

One Piece 401

Chapter 401 - 401: Volume 3 – Chapter 44: How Did You Get So Strong?

The palace's ornate, opulent dome suddenly shattered. A sky shrouded in dark clouds flickered with black and red lightning storms, instantly catching everyone's eye.

Chunks of stone and tile came crashing down, walls cracked and shook, and clouds of dust billowed into the air.

Chaos erupted in the palace hall as members of the Beasts Pirates scrambled for cover. They clutched their heads, struggling both to resist the pressure of their captain's Conqueror's Haki and to dodge the falling debris.

"Prepare for battle!!"

King kicked aside a massive falling boulder. Behind him, his black wings ignited with blazing crimson flames as he shouted with authority.

"Queen, rally the troops! Protect the armory sector!"

Queen flinched at the command. His rotund body trembled as he staggered to his feet, nodding furiously.

"Y-Yes! Got it!"

Before his words had even finished, a surge of murderous aura burst from King's body. His flame-wreathed black wings flared wide, launching him into the air.

Mid-flight, his form rapidly shifted—transforming into a massive, pitch-black Pteranodon that soared after the rising azure dragon.

...

Boom...

Far off in the mountainous terrain of the Kuri District, colossal clouds of dust churned skyward like a dragon twisting in the earth, wave after wave crashing like a stormy sea.

The ground groaned beneath the pressure. Cracks spiderwebbed across the cliff faces.

The vast industrial complex hidden among the peaks had become a blazing inferno.

Steel machines, lathes, and chimneys twisted and collapsed under a bizarre, invisible force, then exploded within the smoldering furnaces, sending flames roaring into the night.

Black smoke surged upward, and tongues of red fire—like giant wings—licked at the belly of the sky with a howling roar.

When Kaidou laid eyes on the devastation, his fury-filled eyes bulged, as if ready to burst from their sockets.

Wano Country had several political regions, and over half of the Beasts Pirates' military industry was concentrated in the Kuri District.

Yet in less than ten seconds, more than half of those facilities had been wiped out—by that damn Marine.

"Damn it!!"

In his blue dragon form, Kaidou swept his gaze across the smoky skies—and immediately locked onto a figure.

"Daren, you little brat!!"

A thunderous roar of pure rage tore from Kaidou's throat, his voice thick with bloodlust and fury.

But Daren, mid-"demolition," simply looked up with a relaxed smile, raised a hand in greeting like he was spotting an old friend, and called out casually:

"Yo, Kaidou... You made it."

He gestured toward the burning ruins below with mock surprise.

"Scary stuff. Can't believe you managed to rebuild such a huge weapons facility so fast."

The furious look on the dragon's face froze.

"Yo, you made it"?

What the hell is that supposed to mean!?

Do we look like old buddies or something?!

Humiliation surged through Kaidou, mixing with his boundless fury—it exploded like a volcano.

"You're dead!!!"

The blue dragon roared with the force of thunder cracking the sky. His maw, lined with jagged fangs, opened wide.

A violent torrent of air surged within his throat, rapidly compressing into dozens of emerald wind blades. Like a storm of sickles, they slashed forward in a dense wave aimed squarely at Daren.

"Kaifū!!"

The blades screamed through the air, splitting it with a shrill, piercing whistle.

The range was massive—completely sealing off a wide area around the target.

But just then—

Two streaks of violet lightning sparked to life in the depths of the Vice Admiral's eyes.

He moved—without warning.

His figure flickered across the sky, shifting laterally again and again. He moved so fast that a dozen afterimages trailed behind him.

The wind blades, powerful enough to cleave fortresses and battleships, missed him entirely—whizzing past and carving deep, jagged scars into the earth far below.

What... is this?

Kaidou's pupils contracted sharply.

This kid—he's gotten way faster than he was at Marineford not long ago!

No, wait... it's not just his speed.

It's—

Kaidou's eyes suddenly widened, staring at Daren in utter disbelief.

"How did your Observation Haki get so much stronger!?"

Daren grinned.

"Who knows?"

Buzz—

A coin suddenly snapped into the air from between his thumb and forefinger.

It spun rapidly in midair, glinting with a cold, metallic shine, reflecting the contrasting expressions of Daren and Kaidou.

"Magnetic Overload—Railgun."

With a flick of his index finger—

BOOM!!

A colossal blue-white beam erupted from in front of Daren, piercing through the void and bursting into rippling shockwaves as it roared toward the colossal dragon blotting out the sky!

The Railgun, with its overwhelming power, wasn't very useful against someone as absurdly agile as Shiki. And back in Marineford, Daren had avoided using it for fear of accidentally injuring other Marines.

But for Kaidou—a massive, grounded target—it was the perfect weapon.

"Damn you, Linlin!! What the hell did she do to you?!"

Kaidou roared with fury, mouth opening wide again as he unleashed a torrent of blazing flames.

"Bolo Breath!!"

The red and blue attacks collided in midair with immense force, turning the black sky blindingly bright.

For a split second, all of Wano fell silent.

Then came a thunderous explosion, echoing through the heavens!

Amid the blazing firelight, the massive shadow that had been floating in the sky shrank rapidly to the naked eye. Kaidou's monstrous form came crashing down from above like a demon descending from the heavens.

His wild black hair flared around him like a storm, his presence ferocious and maddened.

Back at Marineford, this Marine brat's Observation Haki had been nowhere near this strong.

More importantly—just a few hours ago, Kaidou had personally watched his battle against Charlotte Oven via visual Den Den Mushi. He knew exactly what level Daren's Observation Haki had been.

And now, in just half a day... it had reached this level!?

Unbelievable!

Aside from the possibility that that crazy hag Linlin had personally taught him the secrets of Observation Haki, Kaidou couldn't think of any other explanation.

But the moment that thought surfaced, a chill ran down his spine. Cold sweat beaded across his back.

If Daren's Observation Haki really came from that insane woman—

Did that mean... they'd already made some kind of secret deal?

Could it be that...

The intelligence about the Beasts Pirates' operations in Wano had been leaked by Linlin herself?

Was she trying to use this Marine brat to undermine his power?

The more Kaidou thought about it, the more disturbed he became.

But his body didn't hesitate.

With both hands, he gripped his massive spiked kanabō and charged at the Marine Vice Admiral like a bolt of lightning.

Like a stormwind—like thunder's roar—he crossed the distance of hundreds of meters in an instant.

Purple lightning coiled around the kanabō, leaving a blazing trail of thunderous light across the air.

"Raimei Hakke!!"

Chapter 402 - 402: Volume 3 – Chapter 45: Genkotsu Shock

A strike faster than lightning!

Daren's eyes snapped wide open, and brilliant purple lightning flared deep within his pupils.

This wasn't the first time he'd faced Kaidou's chaotic "club swing," but no matter how many times he confronted it head-on, the pressure of that move was still suffocating in its intensity!

Too fast!

It felt like a thunderbolt tearing through the void—raw power and speed unleashed in a perfect, unstoppable line.

It couldn't be followed by the naked eye. Even with his enhanced Observation Haki, heightened by the Jiki Jiki no Mi, Daren could only barely perceive a faint, blurry streak of motion.

The Hassaikai, cloaked in wind and thunder, didn't look like it was being swung by Kaidou—

It felt like the kanabō was dragging Kaidou behind it!

In that instant, Daren couldn't help but compare Kaidou to Katakuri.

And he was completely certain—

Even if Katakuri activated future sight with his Observation Haki, there was no way he could dodge this blow!

Being able to see the future didn't mean invincibility.

When your opponent's strength was overwhelming—

When their speed outpaced even your nervous system's ability to respond—

All that awaited was helplessness. Despair.

In dozens, maybe hundreds of glimpsed futures, no matter what actions he took, what choices he made—

The ending was always the same.

