

One Piece 391

Chapter 391 - 391: Volume 3 – Chapter 34: Double Blessings?

The intensity of his Observation Haki... was rising at an unprecedented rate!

As expected of a top-tier master!

This level of "instruction"—Daren had only experienced something similar at the hands of that fat guy Queen!

Bang!

A heavy mochi fist caught him off guard, slamming into his face. Ripples spread across his skin and muscle as his head snapped to the side. Blood and bruising began to show on the surface.

Yet Daren's eyes shone brighter than ever, and the grin on his face only grew.

Observation Haki had always been his weakest area.

Because he relied too much on physical durability and magnetic field sensing, he had struggled to make any real progress with Observation Haki.

Even after enduring Zephyr-sensei's brutal special training—getting beaten half to death while shackled with Seastone—he had only barely managed to awaken it.

But strength-wise, his Observation Haki had barely improved. No matter how hard he trained, the results had remained disappointing.

Now, finally... Daren was experiencing that same mix of agony and exhilaration he once felt in the prison of the Beasts Pirates.

Adaptation.

That's right—Daren wasn't just taking a beating.

That would've been far too simplistic.

In every clash with Katakuri, he was constantly analyzing, mimicking, and adapting to the way his opponent used Observation Haki—forcing his own body to adjust to that level of speed!

And little by little, as the storm of fists rained down around him, Daren began to see it more clearly—feel it more sharply.

The crimson glow in his eyes only deepened.

At the same time, Katakuri finally started to sense that something was off.

As the battle dragged on, he was stunned to realize that Daren's dodging speed, reaction time, and precision were all steadily improving!

Where he could land five clean hits out of ten before—now, not even two were connecting.

Then, all of a sudden, a horrifying thought surfaced in Katakuri's mind:

This guy's Observation Haki is evolving in real time!

But...

"How the hell is that possible?!"

Katakuri gritted his teeth and roared, suddenly accelerating the speed of his punches!

A torrential downpour of fists fell, each one cloaked in Haki, dark and heavy like storm clouds, hammering down over Daren's head.

"Don't underestimate your potential, Katakuri!"

Daren let out a vicious grin, blood-streaked teeth gleaming.

A flash of eerie red light suddenly ignited deep within his pupils.

Observation Haki intensity... 60 points!!

Even Daren himself hadn't expected this. What was once his weakest ability had now overtaken his Armament Haki—breaking past the 60-point barrier first!

Everything around him seemed to slow to a crawl.

In that moment, all sound faded into the distance. His mind was clear—piercing.

The scene before him unfolded like a film reel in slow motion, frame by frame.

A supreme silence overtook his thoughts, sharpening his senses with cold focus.

Whoosh!

In a single step, Daren's figure vanished like a ghost from his original spot.

It was as if a streak of blue lightning had flashed across the void. In the blink of an eye, the Marine Vice Admiral had crashed through the storm of fists—materializing at Katakuri's side.

His powerful thigh muscles stretched the fabric of his military trousers tight. The side kick that followed cracked through the air like a steel whip, carrying terrifying force as it drove straight toward Katakuri's gut.

Bang!!

Katakuri crossed both arms in front of him to block the blow—but the air exploded outward as a tidal wave of force slammed into him.

It felt like being struck head-on by a speeding battleship.

He vomited blood on impact and was launched backward like a missile.

Boom!

He crashed through one building.

Boom!

Then another.

Boom, boom, boom...

He barreled through more than a dozen structures before finally smashing into the distant ruins of Fukkura Town like a cannonball, sending a towering wave of dirt hundreds of meters into the air.

The island groaned under the pressure. Debris trembled and leapt from the ground.

"He's not dead, is he?"

Daren landed smoothly, raised a hand to wipe the blood from the corner of his mouth, and narrowed his eyes.

His Observation Haki had just broken through, and in that sudden rush, he'd ended up unleashing his full strength without thinking.

Katakuri's "lesson" had been too good to pass up—he hadn't planned on finishing him off this quickly.

A "master" like this wasn't easy to come by.

Sure, guys like Kaidou and Big Mom were also top-tier instructors in their own way—but when it came down to it, their fists did more talking than their teaching.

Fighting them was no joke.

One slip-up and you were dead. There wasn't any room to experiment or learn mid-fight.

But Katakuri was different.

Even though he was only about twenty years old, he had already refined his Observation Haki to the point where he could see into the future. Still, in terms of raw power, he was far from the peak level he reached in the original timeline.

This current Katakuri was just right—strong enough for Daren to take seriously, but still within a range where he could be dominated without ruining the "lesson quality."

A sparring partner and mentor this good? No way Daren was letting him go.

You didn't harvest the crop the second it sprouted. Patience yielded better rewards.

He had only just pushed his Observation Haki past the 60-point threshold—there was still plenty of room to grow.

Compared to a certain someone who mastered future sight after just half a day of training, his progress was practically crawling.

...

"No way... There's no way I lost to you like this..."

A hoarse voice rasped from the rubble.

A bloodstained hand pressed against the collapsed, ash-covered wreckage. Katakuri coughed violently as he slowly, unsteadily stood up, one hand braced against his knee, gasping for breath.

The wide scarf that had once concealed his face was gone, revealing a twisted, demon-like visage, fangs jutting forward in a grim snarl.

His bloodshot eyes locked onto Daren, filled with agony and guilt.

"I swore I'd protect my little brothers and sisters..."

He lifted his head sharply.

"No matter what—I have to kill you! I'll avenge them!"

As the words left his mouth, he let out a roar so raw it tore at the throat.

And then... the ruins of Fukkura Town transformed.

The charred ground, the toppled buildings, crumbling walls, shattered trees...

All of it began to stir.

As if the dead had come alive, everything twisted and writhed, turning into surging masses of white mochi that churned like a storm beneath and behind Katakuri.

"The Devil Fruit... has awakened!"

Daren blinked in surprise—then his eyes lit up.

Observation Haki lessons weren't even finished yet, and now he was getting a crash course in Devil Fruit mastery?

A double blessing!?

Chapter 392 - 392: Volume 3 – Chapter 35: A Thrilling Battle

How could such luck be real?

Katakuri, at such a young age, had not only trained his Observation Haki to the level of future sight, but had also awakened his Devil Fruit ability?

That kind of talent... was downright terrifying.

When someone pushes their Devil Fruit ability to its limits, they can reach the stage known as "awakening."

As far as Daren knew, the effects of awakening varied depending on the Devil Fruit type.

For Zoan-types, awakening granted the user incredible regenerative capabilities—so long as it wasn't a fatal injury, they could recover in a flash.

Logia awakenings hadn't been directly shown in the original timeline, but judging from the aftermath of the battle between Kuzan and Sakazuki for the title of Fleet Admiral—which permanently altered the climate of Punk Hazard—Daren guessed that a Logia awakening could impact the weather itself.

As for Paramecia, awakening gave users the ability to change, influence, or even assimilate the surrounding environment.

Katakuri was the perfect example.

The terrain around him had already transformed into sticky mochi, completely under his control.

And yet, Katakuri was only twenty!

For a moment, Daren was thrown off.

Was this the "masterpiece" of the Charlotte family?

Or... had Katakuri just awakened his Devil Fruit mid-battle, triggered by their clash?

Did that make him the "instructor" without realizing it?

That didn't seem right...

No. Impossible.

Daren quickly ruled it out, shaking his head.

He narrowed his eyes, carefully observing Katakuri's current condition and the environment shaped by his awakened Mochi Mochi no Mi. It didn't take long for him to reach a conclusion.

Katakuri's mastery over his awakening was already refined—it was clearly not his first time using it.

In that case... his talent was just plain monstrous.

