

One Piece 281

Chapter 281 - 281: Volume 2 – Chapter 183: You Should Be Having Trouble Even Standing Up

Seeing Daren standing there with that "nothing-to-lose" look, Zephyr's mouth twitched.

Dealing with normal people most of the time, he sometimes forgot just how absurd this brat's physique and durability really were.

But soon, another thought crossed his mind.

"Still, something doesn't add up... With your strength, you should've awakened Observation Haki naturally by now."

He rubbed his slightly scruffy chin, a flicker of doubt in his eyes.

Daren just shrugged helplessly.

Observation Haki awakens differently from Armament Haki. It's more of a "listening" ability—an internal sense.

It allows the user to perceive the "presence" of others. As it develops, one can sense enemies outside their field of vision, their numbers, positions, and even predict what they'll do next.

Its core functions include sensing attacks, predicting movements, gauging someone's strength, reading their emotions or thoughts, and even perceiving the location and quantity of things out of sight. The range and precision of these abilities vary by person.

Some gifted individuals are even born with Observation Haki.

And among them, a few special cases have developed truly incredible applications beyond the standard abilities.

For example, as Daren recalled from the original story, Princess Otohime of Ryugu Palace on Fish-Man Island could use her Observation Haki to help her influence people's emotions and thoughts.

Then there was the legendary pirate "Red the Aloof," Patrick Redfield, who stood toe-to-toe with both Roger and Whitebeard. His unique Observation Haki let him read not just thoughts—but memories.

It was exactly because of its power that Daren had long desired to awaken Observation Haki.

Sure, his Devil Fruit's magnetic field sensing could substitute in some ways, but it just wasn't the same.

Not to mention that true masters of Observation Haki could even glimpse brief flashes of the future.

"Zephyr-sensei, I really don't know why. It's not like I haven't tried. I've trained, but nothing ever came of it."

Daren frowned slightly, trying to put his feelings into words.

"If Armament Haki came to me naturally, like water flowing through a channel—smooth and effortless—then Observation Haki is the opposite."

"It's like... when I look up at the sky, and there's this massive curtain blocking everything. I can't see a thing, no light at all. It's like..."

"...being blind," Zephyr cut in suddenly.

Daren froze for a second, then his eyes lit up.

He nodded quickly, a little excited.

"Zephyr-sensei, you've seen this kind of thing before!?"

Zephyr gave a proud grin.

"I've been teaching at the training camp for years. I've trained more outstanding students than I can count. Your case is rare, sure—but not unheard of."

Hearing that confidence, Daren couldn't help but smile and offer a bit of praise.

"Zephyr-sensei really is the Marines' chief instructor... Your insight and knowledge are leagues above the rest."

The flattery landed perfectly. Zephyr practically beamed, hands on his hips as he laughed.

"Now you see how amazing I am, huh? If you'd gone to Garp, that bastard would probably just say, 'You're overdue for a beating,' and leave it at that."

"Then what do you think, Zephyr-sensei?" Daren asked quickly.

He couldn't wait any longer—his eyes filled with anticipation.

Combat benefits aside, what mattered most was that he never wanted to go through that kind of embarrassment again.

"In your opinion, what's the real reason I haven't been able to awaken Observation Haki?"

Meeting Daren's hopeful gaze, Zephyr just smiled...

He said proudly, "You really are asking for a beating."

Daren: "..."

Are you seriously enjoying messing with me, you old geezer...?

"Hahaha..."

Zephyr raised his hand and patted Daren, who looked completely speechless, laughing as he said,

"The core of the issue is pretty much the same. That bastard Garp may be reckless and crude in his teaching, but with his experience and vision, his overall judgment is usually on point."

A gleam flashed in his deep-set eyes.

"Daren, the reason you haven't awakened Observation Haki is actually quite simple—it's just that you, being the one experiencing it, haven't noticed."

"To some extent, the awakening of Observation Haki is similar to Conqueror's Haki. Both are stress-induced responses that the body develops naturally under intense emotional stimulation."

Once he switched into teaching mode, Zephyr spoke fluidly and clearly. There was no denying he was an exceptional instructor—his explanations were both insightful and patient.

"When people face danger, as long as they've had proper training, the chances of awakening Observation Haki aren't low."

"But you've trained your body to such a ridiculous level that, in a way, you've dulled your sensitivity to danger..."

"And on top of that, your Devil Fruit ability partially replaces the function of Observation Haki. All of that combined is why you still haven't awakened it."

"Use it or lose it. That's not just a law of nature—it applies to us humans too. Now do you understand?"

Daren fell silent for a moment, clearly deep in thought.

"So that's how it is..."

He frowned slightly and asked,

"Then, Zephyr-sensei, how do I fix it?"

Zephyr smiled.

"Wait here a second."

As he spoke, he used Soru and disappeared in a flash.

Less than ten seconds later, Zephyr returned, reappearing right in front of Daren.

In his hand was a pair of dark blue-black shackles.

"What's that...?"

Daren blinked.

"These are Seastone shackles. The Seastone inside can suppress or even completely nullify a Devil Fruit user's powers, stopping you from using your magnetic field sensing ability."

Zephyr grinned confidently.

"With this, we can suppress your powers and weaken your body. Once you're under pressure and can't rely on your magnetic perception, your body will be forced to draw on its hidden potential. That'll seriously boost your chances of awakening Observation Haki."

"But Zephyr-sensei... these Seastone shackles, they actually—"

Daren tried to say something, but Zephyr waved him off.

"Alright, enough with the chatter. Put them on already."

"...Okay." Daren took the shackles and fastened them on himself.

"Hmm, you probably can't even stand up now, right? Hahaha! Come on! Hit me with a punch—let me see what your condition's like!"

Zephyr laughed loudly, completely at ease.

"Zephyr-sensei, are you sure? I mean, I actually..."

Daren hesitated again.

"Stop whining, you brat!!"

Zephyr snapped impatiently.

"Just hit me already—eh!?"

Bang!

A heavy punch slammed into Zephyr's abdomen like a hammer.

His expression froze instantly.

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Chapter 282 - 282: Volume 2 – Chapter 184: Fight to the Death

The training ground fell into complete silence.

Only the sound of wind and swirling sand drifted through the still air.

Daren's fist was still pressed against Zephyr's abdomen. Zephyr stood frozen, body stiff, the corner of his eye twitching slightly. Neither of them moved.

"Um... Zephyr-sensei, are you alright?"

Daren blinked and looked innocently at Zephyr's frozen expression. He slowly withdrew his fist, the Seastone shackles on his wrists jingling with a crisp clatter.

Zephyr's expression shifted as if he were suppressing something. Blood vessels faintly surfaced around his eyes.

He suddenly took a deep breath and looked at the Marine Commodore before him with a deeply aggrieved stare, his voice low and quiet.

"Seastone... doesn't affect you?"

Daren scratched his head, looking a little confused.

"When Kaidou captured me, his subordinate, 'The Plague' Queen, used Seastone shackles to restrain me. I used that time to train for Seastone resistance."

"While I couldn't use my Devil Fruit abilities, I could still move normally and maintain decent combat strength."

He gave the shackles on his wrists a little shake and added with a bit of regret,

"But that said, the purity of the Seastone shackles we use in the Marines seems a bit lacking..."

Zephyr: "..."

His chest rose and fell sharply as he clenched and unclenched his fists again and again.

He cursed furiously in his heart.

Of course the Marine HQ shackles aren't pure—what do you expect?

It's not like the Marines rely on these things to catch pirates!

High-purity Seastone shackles do exist, but most of them are reserved for Impel Down!

Zephyr stared at Daren, face unreadable.

"Why... didn't you say anything earlier?"

Daren spread his hands innocently.

"I was just about to, but you kept cutting me off and told me to hit you."