Crushed by that single swing.

"Pretty impressive. But..."

Daren's lips curled into a wild, fearless grin as an unquenchable fighting spirit surged like fire.

"I'm not dodging it either!!"

Shhh!!

Jet-black Armament Haki instantly surged over his arm. As it filled his muscles, a burst of white vapor hissed off his skin.

He hadn't come to Wano to spar with Kaidou for Observation Haki training!

The wind exploded around him, whipping his hair skyward.

In this moment—facing a blow that could level mountains—Daren's spirit, will, and strength converged like never before.

"Daren, strength is unity. When you throw a punch—there shouldn't be even a shred of hesitation!"

"This is... a fist that carries your will!"

Garp's half-baked teachings flashed through his mind.

And as Daren's vision narrowed, his focus sharpened into something blazing—everything else faded like receding tides.

The wind vanished.

The lightning disappeared.

The cliffs, the mountains, the churning seas of Wano... even the massive kanabō just inches away—

Gone.

In their place was silence.

The warmth of a sea breeze.

The sound of waves against the shore.

His fist, rising under the sunlight—

And before him, a shattered, worn-down warship.

He was back—

Back in that abandoned military harbor at Marineford.

And in his eyes, there was nothing but that battered ship.

Mind, body, and technique became one in that instant.

Armament Haki +0.893

His Haki, which had stalled at 59, finally broke the 60-point threshold!

Visible to the naked eye, the Armament Haki surged along his arm and fist like a spiraling stream, warping the space around it like a rippling blast wave.

Daren's eyes burned with intensity.

And he burst into laughter.

"I get it now!!"

Daren threw a punch!

His Haki roared like thunder, and the force of his strike erupted into a hurricane.

He met Kaidou's Raimei Hakke head-on!

"Genkotsu Shock!!"

BOOM!!

The kanabō and the fist, both wrapped in crackling Haki, collided in midair like a meteor slamming into the earth!

The shockwave that followed surged outward like a tidal storm, blasting in all directions from the point of impact.

Even though the clash happened high in the sky, the expanding pressure slammed downward, fracturing the ground for kilometers around and sending shockwaves rippling through the land.

Crimson and azure auras clashed, bursting violently from the two monstrous figures. They devoured and crushed one another, unleashing waves of destructive force.

At that moment, King—who had just taken wing in his Pteranodon form after charging out of the palace hall—froze mid-flight, his eyes wide with disbelief.

That Marine... actually blocked Kaidou-san's Raimei Hakke head-on!?

How was that even possible!?

What the hell happened!?

Though King hadn't participated in the invasion of Marineford, he'd seen Daren's full power firsthand on Coin Island.

During the battle for the Moa Moa no Mi, Daren had managed—barely—to block one of Shiki's strikes. That had been thanks to the restrictive nature of his Devil Fruit and a bit of luck. Even then, he'd taken a heavy hit.

But King had seen it clearly—if not for that freakish physique of his, Daren would've been killed outright under Shiki's overwhelming swordsmanship.

And now... it hadn't even been that long.

A month!?

This Marine's growth was off the charts.

He'd already surpassed him.

What the hell had happened to this guy?

Could the Marine Headquarters' so-called officer training camp... really be that insane?

"Impossible!!!"

Kaidou suddenly let out a furious, incredulous roar, his eyes bloodshot as he locked onto Daren.

His heart surged in chaos.

This Marine brat—who once could've been swatted dead with a single swing—was now one step away from reaching that level of power!

Blood trickled from the corner of Daren's mouth.

Even though he'd managed to block Kaidou's strike with his own strength, Kaidou's raw power and Haki were still superior. His insides felt like they'd been flipped upside down by the impact.

But Daren just laughed wildly, showing bloodstained teeth in a manic grin.

Just a little more... just a little more...

His Armament Haki had finally broken through 60 points.

Now, if he could raise both his Strength and Speed to 80...

He'd break through that threshold—for real.

"This is all thanks to Queen-sensei's lessons... If he hadn't pumped me full of all those crazy deadly viruses, I wouldn't have grown this fast."

The moment those words left his mouth, Kaidou and King's pupils shrank in unison.

A rush of thoughts flashed through their minds.

Of course!

Daren's strength had skyrocketed lately—but his fastest growth had occurred while he was locked up in Queen's prison!

They turned their heads at the same time, glaring toward the blazing armory complex nestled in the mountains.

Down at that location, Queen—now in his massive Brachiosaurus form, leading the Beasts Pirates' rescue effort—suddenly felt every hair on his body stand on end.

He spun around...

Only to meet the murderous glares of Kaidou and King.

His already wrinkled face flushed bright red as he shouted,

"I didn't do it, I swear! Don't talk nonsense! This has nothing to do with me!!"

Chapter 403 - 403: Volume 3 – Chapter 46: Come on, Kaidou-sensei

Queen's face flushed red with grievance and frustration.

He hadn't done anything wrong!

All he did was follow Kaidou-sama's orders and make those two brats in the prison wish they were dead. He even used the latest viruses he'd developed!

Who could've predicted that the deadly viruses he worked so hard on would actually make them stronger!?

"I'll deal with you later!!"

Kaidou shot the fat man a fierce glare and roared.

His body suddenly began to change in a shocking way—his height shot up by a meter, sharp dragon horns pierced through the skin of his forehead and curled outward, and his entire body became covered in dense blue dragon scales. A thick, powerful dragon tail sprouted from his tailbone.

He had entered his dragon-man form!

As Kaidou transformed, a savage, primal, and violent aura erupted like a tide rising from a sea of corpses. He gripped his kanabō with both hands and swung it with explosive force.

Bulging muscles rippled under his skin, veins protruding.

Daren felt the sudden surge of power through the kanabō and his expression shifted slightly.

"Don't get cocky, Marine brat!!"

Kaidou snarled through gritted teeth.

Zzzzz...

Conqueror's Haki burst from his monstrous body, spiraling around the black kanabō before slamming down with a thunderous crash!

Boom!!

The blast of Haki echoed like distant thunder, and a ripple of white airwaves spread out from the impact.

Daren could no longer withstand the overwhelming force. He was smashed into the ground between the mountain ridges like a cannonball.

It was as if a small meteorite had hit—the terrain within several kilometers collapsed, leaving a massive crater in its wake. Smoke and dust surged into the sky.

Kaidou descended from above, and his immense strength crushed the already cracked ground beneath his feet, forming another deep crater.

Holding his kanabō, Hassaikai, white smoke snorted from his nostrils as he slowly approached the figure rising from the deep pit.

"I don't know what trick you used to boost your strength like this..."

"But if you think that gives you free rein on my turf, you're dead wrong, Marine brat."

Kaidou's blood-red eyes gleamed with murderous intent. Each step he took made the earth tremble, his presence overwhelming.

Black and red lightning crackled around his body, surging outward in bursts, tearing through the heavy clouds above.

"Observation Haki is just the threshold."

"A strong body, beastly strength, and overwhelming Haki... that's what lets me survive in this sea!"

Suddenly, a pitch-black military boot stepped out from the swirling dust.

A gust blew the smoke away, revealing the Vice Admiral, blood dripping from his mouth, wearing a crazed grin.

He laughed wildly, as if he couldn't even feel his injuries.

Bang!

Daren shot forward like a tiger unleashed from its cage.

In a diving attack stance, he charged head-on at the monstrous Great Pirate Kaidou—rather than retreating, he launched a daring counterattack!

"You think I don't know that!?"

Did you really think I came to Wano just to sightsee!?

Daren's injured, pale face turned flush with madness, and his boiling blood pounded in his chest with a euphoric, near-death intensity. His limbs were filled with violent energy.

It worked!

After taking Kaidou's hit head-on, Daren could clearly feel it—his physical stats, which hadn't budged from daily training, were finally changing!

