

One Piece 331

Chapter 331 - 331: Volume 2 – Chapter 233: That Marine Brat

"It's Shiki the Golden Lion!"

"The legendary pirate on par with Oyaji!"

"Damn it! Why is he here?!"

"All hands, prepare for battle!"

...

The sea raged with violent winds and towering waves, and the Moby Dick rocked fiercely in the storm.

The members of the Whitebeard Pirates stared in horror at the figure plummeting from the sky. Their eyes were filled with dread and tension as they gripped their swords, bracing for a fight.

Even the newest recruits had heard more than once about Shiki's terrifying reputation. The man was volatile, ruthless, and cruel—a savage pirate, the complete opposite of their Oyaji.

Feeling the oppressive pressure bearing down, Marco's heart pounded and his expression tensed.

Shiki, at this moment, showed no hint of despair over the total destruction of his massive fleet. Instead, his overwhelming and untamed aura was even more intense than when they'd last seen him on Coin Island.

"This is bad—Oden?!"

Marco's face changed abruptly, but before he could move, he heard quick footsteps behind him.

"Oden?!"

"What are you doing?!"

...

Everyone gasped as they turned and saw a one-armed figure in samurai garb leap from the deck.

"Wahahaha!! What incredible sword aura! Let me see your strength!"

All traces of Kozuki Oden's drunkenness vanished, his eyes blazing with fierce fighting spirit. The wind whipped his loose kimono wildly as he looked up at Shiki descending from the sky.

The gloom in his heart was gone.

He had left Wano to circle the globe, to witness all the wonders and beauty the world had to offer. And aboard this ship, Whitebeard had taken him in, shown him warmth he'd never known.

He wouldn't let anyone defy Whitebeard's authority!

Oden launched into the air, body low and angled forward, one hand gripping the hilt of Ame no Habakiri as he assumed a drawing stance.

Swish!

Flowing Haki danced around him like delicate cherry blossoms, spreading from his arm to the entire length of his blade.

Then—his head snapped up.

With a fierce motion, Kozuki Oden drew his sword toward the airborne lion barreling down on him!

The storm-darkened sky suddenly lit up, as if day had broken in an instant.

A brilliant flash of blade light burst forth.

The sword led, the warrior followed.

It was as if the famed Meito itself dragged Oden forward, soaring upward like a meteor at a speed too fast for the eye to catch.

"Tōgen Totsuka!"

"Jihahahaha! Brat, you've got a death wish!"

Faced with such a dazzling strike, Shiki's savage eyes narrowed. He let out a wild, maniacal laugh.

Zzzzt zzzzt...

Crackling black-red lightning exploded from his twin Meito, Oto and Kogarashi, like fireworks. The sheer force tore through the surrounding space, painting a hellish scene.

"Outta my way!"

Like he was wielding raw storms in both hands, Shiki's bloodshot eyes flared as he slashed downward!

BOOM!!

In the blink of an eye, the two clashed—like a meteor striking the earth!

A dense, twisted sphere of black-red energy compressed at the point where the three swords were about to meet.

Kozuki Oden's pupils shrank to needlepoints.

There was no impact!

This was... Whitebeard's ability!

Before he could react, Shiki let out a crazed laugh and brought his blades down with full force!

A massive blast of black-red lightning slammed into Oden's chest. Blood sprayed through the air as his body shot back like a broken kite, crashing into the Moby Dick and smashing a hole in the deck.

Cries of alarm rang out from the crew.

With Oden heavily wounded in a single strike, Shiki didn't slow down—he launched straight toward Whitebeard.

Whitebeard frowned, gripping his enormous naginata. As he stepped forward, he swung it upward with crushing force!

Another black-red lightning storm burst forth, crackling densely around the blade of his weapon.

Blades and naginata clashed midair!

BOOM!!

A boiling mass of black-red energy erupted again, twisting and colliding violently between their weapons...

Lightning and hellish winds exploded outward, engulfing the two combatants. Roaring shockwaves flattened everything in their path, and for kilometers around, the sea erupted into chaos—titanic waves towering hundreds of meters crashed in all directions.

The cloud-filled sky split apart. The Moby Dick's deck groaned, webbed with cracks under the pressure.

Many crew members were thrown into the air, clinging desperately to masts and railings to avoid being swept into the ocean.

Marco and the division commanders shielded their eyes with one arm, staring in awe at the two monstrous figures locked in battle.

"Oyaji... he's going all out!"

"There's actually someone on this sea who can go toe-to-toe with Oyaji..."

"This is insane... it's like the end of the world."

...

Right now, Whitebeard and Shiki stood across from each other, golden hair whipping wildly in the wind, red glints flashing in their eyes. The sheer force of their presence surged to its peak.

BOOM!

With a thunderous roar that seemed to tear the world apart, a massive shockwave blasted skyward, ripping a jagged rift through the thick sea of clouds.

The sky split open.

Both men stepped back simultaneously, and the chaos seemed to settle.

The tsunami that had been suspended in the air crashed back down, sending up towering plumes of spray.

"Jihahahaha! Newgate, it's been a long time."

Shiki laughed as he sheathed his twin swords, casually grabbing a bottle of liquor from a nearby crate on the deck. He popped it open and took a hearty swig.

Glancing at the samurai climbing out from the wrecked deck, he grinned.

"Your sworn brother's got some serious fight in him."

His eyes landed on Kozuki Oden—chest bloodied, but eyes burning with fire.

"Hey, samurai. You're a two-sword-style user, right? That move earlier... was missing something."

Kozuki Oden gave a pale smile.

"It's just an arm. Won't be long before I adjust... and when I do, I'll be even stronger than before."

As he stared at the proud lion before him, there wasn't a trace of defeat on his face—only eager anticipation.

He's strong.

Unbelievably strong.

And unlike Whitebeard, Shiki fought like he once had—with twin blades and overwhelming ferocity.

In fact, Oden had a feeling that Shiki the Golden Lion... might just be the strongest swordsman of this entire era.

Fighting a madman like this had awakened something in him. His understanding of swordsmanship had been shattered and rebuilt on the spot.

His grip tightened on the hilt of Ame no Habakiri, confidence shining in his eyes.

With this battle under his belt, he was certain—he'd reach the top again soon.

No—he'd surpass it.

"I'll be waiting," Shiki said casually, then turned to Whitebeard, whose face was still dark.

He grabbed another bottle of booze and tossed it over.

"What's wrong, Newgate? After all these years, this is how you greet an old friend?"

He squinted teasingly.

"Not even gonna share a drink with me?"

"Come on, we were crewmates once."

Whitebeard narrowed his eyes, stabbed his naginata into the deck, and popped the cork. He downed the entire bottle in a single breath.

Less than five seconds later, it was empty.

With a loud smash, he crushed the bottle and sat back in his seat, voice cold.

"That's one bottle. Now get to the point, Shiki. Say what you came to say, before I decide to throw you back into the sea."

"Jihahaha, so cold..."

Shiki grinned wickedly.

"This time... I'm here to talk."

He licked his cracked lips, a wild, violent glint flaring in his eyes.

"To talk about... a certain interesting Marine brat."

He cast a mocking glance at the one-armed samurai.

"Come to think of it, he and your Whitebeard Pirates... have quite a bit of bad blood between them, don't they?"

Chapter 332 - 332: Volume 2 – Chapter 234: He Will Be Your Father

New World.

Whole Cake Island.

The island's environment was truly unique—every building was stark white with a creamy aesthetic, and on closer inspection, one would be shocked to find they were actually made of cake.

The sky hung low with gray clouds as a fine drizzle fell steadily, washing through the air and diluting the island's rich, sugary aroma.

...

In a secluded corner of Whole Cake Island, the grassy land was soft and fragrant. The Charlotte family members, instead of their usual bizarre attire, were dressed in simple black clothes.

Their eyes were downcast, and one after another, black-clad figures stood quietly in the rain, a heavy silence settling over the group.

Two grayish-white gravestones stood before them:

"Charlotte Perospero's Grave"

"Charlotte Daifuku's Grave"

Before the graves lay an assortment of sweets and fresh flowers as offerings.

...

Tap. Tap. Tap...

Muffled footsteps approached from behind, mixed with sharp, rhythmic clacks—the sound of spurred boots striking the ground.

