

One Piece 321

Chapter 321 - 321: Volume 2 – Chapter 223: The Leader

New World, a certain island.

Bonfires crackled under the night sky, the scent of grilled meat and fine liquor wafting through the air.

"Captain, are we really just letting Bullet run off like that? Aren't you worried he'll stir up trouble somewhere?"

At the crew member's question, Roger burst out laughing.

"If he wants to stir up trouble, let him! Otherwise, he'll just stay on the ship itching to pick a fight with me all day. Wahahaha!!"

Splash!!

A sudden roar of crashing waves echoed as a massive column of water shot into the air. A small metallic submarine burst through the surf and sped toward the shore.

With a clank, Bullet climbed out from the hatch.

"Hey! Bullet's back!!"

"Hahaha, had a good time causing chaos?"

...

There was a brief pause, then the crew greeted him warmly.

Bullet shook out his hair, clearly annoyed.

"Don't even ask... I went out looking for a good brawl."

Everyone's curiosity was immediately piqued.

Bullet strolled over, grabbed a bottle of strong liquor, and without warning, ruffled the hair of Shanks and Buggy, the two young brats. They glared at him, but he just grinned and threw back the drink.

After draining the bottle, he let out a loud burp and finally began recounting his trip.

"...And that's how it went. That bastard Daren stole all the spotlight—and didn't even give me a proper fight!"

He tore off a chunk of juicy roasted meat and chomped down with relish.

The other members of the Roger Pirates stared in stunned silence.

Shiki's massive fleet of tens of thousands... was just turned into fireworks?

Shanks and Buggy, still just kids, turned pale.

They remembered all too well the terrifying presence of that Marine named Daren. They'd barely escaped death the last time they crossed paths with him...

"Well, that's that..."

Bullet chewed on the meat, sounding a bit frustrated.

"In the end, Daren played everyone. I bet Big Mom, Kaidou, and Shiki are all losing their minds right now."

"Nice going!!" Roger suddenly slung an arm around Bullet's shoulders, laughing with excitement.

"Captain, what's with that huge grin?" Bullet frowned.

Roger shook his head, still smiling.

"Oh, nothing. Just glad to see you made it back in one piece."

But in his mind, he was howling with glee:

Wahaha... Even that smug bastard Shiki got wrecked by that Marine kid!

...

North Blue, Rubeck Island

"D-Doffy! Big news!!"

Covered in a gooey mess, Trebol stumbled into the grand hall of the Donquixote Family headquarters. He tripped over his cloak halfway in and faceplanted hard on the floor.

Groaning, he thrust a newspaper into the air while still on the ground, wailing,

"News just came in from Coin Island!"

"That Daren—no, Godfather—he wiped out Shiki the Golden Lion's entire fleet!"

As the words left his mouth, the Donquixote Family officers, who'd been calmly discussing business moments ago, froze in shock.

"No way!!"

"That's Shiki we're talking about!!"

"He's not some idiot like Byrnni World!"

...

Diamante and the others paled, voices filled with disbelief and alarm.

"I'm telling you, it's real!!" Trebol shakily got up from the floor, trembling either from fear or the impact of his fall.

Seated on a luxurious leather sofa, Doflamingo went silent.

Behind his signature shades, his eyes flickered. He slowly stood and walked over to Trebol, taking the paper from his hands.

It was a fresh print—still smelling of ink.

Doflamingo unfolded it slowly, almost deliberately.

Sensing their young master's grim mood, the others held their breath and cautiously stepped closer to peek at the front page.

And what they saw nearly stopped their hearts cold.

The front page headline blazed across the paper:

"The Monster of Marine Headquarters, the King of the North Blue—Rogers Daren Destroys the Invincible Flying Fleet of the Legendary Pirate, Shiki, Single-Handedly!"

The subheading read:

"Ten Thousand Cannons Roar! The Entire Island Becomes the Arsenal of the 'King of Metal'—Shiki's Fleet Annihilated in an Instant!"

Beside the headline was a photograph.

The image was somewhat blurry, not entirely clear, but still striking.

It showed Coin Island, its land completely blanketed by countless massive black cannon barrels, all firing in unison with blazing flames.

At the center of the firestorm stood a lone Marine Commodore, arms spread wide, grinning savagely. The bold black characters of "Justice" flapped fiercely on the back of his white cape, caught in the furious winds.

Flames and black smoke billowed skyward, and high above, amidst the chaos, Shiki the Golden Lion's flying fleet could be seen—ships exploding midair, crashing down like falling stars in a scene straight out of the apocalypse.

In the background of the photo, one could just barely make out the figures of Marine Admiral Sengoku, Marine Rear Admiral Borsalino—the Headquarters' "monster," King the Conflagration of the Beasts Pirates, Charlotte Perospero and Charlotte Daifuku of the Big Mom Pirates, Douglas Bullet—the "Demon's Heir" of the Roger Pirates... and other elite powerhouses.

The photo's composition was expertly timed, splitting the massive fleet and ten thousand cannons along a golden ratio. Rogers Daren and Shiki were shown facing off from afar, while all those gathered titans,

frozen in expressions of shock, awe, and disbelief, served merely as a backdrop—highlighting the overwhelming presence of that single Marine Commodore.

Below this historic image stretched a full-length article.

From the harrowing chaos of the underground auction, to the sudden appearance of the Moa Moa no Mi and the ensuing frenzy, to Shiki's grand entrance leading his pirate armada, and finally to Daren's devastation of the flying fleet—the entire chain of events was documented in vivid, exhaustive detail.

The more they read, the colder their blood ran. Beads of sweat dotted their foreheads, chills creeping down their spines.

But it was the final paragraph that truly froze them to the bone:

"Marine Headquarters Commodore Rogers Daren, born in the North Blue, is a man of immense strength and unparalleled acumen. Both in leadership and political strategy, he has already displayed a level of sophistication far beyond his years—earning the undisputed title of the 'King of the North Blue.'

Although he has yet to formally graduate from the Marine Headquarters training program, his combat prowess and capabilities already rival those of the Marine 'monsters.'

The 'World Destroyer' Byrnni World was defeated by his hand, and rumors suggest that even the legendary pirates Gol D. Roger, Whitebeard Edward Newgate, Kaidou of the Beasts, and Big Mom Charlotte Linlin have all suffered at his hands.

It is clear that Rogers Daren's emergence will mark a significant leap forward in the overall might of the Marines.

And in the near future, he is destined to become the leading figure of justice in the world."

— World Economic News, President Morgans

Chapter 322 - 322: Volume 2 – Chapter 224: Survivors of God Valley

South Blue, Sorbet Kingdom.

The sky hung heavy with gray as withered snowflakes drifted to the ground, blanketing the world in white.

At the top of the royal castle in the Sorbet Kingdom, a towering, bear-like figure sat at the edge of the rooftop, his legs casually dangling.

He wore a strangely patterned, trapezoid-shaped hat with two bear ears on top. Tufts of curly black hair peeked out from beneath it, and a black coat draped over his shoulders. His face was serious, unsmiling—he looked about twenty, yet there was a distinct air of maturity and calm about him.

Snow fell silently, landing on his hat and coat, but he didn't react. His attention remained fixed on the thick, leather-bound book in his hands. Beside him lay a folded newspaper.

The world around him was utterly still, the only sound the occasional rustle of turning pages.

"I didn't expect the king of the Sorbet Kingdom to be so young."

A low, amused voice suddenly rang out from behind him.

The man paused, adjusted his rimless glasses, and slowly closed the book. With a dull expression, he turned around.

The air atop the castle twisted oddly, forming a miniature tornado visible to the naked eye. It quickly took shape, revealing a human figure.

Tall and imposing, the newcomer wore a dark green hooded trench coat, emanating an overwhelming and profound presence.

"Pleased to meet you, Your Majesty, King of the Sorbet Kingdom—Bartholomew Kuma."

The figure let out a deep chuckle, raised a hand, and pulled back his hood to reveal a square-jawed face radiating fierce intensity. He had no eyebrows, and his left cheek was marked with jagged blood-red tattoos—striking against the whirling snow.

"I know who you are."

Bartholomew Kuma stared calmly at the man before him, his hoarse voice breaking the silence.

"Monkey D. Dragon. 'Son of a Hero.'"

Dragon gave a small smile.

"I'm no longer the 'Son of a Hero.'"

He tapped the blood-red tattoo on his face.

"Now, I'm just a world-class criminal, with a massive bounty placed on my head by the World Government and Marine Headquarters."

Bartholomew Kuma pressed his lips together and replied flatly,

"So, Dragon-san, why have you come looking for me?"

"The Sorbet Kingdom has only just begun to enjoy peace and stability. For someone like you—a wanted criminal of your level—to show up in a peaceful country like this... frankly, it puts me in a difficult position."

