

One Piece 61

Chapter 61: The Underworld of the North Blue Is Ours

Stepping out of the dim hall, Daren lit a fresh cigar and stretched lazily.

The crumbling courtyard was overgrown with dead ivy, tangled around the ruins of a collapsed fountain. The night was bleak, the moonlight cold and pale as it spilled down from above.

Momonga stood silently in the shadows of the wall, completely motionless. He blended into the surrounding architecture so seamlessly it was as if he were part of it. For a full hour, he hadn't moved a muscle or even shifted his weight. His expression was cold and resolute. To Daren, it seemed like he wasn't even breathing—like a statue, silently standing guard.

"You've done well."

A wave of warmth passed through Daren's chest as he spoke with a smile.

The North Blue was a perilous sea.

He still vividly remembered how chaotic it had been when he first arrived. The mafia fought openly in the streets, gunfire echoing through towns, while sobbing civilians trembled in alleyways. Meanwhile, the kingdom's elites clinked glasses at opulent banquets, untouched by the chaos.

There was no trust between people—only scheming, deceit, and betrayal. Someone might act like your sworn brother, showering you with flattery and gifts, only to stab you in the back the moment you turned away.

Clawing his way up the ladder of power, Daren had long lost count of how many people's blood stained his hands. He had always had more enemies than friends.

Even now, with nearly unrivaled power in the North Blue, he lived each day with caution.

In an environment like this, having a dependable second-in-command was a rare and fortunate thing.

Momonga stepped out from the shadows, a faint smirk playing on his lips.

"You really are cold-blooded. He's just a twelve-year-old kid."

He had clearly overheard Daren's "CPU" speech to Doflamingo inside the hall.

Daren shrugged.

"Even a young wolf can tear out a man's throat."

"Don't forget, he killed his own father at ten. And awakened Conqueror's Haki."

Momonga fell silent at that.

He glanced at the chip Daren was toying with, then cast a wary look toward the ominous hall.

"You're not worried he'll stab you in the back?"

"He wouldn't dare. No proof, and no one would believe him," Daren replied with a smile. "Besides, I'm his godfather now..."

Momonga rolled his eyes.

A son laughs over his father's death—that had already happened with Doflamingo.

But he also understood Daren's nature.

This ambitious supreme officer of the North Blue had madness flowing in his blood. He craved the thrill of danger, the rush of walking a tightrope at the edge of a cliff.

It was as if only in those suffocating moments—when his heart nearly stopped—could he truly feel alive.

"By the way, has the situation been contained?"

Daren suddenly asked, as if remembering something.

Momonga nodded seriously.

"The perimeter was secured, and civilians fully evacuated. Even the North Blue Marines who came with us don't know the details... All they know is that it was a mission to eliminate pirates."

Daren chuckled.

"Good. Let's keep it quiet for as long as we can."

"It's about time we head back. If I'm not mistaken, we've got a meeting with Vinsmoke Judge tomorrow?"

Momonga replied in a low voice.

"That's right. The first batch of high-tech weapon prototypes from Germa is ready. You need to inspect them personally and conduct the first field tests."

"The exact location of the meeting is still awaiting confirmation from Vinsmoke Judge."

Daren nodded and began walking.

The wide cloak of justice behind him whipped in the wind.

"Excellent. That means our North Blue Fleet initiative can officially begin."

Under the night sky, his eyes gleamed brighter than the stars.

...

The dim hall was shrouded in shadows.

Cold moonlight pierced through the dusty glass dome above, spilling down like silver onto Doflamingo. The wall lamps flickered faintly, casting dancing patterns of light and dark.

The blond youth sat on a plush sofa, an extinguished cigar pinched between his fingers. His head leaned back, eyes unfocused, staring blankly at the distant dome ceiling.

"Doffy—"

"Young master..."

It was unclear how much time had passed before the four finally stirred from their unconscious state. They glanced around in alarm, only relaxing once they confirmed the Marine was nowhere to be seen.

"Doffy... I mean... how did we end up back here?"

Leaning on his cane, Trebol struggled to his feet. His breath was ragged, and his face was deathly pale from the severity of his wounds.

"I don't know. I woke up here," Doflamingo replied.

"If I had to guess..."

Still staring at the moon through the dome, he suddenly grinned.

"It was probably Rogers Daren who sent us back."

The moment he said it, the four of them gasped in unison, cold sweat seeping down their backs.

This place was on Minion Island. The old, abandoned manor had long served as a secret base for the Donquixote Family—known only to them.

But now, the highest-ranking officer in the North Blue Navy had somehow returned them here while they were unconscious.