"I mean, what could I do? I've never heard such a weird request before, but it was your order, Zephyr-sensei. And as a Marine, it's my duty to follow orders."

He straightened his posture, looking every bit the model soldier.

"Besides, with your strength, Zephyr-sensei, I figured even without the shackles, I wouldn't be able to hurt you. So I just went ahead with it."

Zephyr: "..."

He pressed his lips together, his voice hoarse as he mumbled,

"Yeah... you did well."

"I was careless. I didn't expect you'd trained to resist Seastone."

"That's... good."

Daren nodded, then asked,

"So, Zephyr-sensei, what did you think of the punch?"

"Even though the Seastone was suppressing me and I felt weak, I used the punching technique Vice Admiral Garp taught me for that one."

"...Though I know I'm still far from meeting his standards."

Zephyr: "..."

He opened his mouth, voice dry as he said,

"Mm... not bad."

Only then did Daren let out a relieved breath and smile.

"Thank you, Zephyr-sensei. So, are we starting training now?"

"Yeah. Just... give me a moment."

Zephyr replied flatly, turning around and walking slowly to the edge of the training ground.

He stopped there.

Then bent forward...

Planted both hands on his knees...

And moved in one swift, practiced motion.

"Ugh!!"

A splash of thick yellow and white liquid hit the ground.

Zephyr, still facing away from Daren, wiped his mouth, then turned around and walked back with a calm expression.

"The food at the training camp might not be all that fresh."

Daren: "..."

"Get ready. Training starts now."

Zephyr's voice was hoarse, but for some reason, Daren sensed something off in his tone. A dangerous feeling crept up his spine.

Then he watched as Zephyr pulled out a military Den Den Mushi from his coat and spoke in a deep voice,

"Gion, bring everyone to the training ground."

Less than thirty seconds later, Gion and the other recruits had assembled. They looked between Zephyr and Daren with puzzled expressions.

"Hey, Daren, why are you wearing shackles?"

Kuzan waved cheerfully.

"Is this some kind of new training method?"

When he spotted the Seastone shackles on Daren's wrists, his eyes lit up with excitement.

"That's seriously cool!!"

Zephyr swept his eyes across the group and spoke in a stern voice.

"Daren is currently wearing Seastone shackles. He can't use his Devil Fruit powers, and his strength is heavily suppressed."

"Now, I'm giving you a task. No matter what method you use, no matter how you do it—as long as you land a hit on Daren, you earn one credit. These credits will directly impact your final graduation evaluation."

"If you don't earn any credits, your training for the next ten days will be doubled."

With that, Zephyr stepped aside with his hands behind his back, gritting his teeth as he muttered under his breath,

"Beat him to a pulp!"

Daren: ???

"Wait, Zephyr-sensei—"

Before he could finish, he felt countless pairs of wolfish eyes lock onto him.

A chill ran down his spine. He stiffly turned his head, forcing a smile.

"Uh... we're all classmates, comrades-in-arms here..."

"Hehehe... I never thought I'd see you like this," Tokikake chuckled creepily, cracking his knuckles.

Kuzan's eyes burned with fiery excitement.

"This is great! I've been dying to go at it with you again!"

Daren's mouth twitched. He instinctively looked toward Gion for help.

"Gion..."

Gion paused for a moment, then slowly drew the long sword at her waist. She smiled sweetly.

"To be honest, I've been wanting to do this for a while."

Daren: ...

He turned to Yamakaji.

The big guy gave him a sheepish laugh.

"Sorry, this is Zephyr-sensei's order."

The rest gave Daren apologetic looks—then promptly drew their swords with wild excitement gleaming in their eyes, their fighting spirits soaring.

Maybe it was just his imagination, but Daren could swear he saw sheer glee in their gazes.

They had waited far too long for this moment!

Daren's strength had long been etched in their minds, a monster towering high above them.

Many of them had been "abused" by him during training.

Now, with a golden opportunity to beat him up—without consequences—they couldn't resist the temptation.

"Hey, hey, hey, you're not seriously going through with this... Dammit!!"

Daren's face twitched as he watched the mob advance with vicious grins. He instinctively took a combat stance.

The next moment—

They all charged in at once!

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A short distance away, under a parasol at the edge of the training ground, Zephyr sat back, listening to Daren's screams echoing in the air. A satisfied smile crept onto his face.

He happily lit a cigar, squinted at the scene, and muttered with a chuckle,

"Daren, this is for your own good."

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Chapter 283 - 283: Volume 2 – Chapter 185: I'm the Punk?

The sun was setting.

On the training ground of the camp, Daren collapsed to the ground with a loud thud, gasping for breath. His face was swollen and bruised, his body covered in scrapes and welts of all kinds.

"Hehehe, don't blame me for this, Daren. It was Zephyr-sensei's order. Plus, we get credit for it..."

Tokikake strolled over smugly, putting on a fake "I didn't want to do this either" look as he grinned shamelessly.

Inside, it felt like a tiny version of himself was throwing his head back and laughing hysterically.

This felt way too good!

Back when he had to deal with that bastard Daren, he'd always get "trained" half to death under all sorts of ridiculous excuses.

Especially back in the North Blue—Daren had the nerve to call it "special training."

But now... he finally got payback!

The satisfaction he felt landing a kick right into Daren's face just now—he couldn't even put it into words.

It was better than a night out with the top girl in the red-light district—ten times better!

Daren rolled his eyes, clearly fed up, and didn't even bother responding.

"Sorry about that, Daren."

Yamakaji walked over too, scratching his head with an awkward smile.

The rest came by one after another to "apologize" as well.

Daren just waved them off weakly, looking utterly defeated.

Eventually, everyone cleared out.

The training ground was left with only Daren lying spread-eagle on the dirt, completely drained.

"How're you feeling, Daren?"

Zephyr's shadow fell over him, sunglasses blocking out the orange glow of the setting sun.

Maybe it was just his imagination, but Daren swore Zephyr had a bit of a smug look on his face.

"Any progress with your Observation Haki training?"

Daren let out a long breath, lips twitching slightly.

"I think... I'm starting to feel something. Sometimes, I can barely catch their movements... even from blind spots."

Zephyr smiled and nodded.

"Now you understand my good intentions, don't you?"

That said, deep down, Zephyr was still stunned by Daren's performance.

An entire hour of being ganged up on—even though the other trainees hadn't used their full strength—for someone wearing Seastone shackles, facing a group of top-tier Marine officers, Daren had still managed to hold his own relying purely on physical toughness and combat instincts. He even landed a few solid kicks on Tokikake during the fight.

That kind of absurd endurance... "monster" didn't even begin to describe it.

It was clear: Daren's combat ability was leagues above his peers.

Then again, considering the opponents Daren had faced in the past, Zephyr couldn't say he was entirely surprised.

"What really impresses me, Daren, is that you always manage to stay calm in battle."

Zephyr squatted down beside him, still smiling.

"Observation Haki is heavily tied to the mind. You need a steady, composed state to use it. If your emotions spiral out of control, Observation Haki can fail."

"With the way you're progressing, it won't be long before you awaken it properly."

Daren nodded thoughtfully.

He'd relied too much on his defensive power and his magnetic field sensing, so his body had never really developed the instinct for Observation Haki.

Even if he couldn't dodge, it didn't matter—he could tank a few hits and keep going.

But developing Haki was deeply connected to willpower.

Take Charlotte Katakuri, for example—he took Observation Haki to the extreme, awakening the ability to glimpse into the future. It all stemmed from his unwavering resolve to protect his family.

He couldn't allow himself to make mistakes. That obsession drove him to the peak of Observation Haki.

"So... Zephyr-sensei, can you take off these Seastone shackles now?"

Daren exhaled in frustration.

"Nope."

Zephyr chuckled and shook his head, speaking with deliberate emphasis.

"Until you've properly awakened Observation Haki, those shackles stay on."