Dragon gave a slight bow.

"I offer my sincere apologies for the sudden intrusion."

His eyes glanced at the thick book in Kuma's hands, its cover bearing the word "BIBLE." Then he asked,

"Do you believe in the existence of gods, Kuma?"

Bartholomew Kuma responded expressionlessly,

"In these seas, gods stand high above the clouds. Surely, Dragon-san, you're well aware of that."

Dragon fell silent for a moment.

Kuma set the book aside and said,

"Please get to the point, Dragon-san. And leave as soon as you can... If the government finds out you're here in the Sorbet Kingdom, this country may never know peace again."

Dragon gazed at him deeply, then suddenly smiled.

"Kuma, I want to invite you... to help me change this world."

Bartholomew Kuma's expression didn't change.

He slowly removed his glove, revealing a paw-shaped hand.

Pink pads dotted his palm.

That deceptively "cute" hand made Dragon's pupils shrink sharply.

Bartholomew Kuma said calmly,

"I'm sorry. I refuse."

"Dragon-san, you should leave now."

"If you're planning a trip, where would you like to go? Maybe I can take you there."

Dragon frowned.

"You're not even going to hear me out?"

Bartholomew Kuma shook his head.

"There's no need. I only want to protect the people of this country. As for everything else, I neither want to get involved nor have the power to."

As he spoke, he looked off into the distance, a quiet warmth in his gaze.

Under the climate of the Winter Island, smoke gently rose from chimneys across the island. A sense of peace and calm filled the air.

"I see..."

Dragon chuckled.

Then, he suddenly brought up something seemingly unrelated.

"Half a month ago, a slave ship en route from the South Blue to Mary Geoise was sunk. All the slaves on board vanished, while every guard was found dead."

"Two months ago, the slave market in Rock Port, South Blue, was destroyed. Over five hundred slaves disappeared without a trace."

"Five months ago, a slave trader in the South Blue was killed in his own home. That same day, every ship in his human trafficking fleet was wiped out..."

Dragon looked meaningfully at Bartholomew Kuma and smiled.

"There are plenty more stories like these. Do you really want me to go on?"

Bartholomew Kuma was silent for a while before replying in a low voice,

"Seems Dragon-san has done his research."

Dragon bowed deeply again.

"If I've overstepped, I offer my sincerest apologies."

He straightened up, eyes fixed intently on the towering figure before him.

"But Kuma, I sought you out because I know we're the same kind of people."

"This world is filthy—soaked in darkness and corruption. Only a complete upheaval can bring true change."

His eyes drifted to Kuma's massive paw.

"If I'm right, those hands of yours... they're the 'hands of liberation' that bring freedom to others, aren't they?"

Bartholomew Kuma's expression shifted—just slightly.

It was the first time any emotion flickered across his face.

Not even when Dragon had listed all the incidents tied to slave rescues had he reacted like this.

"What do you know?"

He stared at Dragon, alert and guarded.

Dragon let out a sigh.

"I don't know much. My old man sheltered me too well back then, trying to keep me from seeing the world's ugliness... But some things can't be avoided."

He looked up at the sky, his eyes sharp and filled with scorn.

"Who would've thought—the most terrifying demon in this world isn't in hell, but in the heavens?"

...

Half an hour later...

Snow was falling heavily.

At some point, Dragon and Bartholomew Kuma had sat down side by side, gazing quietly at the peaceful Kingdom of Sorbet.

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

Dragon let out a long breath, which turned into a cloud of mist in the frigid air. His expression was somber.

"The so-called 'heroic' battle of God Valley back then... it was nothing but a genocidal massacre."

His smile brimmed with indescribable bitterness and deep shock.

"No wonder the old man always looked like he didn't want to talk about it whenever I asked..."

The truth behind the God Valley Incident nine years ago—it had been a "hunting game" where the Celestial Dragons slaughtered the native inhabitants!

They sealed off the entire valley, turning it into a blood-soaked arena, where the natives and enslaved people were hunted as prey. The victors were rewarded with invaluable Devil Fruits.

One of the prizes was even the Mythical Zoan-type—Uo Uo no Mi, Model: Seiryu!

During that battle, Big Mom stole the Devil Fruit and gave it to Kaidou.

Bartholomew Kuma had been one of the slaves brought to God Valley. Together with Ivankov, he managed to steal one of the prize Devil Fruits... the Nikyu Nikyu no Mi.

Using the power of the Nikyu Nikyu no Mi to repel people, he continuously saved other slaves, eventually managing to escape—just barely.

In a low voice, Bartholomew Kuma said:

"There wasn't much Garp-san could do."

He looked down at his hands, his eyes tinged red.

"Earlier, you asked if I believed in gods... I don't."

"I only pray because—"

"Guilt," Dragon cut in.

"Yes."

Bartholomew Kuma lowered his gaze and clenched his fists.

"Even if it's just one person... If there really is a god, I want to pray—to be allowed to save just one more person. That would be enough for me."

"But... in the end, I couldn't save them all."

He spoke with quiet sorrow.

Such a gentle soul... Dragon stared at Kuma's emotionless face, then slowly tightened his own fists.

"Kuma, there are no gods in this world. No saviors, either... Even the Celestial Dragons, who claim to be gods, bleed just like any other human."

"If we want to save everyone, we have to rely on ourselves."

"Join me. Let's save this world together!"

He extended his hand.

His eyes were firm.

Bartholomew Kuma looked at the young man before him, whose smile radiated sincerity.

In that moment, countless bloody images flashed through his mind.

Escape... blood... corpses... screams... the twisted grins of the Celestial Dragons...

Bartholomew Kuma took a deep breath.

And then...

He reached out.

Their hands clasped tightly.

As if sealing the most sacred promise in the world.

...

"So, where are we headed next?"

At Kuma's question, Dragon paused in thought.

"We're short on manpower. We need to rally all the trustworthy allies we can find... Since Ivankov is your comrade, we should go meet him."

Bartholomew Kuma nodded.

The Sorbet Kingdom was a small country with light political duties—he could leave its administration to the civil officials without worry.

"I know where he is."

Dragon smiled and nodded.

He glanced casually at a newspaper lying nearby. Then his eyes suddenly widened.

"This..."

Dragon took a sharp breath, then let out a soft chuckle.

"As expected of you, Daren... Looks like I need to pick up the pace, or you're going to leave me in the dust."

Bartholomew Kuma gave him a curious glance.

"You know Commodore Daren?"

Dragon turned his eyes away from the paper, a deep smile spreading across his face.

"He's my..."

He clenched his fist.

"My dearest friend."

Chapter 323 - 323: Volume 2 – Chapter 225: I'll Keep It Short

Two days later.

Marine Headquarters, Marineford.

The massive oval-shaped military port was packed with people.

A sea of civilians stretched as far as the eye could see, all watching the ocean expectantly, clutching flowers and balloons, craning their necks to get a better view.

Among them were reporters from major news agencies and newspapers around the world, their cameras at the ready, eagerly waiting.

Marines in uniform stood in orderly lines, working hard to maintain control of the scene.

"When are the warships coming back?"

"Should be any minute now..."

"What a huge victory..."

"They wiped out the legendary Great Pirate Shiki the Golden Lion's invincible fleet..."

"This is so exciting!!"

"Big news! Big news!!"

The civilians and reporters were buzzing with excitement. After hearing the news that the warships were about to return, they had rushed to Marineford's military port to prepare a grand welcome ceremony.

At the back of the crowd...

"Old man Kong, don't you think this is a bit much..."

With a cigar in his mouth, Zephyr glanced at the throng of people and reporters pushing to the front, then looked helplessly at Kong, who stood nearby with his arms crossed.

Taking down Shiki's airborne fleet was no doubt a major victory... but this reception felt a little over the top.

Civilians showing up to celebrate was one thing, but having this many members of the press? Wasn't that a bit excessive?

There was no need to ask—this was clearly Kong's doing.

Otherwise, given the Marines' usual level of secrecy, neither the press nor the public would've known the exact time of the fleet's return.

Hearing Zephyr's complaint, Kong chuckled and said,

"Zephyr, it's been a long time since the Marines had a win like this. A little publicity isn't such a bad thing."

Zephyr fell silent for a moment, as if something had come to mind.

The last time the Marines scored such a decisive victory against pirates was nine years ago—during the Battle of God Valley.

That was the battle that made Garp a hero.

Though Zephyr, a former Admiral, hadn't participated directly in that war, he'd still sensed something off about it.

Even now, when he asked Garp—his old comrade—for details about the battle, Garp remained evasive and tight-lipped, like it was some taboo he didn't want to touch.

If that really had been a glorious battle to protect the innocent, with Garp's personality... could he have kept quiet about it?