What did that mean...?

It meant that every move they'd made in the North Blue had already been under the watch of that monster-like Marine.

In a daze, they began to feel like even this secret stronghold was no longer safe. As if unseen terrors lurked within the dark corridors and eerie rooms, silently watching their every move.

"So, young master... what do we do now?"

Diamante asked anxiously.

Since setting out to sea, they had enjoyed smooth sailing, never facing a defeat like this. They were used to people kneeling before them, begging for mercy. Used to giving orders, not taking hits.

But now—

That Marine, Rogers Daren, was like an unshakable fortress blocking their path to conquering the North Blue.

He had annihilated thousands of their subordinates on his own. None of them could even last a single exchange against him.

That man was like a demon—terrifying and suffocating.

"What do we do..."

Doflamingo murmured. At last, his eyes regained focus.

He turned to meet the uneasy and fearful stares of Trebol and the others. He didn't speak for a long time.

I've already lost my entire family. You're all I have left.

The thought surfaced, bringing with it a wave of bitter emotion.

And in that moment, he finally understood why Daren had spared Trebol and the rest.

So that's it... that's why...

You're ruthless, Daren.

In your eyes, everything I've done must seem like nothing more than a child's game, huh?

"No need to worry."

Doflamingo sighed inwardly but gave a slight smile.

"The North Blue underworld... now belongs to us."

As the four looked at him in growing disbelief,

the blond youth stood from the sofa and burst into laughter.

"Fufufufufu..."

"From this day forward, Rogers Daren is the godfather of Donquixote Doflamingo!"

"Fufufufufufu!!!"

His crazed, maniacal laughter echoed throughout the grim, desolate courtyard...

Chapter 62: The Meeting

The next day...

North Blue, waters near an isolated island.

The sky was clear, the sea a deep blue. White seagulls soared freely across the cloudless sky, gliding toward the distant horizon. A warship cruised slowly along the surface, leaving a long white trail in its wake.

"How much longer until we arrive?"

Rogers Daren stood at the bow, arms crossed and a lit cigar between his teeth. His spotless white cape fluttered behind him in the breeze.

"Just a few more minutes until we reach the rendezvous point," Momonga replied, standing beside him and checking their course with a Eternal Pose compass.

"Germa 66 has always been elusive. As a mobile war nation, the so-called 'Army of Evil' doesn't have fixed territory."

Daren nodded, then glanced toward the far end of the deck. A smile tugged at his lips as he spotted two young figures drenched in sweat, tirelessly training.

Catching his gaze, Momonga gave a helpless smile.

"Lieutenant Commanders Gion and Tokikake seem to have taken the recent events hard. They've been training nonstop, like madmen."

"At least it's been quieter," Daren said flatly.

The Celestial Dragon incident had clearly shaken these two "chosen ones" from Marine Headquarters. The Marines' helplessness, the despair in the face of overwhelming power, the guilt of standing on the wrong side—it was enough to break a Marine's resolve.

Kuzan's arc during the Ohara incident came to mind. From "Burning Justice" to "Lazy Justice," he too had faced the crushing weight of the Navy's so-called "justice."

"Maybe... you should talk to them?" Momonga said hesitantly, clearly struggling with the suggestion before finally voicing it.

He'd witnessed firsthand Daren's uncanny ability to manipulate and persuade. With his insight into human nature, Daren could always pierce straight through to the heart of a matter.

"Leave the lectures to the old man Sengoku. I'm not interested in babysitting."

Daren looked away from Gion and Tokikake, his tone calm.

"If they can't get past this, maybe they're not cut out to be Marines."

Momonga fell silent for a moment, then let out a weary sigh.

This guy saw through people too well.

And perhaps because of that, he often came off as cold and detached.

"We've arrived."

Daren's deep, steady voice snapped Momonga out of his thoughts.

He looked up and saw massive shadows beginning to emerge through the sea fog in the distance.

A fleet of warships, each towed by enormous snails, carved long white streaks through the ocean. Their presence was imposing and overwhelming. The flag of Germa 66 flew at the top of each ship. At the head of the fleet, the main battleship flew the crossed eagle crest of the Vinsmoke family, proudly displayed at its highest point.

The tightly-packed fleet quickly converged under the lead ship's command. Gears and metal tracks locked together with heavy clunks and roars. In under three minutes, dozens of warships had transformed into a single, mobile nation.

Germa 66.

"No wonder they're called the war nation that makes the world tremble," Momonga said in awe, his eyes shining.

Daren nodded in agreement.