Physique +0.121

Strength +0.183

Speed +0.168

Armament Haki +0.629...

At this rate, if he took a few more hits, he just might break through—he could reach Admiral-level strength!

His current base stats were already sky-high. Even the most intense training hadn't moved the needle.

He was certain that even if Queen injected him with that virus again and he endured the agony, it'd only bump his physique up by about 0.3 points.

And the more injections he took, the less effective they'd become. It wouldn't take long before they stopped working altogether.

But now? This was different!

He had finally found a way to steadily increase his strength!

Or more accurately—

He'd finally found a "Sensei" who could help him train and grow stronger in a stable, reliable way!!

Although the rate of growth wasn't exactly fast—each strike barely raised his stats by even one point—it was still a far cry from the protagonist-level cheat of "Three Strikes with Conqueror's Coating."

But Daren was already more than satisfied.

Come on, Kaidou-sensei!

Even if my bones get shattered and my teeth knocked out, I'm not ending this lesson early!

With a fierce grin, Daren burst forward at full speed, closing the distance to Kaidou in an instant.

He spread his fingers wide, then curled them.

His index and middle fingers pressed together, as did his ring and little fingers, forming a claw infused with overwhelming, destructive power.

Ryusoken...

His three-fingered dragon claw tore through the air, slashing a streak of jet-black light across the void.

Ryusoken—Dragon Claw!

That ferocious offensive, along with the madness burning in his eyes, made Kaidou pause for a split second.

He swung his kanabō upward in a wide arc, blocking the incoming black claw.

Clang!

Sparks flew. A shockwave exploded outward.

"Come on, Kaidou! If you've got the guts, kill me!!"

The sparks lit up the Vice Admiral's bloodied face, his twisted grin full of killing intent. Blood streaked from the corner of his mouth.

"You're asking for it!"

Kaidou's pupils shrank, rage surging from deep within.

Mythical Zoan power burst from his body, shaking Daren to the core and forcing him back. At the same time, his kanabō crackled with a surge of black and red lightning.

"Raimei Hakke!!"

It was a strike coated with Conqueror's Haki!

Black and red lightning instantly consumed everything in front of him. The world seemed to blur as the sheer force of the blow tore through the air itself.

Daren felt a crushing pressure even greater than before. Without hesitation, he unleashed all his Conqueror's Haki to soften the blow.

"Horai Hakke!"

Gripping tightly to the numb, bone-deep fear that came with the brush of death, he threw another punch—this time, with everything he had!

Boom!!

The blast of the shockwave roared like thunder. Kaidou's wild black hair and the Vice Admiral's snow-white cloak whipped violently in opposite directions. Lightning erupted in all directions like fireworks, tearing the clouds above into chaos.

The earth beneath them finally gave out under the sheer force. With a sharp crack, a massive crevice split open—bottomless and stretching for kilometers.

Dust clouded the air as Kaidou, enraged, swung his kanabō again!

The Armament Haki coating Daren's arms shattered inch by inch, bursting into a mist of blood.

His body was flung once more, crashing into a distant cliff face and embedding deep into the mountain rock.

The mountain rumbled violently as fractures spread across its surface. Massive boulders tumbled down the peaks, and the ground trembled.

From afar, Queen watched the scene unfold, his eye twitching as he sucked in a sharp breath.

"Kaidou-sama's gone berserk..."

"Well, that means I should be safe now."

His eyes darted around before he shifted back into his human form. With a smug smile, he casually directed his panicked subordinates to keep extinguishing the fires, lighting a cigar as he did.

"With a blow like that, even an Ancient Zoan like me would be done for... Tsk, tsk, tsk. That Marine's a goner—what the hell!?"

Queen's eyes suddenly went wide, his jaw practically hitting the ground as the cigar hung frozen in midair.

A blood-soaked figure burst out of the rock wall, charging straight at Kaidou again like a madman with no regard for his life!

"What the hell is going on!?"

Chapter 404 - 404: Volume 3 – Chapter 47: So This Is What It Feels Like

What the hell is going on!?

Is that Marine trying to get himself killed!?

Queen's eyes nearly bulged out of their sockets. Even when his cigar burned his lip, he didn't notice—he just stared in disbelief at the Vice Admiral, who once again hurled himself straight at Kaidou.

Not far away, King looked just as stunned.

Part of him was shocked by the Marine's sheer willpower and physical toughness. But more than that, he was baffled—utterly confused by Daren's actions.

After those last two exchanges, the outcome was already clear.

By all logic, someone as cunning as Daren had no reason to stay.

He'd already destroyed most of the weapons factories in Kuri and completed his mission. Sticking around to keep fighting Kaidou-sama would only get him hurt for nothing.

If this kept up, his injuries would only worsen—and he might never leave Wano alive!

What's he thinking!?

A flicker of doubt flashed in King's eyes.

Could the Marines still be hiding something?

Or did that guy really believe he could beat Kaidou-sama?

The chaotic swirl of guesses and suspicions made King hesitate to act. That Marine was too damn crafty. Every time they ran into him, it turned into a nightmare.

If Daren still had some kind of trump card, he needed to be ready for anything.

...

While Queen and King were still lost in thought, Daren had already crashed into Kaidou once again!

Boom!!

His bloodstained arms, wrapped in Armament Haki, smashed against Kaidou's massive kanabō.

A shockwave exploded out, their hair whipped wildly in the blast.

"Worororo!! Marine brat, have you lost your mind!?"

Kaidou laughed wildly, his thick dragon tail lashing the air into a violent gust.

"It's useless! No matter how many times you come at me, you'll never be my match!!"

"That's what you think!!"

Daren laughed, blood running from the corner of his mouth.

After taking that hit, his personal stats had shifted again!

Physique +0.396

Strength +0.163

Speed +0.145

Armament Haki +0.732

Conqueror's Haki +1.512...

Closer!

He was getting closer!

A fierce light flared in Daren's eyes, hotter and brighter than ever before.

Every muscle in his body throbbed with pain.

His arms and ribs showed signs of fracturing.

His lungs burned like fire from the internal injuries...

But even through all of that, he could feel it—clearer than ever—with every clash against Kaidou, he was getting stronger!

Not by much.

But the growth was real!

He was closing in!

He was inching toward that realm... that peak where he could stand shoulder to shoulder with the strongest fighters on this sea!

Let the beatings rain down even harder!

Daren grinned wide, his white teeth now dyed a deep red.

"You don't know your place!!"

Kaidou roared in fury, and with another swing of his Haki-clad kanabō, he brought it crashing down on Daren's head like a bolt of thunder!

Bang!!

Blood spurted from Daren's nose and mouth, a broken tooth flying out amidst the red spray.

His body shot back again like a cannonball, carving a trench hundreds of meters long into the earth.

Dust erupted into the air.

Before Kaidou, Queen, and King could even react, the blood-soaked Vice Admiral came charging toward Kaidou once more.

"Hahahaha!! Not enough! Nowhere near enough!!"

He laughed maniacally.

"You're asking for death!!"

Kaidou's blood-red eyes flared with rage. He stepped forward, gripping his kanabō with both hands.

Swish!

Crackling black and red lightning burst around his body, surging like a storm, and with a mighty swing, he unleashed another devastating strike!

"Raimei Hakke!!"

Boom!!

Daren's body was blasted backward even faster than before, crashing straight into the distant mountains—almost tearing through them entirely!

Dust shot skyward, thunderous booms echoed without pause, and the entire Kuri region trembled as if hit by a quake.

"This... that had to do it, right...?"

Queen stood frozen, staring at the collapsed mountains, his eye twitching uncontrollably.

He couldn't believe that someone—anyone—could take that many direct hits from the monster that was their captain.

But the next moment made his heart skip a beat.

From deep within the shattered mountain range...