But the truth was, that so-called victory—one the Marines should've proudly broadcast to the world—had been wiped from existence. Every trace of it, gone.

Even Zephyr, once an Admiral, didn't have clearance to access the God Valley files.

Naturally, that told him all he needed to know.

As if sensing Zephyr's uneasiness, Kong patted him on the shoulder and changed the subject.

"Well, are you proud? Daren is your student."

Zephyr was taken aback, but quickly recovered and laughed.

"That brat never disappoints..."

As he spoke, he noticed many elegantly dressed women and young girls in the crowd. Their eyes had turned into hearts, and the corners of his mouth twitched as he added,

"Well, at least in battle, he never disappoints."

Kong smiled and said,

"In any case, Daren is indeed the most brilliant Marine of this era."

Zephyr nodded and turned his gaze to the group of Officer Training Camp students behind him.

Except for the grumbling Tokikake, everyone looked full of anticipation. Kuzan was even more excited, pumping his fists with shining eyes.

A proud smile gradually spread across Zephyr's weathered face. But before he could say anything, a cry rang out from the crowd.

"That's... a warship!"

"They're back, they're back!"

"They're back!"

...

As soon as the words were spoken, the murmuring stopped. Everyone instinctively looked up toward the distant sea.

Under the vast, expansive sky, snow-white seagulls soared overhead.

On the blue sea—clearer than the sky itself—a majestic Navy warship appeared at the horizon, slicing through the surging waves with the commanding presence of a triumphant return, heading straight for the headquarters port.

Its white sails billowed in the ocean breeze, and the bold black kanji for "Justice" blazed across them in a striking, dragon-like script, emanating a powerful sense of authority.

At the bow of the ship stood a tall, burly figure, arms crossed, a snow-white cloak fluttering in the wind behind him.

"It's here!"

"It's Admiral Sengoku's flagship!!"

The crowd erupted into commotion.

They could no longer contain their excitement, raising flowers and balloons high into the air.

At the same time...

On the warship—

"Hey, why is the port so crowded?"

Standing at the bow, Sengoku was a little surprised at the sight of the gathered crowd.

"They must be here to welcome us..."

Borsalino walked over, one hand rubbing his stubbled chin, smiling.

Sengoku frowned and hesitated.

"I don't think so."

Borsalino smirked.

"Why not? This is an unprecedented victory. I bet the people are cheering and shouting your name right now..."

"Is that so?"

Sengoku's heart stirred. A flicker of pride and joy passed through his eyes, but he kept his expression calm and smiled slightly.

"This great victory is mainly thanks to that kid Daren."

"How could that be?"

Borsalino shook his head seriously.

"Without your leadership and guidance, Admiral Sengoku, even Commodore Daren wouldn't have pulled it off, right?"

Besides, it was because of your presence that Shiki didn't dare to act rashly... Otherwise, even all of us together wouldn't have been a match for him..."

Sengoku was momentarily stunned.

He thought for a moment, and a smile slowly appeared on his face.

"Yes, Borsalino, you're absolutely right.

Indeed, if it weren't for me, that guy Shiki wouldn't have let Daren off so easily... Hmm... That's true..."

The more Sengoku thought about it, the more sense Borsalino's words made. His chest puffed out instinctively with pride.

He looked at Borsalino with approval and smiled in satisfaction.

"You really are my adjutant. Sharp as ever... Borsalino, you know, I've always had high hopes for you."

Borsalino gave a faint smile.

"Where's that kid Daren?"

Sengoku looked around but didn't see Daren on the deck.

Borsalino replied with a smile,

"Commodore Daren is still resting."

Sengoku thought for a moment.

"Go wake him up. Tell him to get ready."

He squinted toward the distant military port.

"Looks like there are quite a few reporters over there. If he doesn't show up, it won't look good."

"Understood."

Borsalino turned and walked toward the cabin.

Sengoku stood in place, then suddenly seemed to remember something. He called out to one of his aides.

"Bring me a mirror."

He might be interviewed by reporters later—he needed to look presentable.

After all, they'd been at sea for days. There hadn't been time to freshen up, and with limited conditions onboard, he could only tidy himself as best he could.

"Yes, Admiral Sengoku!"

The aide quickly returned with a military mirror.

Sengoku adjusted his tie and uniform in front of it, smoothed out his slightly disheveled afro, and made sure everything was in order.

Satisfied, he smiled at his reflection.

Yes, good. Looking sharp.

Let the interviews and cheers come full force!

Sengoku clenched his fist in anticipation, eyes gleaming with excitement.

He could already picture tomorrow's headlines—him in the center, surrounded by cheering crowds, swarmed by reporters eager for interviews.

As the warship neared the port, Sengoku stood even straighter.

...

Daren yawned and emerged from the cabin, still half-asleep, following Borsalino.

The warship hadn't even docked yet—

Thunderous cheers erupted from the shore.

"They're back!!"

"Welcome!!"

"Our hero!!"

"..."

Sengoku disembarked, maintaining a poised and composed demeanor.

Facing the surging crowd of civilians and reporters, he wore what he believed to be a refined and graceful smile, raising both hands as he spoke.

"No need to rush. I'll just say a few words..."

But before he could finish, the smile on his face froze.

The crowd, having waited far too long, immediately surged forward.

They completely ignored Sengoku, brushing right past him—

And rushed straight toward the sleepy-eyed Daren, practically swarming him.

"Commodore Daren!! I love you!!"

"Marry me, Daren-san!!"

"You're so handsome, Commodore Daren!!"

"Commodore Daren, I heard the mission was all thanks to you. It wouldn't have mattered if anyone else was there, right?"

"Commodore Daren, what are your plans for the future?"

"Commodore Daren, say a few words, please!!"

"..."

Sengoku stood frozen in place, his face as dark as the bottom of a pot.

Dust kicked up by the stampede settled over his face, hair, and uniform.

"What a shame... You even prepared a speech."

A smug voice rang out beside him.

Borsalino let out a helpless sigh.

Sengoku's eye twitched. His expression twisted back and forth between fury and disbelief, fists clenching and unclenching.

Veins bulged across his forehead, and he ground his molars until they nearly cracked.

...Damn Borsalino!!!

Chapter 324 - 324: Volume 2 – Chapter 226: Press Conference?

Just as Sengoku was gritting his teeth and cursing Borsalino in his heart—already thinking about how to strip that bastard of his position as adjutant—a timid voice suddenly spoke up behind him.

"Um... Admiral Sengoku, I'd like to ask you a few questions. Would you be available for an interview?"

Sengoku froze, then immediately lit up with joy.

Finally, someone who knows what's what!

He quickly wiped the smile off his face and turned around with a calm, composed expression.

Standing before him was a young female reporter wearing glasses and a business suit. She held a camera and notebook, looking up at him with a hopeful expression.

Looks like a rookie...

Sengoku glanced at her shy demeanor and allowed a warm smile to spread across his face. He spoke gently,

"Of course, no problem. What would you like to ask? As long as it doesn't involve classified military intel, I can share anything..."

He paused, then winked at her.

"...Even exclusive material."

The reporter's eyes lit up at once.

"Really? That's wonderful, Admiral Sengoku!"

Sengoku chuckled.

"Of course. So, what kind of story are you looking to write?"

About the battle itself? My strategic planning for this mission? Or perhaps my insights into the future state of the seas?"

The reporter eagerly flipped open her notebook and clicked her pen, face brimming with anticipation.

"What I'd like to ask is..."

She hesitated, then said sheepishly,

"Do you happen to know Commodore Daren's criteria for choosing a partner?"

Sengoku: "..."

The smile on his old face froze.

"Which news agency are you from?"

Trying hard to maintain his composure, Sengoku forced the question out.

The reporter blinked, then beamed sweetly.

"Entertainment Gossip Weekly."

Sengoku: "..."

A vein throbbed on his forehead, and his mouth twitched.

"If it's about Commodore Daren, I suggest you go ask him directly."

The reporter awkwardly pointed toward the cluster of people mobbing the Marine commodore.

"There are too many people around him... I can't get through."

Her cheeks flushed slightly.

Sengoku: "..."

Seeing his face grow darker by the second, the reporter quickly added,

"Admiral Sengoku, you didn't have anyone around at the time, so I rushed over. I was afraid I wouldn't get a chance later."

Sengoku: "..."

He rubbed his chest and stared at her blankly.

"You're an intern, aren't you?"

The reporter gasped.

"How did you know!?"

She looked up at the Admiral—his face now as dark as the bottom of a pot—with awe in her eyes.

"Admiral Sengoku, your judgment is incredible!"

Sengoku: "..."

It was obvious the moment I saw you!

Suddenly, Sengoku felt exhausted.

He sighed and waved her off.

"I don't know what kind of woman Daren is into.