Germa 66 had been no match for him—but only because his Devil Fruit powers directly countered their tech. That didn't mean they were weak.

In truth, Germa 66's military capabilities were among the best in the world: advanced weapons, Raid Suits, fearless clones, modular territory that could assemble and disassemble at will... and the power to conduct operations across the Red Line.

If he could acquire that technology and integrate it into his North Blue Fleet, he'd have a force capable of crossing the Red Line, breaking into the Grand Line from the North Blue, and even reaching the New World with ease.

And what he wanted from Vinsmoke Judge went far beyond just that.

"Prepare to board."

With a quiet command and a sharp glint in his eyes, Daren issued the order.

Momonga raised his hand in a precise military signal, and the Marines aboard the warship swiftly moved into position.

The helm turned. The warship smoothly entered Germa's mobile "port."

Gion and Tokikake paused their training, straightened their uniforms, and stepped to the front of the formation. Their eyes were filled with complicated emotions as they looked at Daren's tall, broad back.

Ever since Admiral Sengoku had left Batia Island, they hadn't known what to feel. The guilt had weighed so heavily on them, they couldn't even face Daren—barely daring to speak to him, avoiding him at every turn.

Just then...

Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!

A series of low cannon blasts rang out, snapping Gion and Tokikake from their thoughts.

"Artillery attack!?"

Tokikake stepped forward with a guarded expression, taking a defensive stance as he shielded Gion behind him.

"Gion, don't worry, I'll protect you!"

He declared with righteous flair, and just as he was about to dramatically toss his hair back, he noticed the other Marines staring at him like he was an idiot.

Tokikake froze for a moment.

A cascade of dazzling fireworks burst into the sky, scattering countless brilliant flashes like silver blossoms in the clear blue expanse. The colorful light danced across his face, making him look completely ridiculous—like a clown.

This is...

A... salute!?

Tokikake stood dumbfounded, staring at the sparkling spectacle above. His lips parted, but he couldn't utter a word.

"Don't be nervous, Lieutenant Commander Tokikake."

Daren chuckled, patting him on the shoulder before leading the way down from the warship.

On the soil of the Germa Kingdom, rows of ceremonial salutes launched into the sky, filling the air with the vibrance of celebration and peace.

"Hahahahaha... Welcome, Captain Daren, to the Germa Kingdom. It's truly an honor for Germa 66."

From within a grand and solemn military formation, Vinsmoke Judge stepped out in his ornate robe, long blond hair flowing as he approached with a wide smile, extending his hand toward the Marine Captain.

"It's I who am intruding. The grandeur of Germa 66 never fails to stir my heart, no matter how many times I see it."

Daren returned the smile as he stepped forward.

Their hands met and clasped firmly in midair.

Gion and Tokikake watched the scene, their expressions twitching. As they looked at the overly warm smiles on Daren and Vinsmoke Judge's faces, they couldn't help but mutter in their hearts—

"Two cunning bastards!"

Had they not experienced firsthand the war that nearly annihilated Germa, they would've thought these two were long-lost brothers.

Chapter 63: You Won't Unleash Its Power That Way

Germa Kingdom.

Training ground.

All unrelated personnel had been cleared out. Clone soldiers from Germa 66 stood in formation, forming a human wall around the training ground—silent and still like cold statues.

Led by Daren, the senior officers of the North Blue Marines stood at the center, watching as Germa soldiers carried in heavy, sealed crates one after another.

"As per our agreement, this is the first batch of military tech weapons you requested,"

Vinsmoke Judge said flatly, giving Daren a glance.

"They're just samples, but their performance is already stable. Once you approve them, mass production can begin at any time.

That said, I should warn you—high-tech weapons don't come cheap."

Daren lit a cigar, smiled, and waved casually.

"Money's not an issue. Open them up."

Judge gestured to the clone soldiers. They stepped forward briskly, tearing the seals and opening the crates.

Daren and the others leaned in to take a look.

Inside, all kinds of advanced weapons were laid horizontally, cushioned by dry straw.

Judge casually picked up one—a sleek, cannon-like weapon. Unlike standard artillery, this one had a long, narrow barrel with a metal cylinder attached to the end.

"This is a flamethrower. It shoots flames at around 300 degrees Celsius, with an effective range of thirty meters. It can spray continuously for fifteen minutes. Once the fuel's spent, it needs to be refilled."

He glanced at Daren.

"Want a demonstration?"

Daren made a gesture of invitation.

Judge gave a cold command.

"Step forward!"

A clone soldier wearing sunglasses strode out from the formation, hands clasped behind his back, and stood like a statue at the center of the training ground.