...

"Get ready to repent, you bastard!!"

As Daren was lost in thought, Katakuri had already launched his next assault.

With a guttural shout, he raised his right hand and slammed it into the ground.

The earth beneath them surged violently.

"Nagare Mochi!"

Sticky white mochi rolled forward like a tidal wave, engulfing everything—ruined buildings, streetlamps, debris—all swallowed into a vast white swamp, trapping everything within!

The wave reached him in an instant.

Daren's eyes flared, and he launched himself skyward. Twisting like a spinning butterfly, he weaved through the surging mochi waves with graceful agility.

While evading, he analyzed Katakuri's rhythm and breathing, trying to extract any insights into how Devil Fruit powers could be used more efficiently.

Both his Jiki Jiki no Mi and Katakuri's Mochi Mochi no Mi were Paramecia-types. Though their manifestations differed, their developmental pathways might share something in common.

And more importantly—his Devil Fruit progress had been stuck at 83 points for far too long.

Even gaining a point or two from fighting Katakuri would be a massive win!

Katakuri's eyes flashed red as he took in Daren's movement.

Both of his hands turned into mochi and slammed into the ground again.

Whoosh!

The ground erupted into dozens of rice cake tendrils, shooting into the air like machine gun fire, targeting Daren with lethal precision.

"Amadare Mochi!"

With his future-sensing Observation Haki, Katakuri's strike descended like a curtain of rain, sealing off every possible escape route for Daren!

"What a brilliant tactic!"

Realizing Katakuri's intention, Daren didn't hold back his praise. Blue arcs of electricity flickered between his fingers.

A black and a white flash of phantom light tore through the mochi rain with overwhelming force and then surged toward Katakuri without slowing.

21 Great Grade Blades, Enma!

50 Skillful Grade Blades, Kariumi!

Under Daren's magnetic control, the two razor-sharp Meito danced through the air with speed and precision, spiraling together like threading needles. Waves of white shockwaves rippled out with explosive force!

So fast!!

Katakuri's bloodshot eyes contracted sharply.

In the "future" he foresaw, facing the blinding speed of these two blades, any attempt to dodge would result in being cleaved in half—his heart pierced through!

No way to dodge!

He had to take it head-on!

The decision flashed through his mind, and Katakuri didn't hesitate. His eyes blazed with fierce fighting spirit.

A blast of wind slammed into his face as he raised both fists in a stance reminiscent of a boxer.

Behind him, the ground shifted. Two massive white mochi masses swelled up.

"Musō Donuts!"

The moment he stepped forward, the giant mochi blobs transformed into two enormous fists, cloaked in gleaming black Armament Haki.

He threw a punch!

Katakuri hurled his fist through the air with brute force.

In perfect sync, the mochi fists mimicked the motion, swinging down just the same!

"Chikara Mochi!!"

Clang!! Clang!!

His fists smashed directly into Daren's twin blades, sending sparks flying as the clash of Haki erupted into a fearsome storm.

Boom!!

Within a kilometer, the ground buckled and collapsed, cracking open with deep, jagged fissures as smoke and debris shot into the sky.

"Mochi Ginchaku!!"

Before the last blow even settled, Katakuri gritted his teeth and launched another attack.

His fists moved like a boxer's shadow punches—so fast they left afterimages in the air.

The donuts mirrored his stance perfectly, unleashing a torrent of fists far fiercer than before, engulfing the Marine Vice Admiral in a storm of strikes.

"Hahahaha!! Bring it on!!"

Confronted with Katakuri's sudden surge in power, Daren's smile grew wider, even tinged with a trace of madness.

He pushed his Observation Haki to the limit. Merging it with his biological magnetic field sensing, the red of Observation Haki and the blue of magnetic perception blended—his pupils sparking with violet lightning!

Charging head-on into the sea of fists!

Fists collided again and again!!

Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!!

An electrifying clash!!

Observation Haki +0.05

Observation Haki +0.07

Observation Haki +0.06

...

Without even realizing it...

Daren's Observation Haki had already surged to 70 points!

And at that exact moment, a special trait quietly emerged.

Observation Haki: 70 (Magnetic Field Induction)

Chapter 393 - 393: Volume 3 – Chapter 36: I Am the Greatest Masterpiece

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

Explosions like muffled thunder echoed through the air, and the roaring shockwaves stirred massive turbulence.

Caught in Katakuri's relentless barrage, Daren's figure was completely swallowed by a flurry of fist shadows. From afar, he looked like a lone boat in a raging storm, tossed about and ready to be devoured at any moment.

Bang!

A mochi fist, coated in Armament Haki, slammed into the left side of Daren's face, drawing a smear of blood from the corner of his mouth.

Bang!!

Another struck him in the gut, making blood ooze from his mouth and nose.

...

Katakuri's greatest strengths were his twisted mastery of Observation Haki and the development of his Devil Fruit powers. In both areas, he had barely managed to squeeze into the ranks of the elite.

But due to his age, his raw physical power lagged far behind Daren's—and was nowhere near the peak strength he'd achieve in the future.

His body durability, strength, explosiveness, even the intensity of his Armament Haki, all remained stuck at a second or even third-tier "silver medalist" level.

This was why he didn't dare engage Daren in close combat.

Because the moment it came to close-quarters fighting, he'd be completely overpowered.

So all he could do was rely on his Observation Haki and the awakening of his Devil Fruit, wearing Daren down with high-frequency, long-range attacks.

Meanwhile, with his own Observation Haki suppressed, Daren couldn't fully deflect Katakuri's furious onslaught. He barely managed to keep his vital points safe, relying on his monstrous physical defense to tank whatever blows he couldn't avoid.

Blood continued to burst from his body, but the violet lightning in his eyes grew more frenzied, and the grin on his face twisted into something increasingly unhinged. His Observation Haki was rising—at a speed he'd never experienced before.

Yes, this was it!

This exhilarating sensation!!

He could feel it clearly—his body was quickly adjusting to Katakuri's attack rhythm.

His reflexes, physical responses, even his awareness of breath and energy—they were sharpening rapidly!

It was becoming clearer and clearer...

He could see it now!

Daren laughed wildly, throwing punch after punch.

Each blow, packed with force and Haki, crushed the incoming mochi fists with ease.

The sight made an ominous feeling creep into Katakuri's heart. His expression grew increasingly alarmed.

This guy... he's adapting to my attacks!

How is that possible!?

As the second strongest fighter in the Big Mom Pirates, second only to Charlotte Linlin herself, Katakuri had fought across the seas bearing her flag, cutting down countless powerful enemies.

But he had never seen a freak like this before!

Could there really be someone out there who could rival Mama?

Looking at the Vice Admiral—who seemed on the brink of collapse under his assault, yet stood unshaken like solid rock—Katakuri, for the first time, felt a deep sense of helplessness.

It was the same crushing pressure he felt when facing his mother.

At that moment, a crack appeared in his will.

And his offensive... began to slow.

"Hm?"

Is he wavering?

Of course Daren noticed the shift in Katakuri instantly, his brows furrowing slightly.

What, is this top-tier "lesson" ending already?

He could feel it clearly—as Katakuri's attacks slowed, his Observation Haki's growth was also grinding to a halt.

That won't do.

He couldn't let this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity end so easily...

So he burst into a bloodied, mocking laugh, baring his teeth as he sneered loudly:

"So this is all you've got, Katakuri... What a letdown!"

"With power like yours, you've got no right to talk big about avenging your brothers! Hahahaha!!"

Daren's words cut deep—Katakuri visibly flinched.

"Shut up!! I'll kill you today!!"

His bloodshot eyes pulsed with fury as he gritted his teeth, unleashing an even more powerful aura. His assault surged once more!