Try again later when you get the chance."

Anyway, as long as she's a pretty woman, that damn brat will never let her go.

With that, Sengoku turned around and walked slowly through the crowd toward Kong, his back looking more desolate than ever.

...

To handle the surge of reporters, a long table draped in red cloth was quickly set up.

An impromptu press conference began.

Seated from left to right were the key figures of the operation:

Admiral Sengoku, Commodore Daren, and Rear Admiral Borsalino.

Click, click, click—

No sooner had the three taken their seats than a barrage of camera flashes erupted, with excited reporters firing off photos in a frenzy.

"Alright, let's get started,"

Kong called out casually from below the stage.

The moment his voice fell, every reporter in the room shot their hands up.

But their gazes were all fixed squarely on the yawning Commodore, completely ignoring Sengoku and Borsalino beside him.

Sengoku: "..."

"Daren, you handle this."

He muttered irritably.

Daren blinked, then casually swept his eyes over the crowd and pointed to a reporter at random.

The chosen reporter jumped to their feet in excitement, eyes gleaming as they asked,

"Commodore Daren, it's said that during this operation, the Marines infiltrated an auction and used a large sum of money to participate. Is that true?"

Daren smiled and nodded.

"Yes, it was all part of the mission plan.

After all, our true target was Shiki the Golden Lion. Until he appeared, we had to keep our identities hidden."

"As for the funds—well, that's thanks to the generous support from headquarters."

Sengoku: ???

He turned to Daren in disbelief, only to see the latter flashing him a smile.

Kong's grin froze instantly. Veins bulged on his forehead.

Beside him, Zephyr grabbed his arm in a panic, his face flushed red.

"Old man Kong, calm down, calm down... Everyone's watching..."

Kong clenched his jaw so hard it creaked.

Just then, Daren pointed to another reporter.

"Commodore Daren, we heard that not only did the Marines destroy Shiki's fleet, but you also recovered the powerful Moa Moa no Mi."

"Can you tell us how the Moa Moa no Mi will be used?"

Daren responded with a relaxed smile.

"This was a victory for the entire Navy.

The Moa Moa no Mi is a valuable trophy, and we all recognize its importance."

"Of course, after careful consideration by Fleet Admiral Kong and Admiral Sengoku, they've decided to leave the fruit's disposition to me. I'm truly grateful for their trust."

Sengoku: ???

Kong: ???

"Don't do this, old man Kong—everyone's watching!"

Zephyr quickly tightened his grip on Kong's arm. The Fleet Admiral's face was already bright red with fury.

"That damn brat!! I haven't even decided what to do with the Moa Moa no Mi! Zephyr, let go of me!!"

Kong growled through gritted teeth.

Zephyr, sweating profusely, leaned in and whispered,

"The previous owner of the Moa Moa no Mi was Byrnni World. Daren took him down and made a major contribution. It's only fair he gets to decide what to do with the fruit."

"And what about the auction money!? Nearly a billion! That brat buys things and expects us to reimburse him?!"

Kong hissed through clenched teeth.

Zephyr's mouth twitched. He gave a dry cough.

"Uh... maybe just treat it as a reward?"

Kong: ...

"You damn softie, always covering for your students!"

Zephyr grinned sheepishly.

At that moment, another reporter stood up—

It was the same young woman who had tried to interview Sengoku earlier.

"Um... Commodore Daren, I have a question I think many people are curious about..."

Her cheeks were tinged with red as she looked shyly at Daren.

"What are your criteria for choosing a partner?"

The crowd instantly perked up with curiosity.

Blushes bloomed across the faces of young women and wives alike.

"Oh, that..."

Daren paused, then winked at the reporter and replied with a smile,

"Sorry, that information is classified by the Navy. No comment."

Sengoku: ...

Kong: ...

Zephyr: ...

Seeing more hands still raised, Daren gently motioned for the crowd to settle down and said with a grin,

"Apologies, but that's all the time I have for questions."

He pointed to the bandage on his chest.

"As you can see, I'm still recovering from my injuries. I need rest.

The rest of the interview... I'll leave to Admiral Sengoku."

Daren stood up and looked at Sengoku sincerely.

"While it might look like I was the one who took the spotlight and brought down Shiki's airborne fleet, I want to be honest with everyone—

Admiral Sengoku is the real hero."

"Without his protection, planning, deterrence, and above all, his trust and support... this operation would never have succeeded."

"He's the true cornerstone of this victory."

"Now, let's give a warm round of applause for Admiral Sengoku!"

Daren took the lead and began clapping.

The reporters followed, and soon the applause thundered across the room.

Sengoku finally snapped out of his daze.

Looking down at the reporters' eager faces, he was stunned for a long moment before a brilliant smile slowly appeared on his face.

He threw a grateful glance at Daren, then straightened up, cleared his throat, and stood tall.

His old confidence returned as he smiled with renewed spirit.

"Well then, I'll keep it brief."

Chapter 325 - 325: Volume 2 – Chapter 227: Distribution of War Merits

Marine Headquarters, Marineford.

Fleet Admiral's Office.

"Glug... glug..."

Sengoku took the steaming hot tea handed to him by a guard. Without hesitation, he gulped down several mouthfuls, then handed the empty cup back.

"Bring me another."

Everyone stared at him in disbelief.

Seeing their reactions, Sengoku gave an awkward smile.

"I got a little thirsty. Aren't you guys thirsty too?"

Everyone: "..."

You've been talking for three hours straight without a single break. Of course we're thirsty, you bastard!

Kong rubbed his temples in exasperation.

At the start, Sengoku had at least stuck to the topic, providing detailed answers about "Operation Coin Island," showcasing the Marines' planning and combat strength.

But ten minutes in, the old man completely went off the rails.

He started reminiscing about how hard things were when he first joined the Marines, how he fought through countless hardships to eventually become an Admiral.

From the structure of the Marines to his vision for the next few decades... he dominated the press conference, spouting off passionately with spit flying everywhere.

By the end, half the crowd had left, and the other half were on the verge of dozing off.

Thinking about it, Kong shot Sengoku a glare, sighed, then turned to the Commodore sitting on the sofa, legs crossed. A smile formed on his face.

"Daren, you did a hell of a job this time."

Lighting a gold-embossed cigar, he grinned.

"To be honest, not even I thought you could pull it off."

It had gone too smoothly.

The flying pirate fleet—long a thorn in the Marines' side—was wiped out effortlessly by Daren!

If the results weren't right there in front of him, even Kong wouldn't have believed it.

Daren, cigar in hand, gave a modest smile.

"It was all thanks to Admiral Sengoku's support and trust. Without that, I never would've gotten this opportunity."

Kong chuckled and scolded,

"Don't feed me that political crap, kid!"

"And you, Sengoku!"

He suddenly turned and glared at Sengoku.

"You old bastard, wipe that smirk off your face! Do you even realize what you did? You turned a proper press conference into your personal life story hour!"

"Look at this operation—what did you even contribute? Other than standing around intimidating Shiki a little, what else did you do that actually helped?! If you'd done your part better, would Daren have gotten so badly hurt?"

Kong tore into Sengoku without holding back, leaving the latter shrinking into himself.

"Did you even think about the reporters' questions? This operation would've turned out the same with or without you!"

"I..."

Sengoku's face flushed red, but he had no comeback.

He felt completely wronged.

He was never good with speed or explosive power. Against someone as agile as Shiki, it was already tough just to keep him in check.

If it had been a direct confrontation, Sengoku was confident he wouldn't have lost!

But that damn Shiki refused to face him head-on.

He kept chasing after Daren. How was that Sengoku's fault?

Even if Garp had been there instead, the outcome probably wouldn't have been much different...

Sengoku became visibly sullen and muttered with a hint of grievance,

"This kid's injuries aren't even that serious. Just a fatal wound or so. With a monster-like physique like his, he'll be up and bouncing around in no time..."

"What did you just say!?"

Kong's voice suddenly shot up.

Sengoku shuddered. His expression turned sharply serious as he quickly corrected himself,

"I meant... Fleet Admiral Kong is absolutely right. This was my failure!"

Kong looked at the now "obedient and well-behaved" Sengoku, both annoyed and amused, and gave a half-hearted wave of his hand.

That was just how Sengoku was. Call it "flexible" if you're being nice, "slick" if you're not.

If it had been that stubborn old Zephyr in his place, he'd probably have stiffened his neck and argued, maybe even started a fight right then and there.

Just thinking about Zephyr hiding out in the training camp day in and day out made Kong's headache even worse.

What a bunch of troublesome brats...

He shook his head, clearing his mind of frustration, then straightened up and said firmly,

"I've read the full battle report. You all did well this time."

"Next is the matter of distributing the war merits. There's no question—Commodore Daren... the greatest credit goes to you."