Gion and Tokikake's pupils narrowed slightly at the sight.

This guy... is he really going to test it on his own men?

As if to confirm their fears, Judge raised the flamethrower and, from fifteen meters away, aimed it directly at the clone soldier.

A moment later, without a flicker of emotion, he pulled the trigger.

Roar!!

A blazing stream of fire shot out, instantly engulfing the clone soldier.

Under Tokikake and Gion's stunned gaze, the soldier became a living torch.

No screams. No struggle. Not even a twitch.

In less than five seconds, the burning figure collapsed.

The flames lingered, smoke rising from the charred corpse as the embers slowly faded.

The air was thick with the stench of scorched flesh and feathers.

Tokikake's face turned pale.

Gion felt a wave of nausea rise.

They'd seen war before.

But Vinsmoke Judge's brutality—using his own men to test weapons—was something entirely new.

Smoke curled in the air...

Vinsmoke Judge set down the flamethrower and turned toward the Marine Captain with a proud look on his face.

"What do you think?"

Daren frowned.

"Three hundred degrees?"

The temperature of a flame depends on the type of fuel and the density of the oxidizer (air), ranging from a few hundred to several thousand degrees.

But that's in the real world.

In the world of pirates—where the tech tree has gone wildly off-track—due to the lack of high-concentration fuel, normal flame temperatures usually range between 200 and 900 degrees.

That's also the upper limit of the Mera Mera no Mi's flames.

Lava, on the other hand, ranges between 900 and 1400 degrees, which is why the Magu Magu no Mi is considered superior to the Mera Mera no Mi.

"The firing rate is average, the range is average, and it needs to be refueled. As for power..."

Daren shook his head and turned to Vinsmoke Judge.

"You're not going to get any meaningful data like this."

"Designing and building weapons is your specialty—but killing people is something else entirely."

"For a normal human body, a bullet, a knife, or a blunt strike doesn't make much difference when it comes to taking a life."

He smiled.

"And unfortunately for you, I happen to know a lot about killing."

Vinsmoke Judge froze for a moment, then said with a hint of irritation,

"So what are you saying?"

Daren took a step forward, raised his hand, and removed the black tie from his uniform collar.

He took off his pristine white cloak of justice and stripped off the top half of his uniform, revealing a body covered in scars.

Gion and Tokikake both stared in shock.

This guy... don't tell me he's actually going to...

Momonga groaned and covered his face in disbelief.

Vinsmoke Judge stood frozen, staring blankly at the wild, violent aura radiating from the Marine Captain, completely thrown off.

Daren rolled his neck, producing a series of sharp cracks like popping beans, then grinned wickedly.

"Come on. Use me for the test."

As soon as the words left his mouth, a gust of wind swept across the training ground.

His black hair whipped in the air, and his eyes grew increasingly intense.

"Are you serious?"

Vinsmoke Judge's eye twitched as he asked.

Tokikake suddenly snapped out of it and jumped in, shouting in alarm,

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, Daren, this isn't a joke! That's a 300-degree flamethrower!"

If you get burned alive, the North Blue Admiral's seat will go to me—ah, wait, I didn't mean to say that!"

He hurriedly clamped a hand over his mouth.

Daren suddenly looked as though he'd seen the light.

"Hm, Lieutenant Commander Tokikake makes a good point. In that case, I'll pass on the risk."

"This honorable task... should go to the genius from headquarters—Lieutenant Commander Tokikake."

As he spoke, he reached out with a large hand toward the back of Tokikake's neck.

"No, no, no!! You do it!!"

Tokikake recoiled with unprecedented speed, drenched in cold sweat.

After that little joke, Daren turned back to Vinsmoke Judge, his expression serious.

"I mean it."

And he truly did.

Daren had trained his body to withstand bullets and even small to medium-scale explosions. He could endure the shock and heat of a shell blast, so a 300-degree flamethrower wasn't exactly life-threatening.

More importantly, with his innate ability of "perception," he could accurately assess a weapon's destructive capability by experiencing its force firsthand.

After all, the fleet he envisioned wasn't meant for minor skirmishes in the North Blue.

In his plans, his military force needed to match—or surpass—the level of pirate crews in the New World.

Naturally, the weapons outfitting that fleet had to meet that same standard of power.

Seeing Daren's determination, Vinsmoke Judge no longer hesitated. He aimed and pulled the trigger.

Roar!!!

In Gion and Tokikake's tightly constricted pupils, a long tongue of flame shot from the weapon, engulfing Daren's upper body.

A wave of searing heat blasted across the training ground, stirring up a blazing wind.

