you in the reception hall."

Momonga smiled.

"Then I'll trouble you to lead the way."

With Senor at the front, Momonga and Vinsmoke Judge walked together toward the reception hall.

Their entourages followed at a measured distance, each group keeping to its own side—clear boundaries, silently maintained.

The gathered guests looked on with mixed emotions—curiosity, wariness, and deep unease—but eventually followed as well.

...

Crystal chandeliers bathed the grand banquet hall in opulent light. Soft saxophone music drifted gently through the air.

It was hard to believe that this single room held nearly all the rulers and power brokers of the North Blue—royalty, nobles, and top traders alike.

Countless business deals were being sealed through offhand chats. A single joke could shift the economic lifeline of a kingdom. A casual wager might alter the fate of hundreds of families.

"Good evening, Mr. Fels... Oh, is this your wife? Pleased to meet you, Lady Dany."

"...Yes, well, I have some matters to attend to. We'll talk later."

Momonga finally managed to escape the swarm of guests, his face visibly darkened with irritation.

He grabbed a glass of red wine from a passing tray, tilted his head back, and downed it in one go, shaking his head with a sigh.

Seriously, if you want something, just say it. You want me to put in a word with the Donquixote family, help smooth your business along—fine. But what's the point of dragging your wife into this?

That gown's neckline... it was practically down to her navel!

"These people are unbelievable..."

Momonga muttered as he rubbed his temples, feeling a headache coming on.

Just then, a voice laced with sarcasm drifted up from behind.

"Power, status, wealth... Sometimes, all that can be a real headache, can't it, Admiral Momonga?"

He turned to find Vinsmoke Judge had quietly joined him at some point, holding out a glass of chilled whiskey.

"Sounds like you're speaking from experience, Mr. Judge."

Momonga chuckled as he accepted the drink.

Judge gave a slow shake of his head, his eyes narrowing as he dropped his voice.

"Word is, Commodore Daren has stirred up quite a storm in the New World?"

Momonga gave him a quick glance, then broke into a smile.

"Nothing too serious—just wiped out the Beasts Pirates' main base."

Vinsmoke Judge's eyelid twitched.

As the commander of Germa 66, he knew full well how formidable the Beasts Pirates were.

One of their top executives, "Plague" Queen, had once been his colleague in a research team. That bizarre, suspenders-wearing lump of a man—Judge knew exactly how terrifying his power was.

When he first heard the news, Judge didn't quite believe it. In his memory, Daren was ridiculously strong, sure—but to destroy the Beasts Pirates' stronghold?

But now, hearing it straight from Momonga, Judge couldn't help but feel a cold chill creep down his spine.

He was quiet for a long moment before finally forcing out a sentence:

"Commodore Daren truly is the pride of the North Blue."

Momonga smiled, sensing the timing was right.

"By the way, Mr. Judge, regarding our North Blue Fleet's ongoing partnership with Germa 66, Commodore Daren has a minor proposal..."

Judge's brows furrowed slightly.

So he's using Daren to corner me?

Suppressing his annoyance, he replied,

"Please, go ahead, Admiral Momonga."

Momonga offered a polite smile.

"It concerns the new weapons and retrofit plans for our warships..."

...

Half a minute later, Vinsmoke Judge gave a measured nod.

"Not a problem."

He scanned the room with a frown.

"That brat Doflamingo still hasn't shown himself? He's really starting to overplay this 'big shot' act..."

His voice clearly carried a note of irritation.

Momonga smiled knowingly.

"Maybe he's tied up with something important... delayed by matters of great significance."

...

Meanwhile—

Inside the Donquixote family estate's grand hall.

While the entire upper crust of the North Blue patiently awaited the banquet's main event, its true star—Donquixote Doflamingo—was kneeling on one knee atop the cold marble floor, head lowered as he gently kissed the back of a man's hand.

With utmost reverence, he spoke:

"Welcome back to the North Blue... my godfather."

Chapter 250 - 250: Volume 2 – Chapter 152: Godfather and Godson

The hall of the estate was dim and cold.

The chandelier cast a pale, chilly glow, stretching shadows across the room.

"Doffy, how've things been lately?"

Daren sprawled lazily on a plush leather sofa, legs crossed, lighting a cigar as he asked the question with a relaxed smile.

Trebol and the other officers of the Donquixote family stood frozen in the shadows, stiff with tension. Not one dared breathe too loudly. The pressure in the room was suffocating.

They stole wary glances at Daren, who, despite sitting there so casually, radiated a terrifying aura of dominance.

He was like a sleeping beast—calm for now, but with the sheer presence of something that could erupt at any moment and tear everyone apart.

This guy's getting more terrifying by the day...

The tales they'd heard from Senor about Daren's bloody rampage through the Beasts Pirates' headquarters echoed in their minds. At this point, any lingering thoughts of defiance had been completely crushed. All that remained was fear.