He smiled.

"This time, your promotion should be a done deal."

Daren gave a small nod, smiling in acknowledgment.

He could have been promoted to Rear Admiral at Headquarters six months ago, but the defection of Dragon had delayed everything.

Not that he particularly cared about the rank of Rear Admiral, but let's face it—nobody minds a higher position.

At least now, he had finally caught up to Sakazuki and Borsalino.

No more saluting when they ran into each other.

But just as Daren was beginning to enjoy the moment—

"Borsalino, you also did very well this time. Not only did you heavily injure the Beasts Pirates' top officer, King, but your dominance on the battlefield during the battle on Coin Island was outstanding. You intercepted Shiki several times at critical moments..."

Kong turned and smiled at Borsalino, who was sitting off to the side, seemingly lost in thought.

"Congratulations, Vice Admiral Borsalino."

Borsalino raised his eyebrows in mock surprise, mouth slightly open, hands floating in mid-air.

"Well, now... I really didn't see that coming. Wouldn't you say so, Rear Admiral Daren?"

He turned to Daren with a smirk that was anything but innocent.

Daren: "..."

You didn't see it coming? Then what are you asking me for?!

This bastard's doing it on purpose!!

"Yes, Vice Admiral Borsalino."

Daren clenched his jaw as he forced out the words.

Still, Borsalino's promotion to Vice Admiral was well earned.

Even if he slacked off or coasted through every mission, the guy always showed up for the big battles.

And with his Devil Fruit ability, he had a knack for "making an impression" at just the right moment, so no one could ever call him out.

Say he didn't contribute, but he did—his presence was overwhelming.

Say he did contribute, but honestly, the outcome might not have changed even if he hadn't.

That kind of balance was something only he could pull off.

He'd glide in, make his mark just enough, and his merit points would skyrocket. Add to that the fact that he was the most senior of the three Admirals-in-training, it was no surprise he was promoted ahead of Sakazuki and Kuzan, securing the Rear Admiral position earlier than the others.

Kong looked at the two of them throwing subtle jabs and couldn't help but chuckle.

Youth really is a wonderful thing.

Back in the day, Garp, Sengoku, and Zephyr were just like this—bickering, throwing shade, and even getting into fistfights. And just like that, all those noisy years passed by.

Now they'd become legends of the Marines, while the new shining generation was growing strong under their protection.

As Fleet Admiral, this was one of Kong's rare moments of genuine ease.

...

"As for the Moa Moa no Mi..."

Kong paused for a moment before continuing.

Daren immediately sat upright, eyes fixed on him.

Sengoku also looked a little anxious.

The power of the Moa Moa no Mi spoke for itself. If Daren were allowed to handle its disposal, it could serve an enormous political purpose.

It could be used as a reward for military achievement—or even better, to cultivate trusted allies.

"Just as we announced at the press conference—let Commodore Daren handle it."

Kong declared decisively,

"This meeting's over. I won't say any more. The actual training will take place in a month when the training camp graduates."

"Dismissed."

Chapter 326 - 326: Volume 2 – Chapter 228: Use My Title at Work

After Daren and Borsalino left the Fleet Admiral's office, Sengoku remained where he was, looking like he had something on his mind.

"If you've got something to say, say it."

Kong gave him a sideways glance and spoke impatiently.

Sengoku, clearly holding it in for a while, couldn't wait any longer.

"Old man Kong, are we really just handing the Moa Moa no Mi over to Daren like that?"

Kong raised an eyebrow, paused for a few seconds, and said,

"Sengoku, I know what you're thinking."

He slowly exhaled a puff of smoke, his aged eyes glinting with wisdom.

"The Moa Moa no Mi is indeed a force to be reckoned with—but that's all it is."

"Compared to the uncertainty of the Moa Moa no Mi, the strength and potential Daren showed in this operation are clear as day."

"If he hadn't taken part, you might not have even secured the Moa Moa no Mi, let alone wiped out Shiki's flying pirate fleet."

"And since Daren has already spoken, sure, I could use my authority to take the Moa Moa no Mi back from him. Outwardly, he might not say anything—but he'd definitely carry a grudge."

"You know that kid's personality... If we don't let him handle the Moa Moa no Mi this time, he might come up with all sorts of excuses to skip the next mission."

Sengoku froze at that.

He thought seriously about Daren's temperament and realized that Kong had a point.

That kid held grudges and was clear-cut about who he liked and disliked.

Treat him well, and he'd repay you just as generously.

Tick him off, and he'd make you pay double.

Looking at it from that angle, the answer became obvious.

A powerful Devil Fruit? Or a monster with unrivaled strength and potential in this era?

Sengoku knew which one truly mattered.

"Sengoku, no need to worry... Even if the Moa Moa no Mi is in Daren's hands, who's he going to give it to?"

Kong suddenly chuckled, eyes gleaming with confidence and authority.

It was the look of someone who had the whole board in his grasp.

"In the end, that Devil Fruit will stay within the Marines."

"And who ends up with it doesn't really matter."

"As long as they're one of ours—that's enough."

Hearing this, Sengoku remained silent for a long time. Then, with a look of sincere respect, he raised his hand and saluted.

"I understand, Kong-sensei."

"My perspective was too narrow."

Kong nodded, then frowned.

"How many times do I have to tell you—use my title when you're working!"

Sengoku saluted sharply.

"Yes, Fleet Admiral Kong-sensei!"

Kong: "..."

...

Leaving the Fleet Admiral's office, Daren and Borsalino chatted idly as they strolled.

"So, who are you planning to give the Moa Moa no Mi to?"

Borsalino asked casually, as if it were just small talk.

Daren smiled.

"Who knows? There's no rush."

The Moa Moa no Mi, if properly developed, had terrifying potential.

But for now, Daren didn't have an ideal candidate in mind.

That young man named Arthur had left a decent impression. Even when facing powerful pirates like Charlotte Perospero and Charlotte Daifuku, he had resolutely fulfilled his duties.

Daren respected that kind of resolve.

It was also why he wanted to bring Arthur over from Sengoku.

Anyone afraid of death wasn't qualified to be one of his subordinates.

But just willpower and courage weren't enough.

In this vast sea, without exceptional talent, no amount of hard work made someone worth investing in.

Reality was harsh like that.

Those clichéd scenes from anime—shouting about friendship and bonds to defeat the villain—might happen in fiction, but Daren had never seen it happen in real life.

And knowing his own personality, even if he did see it, he probably wouldn't care.

Whether Arthur was truly worth cultivating, he'd need to keep watching for a while longer.

Borsalino gave Daren a glance and changed the subject.

"The North Blue fleet has recently purchased a whole batch of laser weapons from the Science Department."

He looked at Daren with a half-smile.

"Looks like their budget got a generous bump."

Daren replied with a smooth smile,

"I heard from Admiral Momonga that the North Blue's economy has been doing quite well lately."

Borsalino's grin deepened.

"Is that so? Well then, something worth celebrating..."

As they neared the training camp gate, he stretched lazily.

"Well, I'll head back for now. The Science Department's had a few breakthroughs lately. If Rear Admiral Daren is interested, you should drop by sometime."

Daren nodded and smiled.

"Of course I'm interested. I'll make time, Vice Admiral Borsalino."

Borsalino gave a faint smile, and in the next moment, his body scattered into countless photons and vanished.

Daren stood still, murmuring to himself,

"What a cunning guy... What exactly are you scheming, Borsalino?"

...

"Daren!!"

An excited voice suddenly echoed from the training camp gate.

Daren looked up to see Kuzan and the others approaching with cheerful grins.

"You guys came all the way out here?"

Kuzan and the group flashed forward, fists clenched in excitement.

"Of course we came to welcome you back!"

"I still can't believe you really took down Shiki's fleet. That's just too cool!"

Yamakaji asked expectantly,

"So, is Shiki the Golden Lion really that strong?"

Doberman gave Daren a light punch to the chest and laughed,

"Welcome back."

Onigumo, keeping his usual cold demeanor, rasped,

"I want another match. Let's see how strong you really are now."

The others gathered around Daren with enthusiasm, throwing questions at him nonstop.

They weren't part of headquarters' core leadership, so they hadn't seen the detailed battle report. All they had were newspaper clippings and rumors about the Coin Island incident.

Seeing all these familiar faces, Daren felt himself relax a little. He answered each of their questions with a smile.

At the back of the crowd, Tokikake watched the scene with a sour expression. He clicked his tongue and muttered,

"Tch. So what if he destroyed a bunch of ships... It's not like he killed Shiki."

He thought back to the end of the press conference, when a bunch of ladies and girls were throwing Daren flirty glances. The memory made his teeth itch in frustration.

Just then, a cold voice cut through the air.

"Commodore Daren."