Everyone present stared in stunned disbelief at the man standing firm in the heart of the crimson flames.

Chapter 64: My Child, Forgive Me

Crackling...

Flames roared fiercely, and from a distance, Daren's upper body looked like a ball of fire.

The swirling flames distorted the air around him, making Gion and the others' hearts pound with unease.

A full minute passed before Vinsmoke Judge finally lowered the flamethrower.

Even he hadn't noticed the fine layer of cold sweat that had formed on his forehead.

Smoke billowed, obscuring everything from view.

Gulp...

Tokikake instinctively swallowed and whispered to Momonga beside him,

"Hey, did that guy really not get burned alive?"

Momonga rolled his eyes impatiently.

Just then, a faint voice came from the center of the smoke.

"Yeah, the firepower's decent."

A gust of wind swept through, dispersing the black smoke.

Everyone stared, wide-eyed, as Daren stood firm in the middle of the scorched ground, looking down at his own condition.

His body was coated in a layer of black ash, and faint burn marks were visible.

But judging from his expression, the injuries weren't serious.

Well, at least not for him.

"Flamethrower passes the test."

Daren patted the ash off his skin and flashed a grin at Vinsmoke Judge.

"Next."

He turned his gaze toward Tokikake and the others.

"Don't just stand there—get over here and test everything. Let's not waste time."

...

Thus began one of the most intense and shocking weapons tests in the history of modern arms development.

Flamethrowers.

High-voltage shock guns pushing thousands of volts.

Portable rocket launchers.

High-speed rotary saws.

Burst-fire heavy machine guns...

All kinds of advanced technological weapons developed by Germa 66 were unleashed on the Marine Captain like a relentless barrage.

The training ground echoed with dull explosions, piercing screeches of cutting metal, and thunderous blasts, occasionally interrupted by Tokikake's mischievous laughter.

Everyone—including Vinsmoke Judge—went from initial shock, to growing used to the sight, and eventually fell into a numb, dazed state.

After a full thirty minutes, Tokikake and the others finally dropped the last weapon with heaving breaths and collapsed onto the ground without a shred of dignity.

They looked at Daren with expressions of disbelief.

"Monster..."

Vinsmoke Judge raised his hand and wiped the sweat from his brow, murmuring in a pale voice.

Daren sat on a crate of weapons, clearly satisfied, a lit cigar clenched between his teeth.

A military doctor beside him worked quietly, bandaging the wounds scattered across his body.

"Not bad. Just start production on the weapons we finalized. Fifty percent upfront, the rest on delivery,"

Daren said with a smile to Vinsmoke Judge.

Vinsmoke Judge replied hoarsely,

"No problem."

By now, he fully understood what kind of terrifying beast the supreme commander of the North Blue Marines really was.

Once the medic finished dressing his wounds, Daren rose slowly.

He slipped on the uniform Momonga handed him, draped the pristine white cloak of justice over his shoulders, and walked over to Vinsmoke Judge.

Lowering his voice, he said,

"By the way, about the warship modifications..."

Vinsmoke Judge's face tensed with concern.

"Your demands are too extreme. If we replace the keel with metal, the ship's weight will more than double. That would seriously affect its draft..."

Daren waved a hand dismissively.

"No need to worry about the draft."

In his deep black eyes, a wild and ruthless ambition flickered.

"What I need is for the ship's main structure to be built with lightweight metal."

Vinsmoke Judge furrowed his brow and muttered thoughtfully,

"If that's the case, we can mix a small amount of the same alloy used in Raid Suits into the steel. That should work."

"But the cost..." He gave Daren a sidelong glance. "...would be astronomical."

"That's exactly what I wanted to hear."

Daren laughed.

Money is worthless when it just sits in your hands.

It only has value when spent to strengthen your power.

The warship set sail, slowly departing from the port of the Germa Kingdom.

Vinsmoke Judge stood onshore, wearing a beaming smile as he waved at the ship fading into the distance.

But as the warship disappeared over the horizon, the smile on his face gradually twisted into something cold and sinister.

"My lord, the deposit from the North Blue Marines has been secured in the vault," a middle-aged man dressed like a butler approached respectfully and whispered.

Vinsmoke Judge nodded grimly.

He said nothing, merely waving the man away. Then, alone, he passed through the heavily guarded gates of the main fortress and entered a high-security corridor.

At the end of the corridor stood a solid metal door.

He approached, eyes scanning the electronic panel embedded in the door, and pressed his hand against the scanner.

"Iris scan complete. Bloodline verified. Welcome back, my lord."

A cold, mechanical voice responded.