And with it, the intensity of his Observation Haki spiked again!

Just as expected!

Daren grinned wide, the mockery on his face deepening.

"Hahahaha! Not enough! Nowhere near enough!"

"The whole sea calls you the Charlotte family's greatest masterpiece. Your siblings praise you as the perfect older brother... Is this how a big brother's supposed to act?"

"You want to protect them? Don't make me laugh! Look at what you've managed to protect!"

"You can't protect anything!!"

Well, yeah—this kind of trash talk is usually reserved for villains. But hey, I'm the biggest scumbag in the Marines anyway.

Daren threw out those classic villain lines with ease, like it was second nature.

Sure enough...

Provoked into a fury, Katakuri's eyes bulged as his snarling jaws exposed his vicious teeth. His attacks became even more ferocious!

But to Daren's surprise, as time dragged on, he noticed that the growth of his Observation Haki had started to slow.

'Probably because Katakuri isn't strong enough... or maybe my Observation Haki has already advanced to the point where his pressure doesn't push me as hard anymore.'

'Yeah... or maybe, like any ability, once you hit a certain level, the progress naturally slows down. The stronger you get, the harder it is to keep growing.'

Countless thoughts flashed through his mind in an instant, and Daren decided to throw on one last layer of fuel.

"Still not enough!!"

He laughed wildly, loud and arrogant.

"I get it now!! I finally understand why Linlin wants me to be her husband!!"

He stared at the furious Katakuri with a mocking, disdainful grin.

"She thinks you're too weak, Katakuri. That's why she wants to give birth to a stronger son with me—to replace you!!"

That one line cut like an invisible blade, shredding the last of Katakuri's composure.

"Impossible!!"

His eyes turned blood red in an instant, veins bulging as he howled in rage.

"Shut up!!"

"Mama trusts me!! She's always relied on me more than anyone!!"

"No one can change that!!"

Katakuri lunged forward, screaming with everything he had:

"I am the Charlotte family's greatest masterpiece!!"

He was losing it!!

Sensing Katakuri's surging aura, Daren's eyes lit up and he burst out laughing.

"Is that so?"

"But Linlin doesn't think so. To get her hands on me, she was willing to team up with Shiki and Kaidou to attack Marineford!"

"What did she ever do for you?"

"Hahahahaha! I killed several of her sons, and I bet she just smiled and said, 'It's fine'..."

"And if I'm right... she probably told you to call me 'Father,' didn't she?"

Chapter 394 - 394: Volume 3 – Chapter 37: Be My Son, Katakuri

Those words struck Katakuri like a thunderclap, piercing straight through his sensitive heart and soul.

Daren's earlier taunts had already wounded his pride and shaken the core of his self-worth.

Because of Big Mom's personality, she had always been an absent figure within the massive Charlotte family. She never truly fulfilled her role as a mother or took responsibility for raising her children.

So from a young age, Katakuri had carried the weight of expectations. As the eldest brother, he bore the duty of protecting his younger siblings in his own way.

To them, he was the perfect big brother—the invincible warrior who never fell, the Charlotte family's greatest masterpiece.

In many ways, Charlotte Katakuri was not just a brother. Within the Big Mom Pirates, he filled in the gaps left by Big Mom herself, even stepping into a paternal role.

But that burden had taken its toll.

On one hand, he revered and admired his mother, longing for her trust and recognition.

On the other, surrounded by siblings who worshiped him, he had to maintain his image—strong, unwavering, perfect—year after year.

These two conflicting roles made Katakuri's entire existence a knot of contradictions.

Now, Charlotte Linlin's obsession with Daren—so deep she was willing to "sacrifice" some of her own sons—filled Katakuri with bitter disappointment. It pierced deeper than any wound and triggered a crisis he had never felt before.

He was seen as the perfect brother, the masterpiece, because of his power and natural talent.

But what if... Linlin really did have a child with Daren?

What kind of terrifying potential would a child with both of their "monster" genes possess?

Would Linlin then pour all her attention into that child?

And if—no, not if, but when—that child surpassed him?

Would his brothers and sisters shift their trust and admiration to someone else?

Daren's child would steal everything that mattered most.

His mother's love. His siblings' trust. Even the title of "greatest masterpiece."

That thought alone was enough to make Katakuri lose control of both his body and emotions.

A paralyzing fear began to take root in his heart.

And then... that damn Vice Admiral delivered the final blow.

All the rage, resentment, pain, hatred, and fear inside him erupted like a long-dormant volcano, finally set off.

"Shut up!!"

"You'll never be my father!!"

"No matter what... never!!"

Katakuri screamed, his bloodshot eyes bulging, crimson leaking from his mouth and staining his sharp teeth, making him look like a beast driven mad.

The moment that roar tore from his throat, a new, fiercer aura surged from his body—wilder than anything he'd unleashed before. It whipped the air into a violent, lightning-charged storm.

Daren was momentarily stunned.

What the...?

His Conqueror's Haki just got stronger!?

From their first clash, Daren had estimated that Katakuri's Conqueror's Haki sat well below his own—probably around 30 points to his own 59.

But now, the pressure radiating off him had jumped to at least 40!

What, is this guy a main character too?

Or was my villainous monologue just that effective?

Did I seriously just push him into a breakthrough?

Maybe I really do have a knack for teaching...

Man, playing the villain is kinda fun!

The thought made Daren want to laugh, but his eyes only burned brighter with fighting spirit—blazing like wildfire.

By the pattern he'd figured out, the stronger Katakuri became, the more pressure he'd feel.

And the greater the pressure in battle, the better the "lesson."

Which meant the faster he'd grow.

Daren laughed and charged in head-on.

Their fists crashed together like shooting stars.

Boom!!

Shockwaves exploded in all directions, sending chunks of earth and massive boulders flying through the air. Building debris was shredded into dust mid-flight.

In the collision of their Conqueror's Haki, the sky split with streaks of red and purple lightning, crackling in and out of existence, tearing the battlefield apart.

Feeling the stagnation of his Observation Haki—and even noticing a fresh surge in his Armament Haki, strength, and speed—Daren grew even more exhilarated. He kept pressing on mercilessly with his taunts.

"Hahaha! Now this is starting to get fun, Katakuri!"

"I never would've guessed... so this is your greatest fear!"

"What? Are you really that reluctant to call me 'Father'?"

With a single punch, he shattered the massive mochi fist conjured by the donut, smashing it into a splatter of liquified mochi that sprayed in all directions.

The recoil sent Daren sliding backward, but he steadied himself instantly. Looking at Katakuri—whose eyes now glared like those of a demon—he made a move.

Towering above the panting Katakuri, he extended his right hand. A smile appeared on his face—one he believed to be "kind," "gentle," and yet "overbearingly dominant."

It was Whitebeard's smile.

Then, with perfect theatrical flair, he delivered the iconic line:

"Be my son, Katakuri."

Katakuri was thunderstruck.

His face went ghostly pale, his eyes bursting with furious bloodshot veins.

"You want to die!!!"

Boom!!

An even darker, more ferocious aura exploded from Katakuri's body, surging out like a storm with weight and force.

Daren: ...

In that instant, he could feel it—Katakuri's Conqueror's Haki had just spiked again!

40... 42... 44...

It didn't stop until it hit 45!

Staring at Katakuri's unhinged state—blood seeping from his eyes and nostrils, veins writhing across his forehead like angry worms—Daren couldn't help but pause.

If this were a game, he could practically hear the system notifications ringing in his ears:

"Your 'taunt' dealt massive true damage to the enemy."

"It was super effective!"

"Critical hit!"

Whoa, whoa, whoa—he's not actually gonna burst a blood vessel from this, is he?