The group froze.

Daren turned and saw a tall figure standing stiffly at the training camp gate, face impassive.

"Commander Gion."

Daren greeted her with a smile.

Gion said expressionlessly,

"Come with me. I need to talk to you."

Daren blinked.

"Alright."

With a swoosh, the crowd instinctively stepped aside to make way.

Tokikake's eyes sparkled, and a sly grin curled on his lips.

"Hehehe, Gion's pissed for sure... That bastard Daren is done for!"

"Beat him up! Beat him good! Hehehe!!"

...

Half an hour later.

In the administrative office of the military academy.

The room was a mess—like it had just been through a war.

A pink cropped top, black hot pants, purple heels with red soles...

Clothes, stationery, and papers were scattered everywhere.

Daren reclined comfortably on a spacious sofa, happily puffing on a cigar.

Gion, drenched in sweat and wrapped in his white shirt, nestled against him like a kitten, her gaze hazy.

"Feeling better now, Commander Gion?"

Daren looked down at the beauty in his arms and grinned playfully.

Chapter 327 - 327: Volume 2 – Chapter 229: A Special Gift

"You... don't call me by my title..."

With Daren lifting her chin so playfully and using "Commander Gion" like that, a flush of shame rose in Gion's chest for no reason she could name.

"Oh? But this is your private office in the training camp. If I don't call you by your title... what should I call you instead?"

Daren looked at the woman in his arms with interest. The usually cool and aloof Gion now wore a shy, dazed expression. That contrast made it hard for him to stop, and he grinned with a half-teasing tone.

"You know this is an office! You bastard!!"

Gion, catching the mischievous glint in his eyes, angrily bit down on Daren's shoulder—but didn't even leave a mark. All she got was an aching tooth.

As if someone with a "steel body" could be bruised that easily. What a joke.

"I know this is the office. That's exactly why I couldn't wait. My bad, my bad."

Daren chuckled, fully embracing his role as a shameless scoundrel.

"But you clearly enjoyed it too, didn't you..."

Gion shot him a glare.

This pervert had locked the door the second he came in and didn't even hesitate to grab her.

What made it worse was that—for some reason, maybe it was the setting—she'd felt more... sensitive than usual.

The thrill of possibly getting caught made her heart race, and every touch of his skin against hers sparked like electricity—tingling, ticklish, impossible to ignore.

"Bastard!"

She muttered reluctantly, unwilling to admit the truth even to herself.

Daren just smiled and reached out to gently smooth her sweat-damp hair, then murmured with genuine admiration,

"Gion, you're beautiful."

That elegant, mature air of hers... the pale blush lingering on her cheeks... her breath soft and fragrant... the weariness in her eyes mixing with a lazy warmth... that proud nature tinged with a hint of rare shyness—right now, Gion had a charm all her own.

"Hmph!"

Gion gave a dismissive snort, slapped his hand away, and tilted her chin defiantly, showing off her long, fair neck like a swan.

But Daren caught it—the tiny, almost imperceptible curve at the corner of her lips.

What a tsundere little thing...

"Haven't seen me in a while. Did you miss me?"

Daren exhaled a stream of smoke, wrapping an arm around her slender waist. His voice was low and gentle.

"No!"

Gion turned away, refusing to look at him.

Daren sighed dramatically, faking disappointment.

"What a shame. And here I brought you a present."

"Really!?"

Gion instantly turned back, eyes bright with surprise—only to meet his teasing gaze. Her face flushed red again.

Trying to cover up her excitement, she stammered,

"I-I wasn't looking forward to your gift or anything..."

Daren chuckled and, as if performing a trick, revealed a coin between his fingers.

"A coin?" Gion blinked, confused.

"It's not just any coin. It's a souvenir from my last mission—one of the coins from Coin Island."

Daren smiled, full of confidence.

"Be patient."

Blue arcs of electricity crackled faintly between his fingers.

And then, something strange began to happen.

Before Gion's widening eyes, the coin in Daren's hand seemed to melt, writhing as if alive.

It elongated and shifted, becoming like threads spun by a craftsman, or ripples in still water. The liquid metal twisted and wove into itself—until it bloomed into a delicate, flawless rose.

A pale golden flower.

In Gion's eyes, it was as if a rose made of gold leaf had blossomed right there, in the hands of a Marine Rear Admiral.

Daren let out a slow breath, unaware that a sheen of sweat had formed on his forehead.

If it weren't for the many battles that had pushed his mastery of the Jiki Jiki no Mi further, he wouldn't have been able to pull this off six months ago.

Reconstructing a coin into a rose of gold leaf—such intricate precision was incredibly difficult. It required absolute control over the Devil Fruit's powers.

"I figured Coin Island didn't have any real specialties, so I came up with this idea. From now on, whenever I'm out on a mission, I'll take a coin from that country and turn it into a rose for you..."

Before he could finish the sentence, warm lips silenced him.

A deep, passionate kiss.

It lasted a full ten seconds before they finally pulled apart.

Daren stared at Gion, her eyes shimmering with tears, cheeks tinged red. He smiled and asked,

"Do you like the gift?"

Gion didn't dare meet his eyes. She just nodded, face still flushed.

Looking at the delicate golden rose in her hand, she couldn't stop the corners of her mouth from lifting into a smile.

There were plenty of people across the seas who courted her—

Young talents from major merchant guilds, princes of allied nations, elite Marines, brilliant nobles...

They had all tried different methods to win her favor.

Lavish wealth enough for a lifetime, Meito swords tailored to her tastes, rare and exotic treasures—love letters and bouquets that could fill rooms.

But no one had ever given her a gift so "cheap" yet so "precious."

Coins were everywhere on Coin Island, countless in number.

And yet, that was the very island where Daren had used those same coins to effortlessly annihilate the legendary Golden Lion Shiki's invincible fleet.

That single coin now carried a unique meaning.

More than anything, unlike anyone else, Daren had used his Devil Fruit ability to personally reshape it—adding his own heartfelt touch to the gift.

How could she not like something so one-of-a-kind?

"So... did you miss me while I was gone?"

Seeing Gion's bashful expression only fueled Daren's urge to tease.

Gion bit her lower lip and shot him a fierce glare.

Daren burst out laughing and pulled her waist tightly into his arms.

Again?

Gion's eyes widened in alarm.

"You... your injury..."

"It's nothing." Daren brushed it off.

"Wait... let me go... y-you bastard..."

"But weren't you enjoying it too?"

"How... how could I possibly... something like that—"

"Tekkai."

"Mm..."

A soft, sultry moan echoed through the empty office.

...

Pleasant moments always passed too quickly.

It was a full two hours before Daren finally emerged from Gion's office, fully content.

Now that he'd mastered a special application of "Tekkai," he felt completely transformed—unstoppable.

As for Gion...

She was prideful to the core. Even though she clearly relished it, she still acted reserved and uptight.

But that very contradiction made the whole process of breaking her in all the more interesting.

"Time to head home."

Daren rubbed his chin, straightened out his messy clothes a little, then walked confidently toward the family quarters.

Chapter 328 - 328: Volume 2 – Chapter 230: Return to the North Blue

Another two hours passed.

The soft, amber glow of dusk spilled into the courtyard, filtering through drifting autumn leaves and casting mottled shadows on the ground. Dust floated gently in the air, rippling in the fading light.

A large pink kimono, delicate undergarments, white socks, and a long sash were scattered across the tatami.

"Do you like this gift?"

With one arm wrapped around the stunning Amatsuki Toki, Daren conjured a gold-hued cherry blossom in his other hand, the petals forming with a gentle shimmer. His voice was soft.

"Toki, I know how much you love cherry blossoms."

"This time, Coin Island didn't really have anything special, so I came up with this instead... I promise you, from now on, every time I go on a mission, I'll take a coin from that country and craft a cherry blossom like this—for us, to remember our love."

Toki lay nestled against him like a kitten, her face still glowing with post-bliss warmth.

When she saw the exquisitely delicate cherry blossom in his hand, her eyes shimmered, misting over with emotion.

"Thank you, my love. I truly love it."

Her fingers moved gently across the scars on his chest—some old, some still fresh—her voice full of tender concern.

"But all I want... is for you to come home safely. That's the best gift you could give me."

Daren chuckled.

"Of course. That won't be a problem."

As he gazed down at the beauty in his arms, he couldn't help comparing Toki to Gion.

In terms of looks, Toki had the clear edge—after all, in the original story, she was the mother of Kozuki Hiyori, the most beautiful courtesan in all of Wano.

But Gion's figure was something else—fiery and athletic from years of training. Her long, toned legs had a power and allure that couldn't be ignored.

Their personalities were just as different.

Toki gave Daren a sense of peace—soft and nurturing, the kind of woman who could make you let go of all your burdens and just rest.