The door slid open, and Vinsmoke Judge stepped inside.

Beyond it was a laboratory the size of several football fields, lined with massive rotating test tubes.

Each one, nearly three meters tall, was filled with green fluid. Suspended inside were humanoid bodies—Germa's Clone Soldiers.

Vinsmoke Judge walked up to a silver control panel, his face expressionless as he stared at the spinning tubes.

Suddenly, he slammed his fist down hard.

Bang!

"Damn it!!"

He gritted his teeth and roared. His bloodshot eyes were filled with fury, his face twisted with rage.

"Shameful! Utterly shameful!!"

His breathing grew heavy, chest heaving violently, eyes practically burning with rage.

To think that I, the great king of the Germa Kingdom... supreme commander of the army of evil... have been reduced to nothing more than a lowly arms dealer!

That bastard Rogers Daren—does he really think Germa is just his personal weapons supplier?!

He even dared to eye the Raid Suit!

"Damn it!! Damn it!! Damn it!!"

Vinsmoke Judge roared, punching the metal console over and over, leaving deep dents with every strike.

His bloodshot eyes locked onto the rows of developing Clone Soldiers, filled with bitterness and resentment.

He seethed with hatred.

That so-called "weapons test" just now... of course he knew what it really was.

It was a warning. A brutal show of dominance from that bastard Daren.

A display of overwhelming, crushing power.

Still panting, Vinsmoke Judge's eyes scanned the lab with venomous intensity.

Clone Soldiers? Their numbers meant nothing to that man.

Germa's pride—the Raid Suit, the high-tech weaponry...

All of it was effortlessly countered by Daren's Devil Fruit abilities.

The way Rogers Daren tested those weapons—savagely, relentlessly—he wasn't a man. He was a monster.

But how do you fight a monster?

A trace of despair flickered in Vinsmoke Judge's eyes.

Was there truly no way to stand against him?

Just then, a voice crackled from a speaker.

"My lord, Lady Sora's water has broken. She's about to give birth. Please come quickly."

Vinsmoke Judge froze.

Sora... his wife.

She was pregnant—and now she was going into labor.

He, the king of Germa, was about to have his firstborn.

For a fleeting moment, a rare softness appeared on Vinsmoke Judge's hardened face.

"My bloodline..." he murmured.

"My bloodline..."

Suddenly, a jolt ran through him like a bolt of lightning.

The next second—

"HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!!! So that's it!!! I've found it! I've found a way to deal with you, Daren!!!"

Vinsmoke Judge burst into maniacal laughter, his voice echoing through the lab.

"Lineage Factor... modification... I should've realized it sooner!!!"

"Only a monster can fight another monster!!"

As if he'd found a final lifeline, he staggered madly toward the far end of the lab, grabbing hold of a pink test tube.

Reflected in the transparent glass filled with pink fluid was his own face—twisted with growing madness.

"My child... forgive me."

"This is for the glory of Germa," he rasped.

Chapter 65: Vinsmoke Reiju

Vinsmoke Judge's near-maniacal muttering echoed through the cold laboratory.

"Only a monster can fight a monster..."

His bloodshot eyes locked onto the test tube filled with pink liquid in his hand, but in his mind, he kept replaying the image of that Marine—Rogers Daren—emerging unharmed through a hail of bullets, relying solely on his physical body to withstand the assault.

"Skin enhancement? No, just enhancing flesh and skin isn't nearly enough."

"Bulletproof resilience... rapid regeneration... brute, beast-like strength..."

"Yes... that's it. Only an exoskeleton could do that."

As he mumbled to himself, a flicker of madness gleamed in his eyes. He picked up a Den Den Mushi and dialed a line.

"My lord, are you here yet? Lady Sora is calling your name... the delivery is about to begin..."

The butler's anxious voice came through the receiver.

Vinsmoke Judge clenched his jaw, his expression shifting. After a moment of hesitation, he made up his mind and barked,

"Have the doctor wait. I need more time!"

With that, he slammed the receiver down, cutting off communication.

Carefully placing the test tube onto the workbench, he swept all the equipment and clutter from the console to the floor in a single violent motion.

With a flurry of clattering sounds, he pulled out a pen and paper and began scribbling rapid calculations.

"Lineage Factor ratios... An exoskeleton alone won't do. I'll need to incorporate toxicity too..."

Beads of cold sweat streamed down his cheeks and chin, but he ignored them completely.

Within just one minute, the blank sheet was filled with dense formulas and reagent combinations.

"Begin."

With a hoarse whisper, he pressed a button on the console.