"You need to get used to not having your magnetic field sensing from the Jiki Jiki no Mi. The more you adapt, the better your odds of awakening Observation Haki."

"So just bear with it for now, Daren."

"Besides, think of it as extra resistance training for Seastone."

Is that so...

Daren glanced down at the heavy shackles weighing down his wrists.

Zephyr patted him on the shoulder with a grin.

"Alright, go home and rest."

"And don't forget to eat up—there'll be plenty more training like today."

He winked.

Daren: "..."

I appreciate your dedication, really, but why does this feel like you're just taking revenge?

Looking at that mischievous grin on Zephyr's face, Daren couldn't help but complain silently in his heart.

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Dragging his aching body, Daren made his way toward the family quarters under the dusky twilight.

His military uniform had been torn to shreds during the earlier "beatdown," now hanging off him like a ragged sheet. His body was covered in cuts and bruises, and the heavy Seastone shackles clamped around his wrists added to the sorry sight. The once-feared "King of the North Blue" now looked more like a worn-out prisoner.

As he passed through a narrow alley, he suddenly came to a stop.

Gion's tall silhouette stood ahead, watching him calmly.

"How are you feeling?"

Her voice was soft, and she glanced away, as if a little embarrassed.

"You were the one hacking away at me the hardest..." Daren muttered, clearly annoyed.

Gion's face flushed as she stepped forward, pulling out a tin of ointment and gently applying it to his wounds.

"I was afraid if I held back... the others would notice something."

She spoke quietly, her slender fingers brushing across his chest, sending a faint tickle through him.

Daren let out a sigh.

He understood where she was coming from.

Girls could be sensitive—and then there was his "scumbag" reputation to deal with.

If people found out that the "Flower of the Marines" had become his woman... she'd never hear the end of it.

It would be like a perfectly prim and proper noble lady falling for some scruffy street punk. Not that he cared—he could take the heat. But Gion was still young. She didn't deserve to carry that kind of burden.

Thinking about it, Daren couldn't help but chuckle to himself.

People love to talk trash about punks—but deep down, everyone wants to be one.

"Does it hurt...?"

Daren didn't respond. He just smiled and pointed to his face.

A hint of pink flashed across Gion's cheeks. She leaned in and gave him a quick peck on the cheek—then spun around and ran off with her high ponytail bouncing behind her.

It was just a small moment, but it lifted Daren's spirits.

He hummed to himself as he continued home.

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By the time he stepped inside, Toki had already laid out a steaming hot meal.

"Toki, I'm home."

Daren called out with a smile.

Amatsuki Toki, dressed in a soft pink kimono, turned around. The moment she saw him, her face lit up, her smile gentle and bright.

"Husband, you're back."

Her eyes dropped to the Seastone shackles on his wrists, a puzzled look on her face.

"Huh? What are those..."

"Ah, just a prop," Daren replied casually, not wanting to explain too much. "Nothing to worry about."

"A prop..."

Toki murmured, her cheeks suddenly flushing as some thought crossed her mind. Her fingers fidgeted nervously in front of her, and she whispered shyly,

"Does that mean... you want me to tie you up?"

Daren: ...

Where the hell did that come from...

Then again... maybe not such a bad idea.

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Chapter 284 - 284: Volume 2 – Chapter 186: A New Mission

Time passed steadily, filled with purpose.

Before long, six months had flown by.

Throughout that half year, Daren continued wearing the Seastone shackles. In the mornings, he trained with Garp at the abandoned port, throwing punches until his arms went numb. In the afternoons, he worked on developing his Observation Haki—under the constant "group beatdowns" from his fellow trainees at the camp.

As for the evenings... well, those weren't up to him.

Sometimes it was Gion. Sometimes it was Toki. And sometimes, it was Gion first, then Toki. Life was fulfilling, though a little rough on his back.

An unexpected bonus was that over time, Daren actually started getting used to the shackles. The Seastone's suppressive effect on his Devil Fruit powers seemed to weaken noticeably.

While his Jiki Jiki no Mi abilities remained sealed, the draining weakness it used to cause had lessened significantly.

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Marine Headquarters – Abandoned Port

The skeletal remains of warships lay scattered across the dusty ground, their surfaces marked with deep, unmistakable fist dents.

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

Drenched in sweat, Daren was hammering away at a warship like it was a punching bag. Every strike made the Seastone shackles around his wrists ring out with a crisp metallic clink.

Not far off, Garp lounged under a sunshade, munching on donuts and watching Daren's back with a look of satisfied approval.

Wearing Seastone shackles made Daren's punches exponentially weaker. Breaking a warship in that condition required effort far beyond his usual strength.

But the kid stuck with it—gritting his teeth and powering through.

Just then, an overly enthusiastic voice rang out.

"Hey! Garp-san! Teach me too!"

Garp blinked and turned around to see a tall figure with a head of black curls, waving energetically.

Not this again... Garp sighed internally.

Ever since Kuzan found out last month that he was training Daren, the kid had been showing up every day, beaming with excitement, pleading to be taught as well.

Garp didn't have the time. According to the latest reports, Shiki had resurfaced in the New World, and Sengoku was tearing his hair out over it.

As for Roger, nothing major had happened—except that he'd recently clashed with "Red the Aloof" Patrick Redfield. The two had wrecked an entire small island in the process, sparking fear across several nations.

Garp had been planning to head back out to sea in a couple of days, so he flat-out rejected Kuzan.

But the kid just wouldn't give up. The more he was turned down, the more fired up he got, showing up daily with undying determination.

Thinking of all that, Garp muttered irritably,

"Kuzan, if you want to learn something, go to the camp and ask an instructor..."

"But I've already learned everything there is to learn!"

Kuzan shouted back, fists clenched, his eyes locked on Daren's back, brimming with fighting spirit.

"I can't fall behind Daren—he's my lifelong rival!"

You moron... Garp groaned and clutched his forehead.

"Alright, alright, come on over."

He sighed heavily in resignation.

Truth be told, Garp didn't dislike the kid. Kuzan's talent was undeniable—like Sakazuki and Borsalino, he was a "monster" in his own right.

But after his less-than-stellar experiences mentoring his own son and Sakazuki, Garp wasn't exactly thrilled about working with another so-called "prodigy."

Honestly, if it hadn't been for the favor he owed Daren, he wouldn't have even bothered training him either.

Kuzan lit up instantly and jogged over, face full of anticipation.

Garp stood from his deck chair and walked over to a nearby wrecked warship.

Off to the side, Daren paused his training and wiped the sweat from his brow, watching curiously.

Just like before, Garp began giving Kuzan the exact same demonstration he had once shown Daren.

"Watch closely. I'm only showing this once."

As Garp spoke, his expression sharpened—and with a single punch, he let loose!

A deep, muffled boom echoed across the port as the massive warship before him exploded into countless fragments, scattering like confetti in the wind.

"Whoa..."

Kuzan's eyes lit up, staring wide-eyed at the now-demolished ship. His voice came out in a daze.

"That's... insanely cool..."

Garp gave a faint smile.

"Got it now?"

He said casually, glancing over at Kuzan.

By this point, even Garp was starting to realize just how rough his teaching methods were. But honestly, part of him hoped this would be too difficult for Kuzan and he'd just give up.

What he didn't expect was for Kuzan to fall into deep thought... then, a few seconds later, grin and say:

"I think I get it."

Daren: ???

You actually got it?

Garp's face was filled with disbelief too.

"Then give it a try."

Kuzan chuckled, scratching his head as he walked over to a nearby warship. Clumsily mimicking Garp's stance, he threw a slow, deliberate punch.

Bang!

There was a dull thud. Not too loud, but the entire ship shuddered violently. Cracks immediately spread across its hull like spiderwebs.

"Uh... I think this is how it's supposed to go. Too bad I couldn't completely break it."