The crowd stiffened and instinctively parted to form a path.

A tall figure slowly emerged through the rain.

It was a young man, around twenty years old. His presence was grim and intimidating, his eyes sharp and frigid like blades.

He had short red hair and long, powerful legs. His bare upper body revealed sharply defined muscles brimming with explosive strength.

His left arm, upper torso, and back bore pink tattoos, with a skull design on his left arm. His entire outfit carried a dark, heavy-metal aesthetic—black jeans and leather boots with spurs.

A wide white scarf covered the lower half of his face, and a black trench coat draped over his shoulders fluttered slightly in the cold breeze.

Dried blood still clung to his boots and coat, releasing a strong metallic stench as he walked, staining the air with the scent of violence.

...

"It's Katakuri..."

"Why is he back? I thought he was still suppressing the rebels in Edranco?"

"Word is he finished them off. All 13,000 of the rebels who tried to resist Mama's rule... slaughtered in a single day."

"Wait—what? Wasn't the battle deadlocked?"

"No idea, but apparently Katakuri lost it after hearing about Perospero and Daifuku's deaths."

"That smell... the blood is overwhelming..."

"..."

...

The members of the Big Mom Pirates looked uneasily at Charlotte Katakuri as he strode forward, their expressions mixed—some whispered, confused or wary.

At the funeral, emotions were far from unified. Some sneered, some mocked, others showed concern, grief, or silent sorrow.

Although all the Charlotte children shared Big Mom's blood, their different fathers meant their bonds weren't always strong.

Not everyone mourned the loss of Perospero and Daifuku.

For some of the more peripheral family members, their deaths were actually welcome news—it meant more Minister positions in Totto Land were now vacant.

And a vacancy meant opportunity—power, status, and a chance to climb.

Big Mom herself never minded these overt and covert power struggles between her children. In fact, she often turned a blind eye to them.

To her, even her own children were tools—means to an end in her rule.

...

Charlotte Katakuri ignored the scattered stares around him and walked straight up to the two gravestones.

He knelt on one knee and gently placed a bouquet of bloodstained flowers on the ground.

"Have you found out who did it?"

His voice was cold and flat.

No one responded.

Katakuri's eyes sharpened.

Boom!

A surge of overwhelming pressure burst from his body, rolling out like a physical force.

Conqueror's Haki!

The Big Mom Pirates flinched. Those with weaker wills buckled with a thud, collapsing to their knees, faces pale and breath ragged.

"I said... Did you find out who did it?"

Katakuri spoke slowly, enunciating each word.

Each syllable carried a biting chill, like icy nails driven straight into the heart.

"No, we don't know..."

"It was Mama... who told us to recover the bodies..."

"Only Mama knows..."

"But we... we didn't dare ask..."

Someone answered, voice trembling.

Katakuri frowned and reined in his aura. The gusting wind stopped instantly, and the eerie phenomena around them vanished.

He slowly straightened, his cold gaze sweeping across every face in front of him.

"Within three days, all entertainment activities on every island in Totto Land will be suspended to mourn Perospero and Daifuku."

"In addition, I don't want to see any of you eyeing their positions or territories. Everything will be decided by Mama."

"Understood?"

Without sparing a glance at anyone's expression, Katakuri turned and walked away.

...

Covered in the stench of blood, he soon reached the gates of the Cake Castle.

He raised a hand to stop the guards from announcing him and stared expressionlessly at the castle.

Then, with a loud bang, he dropped to one knee, bowed his head, and said,

"Mama, I want to know who killed them."

Silence.

Katakuri gritted his teeth—then suddenly slammed his forehead into the ground.

Cracks spread across the floor, and blood dripped steadily from his head, startling the nearby guards.

"Mama, please tell me!"

Still, there was only silence.

A silence so long, it felt deafening.

Katakuri's fury finally broke free.

He had always been close with Perospero—they had worked side by side to maintain Totto Land's fragile order.

And Daifuku was his full-blooded brother—same mother, same father.

Their deaths were a devastating blow to someone like Katakuri, who placed immense value on family and blood.

His eyes were laced with blood-red veins. Gloved fists clenched tightly at his sides.

Suddenly, the world around him began to distort.

The ground, walls, buildings, statues, and streetlamps—every inanimate object twisted and stretched into strange glutinous forms, writhing like serpents in chaos.

The guards, witnessing this surreal scene for the first time, turned pale and instinctively backed away.

"Mama, please tell me!!"

Katakuri raised his bloodshot eyes and threw up both hands.

As his Conqueror's Haki erupted, waves of mochi surged like a tidal storm.

But at that moment...

"Well, well, well... You truly are my most trusted son. You've awakened your Devil Fruit."

A hoarse, raspy female voice echoed from deep within the castle, filled with undisguised praise.

But the tone shifted sharply in the next instant.

"Yet with this display... Are you planning to attack me?"

A burst of Conqueror's Haki, far more powerful than Katakuri's, exploded outward.

It swept over the courtyard like a tangible shockwave, knocking the guards unconscious and sending cracks spidering through the castle walls.

Katakuri's pupils widened in shock.

The crushing pressure slammed him to one knee with a thud.

His vision blurred, the world around him shattering like fragments of glass.

Still, he grit his teeth and forced himself upright, spine ramrod straight.

"No!"

His bloodshot eyes burned.

"I just want to avenge Daifuku and the others!"

"The dignity of the Charlotte family must not be violated by outsiders!!"

Suddenly, the oppressive Haki vanished.

Katakuri's body slackened at once.

He knelt there, gasping for air, drenched in sweat.

Squeak... squeak...

The heavy doors of the castle slowly creaked open.

Big Mom sat on a throne inside, legs crossed in tall pink boots.

One hand lazily supported her cheek as she gazed at Katakuri with a half-smile.

"No, Rogers Daren is not an outsider."

Charlotte Linlin's red lips curled into a seductive smile.

"He will become my twenty-seventh husband...Which means, he will be your father."

Katakuri froze.

Then his eyes bulged, veins bursting blood-red across them.

His fists clenched—tighter than ever.

Chapter 333 - 333: Volume 2 – Chapter 235: Playing House

The New World.

Aboard the Moby Dick.

"Jihahaha! So, what do you think, Newgate... isn't it a flawless plan?"

Shiki locked eyes with the towering man seated at the head of the table. His gaze brimmed with menace and cunning as he spread his arms wide, grinning wickedly.

"It's time for the brats of this sea to witness once again what a real pirate's terror looks like!"

Marco and the other members of the Whitebeard Pirates stood frozen in shock. Their faces had gone pale, and their hearts were in turmoil.

They could hardly believe what they were hearing.

This guy... he actually came up with such a deranged plan?

Has he gone completely mad?

Shiki ignored their reactions entirely. To him, their opinions were worthless.

"Well? It's been a long time since we teamed up... I really miss those days when we fought 'shoulder to shoulder' on the same ship..."

He let out a low, sinister laugh.

"...Those were such 'fond' memories."

Whitebeard frowned.

He lifted the massive sake jug and took a long swig. Then, without any expression, he said:

"Are you done?"

"One bottle's finished. Time for you to leave, Shiki."

Shiki froze for a moment.

A flicker of anger flashed through his eyes.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Whitebeard responded coolly,

"I have zero interest in your plan. I've got no intention of starting a war with the Marines out of the blue... If that's what you want to do, do it yourself."

He glanced at Kozuki Oden.

"Oden will settle his own score."

"That was his decision. None of us will interfere—doing so would be the greatest insult to his honor as a samurai."

"As for what you called our 'bond as comrades'..."

Whitebeard's eyes suddenly turned cold.

"If I remember right, there was never any such bond between us on that ship."

"I've had enough of those days, always watching my back to keep from getting stabbed by a so-called 'ally.'"

As he spoke, his gaze briefly flicked toward Marco and the others, a trace of warmth flashing deep in his eyes.

Shiki narrowed his own.

He clearly caught the way Whitebeard looked at his crew.

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

His eyes gleamed with a sinister smirk as his tone turned mocking.

"What a shame, Newgate... I actually had some hopes for you. Never thought you'd fall this far. What a waste."

"With power like yours, and here you are playing such childish games in the middle of a war-torn sea... Jihahahaha!!"