Gion, on the other hand, was a storm of tsundere pride, fire, and challenge—full of thrill and conquest.

The smile on Daren's lips deepened.

Isn't this the kind of life Marines fight and bleed for?

If all you get is hardship, then no matter how noble your ideals are, being a Marine would just be pure suffering.

"How long will you be staying home this time?"

Toki traced gentle circles on his chest with her slender fingers, her voice soft and dreamy.

Daren thought for a moment before replying with a smile,

"I probably won't be sent out on any missions for a while. Gotta give others a chance to shine, too."

"And besides... there's less than a month left before I graduate from the training camp. I still have a few cultural credits I haven't made up yet..."

"If I do go out again, it'll most likely be for my pre-graduation internship."

The training camp did include academic courses—after all, it was designed to train elite officers. Its primary goal had always been to cultivate the next generation of Marine leadership.

Navigation, weather, geography, world history, naval tactics... the curriculum covered a wide range of foundational knowledge.

The content wasn't especially deep, more of a broad overview. But Daren had spent most of the past half year ditching class to train privately under Garp—so now he had to catch up on those credits.

As for the internship at sea, that was a long-standing tradition.

Near graduation, Zephyr—chief instructor of the camp—would personally lead all cadets out on a mission at sea.

It served two purposes: first, to help them quickly adapt to real combat; and second, to serve as their final assessment before graduation.

The mission objectives varied every year, tailored by Zephyr himself based on the current global situation. Each cadet would be graded on performance during the mission, so there was no way to cheat or rely on past examples.

...

One day later.

North Blue.

Dark clouds churned across the sky, casting the world into shadow like an early nightfall.

"Heaven's Judgment!!"

A massive column of lightning pierced through the thick, swirling clouds—like a roaring dragon descending from the heavens—striking down upon a lone figure at the center of the island.

For a split second, the world fell into deathly silence.

Blinding white light devoured all vision.

Boom!!

A second later, a deafening roar exploded across the land like the heavens were shattering.

An immense blast erupted at the heart of the island. From the point of impact, a storm-like shockwave surged outward in every direction. Everything within a kilometer—trees, plants, the very earth—was uprooted and hurled away.

Dust surged like tidal waves, while flames licked at the air in constant motion.

No one knew how much time had passed when, at last, the smoke and ash were swept away by the wind.

A tall figure stepped forward from the heart of the blaze, his black military boots pressing into the scorched and shattered ground.

A streak of blue lightning flickered across the sky before rapidly condensing into a human form.

Momonga, his body still wrapped in arcs of electricity from the Goro Goro no Mi, looked at the unscathed Marine Commodore in front of him and sighed helplessly.

"You came all the way back to the North Blue just to crush my confidence?"

Daren casually dusted off the soot from his coat.

The land beneath him was a ruined field of charred craters and fractured stone. He smiled.

"I've got to check in now and then—see how your training's going. You've come a long way... The power of the Goro Goro no Mi really is terrifying."

Momonga: "..."

I just hit you with my strongest move—Heaven's Judgment—and it didn't even scratch you. And now you're saying it's terrifying?

If he weren't completely outmatched, Momonga would've pinned this bastard to the ground and beat him senseless.

...He really had it coming.

Seeing the twitch in Momonga's expression, Daren's mood lifted even more.

He reached out and patted Momonga's shoulder, smiling.

"I mean it."

"Your progress with the Goro Goro no Mi has far exceeded my expectations."

Momonga exhaled and said,

"Well, I can't afford to let you down... Otherwise, that so-called strongest Logia-type Devil Fruit would be wasted on me."

Daren shook his head, still smiling.

"I knew you'd get there."

He wasn't just being nice—he meant it.

Momonga's development of the Goro Goro no Mi had been remarkable.

In the original storyline, he was already one of the elite Vice Admirals at Marine Headquarters—a true pillar of the Marines and a symbol of global justice. His natural talent placed him just beneath the Admirals and their closest contenders.

Now, with Daren's personal guidance and Momonga's relentless work ethic, he had pushed his mastery of the Goro Goro no Mi to a level approaching Enel's from the original canon—in less than half a year.

It was both expected and surprising.

Clearly, Momonga was highly compatible with the Goro Goro no Mi.

If he kept progressing at this rate—sharpening his swordsmanship and mastering Haki—then stepping into the realm of Admiral candidates was only a matter of time.

As for whether he could truly break through into full Admiral-level strength... that would come down to fate.

Chapter 329 - 329: Volume 2 – Chapter 231: The Strongest Fleet

The strength of a Yonkō-class fighter ranks among the absolute peak of these seas. Only those who truly reach this level can be considered "gold-class contenders."

It's the line that separates the truly strong from the rest. Some people struggle their entire lives and never make it past this threshold, while others, with monstrous talent, walk into that grand palace with ease.

Momonga already had exceptional potential. Now, with the Goro Goro no Mi gifted by Daren, stepping into that realm wasn't out of reach.

Hearing Daren's words, Momonga rolled his eyes.

Easy for him to say. No one but Momonga himself knew how much time and effort he had poured into mastering the Goro Goro no Mi over the past six months.

What he hadn't told anyone was this—watching Daren grow stronger by the day had stirred a deep, indescribable sense of urgency and anxiety in him.

It wasn't jealousy.

It was the fear of being left behind.

What if... even if it seemed unlikely... but what if, one day, Daren—this monster of a man—ran into an enemy he couldn't defeat, or got caught in a life-or-death crisis...

And what if, in that moment, Daren needed his deputy's help, but he was too weak to provide it?

Momonga didn't even want to imagine that scene.

As if sensing his thoughts, Daren patted him on the shoulder and smiled.

"Don't put so much pressure on yourself. Sometimes you've just got to let things play out."

"How's the fleet doing lately?"

At the mention of work, Momonga immediately snapped into professional mode, his expression turning serious.

"Not bad. Thanks to the foundation you laid, the situation in the North Blue is pretty stable."

"As for the Donquixote Family, ever since we gave Doflamingo that warning last time, he's been a lot more well-behaved. Overall, fleet tax revenue is steadily rising."

Daren nodded.

He knew all about the "warning" Momonga had given Doflamingo—that was part of the reason he handed over the Goro Goro no Mi.

"That kid Doffy's always been like that—proud, defiant, with no regard for anyone else. Half the time I don't even know how to deal with him. If there's no better option, a good, solid beating is the only way to keep him in check."

Daren sighed.

Momonga: "..."

You really are playing the "dad" role to the hilt.

"...After the ruckus you caused in the New World this time, I doubt the Donquixote Family will be acting up for a while."

"Tsk, tsk, tsk. You wiped out Shiki the Golden Lion's fleet just like that... Ruthless. I've heard he's the kind who never lets a grudge go."

There was a hint of concern and caution in Momonga's tone as he spoke.

Daren just chuckled dismissively.

"I won't be leaving headquarters anytime soon. What could he even do?"

"If he really dares to show up at Marineford, honestly, I'd look forward to that."

A glint of cold killing intent flashed in his eyes. He raised a hand, gently brushing the still-aching wound on his chest. A defiant smirk tugged at the corner of his lips.

"I remember that slash he gave me all too clearly."

Momonga was momentarily speechless, then let out a small, reassured smile.

Shiki the Golden Lion, vindictive?

Maybe.

But Momonga knew all too well—this man standing before him wasn't exactly a good guy either.

Daren was the kind of lunatic who killed a Celestial Dragon just because he was in a bad mood!

It had already been a year since the shocking "Celestial Dragons Incident," but Momonga still found himself replaying that moment—when Daren, risking everything, struck down Saint Xildes.

Was it out of pity for that civilian father and daughter?

Maybe.

But with Daren's calm and composed nature, it was hard to believe he'd act so recklessly on emotion alone.

Was it because of his pride and duty as the "King of North Blue," or that unspoken rule he had—"once you take the money, you finish the job"?

Maybe.

But Momonga understood that things like duty, responsibility, and rules never really meant much to Daren.

...None of those were the real reason he made his move.

The truth behind why Daren killed the arrogant Celestial Dragon, Saint Xildes, was hidden in the last thing he said to him that day.

"That guy's face was so revolting, I had the urge to kill him... and it wasn't something I could control, no matter what."

I just couldn't stand him. He ruined my mood, so I wanted to take him out... even if he was a Celestial Dragon.

That's the kind of "justice" Daren follows.

—"Justice as he pleases."

Shiki the Golden Lion might be eyeing Daren, but wasn't Daren already targeting Shiki too?

Momonga had never seen Daren take a loss from anyone.

"By the way, how's the development of the fleet's laser weapons coming along?"

The question reminded Daren of something Borsalino had said.

A smile appeared on Momonga's face as he replied,

"Very smoothly."