Kuzan scratched his head, looking slightly embarrassed.

Garp and Daren both stood frozen, mouths agape.

"You... you actually understood it!?"

Garp suddenly snapped out of it, eyes gleaming as he grabbed Kuzan's hands.

Kuzan nodded eagerly. "Yeah, yeah."

Garp blinked, then threw his hands on his hips and burst into hearty laughter.

"Bwahahaha! I knew it! It wasn't my teaching that was the problem—it's just that you guys didn't have the talent!"

He pointed at Kuzan.

"You, kid... not bad! From today on, you'll be training with me!"

Kuzan laughed excitedly as well.

Daren, meanwhile, stood off to the side, completely dumbfounded, watching these two meatheads laughing with their hands on their hips. Black lines practically floated above his head.

This...

He suddenly covered his face.

So that's it. This "serious punch" technique... only works on single-cell organisms.

"Daren! You see that? I'll be catching up to you in no time!"

Kuzan's eyes burned with competitive fire.

"Yeah, yeah..."

Daren didn't even want to argue anymore. He just waved him off.

...

"It sure is lively over here..."

A slow, almost smug voice rang out just then.

As soon as the words fell, countless golden photons gathered into a tall figure before them.

"Vice Admiral Garp."

Borsalino greeted Garp with a laid-back smile, then turned his gaze toward Daren.

"Commodore Daren, you've got a mission."

Before Daren could respond, Garp grumbled,

"Hey, hey, hey, Borsalino, Daren's my student now."

Borsalino raised both hands innocently.

"This is Admiral Sengoku's order..."

Garp's face stiffened.

He was well aware of the trouble his son had caused Sengoku.

So he immediately changed his tone without missing a beat.

"Alright then, Daren, go ahead and take care of it."

Garp kept a straight face as he added,

"Not like you've got much talent anyway. Staying here would just be a waste of time."

Daren: "..."

The corner of his mouth twitched. He looked at Borsalino and asked, clearly annoyed,

"What's the target?"

Borsalino's smile didn't fade as he answered,

"Shiki... the Golden Lion."

Chapter 285 - 285: Volume 2 – Chapter 187: A Clash of Scoundrels?

Shiki the Golden Lion!?

A legendary Great Pirate—his name stood shoulder to shoulder with Roger and Whitebeard. And according to Marine Headquarters, he was considered even more dangerous than either of them!

The moment the name was spoken, Daren's eyes narrowed sharply. Garp and Kuzan, standing nearby, also froze for a second.

"Hey, hey, hey. Daren hasn't even graduated from the training camp yet. You're seriously sending him up against Shiki? That's insane," Garp said bluntly in his usual gruff tone.

While Daren's strength was already formidable, he was still far from reaching Shiki's level. And Garp, who had clashed with the Golden Lion more than once, knew that better than anyone.

Daren fell silent.

This wasn't the crippled Shiki who'd eventually get smacked around by Monkey D. Luffy. This was Shiki at his peak—an apex predator in the sea, both feared and unstoppable.

A terrifying Devil Fruit power.

Unrivaled twin-swordsmanship.

And a monstrous ambition to dominate the seas and reshape the world...

Daren had no doubt: this guy had definitely awakened Conqueror's Haki.

It wasn't an exaggeration to say that, at this stage, Shiki might even be more dangerous than Roger or Whitebeard. He was the kind of threat that made even elite Marines cautious.

After all, this was the man who once stormed Marineford alone, destroyed half the base, and was only subdued when Garp and Sengoku teamed up to take him down.

Borsalino shrugged and smiled.

"Orders from Admiral Sengoku. And he'll be commanding this mission personally."

Daren's gaze flickered.

So that's the plan—bring me along to counter the Fuwa Fuwa no Mi.

He understood immediately.

Without further hesitation, he smiled and asked,

"Alright. When do we depart?"

After half a year holed up in Marine Headquarters, training relentlessly, he was more than ready to set sail again.

Training behind closed doors had its limits. To become a real powerhouse, actual combat experience was irreplaceable.

And besides... he wanted to see with his own eyes just how terrifying the Golden Lion really was.

"We set sail tomorrow. Get yourself ready," Borsalino said lazily. Then his body dissolved into golden light and disappeared.

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"Hm... Going out to sea again is probably the right move," Garp muttered as he looked at Daren. "You've done your training. Any more at this point would just be redundant."

"But listen carefully, Daren. Don't let your guard down... Shiki isn't like any pirate you've faced before."

"Roger, Whitebeard, Byrnni World... All powerful figures of their time, sure. But none of them were inherently evil."

"Byrnni World wants to challenge the World Government. Whitebeard just wants to protect his family. Roger? That idiot just wanted to explore freely. Yeah, they've all done bad things as pirates... but that's the extent of it."

"But Shiki..."

Garp's expression darkened. A rare flicker of caution and unease appeared in his eyes.

"Shiki is a pure pirate."

"Plundering, destruction, deception, cunning, patience, greed... There's no line he won't cross to achieve his goals. No morals, no code. Nothing is off-limits."

"And with that Fuwa Fuwa no Mi of his, every time he resurfaces, it's a nightmare for us."

Daren nodded, smiling calmly.

"Understood, Vice Admiral Garp. I'll stay sharp."

Garp was taken aback by how composed he was. For a moment, he thought Daren wasn't taking the warning seriously.

But then it hit him.

Plundering, destruction, deception, cunning, patience, greed, and ruthlessness...

Wait a second—wasn't that just Daren's résumé?

Or better yet, wasn't Daren basically the Marine version of Shiki?

Well damn. Maybe he was worrying for nothing.

Garp let out a helpless chuckle.

With Sengoku and Borsalino on the mission, they'd have more than enough firepower to deal with Shiki. And with Daren's scheming, underhanded brain at work, they probably wouldn't be at any real risk.

If anything, it was Shiki who might end up getting played.

And suddenly, it all made sense.

This wasn't just a mission.

Sengoku was sending the "Marine scoundrel" to take on the "Pirate scoundrel."

"That's so cool!"

Kuzan finally couldn't hold back his excitement. Pumping his fist into the air, he shouted loudly, his eyes blazing with admiration.

"Daren, you're seriously going to take on Shiki the Golden Lion, the legendary Great Pirate!"

He turned eagerly to Garp.

"Garp-san! Let me go too!"

"No!"

Both Daren and Garp responded in unison.

Kuzan: "..."

Daren had no intention of dragging that hot-blooded loudmouth along just to have him chattering nonstop the entire trip.

"Kuzan, you still lack real combat experience against top-tier opponents. This mission is too dangerous for you," Garp said flatly. "Wait until you finish training under me—then we'll talk."

He looked at Kuzan with a rare flicker of approval in his eyes.

He'd finally found a student who actually understood his chaotic teaching style—no way was he letting the kid out of his hands this soon.

"Hey, Daren, why are you still standing here? Get moving already," Garp said, waving at him like swatting away a fly.

Daren: ...

Seriously? Is the double standard necessary?

A few dark lines crept across his forehead.

...

The next morning.

As the horizon began to lighten with the first signs of dawn, Daren was already up.

His bags were neatly packed—Toki had taken care of everything and placed them by the door.

Looking at her sleeping soundly, Daren couldn't help but chuckle, remembering their wild goodbye the night before.

"Tekkai really came in handy," he muttered with a grin.

Stretching with a satisfied yawn, the Seastone shackles on his wrists clinked lightly.

After grabbing a quick breakfast, he picked up his luggage and stepped outside.

Bathed in the golden glow of sunrise, he walked at an easy pace toward the military port.

The house behind him grew smaller with each step, and with it, the calmness of his everyday life slowly faded.

...

At the port, Marines were busy loading boxes of supplies onto the warship.

In the midst of the commotion, Sengoku—who had been barking orders—suddenly paused. Turning around, he spotted Daren approaching and gave a faint smile.