Shiki slowly lifted off the ground, floating into the air, looking down from above at everyone on the deck of the Moby Dick.

"Go ahead and keep playing house!"

"You really think if you leave the Marines alone, they'll do the same?"

"Jihahaha!! Utterly stupid! Hopelessly naive!!"

"This world will always be one where the strong prey on the weak!"

His eyes locked with Whitebeard's from afar, meeting the old man's indifferent gaze.

"Newgate, I once thought you were like me—someone driven by ambition."

"But now it's clear... we're on different paths."

"When the real war breaks out, I'll be watching. Let's see if you can still protect all those little brats behind you like you are now!! Jihahahahaha!!"

With that, Shiki shot high into the sky and soon disappeared into the distant horizon.

Whitebeard remained seated, his expression solemn, silent for a long time.

...

A few days later.

North Blue.

Bang!

A military boot slammed hard into Momonga's face, and the sheer inhuman force behind it sent him flying.

White shockwaves rippled through the air as Momonga's body smashed through over a dozen towering trees before crashing into the base of a mountain range.

The tremendous impact sent tremors through the mountain, long cracks splitting across the rocky wall at its base.

Dust exploded into the air, and the sound of Momonga's violent coughing echoed continuously.

"You damn bastard... how many times have I told you not to hit me in the face..."

From the crater in the rock wall, Momonga crawled out with great difficulty. His face was bruised, blood trickling from the corners of his mouth, and Seastone shackles were clamped around his wrists.

Not far away, Daren descended smoothly from the sky and landed softly on the ground.

He grinned.

"If you don't want me to hit your face, then don't just stand there."

Momonga's mouth twitched. He wanted to curse him out so badly.

Wearing these damn Seastone shackles, I'm already doing great just being able to move at all!

But he couldn't be bothered to argue. Arguing or not, he'd still end up getting beaten—might as well save his energy.

Momonga plopped down on the ground, all pretense of North Blue admiral dignity gone, lying flat on his back and gasping for air.

"You're wiped out again?"

Seeing his deputy sprawled out like a broken toy, Daren couldn't help but tease with a hint of sadistic glee.

Honestly, Momonga's talent wasn't bad at all.

In just a few days, he had already started adapting to the effects of Seastone. Even when facing Daren's attacks, he could occasionally react with instinctive blocks and dodges.

Sure, he still got crushed in the end—but at least he was starting to put up a bit of resistance.

"Why haven't you gone back to headquarters yet? Nothing going on over there?"

Momonga grumbled in frustration.

Daren shrugged with a smile.

"Sure, I still have a bunch of credits left to complete—but I've got plenty of time."

"And really, between culture classes and helping my adjutant train, I think the latter is way more important."

You're just hooked on beating me up, aren't you...

Momonga rolled his eyes weakly.

"Alright, today's beatdown... ahem, I mean, today's Seastone combat training ends here."

With that, Daren summoned his metal skateboard, stepped onto it, and soared into the sky under the pull of his magnetic field, disappearing into the clouds.

Momonga: "..."

You let it slip.

...

Rubeck Island.

Donquixote Family Headquarters Hall.

Doflamingo, Trebol, and several other officers were in the conference hall, deep in discussion over their next move.

"Who's there?!"

Doflamingo's eyes turned cold in an instant. His fingers curled like talons as he lashed out in a specific direction.

Shhh!

Sharp gashes tore across the walls and floor of the hall.

From the shadows, a tall figure emerged slowly, gripping several invisible threads in one hand. Sparks crackled against his skin as he looked at Doflamingo with a smile.

"Doffy, long time no see. You've come a long way."

Doflamingo's expression shifted.

He hesitated briefly, then took a deep breath and dropped to one knee.

His proud head lowered slightly.

"Greetings, Godfather."

Chapter 334 - 334: Volume 2 – Chapter 236: Godfather's Feelings

Seeing this, Trebol and the others exchanged subtle glances, then immediately knelt on one knee and bowed their heads in unison.

"Greetings, Godfather Daren-sama."

They had no choice but to bow.

The man before them was a monster who had single-handedly wiped out the entire fleet under the legendary Great Pirate Shiki.

And right now, the terrifying aura faintly radiating from Daren was enough to make their hearts pound uncontrollably with fear.

No matter how proud they were, no matter their status in the North Blue's underworld, before absolute strength, they were nothing more than ants.

In the vast assembly hall, no one remained standing except for Daren.

A satisfied smile curved his lips.

"Very good. I like people who know their place."

Daren walked over slowly and extended his hand for Doflamingo to kiss the back of it.

"You all know I've been busy lately and haven't returned to the North Blue often... But judging by how things look now, you've done a great job. The underworld here is well-managed and orderly. I'm quite pleased."

The others stood up, still a little tense and uneasy.

Daren casually sank into a soft leather sofa, lit a gold-embossed cigar, and looked over at Doflamingo seated opposite him.

It had been more than half a year since they last met, and the kid had grown a lot.

Compared to the scrawny little brat who first arrived in the North Blue, Doflamingo had now matured into a young man.

His messy blond hair, like a crown, framed sharp, defined features. He stood nearly 1.8 meters tall, and in his expression was a faint trace of the spirit and brooding aura of a future Underworld Emperor.

Even through Observation Haki, Daren could sense how much stronger his aura had become.

He couldn't help feeling a little sentimental.

There was no denying it—Doflamingo truly was born gifted. In raw talent alone, he far surpassed Momonga.

If Daren hadn't entrusted the Goro Goro no Mi to Momonga, trying to suppress an ambitious Doflamingo in the North Blue would have been a nightmare.

After all, Momonga had his teachings and guidance.

And Doflamingo?

All he had were Trebol and those bootlicking misfits. Yet, through sheer trial and error, he'd managed to develop the Ito Ito no Mi to this level. That spoke volumes about his talent.

"Godfather... is the reason you returned to the North Blue this time..."

While Daren observed him, Doflamingo was also carefully trying to read his godfather's intent, speaking up cautiously.

Daren smiled.

"Can't I come back just to see my godson?"

He exhaled a smoke ring, sighing softly.

"To be honest, Doffy, I haven't been much of a godfather... I've barely taught you anything."

"This time, besides dealing with some affairs related to the North Blue fleet, I wanted to make up for that regret."

Everyone in the hall was stunned upon hearing that.

Doflamingo asked, still skeptical,

"Godfather, you mean... you're going to personally guide my training?"

Daren replied with a touch of helplessness,

"That's right. As my godson, if you're too weak, that would make me look bad, wouldn't it?"

...

Ten days passed in a flash.

That day, on a remote island in the North Blue...

Two figures shot through the sky in rapid succession.

"That's it! Use your threads to latch onto the clouds and pull yourself—this way you'll be able to fly through the sky!"

Riding a streamlined metal skateboard, Daren had both hands in his pockets, gliding backward as he casually coached DoFlamingo.

"Try to maintain balance at all times. Otherwise, during thread switches, you'll leave yourself wide open!"

He wore a grin as he watched DoFlamingo's slightly clumsy movements with amusement.

Compared to Daren's fluid and agile maneuvers in the sky, DoFlamingo was clearly still stiff and wobbly, his figure unsteady and sweat dripping from his brow.

"Incredible talent... he's basically got the hang of Sora no Michi in less than an hour..."

Daren narrowed his eyes, observing carefully as Doflamingo's technique grew steadily more refined. When he judged the time was right, he flicked a finger.

Whoosh!

A streak of silver flashed through the air, whistling toward Doflamingo at high speed.

His pupils shrank instantly.

A sudden sense of danger surged through him, and he instinctively lashed out with a clawed hand.

Clang!

Several nearly invisible threads caught the silver-white longsword mid-flight, clashing against the blade and sending a shower of sparks flying.

"What is this..."

Daren smiled faintly.

"From here on, we're cranking up the difficulty."

As soon as he finished speaking, the Skillful Grade Blade Kariumi vanished, transforming into a storm of sword shadows that densely surrounded Doflamingo.

Doflamingo's face shifted dramatically as he moved faster to respond.

While flicking invisible threads from his fingers to anchor himself to the drifting clouds—swinging through the air like a pendulum—he also had to fend off sharp blades coming at him from bizarre angles. The pressure on him surged instantly.