"Vinsmoke Judge really lives up to his reputation as one of the top scientists on the seas. He's already successfully deconstructed the laser weapon's energy core and made modifications."

"With the current progress I've made in developing the Goro Goro no Mi, each charge cycle takes three minutes, and a single charge can unleash at least fifty laser blasts."

"In the past six months, the fleet has expanded from ten to twenty warships, and it's still steadily growing at a rate of two new ships per month."

"As of now, the North Blue Fleet has twenty main battleships. Each one is equipped with at least five laser cannons and five conventional heavy cannons, plus eight supply ships."

"Based on your earlier plans, by the second half of the year, the North Blue Fleet is expected to grow to around twenty-five ships. By then, all weapons will be fully upgraded, forming a complete large-scale naval combat fleet."

Daren nodded in satisfaction.

He had full confidence in Momonga's capability, especially when it came to managing military affairs—his patience and diligence even surpassed Daren's own.

Though Daren had been gradually stepping back from the fleet's daily operations, he still provided the strategic vision, shaped by his knowledge and perspective as someone from the modern world.

A fleet that far surpassed the technological level of this era!

Replacing traditional wooden hulls with high-grade alloys, swapping natural wind propulsion for high-efficiency energy systems, and equipping ships with cutting-edge laser weapons instead of outdated gunpowder cannons...

Thanks to Germa 66's modifications, the North Blue Fleet's warships were beginning to resemble modern battleships.

Every aspect—from construction and upgrades to weapon integration—cost more than five times what a comparable Marine Headquarters vessel would.

If Daren hadn't looted the treasure of Skypiea's City of Gold, even draining all of North Blue wouldn't have been enough to fund such a fearsome fleet.

And this heavily armed North Blue Fleet would become his greatest strength and the core force under his command for the days to come...

Chapter 330 - 330: Volume 2 – Chapter 232: Sweating Yet?

"By the way, I heard you had a run-in with Big Mom?"

Momonga suddenly remembered something and asked with a curious look.

Daren gave a helpless smile.

"Kind of. I killed two of her sons right in front of her."

Momonga: "..."

What do you mean 'kind of'... With Big Mom's insane personality, you kill two of her sons and she'll hunt you down across the seas, no questions asked!

Wait...

He suddenly narrowed his eyes at Daren, his face full of suspicion.

"You said 'kind of'... What's that supposed to mean?"

"You didn't do anything weird, did you?"

As the Admiral of the North Blue—and someone naturally cautious and steady—Momonga knew the bounty posters of the major pirates on the sea like the back of his hand.

Even though Charlotte Linlin, Big Mom, was nearing 40, she still had her charm.

And considering Daren's reputation as a notorious womanizer...

"What the hell are you imagining..."

Daren's face twitched, and he snapped irritably,

"I didn't do anything, damn it! I still have some damn morals!"

He practically ground his teeth.

"Is that so..." Momonga muttered, clearly unconvinced.

He eyed Daren skeptically.

"That reaction's a bit too much, don't you think...?"

Momonga knew Daren far too well.

Usually, when it came to women, the guy had skin thicker than a battleship's hull.

But this over-the-top reaction... made things look even more suspicious.

Daren: "..."

"So what actually happened?"

Momonga asked, half-grinning.

Daren's eye twitched as he turned away, pretending to casually stare out at the distant sea.

"That lunatic wanted me to be her husband."

He mumbled under his breath.

"What?"

Momonga's eyes flew wide open. He looked like he couldn't believe what he'd just heard.

Daren barked,

"I said, that crazy woman wanted to have my child!"

"You bastard, you heard me the first time!"

For a moment, the surroundings went dead silent.

"Pfft—!"

Momonga suddenly burst out laughing, clutching his stomach, face flushed red, eyes tearing up.

"Bwahahahahaha!!"

Daren stood there, deadpan, watching Momonga double over in laughter, his own face twitching with growing irritation.

"Hahaha... You... Why didn't you just go for it?!"

Momonga could barely get the words out, trembling with laughter.

"Charlotte Linlin—she's one of the top beauties among pirates... Hahahaha!"

"And that seductive, mature style of hers? Wasn't that exactly your type back in North Blue... Hahahaha!!"

"Plus, you both have insanely hard bodies... You're literally made for each other! Hahaha!"

"With your charm, maybe you could've tamed her! She might've turned over a new leaf—and hell, maybe the Headquarters would've given you a medal... Hahahahaha!!"

Momonga laughed uncontrollably, completely oblivious to Daren beside him, whose face was now as dark as the bottom of a pot.

"You should've just gone along with it. It's not even a bad deal... Huh?"

Click!

The laughter stopped cold.

Momonga looked down, confused, only to see both his hands suddenly clamped in black shackles.

A wave of weakness hit him like a truck. His legs nearly gave out as his whole body turned limp.

That overwhelming strength vanished like a receding tide.

"Seastone shackles!?"

Momonga cried out in shock.

This guy... Daren actually carries those around with him?

But isn't he a Devil Fruit user?

Then why is he acting like it's nothing?

He instinctively looked up, only to meet Daren's half-smiling, half-menacing gaze.

A chill shot up from the soles of his feet, racing along his spine straight to the top of his head. His scalp prickled.

"Not laughing anymore?"

Daren stood there, face clouded, cracking his neck with a grin as he flexed his fingers. Each pop sounded like exploding beans.

"You sweating yet?"

Momonga forced a strained smile.

"H-Hey, Daren... don't be rash, I was just messing around..."

His legs felt like jelly. Whether it was the Seastone's natural suppression on Devil Fruit users or just Daren's terrifying stare, he couldn't tell.

"Of course I know you were joking," Daren said with a grin that didn't reach his eyes.

Momonga took a cautious step back, eyes warily scanning Daren.

"So... you're not mad, right?"

"Me? Angry? Why would I be angry?" Daren smiled calmly. "Nothing worth getting mad over."

Oh, you're not mad? Then I'm relieved... yeah, right!!

Momonga's eye twitched uncontrollably as he stammered,

"S-So what are you planning to do then...?"

Daren clenched his fist—and with that simple motion, an audible airburst cracked out. Momonga's heart skipped a beat.

"This?" Daren said seriously. "This is Seastone resistance training."

He looked completely sincere.

"It's a method I learned in Wano Country. It works fast, and the results are great."

"Only downside is... it's a bit painful."

"So hang in there."

Momonga: ???

The next second—

"Aaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhh!!!"

Agonized screams echoed through the dense forest of the uninhabited island...

...

New World — Somewhere at Sea

Aboard the main ship of the Whitebeard Pirates, the Moby Dick.

Dark storm clouds loomed on the horizon, seeping across the sky like black ink.

The once clear skies were swallowed in an instant, and a violent gale churned the sea into towering waves. Thunder rolled in the thick darkness above, flickering with bursts of red-black lightning.

"Man, the weather turns fast out here..."

A young division commander frowned, glancing at the sky.

"No... this isn't just a weather change!"

Marco leapt down from the mast, his face grim and voice cold.

"Something terrifying is coming."

"What?" The rest of the crew began to sense the unease too.

Near the mast, Kozuki Oden had been drinking alone. The momentary buzz in his eyes vanished. He stood up abruptly.

His gaze locked on the distant sky. His remaining arm instinctively pressed against the hilt of Ame no Habakiri at his waist.

As a master swordsman, he could feel a fierce, unrestrained Haki—sharp and wild—roaring toward them from afar like a blade through the wind.

"This is bad! It's him!!"

Marco's expression shifted sharply. He turned to the crew, shouting,

"All members below division commander, get below deck!"

But even as the words left his mouth, he knew—it was already too late.

BOOM!!

A vast surge of black-and-red lightning suddenly tore across the heavens. The flickering light illuminated the stunned, pale faces of the Whitebeard Pirates.

Gale-force winds battered the sea, and monstrous waves roared to life.

An overwhelming pressure slammed down like a tidal wave, shattering the clouds in its wake.

Younger crew members were overwhelmed by the shockwave, dropping like flies. Some of the weaker ones passed out on the spot.

The world before them now... was a living hell.

"That troublesome bastard... has arrived."

Whitebeard, who had been resting with his eyes closed in the captain's seat, slowly opened them.

With a tired sigh, he reached out and grabbed the massive naginata Murakumogiri beside him. His towering figure rose, golden hair whipping wildly in the storm winds.

"Jihahahahaha!!"

A savage, wild laugh echoed from the distant sky.

Then—

From the churning storm clouds above,

A brutal silhouette burst forth, wrapped in a storm of black and red lightning, dual blades in hand, hurtling toward the Moby Dick like a falling meteor!

His long golden mane whipped like a raging lion in flight!

Shiki, the Golden Lion!!

"Newgate... long time no see!!"