"You're here?"

Daren raised his hand and saluted crisply.

"Commodore Rogers Daren of Marine Headquarters, reporting in!"

Sengoku glanced at the Seastone shackles still locked on Daren's wrists and asked with a trace of surprise,

"You're still wearing those?"

Daren smiled casually.

"I've gotten used to them. I'll take them off once we're on the way."

Sengoku nodded.

With the ammunition, food, and other supplies already loaded, he turned and led Daren onto the warship.

The cold sea breeze whipped through the air, laced with a solemn, battle-bound tension.

"Set sail!"

...

Chapter 286 - 286: Volume 2 – Chapter 188: Facing Death

The warship sailed steadily across the sea.

The cold ocean wind sent the seagull flag atop the mast flapping sharply in the breeze.

Daren stood quietly at the bow, ignoring the curious glances from the Marines around him at the Seastone shackles on his wrists. Eyes closed, he let the wind wash over him, taking in a moment of brief peace.

At the same time, he carefully assessed the condition of his body:

Physique: 85.812

Strength: 74.513

Speed: 73.001

Armament Haki: 43.035

Conqueror's Haki: 52.301

Over the past six months, Daren had focused mainly on developing his Observation Haki and studying hand-to-hand combat under Garp.

As a result, the most noticeable improvements were in Strength and Armament Haki.

Compared to half a year ago, his Strength had risen by 3 points, while Armament Haki had jumped from 38 to 43—a full 5-point increase.

Physique and Speed had also gone up slightly, gaining 2 to 3 points as a spillover effect from training.

Daren was fairly satisfied with the results.

As his base stats increased, each additional point became exponentially harder to gain.

Take Physique, for example—regular endurance training no longer had much impact on someone like him.

It was clear that the closer any stat got to the cap of 100, the harder it would be to improve.

Worse still, a serious injury could even cause his stats to drop.

"How's your training been going lately, Daren?"

Admiral Sengoku approached, his cloak billowing slightly, and casually handed Daren a cigar.

Daren took it without hesitation and gave a slight smile.

"Not bad."

Sengoku lit his own cigar and said slowly,

"At your level, regular training doesn't do much anymore. If you want to improve, you'll either need to devote an enormous amount of time to disciplined, even brutal training—or face real combat."

He glanced at the Seastone shackles on Daren's wrists.

"How's your Observation Haki development coming along?"

Daren let out a wry smile.

"I've almost reached the threshold, but it still feels hazy—like I'm just one step away."

Sengoku's expression shifted as a thought struck him. He stared at Daren, half in shock.

"You're not... planning to fight Shiki while restrained by Seastone, using the threat of death to force a breakthrough in Observation Haki, are you?"

Daren stared out at the vast sea ahead, his voice low.

"It's the only way."

"The training Zephyr-sensei arranged for me was helpful, but in the camp, my opponents are all comrades. They're not going to try and kill me."

"I can feel it—if I stay stuck at this stage without breaking through, my chances of awakening Observation Haki will just keep dropping over time."

"...Facing death is the best way."

Humans are creatures of habit.

Once you grow used to relying on physical toughness and Devil Fruit powers in battle, your body's subconscious "need" for Observation Haki starts to fade.

And according to data from the training camp and Zephyr-sensei's own experience, the older you get, the harder it becomes to awaken Haki.

Daren was already twenty.

He might still look young, but time was no longer on his side.

There was a brief, heavy silence.

"...You're crazy."

After a long silence, Sengoku finally spoke.

Daren laughed it off.

"If you're not a little crazy, how can you compete with those real 'monsters'?"

As he spoke, the scene from the day before surfaced in his mind.

Just from watching once, that guy Kuzan had basically figured out Garp's fist technique.

How he figured it out?

Daren had no idea.

Just like Garp couldn't clearly explain his own teaching methods, Kuzan couldn't really explain how he'd learned it either.

Some things are just like that—you either get it or you don't.

The only word that could describe it was: talent.

And it wasn't like Garp's fist technique was anything as common as the Marine Rokushiki. It was a true secret art.

Kuzan had taken only a minute to catch up to what Daren had spent half a year barely scratching the surface of.

That was what a real "monster" looked like.

Hearing Daren's words, Sengoku went quiet for a moment. His eyes drifted unconsciously to the other side of the deck.

On the side of the ship, Borsalino lay leisurely on a beach chair, sipping a glass of watermelon juice.

Sengoku's mouth twitched.

With that lazy look of his, was he really on a mission to hunt down the legendary Great Pirate, Shiki the Golden Lion?

Calling it a paid vacation wouldn't even be a stretch.

But despite his loafing around, Sengoku was finding it harder and harder to gauge his strength.

Even though Borsalino was his own adjutant, Sengoku couldn't get a clear read on his combat capability.

And that was frightening.

That bastard never did anything serious all day, and Sengoku had never once seen him train properly!

Shaking his head, Sengoku changed the subject.

"Daren, do you know why I brought you along this time?"

Daren thought for a moment before answering slowly.

"My Devil Fruit ability is well-suited for large-scale battles."

Sengoku nodded with a satisfied smile.

"Exactly. Sakazuki may outclass you in sheer destructive power, but when it comes to dealing with Shiki's Flying Pirate Fleet, your ability is far more suited to the task."

"More importantly, I want you to witness the power of that fleet with your own eyes. If possible, we can use it as a model to create our own flying fleet for the Marines."

Hearing that, Daren frowned.

He picked up on something else behind Sengoku's words.

"Admiral Sengoku, are you saying that the main objective of this mission isn't to take down Shiki?"

Sengoku sighed and shook his head, his expression growing serious.

"That guy Shiki is extremely cunning. He's not someone you can take down so easily."

"The Marines have tried to corner him multiple times before, but he's always managed to slip away using his Devil Fruit powers."

"He's nothing like Whitebeard or Roger. He's vicious, ruthless, and completely cold-blooded. He doesn't care about the lives of others, and when push comes to shove, he'll even use his own men as shields."

"That's why our top priority this time is to eliminate the main force of the Flying Pirate Fleet."

...

Chapter 287 - 287: Volume 2 – Chapter 189: You're Too Late

One day later.

Somewhere in the New World...

"We should be getting close. According to our intel, Shiki's last known appearance was near this area."

On the deck of the warship, Sengoku calmly flipped through the nautical chart in his hands. He adjusted his black-rimmed glasses as he spoke.

Daren narrowed his eyes at the vast ocean ahead, frowning.

Even with the Marine's massive intelligence network, finding a pirate crew in this endless sea was no easier than finding a needle in a haystack.

He was starting to understand the difficulties Sengoku and the other Marine top brass faced.

It wasn't that the Marines were incompetent—standing by and letting the Great Pirate Era run rampant, allowing so many pirates to wreak havoc across the seas.

The truth was, the world was just too vast. Communication and intelligence networks were underdeveloped. Warships, while not exactly slow, were still nothing compared to the sheer scale of the ocean.

Even if they acted immediately upon receiving intel about a pirate sighting, by the time the main force arrived, it would already be hours or even days later.

And that's not even considering how unpredictable and treacherous the weather in the New World could be.

All of this made the Marines' ability to chase down pirates incredibly inefficient.

These were objective limitations—ones that couldn't be easily overcome.

And that was one of the main reasons Sengoku was so desperate to establish a flying fleet.

The Marines didn't lack firepower—they lacked mobility.

If they had a flying fleet, their maneuverability would increase exponentially. With that, their ability to pursue pirates would reach an unthinkable level.

"Wandering around like headless flies won't get us anywhere. Admiral Sengoku, have we figured out why Shiki the Golden Lion showed up this time?"

Daren frowned.

Sengoku shook his head.

"No, we haven't. Shiki is extremely secretive, highly strategic, and excellent at concealing his objectives."