The lab equipment roared to life, pumping carefully measured chemical agents into the pink test tube.

The liquid inside began to boil violently, releasing a rush of bubbling foam.

"Success!"

Seeing the indicator light flash green on the control panel, Vinsmoke Judge clenched his fist and grabbed the test tube, striding quickly out of the lab and toward the palace.

...

As he passed through long corridors and manicured palace gardens, the moment he stepped into the royal residence, the sound of anguished cries reached his ears.

It was his wife.

"Sora..."

He whispered anxiously and quickened his pace, entering a lavish bedroom adorned with painted murals.

The once-white bedsheets were now stained deep red with blood, and doctors and nurses in white coats bustled frantically around the room.

A beautiful woman with a gentle face lay trembling on the bed, drenched in sweat and writhing from the pain of childbirth.

"My lord, you've finally arrived!"

A doctor wearing rimless glasses paused and bowed respectfully.

Vinsmoke Judge waved him off and quickly approached the bedside, grasping his wife's hand tightly.

"Sora, I'm here."

The queen of the Germa Kingdom, Sora, slowly opened her eyes. A gentle smile appeared on her face as she softly murmured,

"Judge... Judge..."

Seeing the pain on his wife's face, Vinsmoke Judge felt his heart tighten.

He took a deep breath.

"Sora, I've found a way for Germa to rise again... to dominate the North Blue!"

He raised the test tube in his hand, filled with swirling pink liquid.

"Lineage Factor! With this technology, our child will be born with the talents of a monster!"

"Our child will become the strongest warrior Germa 66 has ever seen!"

"The Vinsmoke name will rise with them and echo across the seas!"

He spoke with fervor, expecting joy from his wife.

Instead, what greeted him were eyes wide with fear and disbelief.

"You want to turn our child into a weapon?!"

Queen Sora's voice trembled, her face pale.

As Germa's queen, she understood all too well the terrible consequences of the "technology" her husband wielded.

Just like the Clone Soldiers of Germa 66—those infused with Lineage Factor would lose all human emotion, bound to obey Vinsmoke Judge's every command without question.

Judge froze.

"No, Sora..."

Her terrified gaze felt foreign, unfamiliar. In that moment, he softened.

"I'll preserve our child's emotions," he said.

"—But our child will still be a weapon in your hands, won't they!?"

Judge opened his mouth but couldn't utter a single word of denial.

Silence fell.

In his mind, the image of Rogers Daren's wild, unyielding face kept flashing again and again.

"This... is for Germa's glory."

His voice dropped, cold and distant.

The head of the Vinsmoke family rose to his feet. Turning his back to his wife, who now wept in silent disappointment, he clenched his fists and rasped,

"Only then can Germa rule the North Blue again."

"I'm sorry, Sora."

He murmured the words so softly they barely carried.

Then,

As his wife cried behind him, Vinsmoke Judge handed the pink test tube to the doctor. His bloodshot eyes glistened faintly with grief as he gritted his teeth and ordered,

"Inject her with the serum... then begin the delivery."

With that, he turned and walked out of the room without looking back.

...

Half an hour later.

Outside the royal palace, Vinsmoke Judge paced impatiently. Finally, the sharp cry of a newborn rang through the air.

"Congratulations, my lord. The madam has given birth to a healthy baby girl."

A doctor in a bloodstained white coat and surgical mask stepped out, gently cradling a baby in his arms.

Judge froze.

He stared blankly at the child, then instinctively reached out and held her in his arms.

Soft pink hair covered her right eye. Her left eyebrow curled in a counterclockwise swirl. Her violet eyes gleamed with intelligence.

"It's just..." the doctor hesitated, "my lord, the young lady's skin is extraordinarily tough. The needle couldn't pierce it. I'm afraid she can't be vaccinated..."

Judge blinked, stunned. Then an overwhelming surge of joy exploded within him.

"HAHAHAHAHA!!!"

He threw his head back and burst into wild, manic laughter.

The experiment had succeeded!

It really worked!

A child born with a superhuman body!

"No need for vaccinations," he declared.

"My daughter... is a monster by birth!"

"HAHAHAHAHA!!!"

That day, in the Germa Kingdom of the North Blue, the Vinsmoke family welcomed its first royal heir.

The King of Germa and commander of the Army of Evil, Vinsmoke Judge, gave her a name—

Vinsmoke Reiju.

Chapter 66: Special Training

North Blue.

Branch 321.

The blazing sun scorched the training grounds as yellow sand whipped through the air.

Three imposing figures launched a fierce assault on a black-haired Marine standing at the center. Their speed and strength had been pushed to the limit, and their coordination was nearly flawless.