That towering figure once again staggered to his feet through the thick, swirling dust!

"What... what kind of monster is this!?"

Queen gasped sharply, his face pale as a sheet.

"No human could possibly have a body that strong! Not even an awakened Zoan user could endure this much!!"

Then something seemed to click in his mind. He instinctively took two steps back.

"Unless..."

A hand suddenly clamped down over his mouth.

"Shut up!!"

King snarled, his eyes twitching as he forced Queen into silence.

Queen let out muffled protests, flailing his arms, and finally pointed frantically in the direction of the mountains.

"I never imagined... that the breakthrough would come like this."

The Vice Admiral's low, raspy voice echoed from the distance, tinged with a strange trace of amusement.

King's pupils shrank sharply.

A blood-soaked military boot stepped out from the dust and pressed gently against the ground.

But that one step...

Boom!!

A monstrous rumble shook the land like a giant beast slamming down from the heavens! The earth quaked violently.

A column of dust shot into the air, winds howled around them.

The Vice Admiral's silhouette slowly emerged.

His uniform and cape were soaked in blood. His arms and face were swollen and dripping red—but his eyes burned hotter than ever.

Kaidou narrowed his gaze.

He couldn't say why... but at that moment, he sensed something from Daren—an aura that felt eerily similar to his own.

That trace of kinship sparked a bad feeling deep in Kaidou's gut. Without hesitation, he struck.

Swish!

He swung the kanabō through the air. A compressed wave of force—club energy—shot forward like a missile, tearing through everything in its path as it hurtled toward the Marine Vice Admiral.

"Narikabura!"

A ranged technique, similar to the way swordmasters unleash flying slashes—except this was a shockwave fired from a kanabō!

Faced with a strike powerful enough to obliterate a warship, Daren's lips curled into a curious smile.

No guard. No dodge.

He charged straight into it!

Under the stunned, horrified gazes of Queen and King...

He took it head-on!

Boom!!

The shockwave slammed into Daren's face and chest with brutal force, sending him skidding back dozens of meters.

Blinding light exploded outward, the impact wave spreading with violent force.

Then, silence.

The winds howled again, tugging at the tattered, blood-soaked Marine cloak.

The Vice Admiral's figure emerged once more.

He tilted his head, wiped the blood from the corner of his mouth, and looked at the three stunned men with a calm smile.

"It almost worked..."

Not a scratch.

Queen gulped hard.

King's pupils trembled violently.

Kaidou stared in disbelief.

They all saw it—an imperceptible gleam of hardened energy flowed across Daren's skin.

They recognized that glow immediately...

Daren rolled his neck with a crack, clenched his fists, and squeezed until the air itself cracked around them.

His eyes burned with fanatic heat.

"So this... is what it feels like..."

Physique: 90... 'Indestructible Body'.

Chapter 405 - 405: Volume 3 – Chapter 48 Indestructible

"How fascinating..."

Daren grinned as he tore off his tattered military uniform, revealing a well-trained, muscular torso.

His bare upper body was drenched in blood, skin torn and lacerated—a horrifying sight. Yet, in that moment, the bloodstained skin seemed to shimmer with a cold, steely sheen.

He could feel the changes in his body, and a cocky smile tugged at the corner of his lips.

It was only a small boost in stats, yet after crossing the 90-point threshold, he could clearly sense a dramatic improvement in his physical resilience.

Indestructible Body!

Even shackled in Seastone, he could resist executions by blade, fire, lightning, or poison, relying solely on the durability of his flesh. He had become something worthy of the title "monster!"

Daren hadn't expected this. He had focused solely on training his Strength and Armament Haki, but in the end, it was his long-dormant "physique" that broke through first.

"Talk about a pleasant surprise..."

He subconsciously glanced at Queen in the distance, the fat man frozen in shock. Daren grinned.

That grin alone made Queen's face twist in fear, his chubby cheeks trembling.

"Why are you looking at me!?"

"Why did you glance my way!?"

"Why are you smiling at me!?"

Caught between Kaidou and King's murderous stares, Queen turned pale and stammered through gritted teeth.

"This... this has nothing to do with me!"

Trying to prove his innocence, he suddenly stepped forward.

A massive metal arm lifted, and with a blinding flash from its mechanical claws, a piercing laser beam shot through the air.

"Black Coffee Beam!"

The world around them suddenly darkened. The golden laser beam reached Daren in a flash.

Sparks of violet crackled deep within his eyes—his Observation Haki had already "seen" the beam's precise path.

But he didn't move to dodge.

Instead, he sneered and raised a hand, grabbing at the laser head-on!

Boom!!

A deafening explosion erupted, engulfing everything within a hundred-meter radius in blazing flames.

Black smoke billowed into the sky, heat waves rippled outward, scattering debris in all directions.

"D-Did it work?" Queen muttered, squinting as he lowered his voice.

Beside him, King wore a grim expression, his eyes flashing warily behind his mask.

"It almost did..."

A hoarse, mocking voice echoed from the distance.

The figure of the defiant Vice Admiral slowly emerged from the sea of flames, the arm he used to catch the laser beam barehanded now trailing wisps of black smoke.

From afar, he looked like a demon god rising from hell, his presence oppressive and overwhelming.

"No matter how advanced your tech is, it's still just an imitation. Compared to Borsalino's real deal, you're still a few steps behind, fatso."

Daren lifted his hand, examining the faint scorch marks on his palm. A faint smirk appeared in his narrowed eyes.

If that laser had come from Borsalino at full power, even with the Indestructible Body, he would've been seriously burned.

Of course, that was purely his physical defense.

With Armament Haki layered on top, it might've been a different story!

Daren clenched his fist, snuffing out the remaining flames.

He had to admit—the Indestructible Body was insanely powerful.

By his estimate, no attack lacking Haki could harm him now.

Even if coated in Armament Haki, it depended on how strong the Haki was.

If it hadn't reached the "Internal Destruction" level of Ryuo, even if it pierced his defense, it would likely cause nothing more than surface wounds.

Still, he couldn't deny it—this level of physical durability gave him a dangerous sense of overconfidence.

He could've dodged Queen's laser just now with his boosted Observation Haki. But in that moment, Daren simply didn't feel like it...

Sure, part of it was testing his defense, but honestly—what's the point of training Observation Haki when you've got an Indestructible Body?

Good thing he went to see Katakuri first...

The thought flickered through his mind as he checked his stats.

Physique: 90.001 (Indestructible Body)

Strength: 79.591

Speed: 79.415

Fruit Ability Development: 85.444 (Island-Wide Coverage)

Armament Haki: 62.315

Observation Haki: 72.887 (Magnetic Field Induction)

Conqueror's Haki: 62.091

Almost there...

Daren narrowed his eyes.

"I didn't expect you to actually reach this level..."

A deep, thunderous voice suddenly echoed through the air.

Daren turned to look and saw Kaidou's aura had inexplicably quieted.

"All these years, no one's ever brought their body to the level I have."

Kaidou's head hung low, his long black hair falling over his face. An overwhelming battle spirit, wild and unrestrained, was gathering inside his monstrous dragon-hybrid body like a massive storm vortex.

"Good."

He abruptly lifted his head, blood-red eyes locking onto Daren as he let out a booming, satisfied laugh.

"Wororororororo! Daren, you brat! You're finally worthy of a head-on fight with me!!"

Boom!!

A fierce eruption of Conqueror's Haki burst from his body, transforming into streaks of black and red lightning that exploded outward, crackling through the air.

They filled the dark sky like a storm of chaos, illuminating Kaidou's twisted, ecstatic expression in flickering flashes.

A hellish gale swept across Wano Country, tearing through everything in its path.

The clouds shattered and scattered, and for a moment, it felt like the entire world had lost its color—leaving only that tyrannical figure, looming like a demon god.