But Daren's assault was relentless. Before long, deep gashes from the slicing blades appeared across Doflamingo's body. Blood gushed from the wounds, staining his white shirt and pink feathered coat crimson.

Down on the island, Trebol and the others watched in horror as their young master bled. They were frantic, but there was nothing they could do—only stand there and watch helplessly.

All they could do was pray that the "King of the North Blue" would hold back and not use training as an excuse to "accidentally" kill their young master.

"What's wrong, Doffy... Is this all you've got?"

Daren casually lit a cigar, his hands in his pockets as he watched the trapped blond youth, mocking him with a smirk.

"Taking hits passively isn't like you."

"I'm standing right here, not even moving... Don't tell me you can't even handle one of my swords?"

Behind his sunglasses, Doflamingo's eyes turned red. He clenched his teeth and roared,

"Damn it!! Shut up!!"

Dozens of threads spread from his fingers like a spiderweb, catching the incoming swords and binding them tight.

The next moment—

With a sudden tug, Doflamingo launched himself upward, his feather coat billowing as he soared above Daren in an instant.

"I'm Doflamigo!!"

He slashed downward with his claws.

"Goshikito!!"

Hiss!!

Five razor-sharp threads pierced Daren's skin, digging deep into his steel-like muscles.

Blood splattered, spraying across Daren's face.

At last, he smiled.

"Good. You've finally managed to break through my physical defenses."

A thick cloud of white smoke escaped his mouth, and in the next instant, the Commodore's figure vanished like a ghost.

Doflamigo was stunned.

Before he could react, a black military boot suddenly filled his vision.

Boom!!

Doflamigo was sent crashing into the island like a cannonball, blasting out a massive crater.

"Doffy!!"

"Are you alright!?"

"Young Master!?"

Trebol and the others ran over, faces pale with fright. They tried to help the bloodied Doflamingo, but he shoved them away.

Gasping for air, the battered Celestial Dragon knelt at the bottom of the crater, raising his head to glare at the tall figure descending from the sky, blood dripping from his body.

The man walked toward him step by step.

That towering, imposing frame seemed to block out the sun itself, casting a massive shadow over Doflamingo.

He slowly extended his hand.

Seeing the hand reaching toward him, a flicker of fear crossed Doflamingo's eyes behind his sunglasses.

But the hand simply ruffled his hair gently.

Doflamingo froze.

"You've grown fast. I'm proud of you, Doffy—my godson."

The man smiled.

"Keep growing. Get even stronger."

"Because only when you're strong enough... can you kill me, right?"

Before Doflamingo could respond, Daren stepped onto his skateboard and shot into the sky, vanishing into the distant clouds in the blink of an eye.

The island fell silent.

"D-Doffy?"

Trebol looked cautiously at the kneeling Doflamingo, who remained frozen in place, and spoke hesitantly.

Doflamingo's eyes wavered for a moment before he snapped out of it.

He slowly pushed off the ground and stood.

Blood trickled from his forehead, dripping down to his chin.

But he continued to stare blankly in the direction where Daren had disappeared.

"Tell me... why would someone like that go out of his way to teach me so patiently, help me grow stronger?"

Doflamingo unconsciously clenched his fists.

In just ten days, Daren's training had done more for him than six months of his own efforts.

And he was certain—Daren had held nothing back.

He had gone all out, helping him develop his Devil Fruit, enhance his close-combat ability, and even passed on secret training methods from the Marine training camp, all without hesitation.

"He... doesn't he know I've always wanted to kill him?"

Doflamingo's voice was filled with confusion and doubt.

Trebol and the others fell silent. They'd clearly seen their young master's improvement over the past few days.

To be honest, they didn't understand either—why that man had done all of this.

"Forget it. Let's head back."

Doflamingo shook his head and regained his usual cold arrogance.

But somewhere deep in his heart—even if he refused to admit it—

When that man messed up his hair just now...

He felt a warmth and sense of support he had never received from his own cowardly, worthless father.

Chapter 335 - 335: Volume 2 – Chapter 237: Love is the Answer

After finishing his "training" of Doflamingo, Daren returned to the North Blue 321 Branch.

As soon as he walked into the Base Commander's office, Momonga, who was buried in paperwork, looked up with a helpless expression.

"You again?"

Daren flopped onto the soft leather sofa like he owned the place, lit a cigarette, and grinned.

"What, not happy to see me?"

Momonga's mouth twitched.

He hadn't even enjoyed a few peaceful days before Daren showed up again.

It wasn't that he wasn't welcome—just that his "special training" was downright brutal.

He asked grumpily,

"Did you torment Doflamingo this time?"

Daren poured himself a glass of whiskey but frowned when he couldn't find any ice. For a moment, he found himself missing that hot-blooded guy Kuzan.

After all, whiskey should be served on the rocks. At room temperature, it tasted like some knockoff soda—or worse.

"Yeah, kind of. Gave him a bit of guidance."

Momonga shot him a look and suddenly seemed intrigued.

"You're still not giving up?"

He knew all too well how determined Daren was about shaping Doflamingo.

Although he didn't fully understand what seemed like a "raising a tiger to bite you" kind of move, he'd always respected Daren's decisions.

"Doflamingo is a rare talent. And it turns out putting him in charge of the North Blue's underworld was a smart move."

Daren smiled.

"He's still just a kid. Don't be too harsh on him."

Momonga frowned.

"I'm just worried you're going to lose control. That guy doesn't look like the type to accept being anyone's subordinate."

He hesitated, then added,

"Do you know what happened to the mafia bosses he wiped out?"

"He used his Devil Fruit ability to control them, locked them up with his men, and made them fight to the death. Only the last one standing got to live."

Momonga let out a heavy sigh. That was what had him concerned.

Doflamingo was twisted.

Born into the Celestial Dragons, he had arrogance baked into his blood. But his traumatic childhood had warped that pride into something darker—pathological obsession.

He couldn't tolerate anyone stepping over him. That obsession twisted into hatred and fury, and eventually, a destructive craving to tear everything down.

Pure malice and a thirst for destruction led him to treat life as a game, finding joy in crushing dreams and causing pain.

Hearing that, Daren paused, thoughtful.

After a few moments, he spoke slowly.

"Momonga, you know, all adult obsessions are just ways of trying to make up for what we lacked as children."

Everything Doflamingo did boiled down to one thing: a nasty little brat desperate for attention.

In the original story, he seized the Heavenly Tribute, schemed his way into the Shichibukai, stole the throne of Dressrosa, became the underworld's biggest broker, even worked with Kaidou to create Artificial Devil Fruits, and spread war across the world...

All of it was just to get the World Government—or more precisely, the Celestial Dragons—to notice him. To "prove" that they were wrong to exile him from Mary Geoise.

...Look at me now. If you won't let me return as a Celestial Dragon, then I'll destroy the world you rule.

That was what Doflamingo truly believed.

"I'm not going to pass judgment on his actions. When you deal with enemies, you go in hard—burn everything like wildfire."

A slight smirk touched Daren's lips as he exhaled a cloud of smoke.

"He's just an immature, prideful, and insecure brat with a heavy grudge... We crush him with strength, so of course he needs somewhere to vent all that anger."

"At the very least, he's still playing by the rules. He hasn't hurt any civilians—right?"

Momonga rubbed his temples, a headache brewing.

"I'm just afraid that if something happens to you, he'll completely snap... Doflamingo doesn't seem like someone who submits to power."

Daren nodded in agreement, smiling.

"Exactly. That kind of brat? You can't handle him with brute force alone. Sure, absolute power might make him fear you or keep him in check, but deep down, he won't accept it."

"He'll just bury his resentment even deeper, like a snake in the shadows... waiting for the right moment to strike."

"If you want to truly conquer Doflamingo's heart, you can't just rely on your fists."

"Then what are you supposed to use?"

Momonga asked with a puzzled look.

Daren smiled meaningfully.

"Love."

Momonga: ???

He stared at Daren, completely dumbfounded.

After a long pause, he muttered,

"Doflamingo... isn't a woman."

Daren: "..."

He rolled his eyes.

This guy's getting weirder by the day.