No wonder that line from Whitebeard is so legendary... the real damage is insane! Daren thought, a little stunned.

While Daren's thoughts wandered in amusement, Katakuri had already lost it, roaring with rage as he launched himself forward.

Gone was the composed, battle-hardened warrior from before.

In his place was a beast driven mad—wild, reckless, and desperate!

Chapter 395 - 395: Volume 3 – Chapter 38: I Can't Let Him Go

If Katakuri's usual fighting style was like that of a swift and powerful cheetah—clean, efficient, and precise in hunting down his prey—then right now, he was a completely different beast.

His bloodshot eyes were laced with a web of crimson veins. He had abandoned all defense, his body radiating nothing but frenzied killing intent.

At this moment, he had only one goal.

—to tear apart the Marine who dared call himself his "father"!

"Die!!"

With eyes glowing red, Katakuri took a brutal step forward.

In the blink of an eye, he vanished from sight. Like a bolt of lightning, he reappeared above Daren in a ghostlike flash.

"Chikara Mochi!!"

He punched the air.

Muso Donuts instantly condensed into an enormous mochi fist. Cloaked in Armament Haki, it turned pitch black, dense and unyielding like a falling meteor!

A violent gust of wind slammed down from above. Before the fist even hit, its crushing force had already split the ground beneath.

Daren grinned, lips curled into a wild smile.

A burst of purple lightning surged in his eyes.

Now that his Observation Haki had reached 70 points, it had awakened a new ability through synergy with his biological magnetic field sensing—Magnetic Field Induction. It worked much like the synergy between Observation Haki and the Goro Goro no Mi, amplifying perception through electromagnetic waves.

But while the Goro Goro no Mi focused on extending sensory range, the Jiki Jiki no Mi honed perception to a razor-sharp level.

If you had to compare, then thanks to the Jiki Jiki no Mi's enhancement, Daren's 70-point Observation Haki had reached at least 80 points in precision!

He could see it now...

Crystal clear!

His feet tapped the ground dozens of times in an instant. Daren's figure suddenly shifted sideways and disappeared.

Boom!!

Katakuri's punch slammed down like a collapsing mountain. The full-force strike tore through the town's ground, sending a jagged fissure radiating out from the impact point, swallowing surrounding buildings in a roaring wave of destruction.

Dozens of meters away, Daren skidded back across the ground, his feet carving long trenches into the earth. The moment he regained balance, he shot a sharp glance upward.

His body coiled like a spring wound to its limit. Then—he kicked off the ground with explosive force.

A massive crater erupted beneath his feet, and using the incredible recoil, the Vice Admiral rocketed into the sky like a cannonball.

"I'm going to kill you!!"

Katakuri roared, his voice ragged with fury.

Bloodied fists struck the air rapidly.

Muso Donuts multiplied into nine massive rings, expanding into a swarm of mochi fists that filled the sky and rained down on Daren, who was now streaking through the air.

"Kuzu Mochi!!"

Amid the storm of fists, Daren's eyes flared with surging violet lightning.

The scene before him began to shift.

The blindingly fast barrage of punches—once impossible to follow—now slowed dramatically under the precision boost from his heightened Observation Haki.

Like watching a film in slow motion, every angle and trajectory came into perfect focus.

Then came the spectacle—

The Vice Admiral's figure flickered across the sky, too fast for the naked eye to track, leaving behind a trail of afterimages.

While dodging Katakuri's barrage, he used his flight ability and Geppo to step through the air, charging straight toward his target.

"Hahahaha!! Still not enough—not even close!"

"Today, your dear old man is going to teach you a proper lesson, my son Katakuri!"

Daren let out a classic villain's cackle, deliberately provoking Katakuri to push him into unleashing more power.

In the blink of an eye, he had already closed the gap.

A Haki-clad fist came crashing forward!

But to Daren's surprise, Katakuri didn't retreat or dodge. Instead, rage burning in his eyes, he charged head-on!

He threw a punch too!

Not one conjured by a donut—

—but his own fist!

Both fists aimed straight for each other's heads!

The next second—

Daren tilted his head just slightly.

Katakuri's punch skimmed past his hair.

Bang!!

Daren's fist, however, connected cleanly with Katakuri's face.

The sheer force drove his fist deep into Katakuri's features, snapping his head back as blood burst from his nose and mouth.

If it weren't for his special Paramecia-type body, that punch would've splattered anyone else's skull like a watermelon.

Daren: ???

He didn't dodge?

No, he couldn't dodge.

Katakuri had completely lost his composure—lost control.

His Observation Haki... had failed.

No wonder Daren's own Observation Haki had stopped progressing.

He'd pushed too far. His trash talk had cracked Katakuri's mental defenses entirely.

Kids these days really are too soft. Can't even handle a little emotional damage.

Katakuri had always excelled at calm, calculated combat, dominating his enemies through future-sight and precise moves.

But once he lost his cool, even if his Conqueror's Haki and physical power spiked, his actual combat ability plummeted.

Boom!

Katakuri's body slammed into the ground, blasting out a crater hundreds of meters wide.

The earth shook violently.

Buildings collapsed, smoke and debris filled the air.

Staring at the bloodied, barely conscious Katakuri lying in the rubble, Daren hesitated.

Kill him, or let him live?

He was a Marine, and hunting pirates was his duty.

But Daren wasn't like most Marines.

He followed his own rules.

Katakuri still had a ton of potential. With the right push, he could easily reach Admiral level.

Besides, Daren hadn't fully mastered his own Observation Haki yet. If he killed Katakuri now, where else would he find a teacher this good?

"Why aren't you finishing me off, you damn Marine..."

Katakuri growled through gritted teeth, eyes regaining a flicker of clarity.

Panting heavily, he suddenly roared,

"Just kill me already!!"

The shame of falling in battle, the guilt of failing to avenge his family—it all made death feel like the only answer.

Daren glanced at him and frowned.

Seriously? Giving up already?

Still too young.

After a brief pause, he suddenly grinned.

"I can't bear to."

Katakuri's eyes widened in disbelief as Daren sighed dramatically and said with mock seriousness,

"You're my beloved son, after all... Sure, you're a bit naughty, but have you ever seen a grown-up take a kid's tantrum seriously?"

Katakuri froze.

What the—?!

He vomited a mouthful of thick, dark blood.

Staring at the Vice Admiral in utter shock, he looked like he'd just been hit by lightning.

And then—

"Mamamamama! Daren, I heard you~! So you've finally come around and agreed to be my husband?!"

A sultry, slightly hoarse voice echoed from the distant sky.

Thunderclouds swirled as massive waves formed above, a black vortex churning in the sky, with streaks of violet lightning dancing through the storm.

Daren's mouth twitched.

No hesitation.

He stepped onto Enma's black blade, magnetic fields roaring to life beneath him, and shot away in a streak of black light.

Was she kidding!?

He'd burned through a lot of stamina fighting Katakuri—there was no way he was facing that woman now.

Not that it would've mattered. Even at full strength, he wasn't taking on that lunatic.

He could fight her, sure. But it would be a pain in the ass.

Big Mom's greedy, devouring gaze always gave him the creeps.

Katakuri stared blankly at the rapidly disappearing Vice Admiral.

"I never agreed to that!!"

Daren's voice echoed faintly from the distance, full of frustration.

"Keep dreaming, Charlotte Linlin!!"

Chapter 396 - 396: Volume 3 – Chapter 39: Planting a Seed

The Vice Admiral's speed exploded to the limit—within a second, he had vanished without a trace.

All that remained was a white contrail slicing through the burning clouds of the sunset, like a jet streaking across the sky.

Katakuri, bloodied and broken, stared blankly in that direction. The corner of his eye twitched involuntarily.