"Come, Daren!!"

Kaidou gripped his kanabō in one hand, and with a sudden drop of his dragon-scaled legs, the ground beneath him cracked.

Daren's pupils narrowed.

This guy... his aura just shifted!

Crack... BOOM!!

The earth split wide, then erupted into a massive crater.

Kaidou vanished from sight.

In the next instant, he reappeared above the Vice Admiral's head, both hands gripping the kanabō as he raised it high.

His speed was unreal—so fast it felt like he'd outpaced lightning itself.

Zzzzzzz!

Torrents of black and red lightning, entwined with flashes of purple lightning, tore through the sky and coiled around the kanabō, radiating an overwhelming pressure.

"Die!!"

Kaidou roared, eyes blazing, and brought his club crashing down!

"Kosanze Ragnaraku!!"

It was like a wrathful deity descending upon the world—an earth-shattering strike that tore through the void. Everything in Daren's sight fractured like glass, the air itself twisting into chaos.

An indescribable sense of death surged over him, making every inch of his skin sting with the threat of annihilation.

Chapter 406 - 406: Volume 3 – Chapter 49: The Madman Who Likes Getting Beaten

The explosive storm condensed into a crushing pressure that descended from above.

Even before the kanabō wrapped in Conqueror's Haki came down, its overwhelming force had already shattered and torn the ground beneath Daren's feet, sending rocks flying in every direction.

Though every one of Kaidou's moves was just another swing of his club—with different angles and force—this strike was on a whole other level.

Daren could feel it.

Unlike the last time, when he and Bullet combined their strength to launch a joint attack, this time, he had to take Kaidou's blow head-on, relying entirely on his own power!

Kosanze Ragnaraku—a move named after the Four Wisdom Kings, wielding crushing might to shatter both body and spirit!

"Hahahahahaha!! This is the kind of fight I live for!!"

Daren suddenly let out a wild, defiant laugh. His eyes lit up with savage intensity, burning with bloodlust and battle-lust.

With a loud crack, both feet dug into the earth like iron stakes. Inherited from Garp himself, the Iron Fist was unleashed, crashing upward to meet Kaidou's strike!

Genkotsu: Indestructible!

His arm, gleaming with a cold, metallic luster, clenched into a fist. The Indestructible Body was instantly coated in rock-solid Armament Haki, surging with immense power... and slammed directly into Kaidou's club!

For a moment, the world stood still.

Daren's body sank sharply, his legs buried deep into the ground as shards of stone exploded around him.

BOOM!!

A thunderous roar tore through the battlefield. A massive shockwave burst outward from the clash, raging in all directions like a storm gone wild.

It was as if a tsunami had hit the land, sending waves of earth hundreds of meters high rolling outward.

The shock spread so far that even the seas beyond Wano's shores churned with colossal waves.

The sky flickered unpredictably, clouds splitting apart under the force.

"AAAAAAHHHH!!!"

Both Kaidou and Daren's eyes were bloodshot, their screams raw and frenzied as they clashed.

"Daren, you brat... I'll admit it—your physical strength is now on par with mine."

Kaidou gripped the kanabō with both hands, slowly pressing Daren down. Lightning crackled wildly around him, casting his twisted face in a maniacal glow.

"But..."

A sinister grin curled across Kaidou's fang-lined mouth.

"Haki is still the strongest force on these seas!!"

As the words left his lips, Kaidou's arms bulged like flowing magma. A violent surge of Haki burst from his body.

Countless streaks of lightning howled through the void, flickering in and out of existence as they tore through the Armament Haki cloaking Daren—ripping into even his supposedly indestructible body.

BOOM!!!

Advanced Haki—Second Stage—erupted!

Daren was smashed straight into the earth. The sheer impact caused the ground across several kilometers to collapse downward by meters, sending dust billowing skyward.

Massive cracks spiderwebbed out from the point of impact, stretching so far they seemed endless.

The shockwave swept through the area like a hurricane, forcing both King and Queen to raise their arms to shield their faces.

Their eyes quaked with disbelief as they stared at the apocalyptic scene before them.

"H-He actually pushed the boss this far... What the hell is that Marine made of...?" Queen stammered, his jiggling cheeks trembling with every word.

"He's gotta be down now—mmf!"

King quickly clamped a hand over his mouth, eyes glowing red as he growled through clenched teeth.

"If you say one more stupid thing, I swear I'll kill you!!"

Queen's face turned bright red, his eyes darting around, full of grievance.

But before he could say another word, the blood-soaked figure of the Vice Admiral erupted from the rubble—charging up from the ground once more.

His blood- and mud-soaked black hair whipped through the air as he laughed like a lunatic.

"Hahahahaha!! Hell yeah, hit me again!!!"

King: ...

Queen: ...

Boom!!

Under their dumbfounded stares, the two figures collided once more with a thunderous crash!

"It's useless!"

"Whether it's strength, speed, Armament Haki, or Conqueror's Haki... you can't beat me!!"

Kaidou's bloodshot eyes flared as he roared, his strikes now fueled by genuine fury.

"No matter how many times you come at me, you'll never be my match!!"

The kanabō in his grip crackled with erupting lightning. With impossible speed and power, he swung it again and again, unleashing a storm of force that filled the sky with a flurry of strikes, completely engulfing Daren's figure.

There were no openings. Every angle was covered. Daren had no room to dodge. Explosive shockwaves tore through the earth, blasting out massive craters one after another.

"Gundari Ryuseigun!!"

Another devastating technique named after the Four Wisdom Kings—each blow infused with overwhelming Conqueror's Haki. The Vice Admiral's body was battered until it seemed wrapped in a mist of blood.

Daren clenched his teeth hard, every cell in his body screaming with pain. His strength was being wrung dry, and the blood clouding his vision left him reeling. For a moment, all he could do was block and fall back under the relentless assault.

It was true—just as Kaidou had said—he was being overwhelmed on every front.

But even so, Daren's physique had already broken into the realm of the Indestructible Body. Even someone like Kaidou couldn't take him down that easily.

This was what it meant to clash with the top "monsters" of the sea!

These elite titans, with bodies beyond human, could battle for days and nights without pause!

Daren wasn't quite on that level yet, but with his Indestructible Body, he could still hang in there!

Bang!!

Daren's figure was launched once again, skidding hundreds of meters across the shattered earth. His heavy-duty Marine boots, forged to endure, were finally torn apart—completely destroyed under the relentless punishment.

His face drenched in blood, Daren raised a hand to wipe it from his eyes. His bare toes dug hard into the ground—and with a roar, he charged again.

"That's exactly why I challenged you!!!"

They clashed again.

Bang!!

Clashed again.

Bang!!

Daren looked less like a man and more like a primal beast—an untiring, unfeeling monster—throwing himself headlong at the so-called "strongest creature on land, sea, and air" with reckless abandon.

Over and over again.

Again and again...

In the distance, King and Queen stood frozen, eyes wide, lips parched, and expressions gradually turning blank with disbelief.

If they weren't seeing it with their own eyes, they'd never believe it—someone actually going blow-for-blow with their monstrous boss for this long, even while being completely outmatched!

And as time dragged on...

Even Kaidou, who had started the fight in a rage, began to falter—doubt creeping in, followed by a gnawing sense of unease.

He had been crushing this guy the entire time.

Every strike he landed drew blood and injury.

That little Marine had been knocked down who-knows-how-many times, and yet... every single time, he stood back up with that eerie grin on his face.

It was like the more he got beaten, the more hurt he was... the more excited he became.

Kaidou had never met a lunatic like this before.

And something about it sent a chill crawling up the back of his neck.

Chapter 407 - 407: Volume 3 – Chapter 50: The Strongest Sensei on Land, Sea, and Air

What the hell is wrong with this brat?

Does he actually enjoy getting beaten!?