Sitting in the position of North Blue Admiral had clearly "matured" him—too many formal banquets and social obligations.

"What I mean is, Doflamingo is severely lacking in affection."

Daren said flatly.

"In your eyes, what do you think is Doflamingo's biggest weakness?"

Momonga shook his head.

A strange glint flashed in Daren's eyes.

"His biggest weakness... is his dead biological father."

"He hates his father—hates his incompetence, hates his naïveté... Growing up without paternal love, deep down, he's desperately yearning for a father who's powerful, respected, and awe-inspiring."

"He wants someone who'll give him guidance, care, and approval. Someone who'll ruffle his hair and say, 'You did great,' when he succeeds—and someone who'll pat his shoulder and say, 'It's okay, I'm here,' when he stumbles."

"He longs for someone like that in his life."

Hearing this, Momonga fell into silent contemplation.

After a moment, he looked at Daren and let out a bitter laugh.

"You're really a devil, you know that?"

"Am I?"

Daren chuckled casually.

"I'm just doing my duty as a godfather. Showing care for a lonely, broken kid—trying to steer a twisted young man onto the right path. Some places would call someone like me... an angel."

Momonga: "..."

Shameless.

"Well then, I should be heading back."

Daren finished his cigarette, stubbed it out, drained his whiskey in one gulp, and stood from the sofa, walking toward the door.

As he opened it, his footsteps paused briefly.

"I'm leaving the North Blue in your hands, Momonga."

Momonga didn't respond.

He simply stood tall, raised his hand sharply, and gave a solemn salute.

Chapter 336 - 336: Volume 2 – Chapter 238: You Look Beautiful Today

By the time Daren returned to Marine Headquarters from the North Blue, it was already deep into the night.

With his familiarity with the sentry posts and patrol routes, he easily avoided the watchtower spotlights and patrol ships, bypassed the Marine security units, and slipped into Marineford without a sound.

It wasn't that he was sneaking around for anything shady—he was just too lazy to deal with the hassle.

While riding his metal skateboard toward the residential quarters, Daren suddenly changed course and headed for Gion's home.

No particular reason. He just wanted to check in on an old subordinate.

...

"Mmm..."

A soft, breathy moan filled the air.

The moonlight filtering through the window cast a faint, shimmering glow.

The battle had been intense.

Gion lay sprawled across Daren's chest, her slightly parted lips exhaling warm breath. Her black hair clung messily to her damp neck and shoulders, slick with sweat.

"You bastard... showing up in the middle of the night just to mess with me!"

Seeing the teasing look in Daren's eyes, Gion let out a light huff, irritation flickering in her gaze as she shot him a sharp glare.

Daren smirked.

"Ah, I see. You want me to go home. Well, if that's the case... guess I'll head out."

He made a move to get up and reach for his clothes.

"No..."

A sudden panic welled up in Gion's chest.

She reached out and grabbed the hem of his shirt, but her pride wouldn't let her meet his gaze. She turned her head away and mumbled softly,

"Don't go back."

Just the thought of what might happen once he returned home left a strange, sour feeling in her chest.

More than that, every time they did this, Daren would just zip up and leave without a trace of warmth or tenderness.

That always left Gion with a hollow sense of being used.

"Hmm? What was that? I didn't catch it..."

Daren said with feigned innocence, clearly enjoying himself.

Gion bit her lip hard, then suddenly shoved him forcefully.

"Then get out of here!"

"Don't ever come back again!"

Her delicate eyes welled with tears, the rims already turning red.

But a moment later, she felt a pair of warm, steady arms pull her into a tight embrace.

And in her ear came the voice of that damn Marine scoundrel.

"I'm not going home tonight. I'll stay here with you."

Gion's body trembled slightly. She didn't respond.

But she didn't push him away either.

The moonlight outside, cool and gentle, streamed through the window, filling the room with a serene stillness.

"So... since you got back, you haven't even gone home yet?"

Gion broke the silence, her tone quiet and soft.

Daren wrapped his arms around her, feeling the silky smoothness of her skin beneath his palm, and couldn't help but chuckle.

"That's right. Soon as I got back to HQ, I came straight to you."

Of course, he understood what Gion was feeling.

In the past, he'd always slipped away right after—definitely gave off a "hit it and quit it" vibe.

Gion never said anything outright—thanks to her tsundere pride—but Daren could still sense her dissatisfaction.

So this time, he thought about it and decided to stay with her for the night.

Honestly, it gave him a bit of a headache. Having too many women wasn't always a blessing.

Unlike the casual, playful affairs back in the North Blue, Gion and Toki were... different. It was the heartfelt kind of connection.

And for someone like Daren, that came with a strange mix of feelings.

Hearing his reply, Gion, nestled against him, tried her best to ignore the way his hand kept wandering—but a victorious smile still crept onto her face.

"Hmph..."

Pressed against his warm chest, worn out from their earlier clash, Gion slowly let her heavy eyelids close, drifting into a rare moment of peaceful sleep.

Daren listened to her steady breathing and smiled.

His gaze drifted to a rose on the windowsill.

A rose made of gold leaf, placed in a fine white porcelain vase, decorated with sprigs of baby's breath—clearly tended with great care.

Under the moonlight, it shimmered beautifully.

"Bastard... don't always bully me..."

The girl in his arms murmured in her sleep, shifting slightly.

Daren froze for a moment, his expression softening as he looked at her.

...

Early the next morning.

Daren slipped out of Gion's residence, quietly circling around before finally striding confidently into the Marine Headquarters' military port under full view of everyone.

"It's Commodore Daren!"

"Commodore Daren's back?"

"Good morning, Commodore Daren!"

...

Greeting the patrolling Marines with casual friendliness, Daren stopped by a small roadside shop, grabbed some breakfast, and strolled leisurely toward home.

...

Meanwhile.

Gion quickly tidied up the battlefield from the night before, changed into a crisp new military uniform, and stepped out with a sharp and spirited air, heading straight for Vice Admiral Tsuru's residence.

At this same time every week, she would visit Tsuru for a brief chat before heading to class at the training camp.

She had slept soundly the night before, so her mood was unusually good.

"Tsuru-nee-san."

As soon as she entered the courtyard, she saw Tsuru seated under the shade of a tree, wearing reading glasses and flipping through documents.

"You're here, Gion."

Tsuru closed the folder, looked up with a warm smile.

"Good morning, Gion!"

Just then, a nasal, fawning voice rang out from the doorway.

Tokikake poked his head in, grinning sheepishly as he held a few breakfast bags in his hands.

"Tokikake?"

Gion blinked in surprise, then gave a small, graceful smile.

"Good morning."

Maybe it was just her good mood, but there was none of her usual cold, icy aura. Instead, a gentle warmth softened her expression.

Bathed in the soft light of the morning sun, she looked radiant.

Her black hair fluttered gently in the breeze, framing her like a blooming, thorned rose—stunning and untouchable.

Tokikake froze on the spot.

He had never seen Gion look this dazzling before. That smile, especially, was like the first thaw of spring—brilliant and breathtaking.

In that moment, he screamed inwardly.

'Gion smiled at me! It's gotta be because I shaved today—I must look damn good!!'

What he didn't know was the graceful and enchanting figure someone else had embraced the night before.

Tokikake's face flushed red, and he stammered,

"Gion, you.... you're even more beautiful than usual today."

"Really..."

Gion paused, as if recalling something sweet, then smiled openly.

"Thank you."

Off to the side, Vice Admiral Tsuru couldn't help but shake her head, glancing at Tokikake with a hint of pity.

The sparkle of spring and joy in that girl's eyes—it was obvious to someone with experience.

"She's already fallen hard... That bastard Daren..."

Chapter 337 - 337: Volume 2 – Chapter 239: Garp's New Target

Tsuru let out a quiet sigh in her heart.

She had watched Tokikake grow up. Though the boy wasn't exactly handsome, he was, overall, a decent man.

As for Gion's choice, she knew better than to interfere. She bore no resentment or judgment.

Everyone has their youth.

Compared to someone like that Marine "monster"—powerful, brilliant, charming, and dazzling—Tokikake, while a genius in his own right, simply didn't measure up.

It was only natural to be drawn to someone exceptional.

Still, she couldn't help but feel a little bad for Tokikake.