Daren's frown deepened. This wasn't going to be easy...

"Hmm? Looks like something serious is happening over there..."

Borsalino's lazy voice cut in.

He raised his hand and casually pointed toward a direction on the distant sea, his smile laced with amusement.

Daren and Sengoku followed his gaze, and their expressions immediately shifted.

Through the thin sea mist, the faint outline of a small island came into view.

Thick black smoke was rising into the air above the island, hanging heavy and unmoving.

As a cold sea breeze swept over them, both Daren and Sengoku's eyes narrowed sharply.

The smell of blood!

So thick... it was overwhelming.

"Land on the island!"

Sengoku didn't hesitate and gave the order at once.

...

Corpses.

Mangled corpses.

The entire town on the island was strewn with severed limbs. Crumbled, low-built civilian homes lay in ruins, blood soaking the ground and splattered across the shattered remnants of walls.

Jagged sword marks crisscrossed the earth, and the clean, smooth cuts in the buildings made it obvious—this was the work of a master swordsman.

Dusk approached, casting the fading sunlight over the devastated remains of the town.

Everything before them was desolate and lifeless. Vultures were already pecking at the rotting bodies.

The stench of decay and blood was overpowering—so pungent it turned the stomach.

The Marines who had come ashore turned pale. Many of the younger ones felt their guts twist, on the verge of throwing up.

"That bastard!!"

Sengoku's sudden roar shattered the oppressive silence.

His bloodshot eyes locked onto the carnage around him, teeth clenched tight.

Daren's expression darkened as well.

There was no need to guess. In this vast sea, only one person was capable of such a brutal massacre of civilians.

And with those terrifying slash marks, still brimming with a cold and violent energy...

"Looks like we were a step too late. Shiki's already been here..."

Borsalino sighed, his tone a mix of helplessness and resignation.

Sengoku's face was grim.

"Search for clues. See if there are any survivors."

The chances were slim, but it was still their duty to try.

At his order, the accompanying Marines fanned out immediately.

...

A few minutes later—

"Admiral Sengoku! We've got a survivor here!"

A panicked voice rang out nearby.

Sengoku and the others rushed toward it.

Beneath a collapsed wall lay a man, his body soaked in blood and his face deathly pale.

His lower half was crushed under the rubble, completely immobile.

"How are you feeling?"

Sengoku crouched down beside him, voice tight with urgency.

As he spoke, he glanced toward the ship's doctor, who silently shook his head.

No saving him...

The man struggled to open his eyes. Through the blur, he made out the Marine uniform Sengoku wore.

"Ma... Marines..."

His hoarse voice barely made it out. Then, unexpectedly, he smiled.

There was a sorrowful, almost bitter trace behind that smile.

"You're too late..."

Cloudy tears welled up in his eyes and slid down his stiff cheeks.

"I'm sorry."

Sengoku paused. His gaze dimmed, and he replied quietly.

"Sorry?"

The man slowly lifted his head, staring blankly at Sengoku. His lips curled into a hollow, mocking grin.

Blood-tears welled up in his empty eyes. Then, suddenly, he exploded in fury, his eyes burning red.

"We paid the Heavenly Tribute!"

"Every day we worked ourselves to the bone—groveling like dogs before tax collectors, too scared to even see a doctor when we got sick!"

"My wife died in bed because of it! She couldn't afford a doctor, couldn't afford medicine!"

"All because we had to keep paying that damned Heavenly Tribute!!"

"And in the end? When the pirates came, where were you Marines?!"

"You strut around in your pristine uniforms, riding your magnificent warships, flaunting your power! And now you stand here and tell me... 'I'm sorry'?!"

"My father, my mother... my two children... they're all dead!!"

"This is your justice?! This is how the Marines protect us after taking the Heavenly Tribute?!"

His weak, grief-stricken roar echoed through the ruins like thunder, startling flocks of vultures into flight.

The Marines stood frozen, heads bowed in silence.

Sengoku opened his mouth, lips trembling, but no words came out.

He could've explained so much.

That the Heavenly Tribute had nothing to do with the Marines. That most of it never reached them—it all went to the Celestial Dragons to fund their extravagant, hedonistic lifestyles.

That the sea was vast, and they'd gotten here as fast as they could.

That the Marine forces were stretched thin, and Marine Headquarters was far from the New World...

There were countless reasons.

But for this man—who had already lost everything, and was moments away from death—none of that mattered.

...

Chapter 288 - 288: Volume 2 – Chapter 190: Moa Moa Reappears

"So don't give me any of that 'I'm sorry' or 'my apologies'... You Marines love to talk about justice... cough, cough..."

The man broke into a violent coughing fit, black blood spilling from his mouth. His pale face began turning a sickly purple-black.

He gasped for air, barely clinging to life, and let out a cold, mocking laugh.

"...Justice that arrives too late is no justice at all!"

Sengoku and the others stood in silence.

At some point, it had started to rain.

The steady drizzle washed the blood from the rubble, but it couldn't cleanse the heavy weight pressing on everyone's hearts.

"You're right. The Marines' justice... really is bullshit."

A cold voice suddenly cut through the air.

Everyone looked up in surprise to see Daren slowly crouch beside the dying man, his gaze calm.

He pulled a cigarette pack from his coat and took one out.

"Want a smoke?"

The man blinked in surprise, then gave a faint nod.

Daren placed the cigarette between his lips, struck a lighter, and lit it for him.

The man took a long drag, then choked and coughed again.

"What's done is done. I know words like 'I'm sorry' mean nothing to you now. Justice delayed isn't justice... but to be honest, I've never cared much for 'justice' anyway."

Lighting a cigarette for himself, Daren smiled.

"I only believe in one thing—payback."

"So if you know anything, anything at all... tell me. Even the smallest clue can help us find the bastard who did this, take him out, and avenge your family..."

He glanced at the man, whose pupils were already starting to fade, his life flickering like a candle in the wind.

"And get revenge for you too."

The man stayed quiet for a moment.

As he looked up at the Marine Commodore in front of him, he suddenly realized—this man was nothing like the others.

There was a wild, reckless fire in his eyes.

Was he insane?

The man suddenly let out a faint laugh.

"Three days ago, a fleet stopped by our town to resupply. Rumor was, they'd found some kind of treasure—something priceless. They were planning to sell it off to a big name in the underworld."

"Two days later, Shiki showed up."

"He went on a slaughter... torturing, killing, trying to force out any information about that fleet's whereabouts. And now... you're looking at the aftermath."

A treasure...?

At his words, everyone—including Daren—furrowed their brows, deep in thought.

With Shiki's power and reputation, there was no way he'd be interested in ordinary loot.

Whether it was wealth, supplies, weapons, or territory—anything he wanted, he could just take. He had no need to go through all that trouble.

He lacked for nothing.

"Do you know what he was after?"

Sengoku asked, tense.

The man cast him a scornful glance and slowly shook his head.

Daren spoke up again.

"If Shiki's after it, it's got to be something that can help him conquer the seas."

Sengoku nodded in agreement.

"Do you know where that fleet went?"

He turned back to the man to ask, but the words froze in his throat.

Caw, caw, caw...

Crows passed overhead.

Cold rain fell steadily, pattering against the ground, splashing mud up onto their boots and uniforms.

The man's pupils had gone completely dull, his body stiff and motionless.

The cigarette between his dry, cracked lips had long since gone out.

He was dead.

...

The trail had gone cold.

In the ruins of the town, the Marines moved silently, each focused on their task.

Besides searching for any remaining survivors, they were also combing the area for clues—anything that could lead them to Shiki or the merchant fleet.

Cold rain fell steadily.

Daren, draped in a large hooded coat that concealed half his face, moved through a corner of the wreckage, a cigarette between his lips.

He came to a stop before a building that had been cleaved clean in two. Stepping closer, he reached out to trace the sword mark, one that had nearly split the very earth.