That arrogant Marine... just ran off like that?

But along with the disbelief came a heavy wave of helplessness.

Now that his mind had cleared, his Observation Haki returned to normal. And in that moment, Katakuri realized—Daren's final burst of aura was even stronger than during their fight...

Which meant he hadn't even gone all out.

Fingers soaked in blood dug deep into the cracked soil as Katakuri lowered his head, gritting his teeth hard.

Could he really defeat that man... and avenge his fallen siblings?

"Ma ma ma ma... what a heartless man."

A voice echoed as Big Mom descended from the churning clouds above, thunder rumbling and lightning cracking in her wake.

She looked toward the direction Daren had fled and let out a sultry smile, her crimson lips curling.

"Even the way he runs away is so charming. Truly the man I've set my sights on."

Charlotte Linlin licked her lips.

She leapt down from the thundercloud Zeus, long legs clad in high-heeled boots stepping rhythmically as she approached Katakuri.

"Katakuri, do you understand now?"

He froze.

Still kneeling, head bowed, he spoke between gasps.

"Mama... I don't understand what you mean."

Charlotte Linlin giggled.

"Now that you've fought Daren, you should realize why I chose him, right?"

"His strength, his body, his perfect physique and genes... Ma ma ma ma... our union will create the strongest warrior the seas have ever seen!"

"He'll have the mightiest body, unmatched talent, power surpassing even the giants. He'll be the most powerful soldier in the Charlotte family's conquest of the world!"

Katakuri's bloodshot pupils shrank violently.

The Vice Admiral's mocking words echoed once more in his mind:

"Don't you see, Katakuri... She thinks you're too weak. That's why she wants to have a stronger son—to replace you."

"To replace the so-called greatest masterpiece of the Charlotte family..."

Katakuri's bloodied fists clenched tight. Veins bulged on his back. His knuckles turned white from the pressure.

"So... Mama..."

His voice suddenly became eerily calm, a rasp drifting into the smoky air.

"You mean... just to get his bloodline... even if so many of us had to die—my brothers, your children—it didn't matter?"

Charlotte Linlin smiled.

"Of course. The weak don't deserve the Charlotte name."

"Only those who are strong enough are worthy of being called my bloodline."

"You, Katakuri, are the best example of that. That's why I trust and rely on you the most..."

The words hit like a bolt of lightning.

Katakuri knelt there, frozen. His hands trembled.

In his eyes, the last flicker of hope and light faded away—like the dying glow of the evening sun on the far horizon.

So that's how it is...

That damn Marine... he wasn't wrong after all...

So this is what you truly believe, Mama...

In the end, all of us—my brothers and sisters, even me—we were just weapons to you, weren't we?

Tools to be used.

And once a more powerful "tool" shows up, we're all disposable.

Even me—your most trusted child—was only valued because I was stronger than the rest.

Everything that Marine said... was true.

Even after so many of your children died, all you could say was, "It doesn't matter."

You've truly... disappointed me.

"Ma ma ma ma, Come on, Katakuri, get up..."

Big Mom saw Katakuri kneeling there motionless and chuckled.

"Don't just kneel there and make a fool of yourself. You're the face of the Big Mom Pirates."

"No need to be so down. Once I get Daren and bear a powerful child with him... you'll have a brother to help shoulder your burdens. You'll even have an adorable little brother."

"He'll get along with you just fine. After all, you're the perfect big brother, aren't you?"

"When that time comes, both of you will bear my flag and uphold the glory of the Charlotte family... helping me build a magnificent kingdom!"

"Mamahahaha..."

With that, Big Mom burst into laughter, stepped onto Zeus, and soared into the sky, vanishing swiftly into the clouds.

Katakuri was left alone, standing in place with a blank expression.

For a long, long time.

"No..."

Suddenly, Katakuri gritted his teeth. His defeated look was swept away as his eyes ignited with a sharp, murderous gleam.

He clenched his fists tightly, blood dripping steadily from his arms.

His bloodshot eyes locked onto the direction where Big Mom had disappeared.

"Mama, I'll protect my family—my way!!"

As the words fell—

Boom!!

An even more overwhelming, fierce, and explosive aura erupted from Katakuri's body, sending his hair and clothes whipping violently in the wind. The surge nearly engulfed the entire island.

A tangible wave of Conqueror's Haki swept out, stirring up winds like a purgatory storm across the land.

If Daren had been there, he might've sensed it...

Katakuri's Conqueror's Haki—had surged again!

It had broken past the 50-point threshold!

Amid the roaring tempest,

Katakuri slowly stood up from the rubble, lifted his trident in one hand, and walked away, his figure desolate and solitary.

Like a wild wolf cast aside.

No longer lost.

His eyes were firm.

As if he had found a reason to live.

...

High above.

The sea of clouds receded swiftly behind him.

Now certain he was clear of danger, Daren slowed down, adjusting his slightly ragged breath.

A faint smile tugged at the corner of his lips.

This assault on Totto Land had not only achieved its objectives, but brought plenty of unexpected gains.

Katakuri's "lessons" were self-explanatory—such a satisfying leap in power made every pore in his body feel like it was breathing, leaving him completely reinvigorated.

Most importantly, Daren had planted a seed in Katakuri's heart.

Chapter 397 - 397: Volume 3 – Chapter 40: Now This Is a True Master

Daren didn't know whether the seed he planted would truly take root in Katakuri's heart and grow into something meaningful—but it was an intriguing experiment.

Charlotte Katakuri, hailed in the original story as the pinnacle of the Charlotte family, wasn't someone Daren particularly disliked.

On the contrary, he found himself deeply fascinated by this tragic figure—utterly loyal to Big Mom and fiercely devoted to the Big Mom Pirates.

Charlotte Linlin, that madwoman, treated her children as nothing more than tools. She showed no maternal affection, acted purely on impulse, and wouldn't hesitate to kill her own offspring if they disobeyed.

But Katakuri was different.

Unlike Big Mom, he possessed a broad heart. As a central pillar of the crew, he had dedicated his entire life to protecting every single member of the Charlotte family.

Daren was curious.

When "loyalty to Big Mom" and "protecting his family"—two ideals that originally didn't conflict—began to diverge and clash, what path would Katakuri choose?

Would he suppress his rage over his brother's death and continue being the dutiful and obedient son?

Or would disappointment turn to disillusionment, leading him to finally rebel against Big Mom?

Of course, beyond just his curiosity, Daren had a deeper agenda behind provoking tension between Katakuri and Big Mom.

This was an experiment.

After this "lesson," the boost to Daren's Observation Haki from fighting Katakuri was approaching its limit.

The higher one's stats climbed, the harder they became to raise—this was part of the equation.

But more importantly, Katakuri at this stage hadn't yet reached the peak Yonkō-First-Mate level of the original timeline.

He simply didn't pose enough of a life-or-death threat to Daren.

In other words, the "leeks" weren't ripe enough yet—they still needed time to grow.

But Daren didn't have the luxury to wait two or three decades.

He had to stimulate Katakuri's inner world, push him to grow faster.

And if, in the process, he could shake Katakuri's loyalty and submission to Big Mom... then things would really get interesting.

From Daren's perspective, one of the key reasons Katakuri never reached Admiral-level combat power in the original story likely stemmed from Big Mom herself.

His obedience, his overwhelming loyalty to her, coupled with the burden of protecting his family, had severely capped his potential.

The same went for King and Marco.

Unlike Benn Beckman—the "Yonkō's Right Hand" who rivals an Admiral—Katakuri, King, and Marco were bound by clear chains of command with their respective captains.

Rather than being true "Yonkō's Wings," they were simply stronger-than-average subordinates.