...Until she remembered all those days he spent "caring for women" and "researching the red-light district." At that thought, any lingering sympathy vanished completely.

...

Ding ding ding...

The shrill sound of the bell rang through the training camp's culture class, immediately followed by a chorus of groans and complaints.

"Pens down! Hand in your papers now!"

"Onigumo! Tuck in that hair! If you don't know the answers, it's not going to help to use all your arms to write!"

"And you, Yamakaji! It's just a test—why do you look like it's the end of the world? There's a damn mountain of ash on your desk!"

"Tokikake, you little punk! What are you looking at? Peek again and I'll gouge your eyes out!"

"Kuzan, stop sleeping! Hand it in!"

...

On the podium, Zephyr rubbed his forehead, watching the chaos unfold below.

This group of brats never paid attention in class, and now that it was exam time, they were pulling out every trick in the book.

With a long sigh, Zephyr pinched the bridge of his nose as he started collecting their tests, his frown deepening with every new page.

He flipped through the thick stack of answer sheets, and his brows furrowed tighter and tighter, his expression darkening by the second.

Kuzan had turned in a blank sheet.

Tokikake's handwriting was as messy as his personality—crooked, unreadable, and even the answers he tried to copy from others were wrong.

Onigumo's responses were decent, while Yamakaji was just average.

Gion, as always, was outstanding. Her handwriting was elegant and clear, and her answers were logically structured—clean, precise, and a pleasure to read.

"Wait... where's that troublemaker Daren's paper?"

Zephyr suddenly remembered and started digging through the pile.

"That brat skips class every day... If he bombs the cultural exam, I'm gonna beat some sense into him..."

Muttering to himself, he quickly found Daren's test.

But the moment his eyes scanned the answers, Zephyr froze.

A glimmer lit up in his eyes.

He blinked, stunned, then murmured to himself,

"This kid... really is a genius."

...

"Hey, Daren, how did you do on the exam? The questions were way too hard. I took one look and passed out!"

As soon as they walked out of the exam room, Kuzan threw an arm over Daren's shoulder like they were lifelong buddies, grinning as he spoke.

Daren's mouth twitched.

"I know. I heard you snoring."

"Dahahahaha! Loud, right?!"

Kuzan laughed proudly, showing not a shred of embarrassment.

This hot-blooded guy... Daren could almost see the black lines forming across his forehead.

Truthfully, the culture class exam wasn't that difficult. Most of the questions were just entry-level material. After all, the training camp focused more on enhancing combat ability than academic knowledge.

As a transmigrator, Daren had endured the soul-crushing grind of standardized tests. He may not have been a straight-A student in his past life, but for this kind of exam—designed for recruits with limited cultural literacy—he was more than capable.

"Right, you've been gone for over ten days. Garp-san asked you to stop by."

As they strolled toward the family housing area, Kuzan suddenly smacked his forehead like he'd just remembered something important.

"Vice Admiral Garp?"

Daren paused for a moment, then nodded.

Back on Coin Island, when he clashed with Shiki the Golden Lion, he'd instinctively recalled the feel of Garp's punch. That memory helped him barely block Shiki's terrifying strike.

Sure, part of it was due to his inhuman physique and powerful Armament Haki—but it also proved how terrifying Garp's strength truly was.

Just grasping the basics of Garp's techniques had allowed him to push his limits and survive a fight with a legendary pirate.

So what if he actually mastered Garp's full arsenal?

With that, combined with his abnormal physical strength...

Yeah—he wouldn't have to worry about getting stabbed ever again.

...

A few minutes later, Daren and Kuzan arrived at the training port, cluttered with discarded materials and broken warships.

The moment they stepped into the long-abandoned area, Daren spotted the remains of ships scattered across the ground.

One by one, the mid- and small-sized vessels had been torn apart and smashed to bits, like they'd been shredded by a rampaging T-Rex. The scene was brutal.

Compared to the last time he was here, at least a quarter of the wreckage was gone.

No need to ask—this was the result of Garp and Kuzan's joint training during his absence.

"You guys have been going all out, huh."

Daren couldn't help but comment.

Kuzan might act lazy and indifferent toward anything that wasn't combat or pirate hunting, but when it came to training, he never slacked.

Same with Garp.

Daren even suspected that Garp's refusal to be promoted to Admiral wasn't just because he didn't want to protect those disgusting Celestial Dragons—it was also because he wanted the freedom to train and move as he pleased.

More time for self-improvement.

And more time to chase Roger across the seas.

"Of course!"

Kuzan clenched his fist, his tone fired up.

"If I don't put in the effort, you'll leave me in the dust!"

Daren smiled.

...

"You're both here."

A deep, warm voice with a hint of amusement came from behind.

Daren and Kuzan turned and instantly straightened up, saluting as Garp strolled over in his trademark dog-head hat.

"Vice Admiral Garp!"

"Vice Admiral Garp!"

Garp waved casually and plopped down in a nearby spot, grinning as he looked at Daren.

"So, kid, I heard from Sengoku you used one of the moves I taught you when you fought Shiki?"

Daren nodded, then shook his head.

"Just the basics. I feel like I still have a long way to go before I really get it."

Garp burst into hearty laughter.

"That's already damn impressive! My moves aren't something just anyone can pick up!"

He stood with pride, hands on his hips.

"Alright, spit it out—any training questions, I'll answer 'em. I'm heading out soon, and time's tight."

Daren blinked in surprise.

"You found the Roger Pirates...? There's news?"

Roger's crew had been completely off the radar for over half a year now. Not a single shred of intel.

The sea was just too vast—and for a crew like Roger's that moved in a tight elite formation, they could vanish without a trace unless they made some kind of major move. Even the Marine Headquarters would struggle to locate them.

"No, still no word from Roger. Damn guy's been awfully quiet lately..."

Garp shook his head, a serious glint flickering in his eyes.

"This time... our target is Patrick Redfield."

Chapter 338 - 338: Volume 2 – Chapter 240: King of Teamwork

The moment that thunderous name left Garp's mouth, both Daren and Kuzan froze in place, their pupils narrowing sharply.

Patrick Redfield!

Known as "Red the Aloof" and "Red Count," he was one of the legendary Great Pirates, a man so powerful it was said he could stand shoulder-to-shoulder with Roger and Whitebeard on his own!

That reputation, though it came from Sengoku—who had a habit of exaggerating the strength of his opponents—was still enough to confirm just how terrifying Redfield truly was.

Daren remembered clearly: Redfield had a very real and terrifying record.

Before the Great Pirate Era even began, he had battled Fleet Admiral Kong for ten days and ten nights, narrowly securing victory with a final blow. Exhausted, he was eventually "picked off" by Garp, who arrived late to the scene and captured him, sending him straight to Level Six of Impel Down's Eternal Hell.

It was that very battle that earned Garp the infamous nickname: "King of Pickups" or more politely, "King of Teamwork."

So this must be the moment in the original timeline when Red the Aloof was defeated.

That thought flickered through Daren's mind before he steadied himself again.

Thinking back, Garp's "King of Teamwork" title wasn't exactly undeserved.

Looking at his entire career, every one of his legendary achievements had some element of "teaming up" behind it.

At the God Valley Incident, a young Garp joined forces with Roger—then a rising pirate—to take down the Rocks Pirates, earning himself the title of "Hero."

In the fight between Kong and Redfield, Garp teamed up with Kong and successfully swooped in to finish the job, further cementing his status as the "strongest Marine."

Then came the time when Shiki went berserk and attacked Marineford alone—Garp and Sengoku teamed up to defeat him and send him to Impel Down.

Whenever the Teamwork Buff was active, Garp was invincible.

But the moment he went solo—like when he charged into Hachinosu to rescue Koby—he ended up getting stabbed through the chest by Shiryu and left for dead.

Something about that just didn't sit right.

'Thinking about it now... "King of Teamwork" kind of fits.'

Daren rubbed the stubble on his chin and glanced at Garp with a slightly odd expression.

Before he could speak, Kuzan suddenly let out a bizarre cry that startled Daren.

"I'm ready, Garp-san!!"

Daren turned his head, his mouth twitching. Kuzan's face was flushed with excitement, his fists clenched tight, his whole body trembling with energy.