The twisted thought popped into Kaidou's mind without warning, sending an involuntary chill down his spine.

Something wasn't right...

Even as the thought formed, that blood-drenched Vice Admiral came charging at him again.

"Damn it! Get the hell away from me!!"

The sight of that increasingly deranged grin on Daren's face made Kaidou's skin crawl.

Grimacing, he decided he was done wasting time on this psycho Marine.

The muscles on his dragon-scaled arms swelled violently, surging with the might of his most powerful hybrid form.

Zzzzzzz!!

Waves of dark purple lightning burst outward, crackling and expanding like a net stretching across the sky... At the center of that thunderous storm was his black kanabō—Hassaikai.

"Die!!"

Kaidou roared in rage and stomped forward, splitting the ground beneath him as he poured every ounce of strength into one swing.

"Daiitoku Raimei Hakke!!"

He flashed past Daren in an instant like a thunderbolt.

The pitch-black lightning, compressed to its limit, erupted behind Daren's back with the force of a nuclear blast.

BOOM!!

A colossal mushroom cloud, wreathed in hellish winds, shot skyward.

For a moment, the entire world fell into silence.

Then came the second wave of Haki. Daren spat out a mouthful of blood and was blasted away like a missile.

He tore through more than a dozen mountains before finally slamming deep into a rocky barrier far off in the distance.

Cracks spidered through the surrounding cliffs. Dust billowed into the sky. All of Kuri shook like it had been hit by an earthquake.

The sky split. Fierce winds howled in chaos.

Queen stood frozen, face pale, jaw twitching. He opened his mouth as if to say something, then quickly shut it and slapped a hand over his lips.

King's gaze turned sharp and deadly serious.

Kaidou landed heavily on the ground, still gripping Hassaikai in one hand. His breath was slightly ragged, and his bloodshot eyes were locked on the mountains ahead.

One second.

Two seconds.

Three...

The smoke finally cleared, scattered by the howling wind.

And there, embedded deep into a massive crater in the rock wall, was Daren's battered body.

Blood poured from his nose and mouth. His ribcage had caved inward, and a broken rib had pierced straight through his skin, its bone-white tip exposed to the air.

He was gasping, face white as a corpse.

But his eyes...

They locked defiantly onto Kaidou and the others—and then, he laughed.

"Hahahahaha!!! That felt great!!!"

Queen and King both flinched, their eyes flashing with pure disbelief.

He was... still laughing!?

But shock quickly overtook their confusion, and that shock turned into horror.

"This... can't be..."

"His aura..."

They turned to each other and saw the same fear reflected in each other's eyes.

"You got stronger!?"

Kaidou shouted, stunned.

Through the perception of their Observation Haki, they could sense it—Daren's aura was rising!

His life force had nearly burnt out, like a candle in the wind...

And yet, the presence radiating from his body...

Was unmistakably stronger than before.

"Well... that wraps up today's training."

Daren let out a crazed laugh.

He raised a hand, gripped the rib that had pierced through his skin—and slammed it back into place with a sickening crunch!

The sharp sound made Queen flinch, the corner of his eye twitching violently.

"What a rewarding lesson this was."

Panting heavily, blood dribbling from his mouth, Daren grinned wildly without a care in the world.

At that moment, his personal stats had changed to:

Physique: 90.001 (Indestructible Body)

Strength: 80.991 (Giant's Strength)

Speed: 80.917 (Soru's Godspeed)

Fruit Ability Development: 85.445 (Island-Wide Coverage)

Armament Haki: 65.315

Observation Haki: 72.887 (Magnetic Field Induction)

Conqueror's Haki: 63.091

Under the punishing, nuclear blast-like strike from Kaidou just moments ago, Daren's Strength and Speed had finally shattered the 80-point barrier!

And just as he had predicted, similar to Physique, breaking through that threshold awakened unique abilities:

Giant's Strength: Every strike now carried the power of a fully grown Giant warrior—and would only grow stronger alongside him.

Soru's Godspeed: Every burst movement or evasive step surpassed even the Navy's Rokushiki Soru in speed!

Finally... the breakthrough!

Daren felt like every bone in his body was ready to fall apart.

But after taking that many hits from Kaidou, he'd finally reached his goal!

As those words left his mouth, Kaidou's pupils narrowed into slits.

It hit him.

This brat hadn't come here to challenge him—he'd come here to use him for training!

That twisted smile Daren wore while being smashed around wasn't sadism... it was satisfaction.

He was getting stronger.

The instant Kaidou realized this, an uncontrollable wave of rage surged from his chest, completely overtaking his vision.

"You damn Marine brat!!"

Blood vessels popped in his eyes, and killing intent exploded off him.

"I'm Kaidou of the Beasts! The strongest creature alive! And you... you used me to train and level up!?"

Daren grinned wider.

"No no, you're not just the 'strongest creature on land, sea, and air'..."

A flash of black light swept beneath his feet, lifting his battered body high into the sky.

"To me... you're the strongest sensei on land, sea, and air."

"Hahahaha!!"

Daren hovered high above, blood streaming down his body. With surprising grace, he placed a hand over his chest and gave a deep, respectful bow.

"Thank you for the lesson, Kaidou-sensei."

He shot Kaidou a polite smile.

"I'll be sure to visit again sometime."

Kaidou stood frozen, as if struck by lightning, stumbling back two steps.

After that, Daren paused for a beat—then turned to look at Queen.

Under Queen's horrified stare, Daren gave him a slow, meaningful smile.

Before anyone could react, what little strength he had left erupted into a surge of magnetic force, launching his body skyward. In a flash, the Vice Admiral disappeared into the clouds.

Queen's eye twitched violently.

"Wait... damn it..."

Realization hit him hard, and he let out a hoarse scream.

"Why did you look at me!? Why did you smile at me!? Damn it!! Come back here and explain yourself—!"

His voice cut off instantly.

At some point, two murderous figures had appeared behind him.

A massive shadow fell across his back. Queen turned, trembling, forcing a nervous smile.

"Uhh... I-look, this really has nothing to do with me—AHHHHHHHHHHH!!!"

What greeted him was a kanabō crackling with purple lightning and a long sword engulfed in flame.

Chapter 408 - 408: Volume 3 – Chapter 51: Dragon and Kuma's Adventure

At the same time...

Grand Line, somewhere at sea...

Inside a church in a certain kingdom.

Dragon stood in the shadows of a corner, arms crossed, his face completely hidden beneath a dark green hooded coat. He watched the long line of people ahead with a look of helplessness.

The crowd, thin and ragged, stretched in a long line. At the front stood a towering figure in priestly robes.

He wore frameless glasses and spoke gently to a hunched old man in front of him.

The old man looked frail and drawn, his expression contorted in pain, as if suffering from a serious illness.

After a brief exchange, the large man lightly tapped the old man's body.

A transparent black mass was expelled from him.

Before their eyes, much of the sickly pallor faded from the old man's face, and his complexion grew noticeably rosier.

He touched his own body in disbelief, then burst into tears and hugged the man tightly.

"Thank you! Thank you so much!! Thank you!!"

And so, one after another...

For a full hour, the sick continued lining up to be "healed" at the church.

Once it was over and the crowd had dispersed, Dragon stepped forward and said with a sigh,

"Kuma, are you sure you can keep doing this?"

"They don't realize that the pain you slap away with the Nikyu Nikyu no Mi ends up being transferred to you."

The Nikyu Nikyu no Mi possessed strange and mysterious powers. The user's palms grew pads resembling bear paws that could repel anything they touched—objects, people, even the user themselves—allowing instant teleportation.

More than that, Kuma had developed a way to repel fatigue and pain from the body.

But that pain and exhaustion didn't vanish—they were only transferred. Someone still had to bear them.

Hearing Dragon's concern, Kuma shook his head.