Doflamingo, calm as ever, sat across from Daren. He caught the gold-embossed cigar Daren tossed to him, bit it between his lips, and smiled faintly.

"Thank you for your concern, Godfather."

"With Admiral Momonga's full support, the family's business and influence have been developing smoothly."

Daren gave a slight chuckle and shook his head.

"No, I don't really care about the Donquixote family's growth. I've always trusted your abilities—otherwise, I wouldn't have left the entire North Blue underworld in your hands."

"What I care about is your personal growth. After all, you're my godson."

He gave the blond teen in the pink feathered coat a once-over, quietly sensing the strength of his bio-magnetic field.

"From what I can see, you haven't let me down. You've made real progress..."

Raising a hand, Daren gestured a height and grinned.

"I still remember when I left the North Blue a few months ago, you were only about this tall. Now you're nearly 1.8 meters."

Daren didn't know Doflamingo's exact age, but he figured he had to be around twelve or thirteen.

That age comes with explosive growth—and Doflamingo wasn't just any kid. He was born to be a "dark king."

In Daren's eyes, the boy before him had changed drastically in physique and presence since his last visit.

Most notably, the strength of his bio-magnetic field had multiplied several times over.

The wild, rebellious aura, the cold gleam in his eyes, the cruelty etched between his brows—it was all starting to match the image of the overbearing Shichibukai Daren remembered from the future.

No wonder even Momonga had started to feel uneasy.

This kid's growth was absurd.

"That's good."

That was very good.

Doflamingo pressed his lips together, saying nothing.

Outwardly calm, but inside, suspicion and unease churned. He couldn't quite grasp what Daren truly meant.

"Having any trouble with your training lately?"

Daren suddenly asked, exhaling a thin trail of smoke like a dragon's breath.

Doflamingo raised an eyebrow.

What did he mean by that?

Suppressing his confusion, he answered slowly,

"Nothing major. I've been training hard, constantly developing my Devil Fruit powers and making sure not to neglect my physical conditioning."

"Oh?"

A grin crept onto Daren's face.

In the next instant, without warning, his figure vanished from the sofa with a sharp whoosh.

Doflamingo's pupils contracted to pinpoints. Every muscle in his body snapped taut.

Like a drawn bowstring pulled to its limit.

An overwhelming sense of danger surged over him. Cold sweat instantly beaded down his back.

He couldn't see it.

He couldn't track Daren's movement at all!

Before he had time to think, Doflamingo's instincts took over. His fingers curled into claws, and he lashed out at the space in front of him.

Clang!

A burst of sparks exploded, lighting up the black-haired Marine's dominant, arrogant face.

Five nearly invisible threads of razor-sharp wire stopped dead against Doflamingo's clawed hand, shimmering with a cold gleam under the chandelier.

Threads sharp enough to slice through steel and stone—yet now, they couldn't pierce human flesh.

"Young master!!"

"What are you trying to do!?"

"Damn it!!"

Trebol and the others finally snapped out of it, their expressions twisting as they drew their weapons in a panic.

"Stand down."

Doflamingo's cold voice cut through the tension, stopping them in their tracks.

A single bead of cold sweat traced down his cheek. Reflected in his sunglasses was Daren's smiling, handsome face. Doflamingo stared at him deeply, then let out a low, sinister laugh.

"Fufufufufu... No need to panic. Godfather's just testing how far my training's come."

Trebol and the rest froze, glancing at Daren with a mix of shock and disbelief.

Testing his training?

But that killing intent just now—it had felt like being drowned in a sea of corpses and blood. It was overwhelming enough to crush them where they stood.

Still, out of loyalty and faith in Doflamingo, they forced themselves to calm down, lowered their weapons, and stepped back a few paces.

They understood one thing perfectly well—if this Marine had really wanted to kill Doffy, not even all of them combined could've stopped him.

Seeing this, Daren finally smiled in satisfaction.

"Not bad. Your reactions were sharp, and your strength..."

With a casual flick of his fingers, he tugged on the razor-sharp threads.

Under the stunned gaze of Trebol and the others, those unbreakable wires twisted and bent into warped arcs in Daren's grasp—like they were nothing.

"...has grown quite a bit."

Daren looked at the blond youth before him, eyes full of approval, and gave a small smile.

"It's clear you haven't slacked off. As your godfather, that makes me proud."

"Doffy, remember this—business, enterprise, influence, territory... all those things that make people feel powerful, they're just illusions."

He gestured toward the corridor leading to the banquet hall, where the clink of glasses and the buzz of mingling voices could be faintly heard.

"Some people spend their whole lives rolling around in power and prestige, thinking they're great—successful, important. But to those with real strength? They're nothing more than ants."

"Don't let the success in front of you cloud your vision. This sea—at its core—is a brutal jungle. Only the strong survive. Only real power puts you above it all."

"Now... come at me. While I'm back in the North Blue, I might as well give you a little training."

"Otherwise, I wouldn't be much of a godfather, would I?"