"After all this training, I've mastered everything the training camp has to offer! I've got a handle on Haki, too! I'm ready to take down Great Pirates and fight evil to the very end!"

Twin streams of white steam puffed from his nostrils as he straightened up, gave Garp a deep bow, and shouted,

"Please take me with you!!"

Daren: "..."

This guy was way too enthusiastic.

Even as he rolled his eyes, Daren couldn't help but feel impressed. Kuzan's growth was nothing short of monstrous.

No wonder he'd become one of the future Three Admirals. In just half a year, he'd already mastered Haki, and judging by his aura, he wasn't far off from being on par with elite Vice Admirals. His Devil Fruit powers had probably advanced just as fast.

That kind of talent was outrageous.

"Bwahahaha! That's the spirit! You really are my student!"

Garp laughed heartily, looking at Kuzan with satisfaction.

"But... I won't be taking either of you this time."

"Redfield is a lone wolf. No fleet, no crew. That means if I bring you two along, you'll be facing him directly. And if that happens, I might end up having to protect you instead."

He raised a hand and gently patted Kuzan's shoulder, smiling.

"You're the future of the Marines. You can't afford to get hurt."

"Otherwise, that bastard Zephyr will never let me hear the end of it."

Sengoku had involved Daren in previous missions only because his Devil Fruit abilities countered specific targets, and he never intended for Daren to go toe-to-toe with any legendary pirates. That was the only reason Zephyr had reluctantly agreed.

No one expected Daren to keep ending up in direct combat with Great Pirates anyway.

"Damn it!"

Kuzan punched the air in frustration, his shoulders slumping in disappointment.

...

"Come on, Daren! It's been way too long since we've had a proper fight!"

In the deserted harbor, Kuzan struck a stance, eyes blazing with intensity as his fighting spirit surged like wildfire.

Daren scratched his head with a sigh.

Garp had only offered a few quick training tips before rushing off to sea. According to the latest intel, Fleet Admiral Kong had already engaged Redfield—battle had officially broken out. Garp needed to head out and back him up immediately.

The moment Garp left, Kuzan could barely hold himself back and dragged Daren into a match, which led to the current scene.

"Alright then," Daren said with a chuckle, "I'm actually pretty curious about how strong you've gotten."

He took a calm breath and flicked his fingers.

Two razor-sharp Meito blades—one black, one silver—whistled in from the distance and floated steadily by his side.

Enma. Kariumi.

Kuzan's eyes lit up.

"You got another sword?!"

His gaze sparkled.

"That's... seriously badass!"

"In that case, I'm not holding back!"

As the words fell, Kuzan raised his arm.

A surge of freezing ice burst forth, rapidly forming a massive ice bird with transparent wings that swept across the battlefield, freezing everything in its path as it lunged straight at Daren with overwhelming force!

"Ice Block: Pheasant Beak!"

Having experienced Daren's terrifying magnet-controlled swordsmanship firsthand, Kuzan didn't dare to pull any punches—he opened with a full-power attack.

In a flash, the chilling air slammed forward like an avalanche crashing down.

As that bone-deep cold and mounting pressure hit, a smile crept onto Daren's lips.

Kuzan had really gotten stronger.

With a slight motion of his finger, both swords behind him were instantly coated in jet-black Armament Haki.

Propelled by a violent magnetic field, the blades trembled violently before erupting in bursts of white air pressure—launching forward like rockets fired from a launcher!

Boom!

The twin blades slammed into the ice bird midair, and the resulting shockwave blasted everything around them apart.

As ice shards rained down from the sky...

Daren and Kuzan burst through the crumbling wall of frost at the same time.

Their fists were wrapped in hardened Haki, each swinging a punch straight at the other's face!

Bang!

Bang!

Blood splattered from the corners of their mouths as both took direct hits.

But their eyes burned with fire, bright and intense—barely a second passed before they charged each other again without hesitation!

"Now this—this is what I call a real fight!"

Chapter 339 - 339: Volume 2 – Chapter 241 Martial Law?

Abandoned military port.

The afterglow of the setting sun had turned into a crimson haze, gradually tinting the distant horizon and casting its glow over the earth.

By now, the entire port had become a frozen landscape—crystal-clear ice shards jutted from the ground, and a faint white mist drifted through the air.

With a dull bang, Daren and Kuzan's fists slammed into each other's faces at the same time. Blood sprayed, and both staggered back before falling flat onto the icy ground.

"Huff... huff..."

They lay sprawled out on the snow-covered earth, gasping for air, their faces battered and swollen, blood streaking their skin.

"Dahahahaha! That was awesome! Fighting you is the only thing that really gets my blood pumping!"

Kuzan laughed heartily, not even bothering to wipe the blood off his face. His grin radiated genuine joy—it was the thrill of finding a worthy opponent.

Daren rolled his eyes and yanked his feet out of the ice, causing the surrounding ice crystals to shatter with sharp cracks.

"Your Devil Fruit ability restricts my movements too much. Kinda makes the fight dull."

Still, the exhilaration in his eyes made it clear he had enjoyed the match.

Kuzan turned his head to glance at Daren and grinned.

"You were holding back, weren't you?"

Daren didn't respond.

Kuzan had truly earned the title of "monster."

In just six months, his strength had undergone a complete transformation—far beyond what he was when he first arrived at the training camp.

Not only had he further developed his Devil Fruit powers, but he had also mastered Haki. Under Garp's training, he'd completely reshaped his biggest weakness: close-quarters combat.

From their clash just now, it was clear—Kuzan's strength now surpassed that of most elite Vice Admirals at headquarters.

Even so, he still had ground to cover before catching up to Daren, who was a monster in every sense—powerful across the board.

But even that much was enough to leave Daren genuinely impressed.

"You really are something, Daren... Looks like I've got to push myself even harder."

Seeing that Daren didn't deny it, Kuzan wasn't discouraged. Instead, the fire in his eyes only burned brighter. The spirit of rivalry surged within him.

Daren smiled, about to speak—

When a sharp, ear-piercing siren suddenly rang out from the distance.

Urgent. Tense. Filled with unease.

Both their expressions changed in an instant. They sat up straight, faces serious, staring toward the military zone.

That was... the Marineford alarm!

What happened?

With their sharp eyesight, they could faintly make out a fleet of patrol ships racing back toward the oval-shaped port. The rapid, heavy footsteps of Marines echoed from afar.

"Commodore Daren! Captain Kuzan!"

A panicked figure rushed into the abandoned port—it was a messenger.

The young Marine came to a breathless halt, saluted, and said gravely:

"Admiral Sengoku has ordered that Marine Headquarters in Marineford is now officially under martial law. Please return to your respective quarters immediately and report your current status."

"Ara Ara, something big must've happened. Mind telling me what it is?"

Kuzan dusted himself off and stood up, curiosity written all over his face.

The messenger glanced at him but said nothing.

Sensitive information like this wasn't something that could be shared casually—especially with Kuzan, who was still just a Captain at headquarters.

Daren frowned, quickly piecing it together.

"I'm a Commodore of Marine Headquarters. As you know, once I graduate from the training camp, I'll officially be promoted to Rear Admiral."

The messenger paused, then replied,

"A Celestial Dragon was killed in the New World. Admiral Sengoku has already set sail to handle the situation."

A Celestial Dragon... killed?

Daren's eyes widened slightly.

That was rare.

The Celestial Dragons, as world nobles, stood at the very peak of power and status in this sea.

With CP agents guarding them, small pirate crews wouldn't stand a chance.

And even among the powerful pirate groups in those waters, most either didn't dare or couldn't be bothered to touch a Celestial Dragon.

Killing one meant the Admirals would come after you personally—and the World Government would never let it go.

It was a surefire way to bring endless trouble.

No one in their right mind would do something so reckless and unprofitable—unless, like Daren, they had the cover of a Marine identity and the means to create diversions and erase their tracks.

But still... something about this didn't sit right with him.

He couldn't quite put his finger on it, but the feeling wouldn't go away.

"Then I'll head out first. I still need to relay the orders to the other departments."

The messenger saluted again, then hurried off.

"What a pain. I was hoping to squeeze in a bit of fun at sea before graduation."

Kuzan walked over, looking visibly annoyed.

Daren shook his head.