The real "Yonkō's Wings"—true equals—were people like Beckman to Akagami, or Rayleigh to Roger.

They weren't bound by hierarchy. They stood as comrades, as partners.

The world of pirates is full of mysteries.

Willpower—or the "power of the heart"—plays a crucial role in both expressing and developing strength.

Once that will falters, or when submission to another takes root, power stagnates—or worse, regresses drastically.

There are endless examples.

In his youth, Gecko Moria once clashed head-on with Kaidou. But after losing his crew, he fell apart—his strength plummeting to the point where he couldn't even use Haki. Anyone could beat him.

Crocodile, too. As a rookie, he rampaged into the New World, unstoppable. He even fought Bullet for days without a clear winner.

But after being crushed by Whitebeard, he lost all drive, placing his hopes in the power of ancient weapons—only to be taken down by Luffy.

Yet during the Impel Down breakout, Crocodile rekindled his resolve and set sail once more.

With his will restored, he returned to the battlefield in the Summit War, his power surging—trading blows with top fighters, arguably becoming the MVP of the whole conflict.

Doflamingo is another prime example.

A man who once aspired to become the Pirate King.

But after witnessing Kaidou's monstrous power, he chose to yield and ally himself. He even trembled at the mere mention of Kaidou's name.

Otherwise, with his talent, he could've achieved far more.

...

Daren didn't know exactly what kind of impact his words would have on Katakuri.

But he was genuinely looking forward to seeing Katakuri grow stronger.

After all, he still hadn't fully mastered his Observation Haki.

And if his provocations somehow drove a wedge between Katakuri and Big Mom... well, that would make things even more entertaining.

With that thought, Daren soared through the sky toward Marineford, the Marine Headquarters, while activating his sensory ability to check on his current status.

Physique: 88.649 (Steel Body)

Strength: 78.513

Speed: 78.711

Devil Fruit Development: 85.211 (Island Coverage)

Armament Haki: 59.035

Observation Haki: 72.117 (Magnetic Field Induction)

Conqueror's Haki: 60.000

His physique, strength, and Armament Haki had all gone up by nearly one point. After all, he didn't take all those punches from Katakuri for nothing.

His speed had increased by two points—which made sense, considering how much dodging he did during that "special training" session. His body and reflexes had clearly sharpened.

Even his Conqueror's Haki had finally broken past the 59-point mark, now reaching a solid 60.

As for how to train Conqueror's Haki effectively, Daren still hadn't quite figured it out.

It was a reflection of one's "will" and "power of the heart"—an external manifestation of one's spirit.

But one thing was clear: fighting powerful opponents and clashing with other Conqueror's Haki users did help raise it, albeit slowly.

The fastest improvement, however, was undoubtedly in his Observation Haki.

Watching it jump from 47 to 72 in just half a day, Daren couldn't help grinning. His heart practically bloomed with joy.

"What elite officer training camp? Nothing beats Queen and Katakuri, the true master teachers."

Of course, he was only half-joking.

Deep down, Daren understood that without Zephyr's foundational training back at the camp, he'd never have improved this quickly in the first place.

As he pondered the newly awakened "Magnetic Field Induction" ability, he grew more eager to push both his Strength and Speed toward the 80-point threshold.

"So... maybe it's time to take a little trip to Wano?"

Eyes gleaming, Daren rubbed his chin and muttered thoughtfully.

Chapter 398 - 398: Volume 3 – Chapter 41: I'm in Wano Country

Ever since Daren helped the Marines take down the Beasts Pirates' main base, Kaidou and the remnants of his crew had vanished without a trace.

The only known sightings were during the scramble for the Moa Moa no Mi on Coin Island, where King "the Conflagration" made an appearance, and when Kaidou joined forces with Shiki and Big Mom to launch an assault on Marineford.

In fact, after capturing the Beasts Pirates' headquarters, Marine HQ had originally drafted a plan to follow up with a full sweep—to hunt down Kaidou and the remaining Beasts Pirates and wipe them out completely.

But with little intel and the New World's unpredictable landscape, the operation was eventually shelved.

Still, even if Marine HQ had no idea where Kaidou was hiding... Daren certainly did.

Drawing on his knowledge of the original storyline, Daren had every reason to believe that Kaidou had likely already invaded Wano Country.

After all, the only one in Wano capable of resisting Kaidou—Kozuki Oden—had already set sail and boarded Whitebeard's ship.

Given Kaidou's cunning and ambition, there's no way he would miss the chance to seize Wano. Just like in the original timeline, he'd join forces with Kurozumi Orochi, seize control of the nation, and turn it into his base of operations for conquering the seas.

Back when planning his "blitz" operation, Daren had indeed considered targeting Kaidou, but ultimately opted for Totto Land, under Big Mom's rule.

One reason was the uncertainty about whether Kaidou was even in Wano at the time. The other? The strength gap.

If he launched a blitz on Wano, setting aside any political fallout or public opinion, he could easily find himself in over his head.

After all, Kaidou wasn't the only one in the Beasts Pirates with flight capability.

Aside from Kaidou, the crew's top officer, "King "the Conflagration", also possessed formidable flying power.

If those two managed to pin him down mid-raid, even if the mission succeeded, Daren himself might not walk away unscathed.

Totto Land, however, was a different story.

Big Mom's vast territory was scattered across dozens of island strongholds, floating like stars across the open sea.

As long as he didn't recklessly charge into the heart of Totto Land—Whole Cake Island—no one except Big Mom herself could realistically stop him.

More importantly, Daren needed a clean, decisive victory to cement his growing reputation and fulfill the promises he'd made. In that sense, targeting Yakigashi Island had been the perfect move.

And the results proved him right.

The "live broadcast" of the surprise attack had an excellent impact, and he'd completed the mission flawlessly.

Which meant—Daren was now free to move as he pleased!

From this point on, he didn't have to worry about wins or losses. He could just do things his way.

So... it was time to scout out Wano!

Most importantly, unlike before, after the "lesson" from the renowned Katakuri, Daren's Observation Haki had skyrocketed to an unprecedented level. His overall power had climbed significantly as well.

Right now, Daren was confident that even if he dove deep into Wano and got ambushed by Kaidou and King, as long as he played it smart, he could still escape in one piece.

After all, Kaidou hadn't yet reached his peak—nowhere near as terrifying as that lunatic Big Mom.

So what was there to hesitate about?

Time to move!

A cocky grin curled at the corner of Daren's lips, his eyes flashing with excitement. Controlling Enma beneath his feet, his body twisted midair in a sharp pivot, rocketing off in a new direction.

...

Marine Headquarters, Marineford.

Admiral's Office.

"Moshi moshi, yes, King Nock, it's me..."

With a warm smile, Sengoku spoke into the Den Den Mushi in front of him.

"On behalf of Marine Headquarters, I'd like to express our gratitude for your country's support in the reconstruction of Marineford."

"Vice Admiral Daren? Of course, of course, I've had high hopes for that kid from the very beginning..."

After a round of empty pleasantries, Sengoku finally hung up, letting out a long, weary sigh.

That had been the thirteenth call.

Though the royal families of these member nations didn't donate much—usually just 30 to 40 million Belly—any more than that would've raised red flags with the World Government's oversight departments.

These "donations" were more symbolic than practical, but Sengoku wasn't about to complain. Even a little was better than nothing.

So, out of courtesy and protocol, Marine Headquarters had to call and politely thank each contributing nation.

Technically, this should have been the Fleet Admiral's job.

But since Kong didn't want to look bad, he called it "mental training" and dumped the whole thing on Sengoku.

Snap, snap...

A crisp crunching sound rang out nearby.