Since training under Garp in hand-to-hand combat, Daren had gradually come to understand that Garp's strength stemmed from the explosive force created through the intense fusion of mind, body, and technique.

It came down to willpower—or more precisely, an overwhelming sense of "presence."

If Garp's punches carried a forceful, unstoppable grandeur, then the sword strike that left this scar reeked of something entirely different—wild, cruel, and ruthless.

It wasn't hard to picture the kind of person capable of such a blow.

Someone twisted, violent.

Someone who treated life like a game, who'd stop at nothing to get what they wanted.

Someone who could laugh at death—others' and even their own.

Gradually, a tyrant's image began to form in Daren's mind.

Brr brr... brr brr...

Suddenly, the Den Den Mushi in his pocket rang.

Daren paused, then pulled out an encrypted line. When he saw the signal flashing across it, he narrowed his eyes.

He scanned the area to ensure no one was watching, then connected the call.

A deep, arrogant chuckle came through the line.

"Fufufufu... Dear Godfather-sama, I've got some good news for you."

The Den Den Mushi mimicked Donquixote Doflamingo's face perfectly, down to his crooked grin.

"The thing you've always wanted me to find... has finally surfaced."

A glint flashed through Daren's eyes.

As if connecting the dots, he squinted slightly, his gaze sharpening like a pair of blades.

Doflamingo chuckled darkly.

"That little treasure has fallen into the hands of the New World's Underworld Emperor—the 'Loan Shark King,' Lu Feld. Word is, he's holding an auction on a neutral island tomorrow. Highest bidder takes it."

"Plenty of players have already caught wind of it... including some real monsters."

Daren exhaled slowly, his voice low.

"Got it."

"Let me guess... one of those 'monsters' is Shiki the Golden Lion, isn't it?"

There was a pause. Then Doflamingo laughed again.

"Fufufufu... Looks like Godfather-sama already has things in motion. I'll stay out of it."

"Thanks, Doffy."

Daren ended the call without another word.

The Donquixote Family had influence in the North Blue, sure—but in the New World, they were nothing special. He had never planned to involve Doflamingo anyway.

But this information...

Now everything made sense.

Daren turned, tucked away the Den Den Mushi, and strode quickly toward Sengoku.

"Admiral Sengoku, I know what Shiki's after."

Sengoku, who had been coordinating with the others, froze mid-task.

"What is it!?"

Daren tilted his head toward the stormy sky above.

"The ability of the 'World Destroyer' Byrnndi World... the Moa Moa no Mi."

At those words, Sengoku's face changed instantly.

...

Chapter 289 - 289: Volume 2 – Chapter 191: Coin Island

The New World.

Coin Island.

This island was once a barren wasteland, but thanks to its unique position at the crossroads of several major trade routes in the New World, it gradually developed into a thriving hub of commerce and logistics.

Over time, the island became hotly contested by various underground factions and pirate crews. After all, the more prosperous a place, the more money, intelligence, and resources flowed through it—in other words, massive profit potential.

After more than a decade of conflict, competition, and war, the island finally fell into the hands of the Underworld Emperor—Lu Feld. With his aggressive investment and development, the island rapidly transformed into one of the New World's most prominent financial ports.

Countless banks, both large and small, set up branch offices here. News agencies, merchant guilds, casinos, and commercial facilities filled the streets. Towering buildings stood in rows, creating a skyline of wealth and power.

Thanks to Lu Feld's continuous land reclamation and expansion—earning him the moniker "Loan Shark King"—the island, when viewed from above, resembled the vague shape of a giant coin. And with the staggering volume of financial transactions conducted daily, its original name gradually faded from memory.

Everyone now simply called it "Coin Island."

...

On the warship's deck, Daren flipped through the intelligence reports Sengoku had handed him, briefly reviewing the details on the golden-hued island visible in the distance.

"So basically... this island's swimming in money?"

Daren summed it up plainly.

Sengoku nodded with a serious expression.

"Lu Feld, the 'Loan Shark King'... This guy controls more than half of the underworld's high-interest lending operations. His banks and money houses are known as 'cash vaults.' There's even a saying in the New World—'Even the shit Lu Feld takes turns into gold.'"

"Crude as it is, it speaks volumes about his resources and influence."

Daren raised an eyebrow, smiling faintly.

"I'm curious—how does a guy this rich manage to stay alive in the New World?"

Sengoku let out a quiet sigh.

"He doesn't just deal with merchant guilds, fleets, or pirate crews... It's said that quite a few World Government member nations have dealings with him as well. Emergencies that require fast access to funds can happen to any power. That's why, even with how chaotic the New World is, it rarely affects the Coin Island."

"This place is like a pocket of calm in the middle of a storm—untouched, unshaken."

"Which is exactly why it attracts so many criminals and shady players."

Daren nodded in realization.

If that's the kind of backing he had, it all made sense.

Otherwise, a fat cash cow like this sitting in the middle of the New World? No way the greedy sharks wouldn't have taken a bite already.

As for those cooperative ties with World Government member nations... even without knowing the full picture, Daren could guess. It likely had something to do with the Heavenly Tribute.

Each year, the World Government demanded massive sums in Heavenly Tribute from its member nations.

But not every nation could pay on time. Weather, trade disruption, war—any number of factors could cause tax revenues to dip.

Yet the World Government tolerated no delays.

So when member nations hit a financial wall, many ended up using their future tax income as collateral, taking out high-interest loans from Coin Island just to meet the tribute deadline.

Sure, the interest was brutal—but at least it kept them afloat.

Judging from Sengoku's tone...

Daren cast him a sidelong glance.

Don't tell me... even Marine Headquarters had to borrow from Lu Feld to make ends meet?

...

"What's with that look in your eyes..."

Sengoku rolled his eyes in irritation.

He'd clearly noticed the strange expression on Daren's face and scoffed with a half-laugh, "The Marines might be short on funds, but we're not borrowing from loan sharks just yet!"

Borsalino chimed in out of nowhere, "Besides, we couldn't afford that kind of interest even if we tried..."

Daren: ...

Sengoku: ...

"Ahem... Daren, are you sure this intel is reliable?" Sengoku coughed twice and smoothly changed the subject without missing a beat.

"Admiral Sengoku, the information should be solid." Daren nodded. "Even though it's just a small-scale auction, a lot of major players in the New World have received invitations."

His tone cooled slightly as he continued, "But that also means we'll likely run into some unexpected enemies."

Sengoku's face darkened. He had clearly considered this as well.

An underground auction featuring a powerful and rare Devil Fruit like the Moa Moa no Mi was bound to attract intense competition.

After all, with the name of Byrnni World—the "World Destroyer"—attached to it, whichever group got their hands on the Moa Moa no Mi would instantly gain an overwhelmingly powerful asset.

Major pirate crews, powerful merchant guilds, even entire nations... it was clear this auction wouldn't be anything close to "peaceful."

And for the Marines, that meant being at a severe disadvantage.

Just picture it: a bustling, noisy auction, powerful pirates and dark forces locked in a bidding frenzy—then suddenly, a group of Marines shows up...

They'd instantly become the target of everyone's aggression.

The moment a fight broke out, the pirates and dark world factions would aim straight for the Marines first.

Whether or not they secured the Moa Moa no Mi was one thing—but getting captured by the Navy? That was a whole different issue.

After a long silence, Sengoku let out a slow breath and said in a low voice, "No matter what, Daren, our top priority is still Shiki the Golden Lion."

"We absolutely cannot let the Moa Moa no Mi fall into his hands!"

Daren raised an eyebrow. "So you're saying...?"

Sengoku spoke cautiously, "If possible, we try to acquire the Moa Moa no Mi peacefully. There's a good chance representatives from World Government member nations will be present at the auction..."