"Let's head back. With Admiral Sengoku already mobilized, we'll probably hear something soon."

"Alright."

Kuzan scratched his head, clearly bored.

The two of them quickly left the abandoned military port and made their way toward the family quarters.

The sharp, piercing sound of alarms continued to blare, accompanied by a low droning voice from the loudspeakers mounted on the streetlamps:

"Marineford is now under martial law. All citizens, please return home in an orderly manner... There's no need to panic. Stay calm."

"Once again, Marineford is under martial law. All citizens, please return home calmly and in an orderly fashion!"

As they made their way back, Daren and Kuzan frowned at the sight of anxious civilians hurrying about and Marines trying to maintain order.

A torn newspaper fluttered down the empty street, carried by the cold wind. A heavy, tense atmosphere hung over every corner of Marineford.

"Seriously... It's just one dead Celestial Dragon. Is this kind of response really necessary?"

Kuzan muttered under his breath, clearly frustrated that the lockdown had ruined his plans to go fishing.

Daren pressed his lips together.

In truth, this mess was partly his fault.

Ever since he killed Saint Xildes, the World Government's trust in the Marines had been fractured.

Then came Dragon's "defection," which only deepened their suspicions and mistrust.

So now, with another Celestial Dragon killed, Sengoku had chosen to put the entire Marine Headquarters under martial law—to "clear suspicion" and prevent the World Government from jumping to conclusions.

"I'm heading home."

Daren said abruptly, striding off toward his house.

He wasn't worried about Gion—she'd grown up in the military.

But when it came to Amatsuki Toki, he couldn't quite shake his concern.

Chapter 340 - 340: Volume 2 – Chapter 242 He's Already Here

The closer they got to the family compound, the fewer people there were along the way.

The once-bustling commercial street now stood eerily silent. Storefronts were shuttered tight, and some street stalls had been left out in the open, still steaming from recent use, giving the place a bleak, abandoned feel.

Daren's brow furrowed deeper with every step.

The unease in his chest was growing more intense, and his mind began racing.

Fleet Admiral Kong had gone to sea to hunt the great pirate "Red the Aloof" Patrick Redfield, and Vice Admiral Garp had gone to assist him... That was expected. It had happened in the original storyline, and the outcome should match what Daren already anticipated.

A Celestial Dragon had been killed, and Admiral Sengoku had been deployed... That, too, made sense. As world nobles, the Celestial Dragons commanded absolute protection. If they were harmed or

threatened in any way, Marine Admirals were obligated to abandon any ongoing mission and respond immediately.

If all of that was within reason... then where was this nagging feeling of dread coming from?

"Husband!"

Just as Daren was deep in thought, a panicked voice called out and broke his concentration.

He looked up to see Amatsuki Toki standing in front of the gate to the family quarters, dressed in a kimono and wooden clogs. She was waving at him anxiously, her eyes, clear as autumn waters, full of fear and concern.

"Toki."

He called out and hurried toward her, pulling her into his arms. He gently patted her back, trying to reassure her.

"It's okay. Don't be scared. A Celestial Dragon was killed, so the headquarters has gone into lockdown, that's all."

Toki raised her head timidly.

"A Celestial Dragon? But... who would dare go after one of them in these seas?"

Her eyes were filled with confusion.

"So Admiral Sengoku has already been dispatched?"

Daren nodded and gave a small smile.

"Yes. He's the only Admiral left at headquarters right now, so he was the only one available to respond."

"Besides, Fleet Admiral Kong and Vice Admiral Garp are already out on missions. The top forces of headquarters are all tied up out at sea, so there's nothing for you to worry—"

He suddenly fell silent.

"Husband?"

Toki noticed the change in his expression and looked up at him.

Daren stood frozen in place, his face shifting from calm to grim in an instant, his expression darkening rapidly.

...

New World, on a remote island.

A warship swiftly docked.

Sengoku, wearing his Admiral's cloak, leapt down from the deck with a sharp, imposing presence. Behind him, over a hundred heavily armed Marine elites followed closely.

The crime scene had already been cordoned off by the local Marine detachment and government guards. A crowd of onlookers had gathered outside the perimeter, craning their necks to get a glimpse, treating it like a public spectacle.

"Clear the way!"

"Marines at work! Everyone, move aside!"

The stationed Marines fired warning shots into the air to disperse the crowd and opened a path.

Sengoku marched forward, his face tense and his mood foul.

Another Celestial Dragon, killed.

Why couldn't these fat, pampered nobles just stay in their Holy Land and behave?

Did they seriously believe that no one in this vast sea would dare lay a hand on them?

The thought of the mountains of paperwork piling up at Marine Headquarters gave Sengoku a pounding headache.

But as a Marine Admiral, his top priority was to protect the interests of the World Government and the Celestial Dragons. He had no other choice—he had to drop everything and come deal with it personally.

Suddenly, Sengoku froze.

His eyes widened in disbelief.

A massive sword slash had carved its way from his feet all the way to the far end of the street, splitting the entire commercial district in two.

And in the center of that street, the body of a Celestial Dragon lay in two pieces.

Blood soaked the shattered pavement, and even the signature glass dome that Celestial Dragons always wore had been cleanly sliced in half.

A bone-chilling cold surged from Sengoku's feet up his spine, boring straight into his brain. His scalp tingled uncontrollably.

"Admiral Sengoku, sir! According to intelligence from the CP guards, the attacker never revealed themselves... They didn't even have time to react. A slash of sword energy came out of nowhere and instantly killed Saint Jackmar-sama."

A Marine Captain ran up, drenched in sweat, and reported respectfully.

But Sengoku didn't seem to hear him.

He just stood there, dazed, as bloodshot veins crept through his pupils.

"It can't be..."

Just then, two figures clad in white silk robes, their faces deathly pale like ghosts, silently appeared before Sengoku.

A hoarse voice drifted out from beneath their eerie masks, filled with menace.

"Sengoku, the Lords have given you three days to either apprehend or eliminate the killer. If you fail within three days—"

"Shut up!!"

Sengoku suddenly roared, cutting off the CP agents mid-sentence.

The two froze in disbelief, then one of them snapped angrily.

"What kind of attitude is that?! Are you defying the government's orders?"

Sengoku shot them a cold glare. The oppressive aura radiating from him made them falter.

"I already know who the culprit is."

He clenched his jaw, ignoring the two arrogant CP members as his mind raced.

If... if his guess was right...

A wave of dread surged in his chest, cold sweat beading on his forehead.

Names flashed rapidly through his mind.

A second later, he made his decision, pulling out a military Den Den Mushi and dialing a secure line.

"Buru buru... buru buru..."

The call tone rang through the dead silence, sharp and urgent. Sengoku's nerves were strung tight.

Pick up already!

"Buru!"

The Den Den Mushi connected.

"Admiral Sengoku."

A deep voice came through the line.

Sengoku gritted his teeth.

"You've heard, haven't you? A Celestial Dragon was killed, but it's a setup—a ploy to draw me out!"

"The real target... is Marineford!"

There was a brief pause on the other end.

"Did you hear me, you brat?!"

Sengoku barked, growing more agitated by the silence.

"I heard you, Admiral Sengoku."

The voice replied once more.

Sengoku took a deep breath and forced himself to stay composed as he spoke gravely.

"This is just a theory for now, but I'm placing all Marine Headquarters forces under your temporary command. Mobilize the troops. Raise the alert level. Be ready for anything—"

"No need."

The voice interrupted, calm and resolute.

Sengoku froze. His pupils shrank to pinpoints.

...

Marineford.

Daren held the Den Den Mushi tightly in his hand, pulling Amatsuki Toki behind him. His expression was cold and composed as he looked up.

At some point, the sky had turned pitch black.

Thunder rumbled. Lightning flashed. Black clouds churned as if a monstrous storm was about to break.

The Marine Commodore's lips curled into a cold, mocking smile.

"He's already here."

As the words left his mouth—

A figure with wild, golden hair burst out from the storm clouds, his overwhelming presence erupting like a tempest and slamming down upon all of Marineford.

"Jihahahaha! Marines! This time, I'm going to slaughter you all!"

The legendary great pirate—Shiki the Golden Lion!

Had arrived to invade Marine Headquarters!