"I'm fine. My body's stronger than most."

He gave a simple, honest smile.

"These are poor elderly folks who can't afford to see a doctor. That's why they come, seeking mercy from the gods... If I can help ease their suffering, then I don't mind a little pain."

"Did you see how happy they were, once their pain was gone? Seeing them smile like that... it makes me happier than anything."

As he spoke, Kuma slowly extended his large, pink-padded hand into a transparent mass of air floating nearby.

His brows tightened, and cold sweat gathered on his forehead.

Dragon sighed again at the sight, his gaze filled with respect as he looked at Kuma.

This was the third country they had visited since setting out together.

According to Dragon's plan, before they could spark true change in the world, they had to travel the seas and gain a deeper understanding of the different nations and their conditions.

By comparing systems of government, wealth disparity, class divides, and more, only through thorough investigation and analysis could they form a lasting blueprint for reform.

But so far, everywhere they had been, all they saw was poverty.

Poverty, natural disasters, Heavenly Tribute, disease, human trafficking...

These deep-rooted issues existed in nearly every country. Even among the wealthy Member Nations of the World Government, the slums hidden beneath the surface were often worse than those in non-member states...

"So, did you find anything?"

Kuma asked hoarsely as he continued absorbing the pain and fatigue he'd extracted from the sick.

Dragon shook his head, his expression grave.

"Poverty is a reflection of the entire world. As long as a privileged class exists, exploitation will never disappear."

"But one thing's certain—our investigations have shown that the oppressed and impoverished are indeed potential allies."

"Maybe... if we can tap into that power and find like-minded people among them, our movement could really grow."

Kuma nodded, eyes full of respect.

"Dragon-san, you truly lived at the core of the Marines. Your insight and vision are far beyond most."

"And that line of yours—'Without investigation, there's no right to speak'... it really hits home now. Feels like an undeniable truth."

Dragon's expression shifted slightly at that.

The truth was, he'd gotten that line from Daren, but with his pride, he'd never admit it.

"Ahem... how are you holding up?"

He quickly changed the subject.

By now, Kuma had absorbed all the pain and fatigue. He was breathing heavily, his face pale and covered in cold sweat.

"I'll be fine... just need a little rest."

He forced a gentle smile, clearly trying not to worry Dragon, then added,

"But we have a problem..."

"What is it?"

Dragon suddenly had a bad feeling.

Kuma scratched his head awkwardly.

"We're out of money."

"WHAT!?"

Dragon completely lost it, clutching his head and glaring at Kuma.

"You gave all our money to the poor again!?"

Kuma gave a sheepish chuckle, scratching his head with an innocent look.

"They needed it more than we did."

Dragon was utterly defeated. His face twitched, a mess of frustration and exhaustion.

"So now we have to go hunt pirates again..."

He groaned in despair, clutching his head like he regretted every choice that brought him to this point.

He never should've brought Kuma along as a partner.

In every country they passed through, Kuma insisted on stopping at orphanages or churches, using his Devil Fruit powers to help civilians.

That would've been fine on its own.

But then he went and spent the bounties they earned from hunting pirates on helping the poor!

And it's not like they were living easy lives themselves—they barely scraped by from day to day!

Worst of all, Kuma was just too kind. No matter how much Dragon yelled at him, he never argued back. He just laughed it off, leaving Dragon with no outlet for his anger.

At this rate, when were they ever going to build their own army...

Besides, he'd already defected from the Marines!

Yet here he was, still running around catching pirates like some Marine errand boy. What the hell was he doing?

Dragon felt utterly hopeless.

"We can't keep doing this. Otherwise, we're no different from the Marines."

No money, no people, no intelligence, no strategy...

Only now did Dragon truly understand what Daren meant when he said, "This is going to be a hard road."

He squatted down and let out a long breath, when suddenly—something caught his eye.

A newspaper.

"What's this..."

Chapter 409 - 409: Volume 3 – Chapter 52: He Has Money

Dragon strode over quickly, crouched down, and picked up a crumpled newspaper from the ground.

The date on it was from the previous day—probably left behind by one of the poor folks who'd come for "treatment" or "prayer." For people like them, reading the paper was the cheapest form of entertainment.

But what caught Dragon's attention wasn't the date—it was the headline.

Blazoned across the front page in massive, eye-grabbing type:

"Live Broadcast!! Invasion of Totto Land!! Newly Appointed Vice Admiral Rogers Daren Storms Yakigashi Island Alone, Overwhelms Big Mom Pirates Officer Charlotte Oven!"

Beneath the title was a long article, including a full transcript of Daren's comments during the live broadcast via Den Den Mushi.

Dragon stared at the paper in stunned silence.

"This is today's news? We've been holed up in this church for days... something big must've gone down out there."

Kuma walked over, his body still showing signs of fatigue, and took a glance at the paper—then froze.

"This is a warning..." Dragon muttered, eyes locked on the story. His face gradually lit up with excitement, and his hands trembled slightly as he gripped the paper.

"I can't believe it... Daren actually invaded Totto Land!!"

"A global live broadcast... sending a direct threat to every pirate out there!"

Kuma couldn't hide his shock and murmured,

"To think there's someone in the Marines with that kind of resolve, besides you... Wait, Dragon, isn't this Vice Admiral Daren the 'close friend' you mentioned before?"

Dragon puffed out his chest proudly and gave a satisfied nod.

"That's right. Back when he traveled from the North Blue to Marine Headquarters for training, I was the one who escorted him. I never imagined he'd make it this far."

But as he spoke, his tone turned wistful.

Watching his old friend steadily rise, step by step, achieving such brilliant results on the path he chose...

While he himself, once so bold in front of Daren, was still wandering aimlessly across the sea, barely scraping by, hiding from place to place like a stray—Dragon's heart felt heavy, his expression complicated.

Kuma looked at Dragon's thoughtful, troubled profile. He placed a hand firmly on his shoulder and said solemnly,

"You're going to make it, Dragon. I believe in you."

He paused, then added with a serious nod,

"I'll try harder to save money from now on."

Dragon gave him a dry, amused smile.

"Wait..."

Something suddenly struck him. He rubbed his chin, deep in thought.

"Maybe... we won't need to worry about money much longer."

Kuma blinked, then looked at Dragon with growing anticipation.

"Don't tell me—you figured out a way to earn some cash?"

Being a pirate hunter was no easy feat. Before the Great Pirate Era, there hadn't been all that many pirates sailing around. With so few bounties and so many competing hunters, relying on them to fund a private army was basically a pipe dream.

Dragon glanced back down at the Vice Admiral's photo in the article and gave a knowing smile.

"We're broke... but someone out there has more than enough money."

...

New World.

Daren slowly stirred from a soft bed.

The moment he opened his eyes, a crushing wave of exhaustion and pain surged through him, washing over every inch of his body.

His muscles throbbed with fiery agony, as if they'd all been torn apart.

Each breath carried the taste of blood, and his vision swam in a haze.

Having long since grown used to injury, Daren instantly recognized his condition.

—Severely wounded.

Widespread muscle tears, serious trauma to his internal organs, at least thirty fractured bones, two broken teeth, and debilitating weakness from massive blood loss...

Wounds like these would have killed an ordinary person many times over.

Even with his current body—hardened like steel and backed by monstrous regenerative power—the damage was severe. Full recovery would take no less than five days.

Haaah...

Daren let out a long breath and forced himself upright, using his hands to push off the bed.

Even that simple motion drew a cold sweat from his brow and left him gasping for air.

His arms trembled visibly as he propped himself up against the headboard, panting hard.

A faint, sickly flush colored his paper-white face.

"But... where am I?"

He glanced down at his chest, now loosely bandaged.

The room around him was lavish—a premium suite with a private bath and a spacious sitting area.