"So we're just going to bid like everyone else?" Daren looked stunned. "How are we even funding that...?"

Sengoku glanced over calmly. "Headquarters is strapped for cash—so you'll be in charge of the budget for this one."

His face was the picture of serenity.

Daren: ...

"Admiral Sengoku, I don't think this situation is going to stay under control," Daren said after a pause. "If Shiki's target is the Moa Moa no Mi, there's no way he's going after it peacefully. He's a real pirate—he'll act like one."

Sengoku rubbed his temples, already feeling the headache coming on.

He had considered that too.

"Got any better ideas?"

Daren didn't answer right away.

Flipping through the intel in his hands, a cold smirk tugged at the corner of his mouth. Then he suddenly asked something that seemed completely unrelated:

"I heard the Coin Island is almost entirely built out of actual coins?"

"Yeah, well, Lu Feld's loaded... Wait, what are you planning!?"

Sengoku responded instinctively but then immediately sensed something off. His expression shifted.

Daren gave a faint smile. "Didn't we say a lot of pirates and underworld forces would be attending the auction?"

"This time... let's take them all down in one sweep."

Chapter 290 - 290: Volume 2 – Chapter 192: Overwhelming Numbers

Coin Island.

A sprawling, bustling trade port.

Massive ships slowly entered the harbor one after another, instantly drawing the attention of the crowd.

"They're here! That's... the pink waving skull flag!! The flag of the Big Mom Pirates!!"

The ship was uniquely shaped, adorned with vibrant candy decorations.

"I didn't expect the Moa Moa no Mi to end up in the hands of that fat pig, Lu Feld..."

Onboard the candy-colored pirate ship flying the pink Jolly Roger, two towering and oddly dressed figures stood side by side.

The speaker was a tall, slender young man with a pointed face and heavy makeup. His long, dark blue hair was speckled with light blue spots, and he wore a top hat encrusted with lollipops.

In one hand, he held a candy-striped cane. A mocking smile curled at the corner of his lips as he extended his long tongue and licked it slowly.

Beside him stood a blank-faced young man with cold, lifeless eyes. He wore a blue padded coat with mochi-shaped shoulder pads and a yellow cloak draped over his shoulders. Around his waist was a belt marked with a genie lamp emblem.

Whispers and gasps immediately rippled through the crowd.

"...That's one of the Big Mom Pirates' top officers!"

"Charlotte Perospero, Charlotte Linlin's eldest son, bounty: 210 million Belly!"

"And next to him... that's Charlotte Daifuku, her third son, bounty: 180 million Belly!"

"Looks like Big Mom is dead set on getting the Moa Moa no Mi this time!"

The dead-eyed youth swept a cold glance over the people at the port. No one dared meet his eyes.

Satisfied, he grinned.

"I heard a lot of powerful forces are showing up this time, Perospero-nii-san."

"But it doesn't matter. Mama's given the order—the Moa Moa no Mi must be ours! A Devil Fruit that powerful can only belong to the Big Mom Pirates."

At his younger brother's words, Charlotte Perospero let out a sneering chuckle.

"Don't let your guard down. A few familiar faces have shown up too."

He glanced toward another section of the port.

Charlotte Daifuku followed his gaze, and his expression instantly darkened.

"Some troublesome guys are here too..."

Over there, a rugged pirate ship charged into the harbor like a rampaging sea beast, brutally smashing several nearby merchant ships to pieces and causing chaos on the docks.

Some furious onlookers stood up—only to freeze the moment they saw the flag on that pirate ship. No one dared make a sound.

"That's... the flag of the Beasts Pirates!!"

"The Beasts Pirates are here too!"

"What are you so scared of? Didn't the Marines destroy their base?"

"Go confront them if you're feeling brave..."

"..."

A figure cloaked entirely in black slowly appeared at the bow of the Beasts Pirates' ship.

Massive black wings spread open behind him. A suffocating pressure radiated outward, instantly silencing the crowd.

The Beasts Pirates' top officer—"The Conflagration" King. Bounty: 270 million Belly.

As if sensing hostile intent, King turned his head and locked eyes with Charlotte Perospero and Charlotte Daifuku.

Daifuku's gaze sharpened as he reached calmly for the belt at his waist.

"Don't be hasty."

Charlotte Perospero pressed down on his hand with a cold smile.

"There's no point fighting that guy now. If we're going to fight, we wait until the Moa Moa no Mi shows up."

As he spoke, he gave King a refined nod.

King's face was hidden behind a black mask, giving away no emotion.

He glanced briefly at Charlotte Perospero, then turned and leapt directly onto the shore without a word.

"Tch, what an arrogant bastard."

Daifuku grumbled, but withdrew his hand, a sheen of cold sweat barely visible.

"This guy's presence is getting more and more terrifying... I heard his race is something special. Even Mama wants to recruit him."

Charlotte Perospero chuckled quietly, watching King walk away.

Daifuku frowned, as if recalling something, and asked, "Perospero-nii-san, even the Beasts Pirates are here... do you think the Whitebeard Pirates will show up?"

Perospero shook his head.

"No. The Whitebeard Pirates have never cared for this kind of chaos."

"That man is far too proud to scramble for the Moa Moa no Mi."

Daifuku nodded, then asked again, "What about the Roger Pirates? I heard some guy known as the 'Demon Heir' recently joined their crew."

Perospero shook his head once more.

"The Roger Pirates have no interest in Devil Fruits... Let's go. The auction's probably about to begin."

With that, the two stepped off the ship.

As they walked past buildings made almost entirely out of various coins, a cold smile crept onto Charlotte Perospero's lips.

"Lu Feld's been living far too comfortably these past few years..."

...

"Even the Big Mom Pirates and the Beasts Pirates showed up... This is turning into a real mess."

In a tavern built into the mountainside near the port of Coin Island, Sengoku leaned against a window, his face hidden beneath a large hood. His gaze was heavy as he stared out at the harbor below, muttering under his breath.

"Report, Admiral Sengoku. We've secured the guest list."

A Marine, also in disguise, approached quietly and spoke in a low voice.

"More than 100 pirate crews and dark organizations from the New World received invitations to this auction. So far, over 80 have confirmed their attendance. Based on intel, there will be at least 200 pirates with bounties over 50 million Belly, and more than 80 with bounties over 100 million!"

"Among them are King the Conflagration from the Beasts Pirates, and Charlotte Perospero and Charlotte Daifuku from the Big Mom Pirates."

Hearing this report, Sengoku's heart sank even deeper.

"They're all gathering here... Daren, are you absolutely sure this plan of yours is going to work?"

He couldn't help but glance toward Daren, who was casually sipping his drink and smoking behind him.

Daren smiled, poured a glass of wine for Borsalino seated nearby, and responded coolly, "Admiral Sengoku, no need to worry. If this were happening somewhere else, I wouldn't be so confident."

A sharp glint flashed in his eyes.

"But here..."

He raised his glass, took a light sip, and narrowed his eyes slightly.

Reflected in the rippling wine inside the glass were the countless buildings outside—structures built entirely from different kinds of metal coins.

"This is my turf."

Sengoku let out a long, heavy breath.

Looking at Daren and Borsalino, relaxed as ever with their drinks and smokes, he couldn't shake the feeling that something was off.

These two were far too calm!

The corner of his mouth twitched slightly.

Still, there was no sign yet of the Roger Pirates or the Whitebeard Pirates, which—at the very least—was something.

But calling for reinforcements now was out of the question.

Even at the top speed of a Navy warship, it would take at least three days to get from Marineford to Coin Island.

And the auction was about to begin.

That meant the only forces the Marines could count on were the three of them... and a few dozen elite soldiers.

And their opponents?

Dozens of pirate crews, nearly a hundred pirates with bounties exceeding 100 million Belly...

Not to mention countless members of the underworld.

The difference in numbers... was overwhelming.

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