Sengoku's eyelid twitched. He turned and shot a sharp glare at Garp, who was sitting there with zero decorum.

"Garp, if you've got nothing to do, help out instead of just stuffing your face with my senbei!"

"Hehehe, Old Man Kong said this is your training."

Garp grinned like it was all a joke.

Sengoku's face twitched.

"Besides, Sengoku, I've got a reputation to maintain too."

Garp chuckled as he crunched down on more senbei.

"You're a proud Marine Admiral, and here you are cozying up to a bunch of bloated, drunken nobles over a measly few billion Belly. Tsk tsk tsk..."

Sengoku's face turned red. He slammed the desk and roared,

"Damn it, Garp! If you're not going to work, then get out!"

"Alright, alright, no need to blow a fuse..."

Garp hunched his shoulders and muttered.

Seeing the veins nearly bulging out of Sengoku's forehead, he quickly grabbed a few unopened bags of senbei and bolted from the office.

Sengoku sat back down, rubbing his temples with a sigh.

"Tough job, huh?"

At that moment, Staff Officer Tsuru walked in with a stack of documents. Seeing Sengoku's exhausted face, she chuckled and teased him.

Sengoku shook his head with a sigh.

"Someone's gotta do it."

"The Marines' duties aren't just about fighting."

He held up the list in his hand and gave a small smile.

"The individual donations might not seem like much, but they add up to a decent sum..."

He gave himself a slap on the face to perk up, forced on a cheerful smile, and dialed the next number on the Den Den Mushi.

"Moshi moshi, King Raphael? This is Admiral Sengoku from Marine Headquarters..."

Tsuru sat nearby, quietly watching as Sengoku slipped back into work mode, a small smile tugging at her lips.

Yeah, it was just a little hit to his pride and some polite small talk.

But if it meant one more fortress, one more warship, or just a bit more compensation for the families of fallen soldiers...

Why not?

The Marines didn't just need heroes like Garp charging into battle—

They also needed people like Sengoku, who supported everything quietly behind the scenes.

...

Half an hour later, Sengoku finally wrapped up the last call and wearily set down the Den Den Mushi.

At that moment, he'd have preferred a full-on battle with Shiki over dealing with another round of pompous nobles.

"By the way, Tsuru, has that kid Daren returned yet? Should be about time, no?"

Lighting a cigar, Sengoku suddenly turned to ask.

Still buried in paperwork, Tsuru paused and shook her head.

"No word yet."

Sengoku frowned.

Had something gone wrong?

After the destruction of Fukkura Town on Yakigashi Island, the live feed had cut off. They'd been in the dark about Daren's situation ever since.

Thinking it over, Sengoku picked up the military-issue Den Den Mushi and dialed Daren's personal line.

Buru buru... buru buru...

A few seconds later, the line connected.

"Admiral Sengoku."

Daren's deep voice came through.

Sengoku felt a hint of relief but kept his tone serious.

"Daren, you're not back at HQ yet? Where the hell are you?"

There was a brief pause on the other end.

Then, the Den Den Mushi mimicked Daren's usual cocky grin.

"Admiral Sengoku, I'm in Wano Country."

"What!?"

Sengoku's expression changed instantly as he shot to his feet.

Chapter 399 - 399: Volume 3 – Chapter 42: What to Do with Nothing to Do

Beside him, Staff Officer Tsuru wore an expression of disbelief, eyes locked on the Den Den Mushi.

"Daren, what the hell are you doing in Wano Country!?"

Hearing that familiar, mysterious tone in Daren's voice, Sengoku felt a wave of dread rise in his chest.

He had heard this same cocky, troublemaking tone too many times before—

Right before the ambush on "World Destroyer" Byrnni World in the North Blue;

When they resolved the Celestial Dragon murder case in the North Blue;

At the officer training camp graduation;

And just a few hours ago, before the lightning raid on Totto Land...

Every time, this tone meant only one thing—trouble.

The tangled politics of Wano Country, the public and diplomatic pressure... Thoughts flew through Sengoku's mind, and the more he considered it, the worse it felt.

The image of Fukkura Town on Yakigashi Island in Totto Land being flattened in an instant flashed vividly before him.

That damn brat... Don't tell me he's planning to stir things up in Wano?

The thought made Sengoku's scalp tingle.

"Admiral Sengoku, I just finished my mission and had nothing better to do, so I figured I'd take a little trip to Wano Country."

Daren's voice came through the Den Den Mushi with a relaxed, almost lazy tone—too relaxed. But it made Sengoku and Tsuru's hearts race.

If you've got nothing to do, can't you just come back to HQ?

Or head over to the Pleasure District for a drink and a show—anything but this!

Why the hell did you have to go to Wano!?

Sengoku clenched his teeth, frustration all over his face.

"You brat, you should know better than I do what kind of place Wano Country is!"

"That country's political situation is a mess, with all kinds of samurai factions entrenched there... Do you realize the political impact of a Marine suddenly showing up in Wano Country!?"

"What if you clash with one of those factions!? Those hard-headed maniacs aren't exactly known for being reasonable!"

Even though Wano maintained a strict isolationist policy and was practically cut off from the rest of the world, thanks to Marine intelligence networks and seafaring rumors, Sengoku had learned a thing or two about Wano's samurai.

They were lunatics with no regard for their own lives.

Driven by their so-called "bushido," they fought for the honor and dignity of their lord, drawing their swords at the slightest provocation.

If they could win, they fought to the death. If they couldn't, they'd still go down swinging.

Even the Marines—strong as they were—had no desire to make enemies of those stubborn, rigid, and absurdly powerful warriors.

It wasn't a matter of strength—it was that they were a nightmare to deal with.

And if Daren really got into it with the samurai factions in Wano, this wouldn't just be about the Marines fighting pirates anymore.

This would escalate to an international diplomatic incident.

The Marines attacking a neutral nation?

Even if Wano wasn't part of the World Government, such a move would surely spark backlash from other powerful neutral countries across the seas!

"Of course I understand, Admiral Sengoku."

Despite Sengoku's mounting frustration, the Vice Admiral's tone didn't shift one bit. He still spoke with that same carefree drawl.

"But I think you'll be very interested in what I'm about to tell you."

"What kind of bullshit news!? I don't want to hear it! Daren, don't you dare cause trouble. I'm ordering you to return immediately—before the samurai forces of Wano spot you... evacuate at once!!"

Sengoku was losing it now, yelling into the Den Den Mushi.

But what Daren said next left him frozen.

"I found a massive weapons production facility in Wano—one that dwarfs even the Beasts Pirates' base."

Sengoku's pupils shrank.

He and Tsuru instinctively looked at each other, both seeing the disbelief mirrored in the other's eyes.

They knew exactly how large the Beasts Pirates' military facility had been.

It was large enough to equip the entire active Marine force—twice over.

A military production line of that magnitude... in Wano!?

But Wano was a closed-off country.

A nation that hadn't waged war on others, and one that other nations didn't dare attack.

And most of the powerful groups in Wano were samurai.

Everyone knew samurai prided themselves on swordsmanship and looked down on guns and other firearms with disdain.

A factory churning out standardized military-grade weapons? That was the last thing Wano should need.

But now Daren was saying he'd discovered one?

That made no sense!

Why would those samurai need that many weapons?

Were they preparing for a world war?...

"Daren, are you sure?"

Sengoku's tone turned serious at once, his brows furrowing tightly.

"I'm not a man who likes to joke around, Admiral Sengoku."

Daren replied with a smile.

Sengoku's mouth twitched slightly.

Then he heard Daren continue,

"But since Admiral Sengoku isn't interested in this information, I'll follow your orders and withdraw immediately."

Sengoku: ...

Tsuru: ...