The air was tinged with the scent of expensive perfume—sharp, provocative, and mysterious. It carried a hint of danger.

The plush bedding, the genuine leather sofas, the neatly arranged premium wines on the shelf... As a regular in luxury hotels, Daren could immediately tell—this was top-tier.

"Why would I be here?"

He frowned.

He vaguely remembered pushing his battered body to the brink just to escape Wano. When he finally stumbled upon an island, he hadn't even had time to make out what kind of place it was before he lost consciousness, plummeting from the sky and crashing into a blurry town below.

Looking back now, that "special training" in Wano had been nothing short of a death-defying ordeal.

Even if he hadn't broken through in the final moment, he couldn't have pushed any further—he needed to conserve enough strength for a strategic retreat.

Against a monster like Kaidou, once stamina gave out, the only outcome was death.

Dangerous as it was, the payoff had been enormous.

With this battle, he had finally shattered the barrier that had held him back.

Once he fully recovered, no one in this vast sea would be able to stop him.

...

As his thoughts drifted, the door to the suite suddenly opened.

A woman stepped in, graceful and poised.

Golden hair fell in soft waves around her shoulders. Her long legs and narrow waist were accentuated by a snug, white dress that hugged every curve. Her foxlike eyes sparkled with charm.

With each step, her red high heels clicked rhythmically against the floor.

She smiled at Daren, two dimples forming in her cheeks.

Without a word, she sat leisurely on the sofa across from him. As she crossed her legs, she tilted her hips just enough to give him a glimpse beneath her dress.

Red.

'Definitely intentional.'

Daren quickly arrived at that conclusion, the corners of his mouth curling into a faint smile.

He recognized her.

"Pleased to meet you, Daren-san. I've heard quite a lot about you."

The blonde woman leaned back, arms crossed, her smile relaxed and alluring.

Daren returned the smile.

"My apologies, beautiful lady. If I weren't in such poor condition, I'd gladly kiss the back of your hand."

Chapter 410 - 410: Volume 3 – Chapter 53: The Ultimate Showdown, King of Players vs. Queen of Tease!

As they spoke, Daren watched the blonde woman before him with amused interest. She truly embodied the phrase "a woman of a thousand charms."

With those faint dimples and striking crimson lips, the corners of her mouth naturally curled upward, as if she looked at the world—and everyone in it—with a teasing, mysterious smile. It gave her a sharp, alluring edge.

Even just lounging there, she exuded a lazy, seductive elegance. Every move she made carried a pull, every smile a hook.

What a knockout...

Daren considered himself quite the connoisseur of mature women. Back when he was stationed in the North Blue, he had enjoyed "diplomatic exchanges" with noblewomen from several kingdoms. But even he had to admit—this woman was something else entirely.

Her allure was perfectly measured. Her eyes sparkled like liquid light, and her subtle smile hinted at countless unsaid things. She outshined the others—Gion, with her youthful arrogance; Toki, with her gentle obedience; even the ripe, unhinged madness of Big Mom. None of them had this kind of bewitching pull.

Wait. Why the hell did I just lump that lunatic Charlotte Linlin into a beauty comparison?

Daren's mouth twitched involuntarily.

Yeah... definitely the injuries. His brain must still be a mess.

That's the only explanation.

"You seem to be in a rather good mood," the woman said suddenly, smiling. "Not exactly what I'd expect from someone on the verge of death."

As she smiled, those delicate dimples deepened.

"It's hard not to be," Daren replied smoothly. "With such a delightful sight before me."

He didn't miss a beat.

"In fact... I think my wounds might not even hurt anymore."

She giggled, the sound soft and charming.

"My, who would've thought the famous 'King of the North Blue,' Vice Admiral Daren of Marine Headquarters, would be such a playful man?"

She laughed behind a hand, a trace of blush blooming perfectly across her porcelain cheeks.

Then she leaned forward slightly.

It was the kind of move that would seem aggressive coming from a man—but on her, with that tempting curve of her chest...

Yeah, that was a different kind of "aggression."

She winked.

"I'm glad I personally took the time to check your injuries... and clean your wounds. Up close, of course."

Nice acting.

Keep it up, lady...

Daren smirked inwardly.

He knew that leg-crossing move earlier had been deliberate.

She was trying to seduce him.

But who did she think he was?

Trying to play mind games with a veteran officer?

He was a seasoned Marine commander!

As for her identity—Daren had recognized her the second she walked through the door.

The enchantress in front of him was none other than one of the Underworld Emperors of the New World, ruler of the largest red-light district in the New World—Pleasure Street!

The "Queen of Pleasure Street"... Stussy.

Of course, that was just her public persona.

In truth, the Queen of Pleasure Street was a façade to cover her real role: a senior agent of CP0, the World Government's top intelligence unit.

Then again, that identity was just another layer of disguise.

Daren, well-versed in the truth behind the scenes, knew all too well—this woman had never truly worked for the World Government.

Her loyalty lay with the man known as the genius who was "500 years ahead of the world"—Dr. Vegapunk.

She was the product of his cloning experiments—specifically, a clone of Buckingham Stussy, a former member of the Rocks Pirates. She was the very first successful creation of the MADS cloning project.

For reasons unknown, she had been embedded within the Celestial Dragons' intelligence agency, CIPHER-POL-AIGIS-0, for over twenty years!

This woman was born to be a spy. To put it bluntly—she had more tricks than a pig in lingerie.

She excelled at espionage, assassination, surveillance, infiltration—and she used her beauty like a weapon to get whatever intel she needed.

Which meant, everything about Stussy—her words, her actions, her expressions—was completely unreliable.

She was a master manipulator, a skilled actress, and a high-level seductress trained to control hearts and minds.

Watching her now, with her flawless delivery and unreadable expressions, Daren felt a sudden thrill rising in his chest.

When it came to acting, he prided himself on being second only to Borsalino.

In the womanizing department, he saw himself as second only to Tokikake—who hit on anything that moved.

And when it came to smooth-talking? Maybe only Dragon-san had him beat, thanks to that natural leader's charisma.

But now, facing this dangerous and captivating woman, Daren felt something awaken inside him.

It's been a while... Nothing like the thrill of meeting a worthy rival.

This wasn't just flirting.

This was the ultimate showdown—

The King of Players vs. the Queen of Tease!

"That's a real shame. Why don't you help me tend to my wounds now?"

Without the slightest hesitation, Daren stripped off his open shirt and pants in one fluid motion—so fast it was nearly a blur.

In an instant, his scarred and battle-hardened body was laid bare to the air, radiating a powerful surge of masculine energy.

For a brief second, the smile on Stussy's face froze.

That was way too fast...

But more than that, as she stared at Daren's physique—lithe and coiled like a predator, brimming with restrained power—and that unruly yet strikingly handsome face, something unexpected happened.

Her heartbeat sped up.

Her throat went dry.

It was true that women could captivate men with their bodies—but the reverse was just as true.

And Daren? Daren was devastating.

Even the most elite male escorts on Pleasure Street couldn't match his looks. Compared to the bizarre, mismatched cast of the sea, he was a crane among chickens.

Honestly, even if Daren had no strength or talent to speak of, just his face alone could've earned him a living in the red-light district.

Back in the North Blue, he hadn't just caught the eyes of noblewomen and royal princesses—they had taken risks to be with him. Some had even come back for more, unable to resist.

Now add to that his flawless appearance, his commanding position in the Marines, his world-shaking feats, and the legend his name carried...

Rogers Daren wasn't just a woman-slayer.

Among men, he was the "King of Pleasure Street."

Damn it... I actually had a physical reaction to a man.

Stussy bit her crimson lip and, without a sound, pressed her thighs together.

For someone who'd mastered the art of seduction and control as the queen of the New World's most decadent district, that brief flicker of panic was rare—and it rattled her.