Sengoku clutched his chest and gritted his teeth.

"Hurry up and tell me, you brat!!"

...

On the other end of the Den Den Mushi—

High above the clouds.

Daren squinted, gazing into the distance at the vast complex sprawling across the Kuri region of Wano Country.

Majestic black chimneys rose from the structures, pouring out thick black smoke.

The entire military factory complex was nestled in the mountains, stretching outward in all directions. From above, it looked like an endless black sea.

Found you, Kaidou...

The corners of his mouth lifted slightly as he smiled.

"I see the flag of the Beasts Pirates."

The Den Den Mushi went dead silent.

Daren could almost hear Sengoku gasp from the other side.

Three seconds later, Sengoku's solemn voice came through:

"Daren, you did well."

"I didn't expect Kaidou to have invaded Wano Country. This intel is extremely important to the Marines!"

"However, this touches on global diplomacy and public perception. You must not act rashly. This needs to be thoroughly discussed at headquarters—"

"Bru!"

Daren cut the Den Den Mushi connection.

...

Marineford, Marine Headquarters.

Admiral's office.

Sengoku stared blankly at the now-silent military Den Den Mushi in front of him, his expression slowly turning ashen and stiff.

"That brat... How dare he... hang up on me?"

He mumbled, dazed, as if unable to believe what had just happened.

Staff Officer Tsuru looked at Sengoku's face, which was steadily shifting from pale to dark with frustration. The corner of her mouth twitched as she coughed lightly.

"It must've been a bad signal. Yes, that must be it."

Though, even her tone didn't sound too sure.

Chapter 400 - 400: Volume 3 – Chapter 43: Can't We Even Talk About It?

Sengoku: ...

He suddenly slammed his palm on the desk and roared in fury,

"That bastard Daren! Who the hell does he think he is!?"

"I'm an Admiral of headquarters—his direct superior! And he dares hang up on me!?"

"I've never had a mere Vice Admiral hang up on me before!!"

Staff Officer Tsuru, standing nearby, suddenly chimed in,

"Didn't Garp do that all the time?"

Sengoku: ...

He glared at Tsuru, who was trying to stifle her laughter. His heart felt even more stifled.

"Tsuru... you've changed."

Sengoku muttered,

"You weren't like this before."

Tsuru simply smiled and pressed her lips together.

She wasn't actually that old—not even fifty—but years of managing the Marines' endless internal affairs day and night had taken a toll. Her long, dark hair was already streaked with gray.

Yet time had not diminished her elegance. The crow's feet at her eyes and her silvered hair only added a distinct, weathered charm.

"Don't worry, Sengoku. Daren may be reckless, but he usually knows where the line is."

"He's just as politically sharp as you are. Don't forget how effortlessly he maneuvered through things back when he was stationed in North Blue."

Tsuru's calm, steady tone helped Sengoku settle down.

He took a long drag from his cigar, crossed his arms, and paced the office with a deep frown.

After a moment, he suddenly stopped, his tone firm.

"Still, I don't feel at ease. We should go see Fleet Admiral Kong."

Tsuru nodded in agreement.

If Daren really intended to go to war with Kaidou in Wano, they needed to be ready to support him at any moment.

This wasn't a decision the two of them could make alone.

...

They quickly made their way to the Fleet Admiral's office.

After waking Kong, who had been resting, they laid out the situation in a few concise sentences.

"Daren wants to go to war with the Beasts Pirates in Wano!?"

The moment he heard it, Kong snapped awake, any trace of sleep gone.

"Damn it! Sengoku, why didn't you stop him!?"

Sengoku hesitated, caught off guard.

Just as he was about to blurt out an excuse, he caught Tsuru signaling to him from the corner of his eye.

He froze briefly—then immediately adjusted, speaking in a low, steady voice.

"Fleet Admiral Kong, just as you suspected, I tried to stop him."

"But the Den Den Mushi had a poor signal. The call cut off before I could finish."

Sengoku's face was all seriousness, as if stating an undeniable truth.

It suddenly clicked.

Daren had deliberately hung up—to shield Sengoku from taking any responsibility for this "unauthorized" action.

Even if something happened, Sengoku, as a Marine Admiral, wouldn't be held accountable.

That brat Daren... not bad at all.

Sengoku muttered inwardly.

Kong looked momentarily stunned by Sengoku's words.

Tsuru spoke up at just the right moment.

"Fleet Admiral Kong, Wano's terrain is unique. The surrounding sea currents are chaotic. It's possible the magnetic field or signals were affected unpredictably."

Kong didn't question them—he just pressed his fingers to his temples with a sigh.

"Damn it... why now, of all times!"

"In that case, we need to prepare to mobilize on our end too."

He rose from his seat, powerful hands pressing firmly onto the desk as his expression turned sharp and commanding.

"We need to be ready on all fronts. That includes handling the political fallout!"

Sengoku and Tsuru straightened, raising their hands in salute.

"Yes, Fleet Admiral Kong!"

...

Wano Country.

Kuri Region.

Inside a palace built in traditional Japanese style.

"Kaidou-san, the outer defenses are complete. All major ports have been sealed off by the elite forces of the Beasts Pirates!"

King, exuding a cold and deadly aura, knelt on one knee and reported in a deep voice.

Hearing this, Kaidou's unease eased slightly.

The plan and setup in Wano were the cornerstone of his ambition to rule the seas.

He had long realized that if he wanted to dominate the New World and start an unprecedented war, his own strength alone wasn't enough.

Powerful subordinates, a massive force, a large army, and the military resources to plunge the world into chaos—

All were essential parts of his plan to build an anarchic "pirate empire."

Only by gaining firm control over Wano Country—a land rich in minerals and military resources, with an advantageous location—could he hope to compete with the others.

Charlotte Linlin had Totto Land.

Whitebeard commanded a vast and powerful army.

Shiki possessed an airborne fleet...

And he—he only had Wano.

No matter what, nothing could go wrong with his arrangements in this country.

"But seriously, are we being a little too cautious? It's not like the Marines even know we're here, right?"

At that moment, Queen, the large man lounging nearby with a bowl of red bean soup, muttered under his breath.

He was clearly unhappy with how strictly guarded and on-edge everything was.

After all, in this tense atmosphere, no one was in the mood to join him for a singing and dancing party.

"Shut up!"

King shot him a sharp glare.

Queen looked hurt.

"Can't I even talk? I've been seriously working on optimizing the armory's production lines, you know."

"I was just saying. It's not like I'd actually attract the Marines—"

BOOM!!

Before he could finish, a deafening roar erupted in the distance, shaking the ground beneath their feet.

The earth trembled violently, as if a massive dragon was stirring in the mountains, groaning from the depths of the land.

Kaidou and King's pupils shrank, their faces twisting in alarm.

That direction... it was where the Kuri District's weapon factory was located!

"This is bad!!"

Right then, a Beasts Pirates officer burst into the hall, dressed in animal pelts. He stumbled forward and dropped to his knees, face pale with fear.

"The Marine... that Marine is here!!"

"What!?"

Kaidou and King's eyes turned bloodshot in an instant.

They swung around, murder in their gazes, locking straight onto Queen.

The big man froze in place, instinctively covering his mouth with his metal arm.

"Damn Navy brat!!"

Kaidou had no time to deal with Queen.

With a furious roar, he snatched up his massive kanabō, and in an instant, transformed into a towering behemoth.

He tore through the palace roof, launching into the sky.

"Daren, you little punk! Are you trying to get yourself killed?!"

A storm raged as his Conqueror's Haki exploded outward, unleashing a torrent of black and red lightning that lit up the darkened heavens.

The blue dragon's eyes blazed like fire as it let out an earth-shaking roar.