Three snow-white capes, each bearing the insignia of a Lieutenant Commander, fluttered wildly behind them as they attacked.

The man they surrounded exuded a wild, defiant aura. His upper body was bare, revealing chiseled muscles like carved stone. A faint smile played at his lips as he casually faced their storm-like offensive.

It was none other than Gion, Tokikake, and Momonga "attacking" Rogers Daren.

But despite outnumbering him, all three were drenched in sweat, visibly straining under immense pressure.

Though they were the ones attacking, it somehow felt like Daren was the one overwhelming all three of them alone.

"So weak, Tokikake. Did you skip lunch? That punch... feels more like a tickle,"

Daren laughed mockingly, infuriating the already gasping Tokikake.

"Daren, you bastard! What the hell did you just say!?"

A sharp whoosh cut through the air from behind—danger closing in fast. Daren twisted his body to avoid the slash from Momonga and Gion, who had flanked him. He smirked and taunted,

"Am I wrong? So soft... Are you even capable, twig-boy?"

As he spoke, the Marine Captain deliberately glanced down at Tokikake's crotch. The meaning in his eyes was more than enough to make any hot-blooded man explode with rage.

"Daren, you're dead!! I'm gonna kill you!!"

Right on cue, Tokikake's furious roar echoed across the training yard.

His skin steamed, white smoke puffed from his nostrils, and he charged at Daren like a raging bull.

The force of his stomp shattered the ground, leaving behind a crater over five meters wide.

Tokikake's speed spiked in an instant, and he shot forward like a cannonball.

Bang!

A deep thud rang out.

Tokikake blinked, stunned, at Daren, whose head had snapped back from a clean punch to the face. Blood splattered through the air.

He... actually landed a hit?

But the next second, Tokikake's pupils shrank.

Daren, his head still tilted back, curved his bleeding mouth into a gleeful, twisted grin.

No anger. No pain. Just the delighted look of someone who had found a fun new toy.

"Good strength."

That voice—low, crazed, and excited—crawled into Tokikake's mind like a devil's whisper.

A twitch formed at the corner of his eye. A terrible feeling crept up in his chest.

No way...

Daren grinned wider.

Bang!!

He slammed his forehead straight into Tokikake's skull.

Blood sprayed. Tokikake's vision spun wildly as dizziness overwhelmed him.

Before he could react, a large gloved hand loomed larger and larger in his blurred sight.

"Not the face!!"

Tokikake cried out.

Daren ignored him. With one hand, he grabbed Tokikake by the face, lifted him, and slammed him hard into the ground.

BOOM!!

The earth within thirty meters fractured instantly, crisscrossed with jagged cracks as the ground groaned under the impact.

Dust exploded upward. Tokikake's upper body was embedded in the ground, only his trembling, hairy legs and clogs twitching in the air.

Clang—!!

At that moment, the sharp ring of a sword being drawn cut through the chaos.

A gleaming blade pierced the swirling smoke first, followed by the hardened face of Momonga beneath his military cap.

His billowing cloak rose behind him. Eyes cold, both hands gripped his sword tightly as he brought it crashing down toward Daren with all his strength.

Perfect timing!

Shhhk!!

The blade, glowing with sword light, slashed deep across Daren's chest—blood sprayed from the impact.

"Hmm, not bad. You've improved."

Though a deep, bloody gash now marked his chest, Rogers Daren looked completely unfazed, eyes gleaming with approval as he stared at Momonga.

Momonga gave a bitter smile—then "bravely" accepted Daren's brutal knee strike head-on.

Bang!

His body shot backward like a cannonball, smashing through three humanoid stone targets before crashing to the ground in a battered heap, blood spurting from his mouth.

But the moment Daren landed the hit, he felt a chilling pressure rapidly descending from above.

The sharpness of it made his skin prickle, every hair standing on end.

No wonder she's considered a future admiral candidate—her swordsmanship really is terrifying...

Daren murmured to himself with a smile, extending one hand upward.

Clang!

A golden meitō came crashing down, slicing through his black glove as it struck his palm—yet it stopped there, caught and locked in place by Daren's grip.

Wind howled across the training ground, scattering the smoke and dust.

Gion had leapt high into the air, gripping her blade with both hands in a full overhead stance. Her cape snapped in the turbulent air, nearly vertical behind her.

She glared down at the Marine Captain who met her with that ever-casual, teasing grin—and let out a fierce, low shout.

Her blade, Konpira, burst into a brilliance it had never shown before, straining desperately to break free of Daren's monstrous strength. Drawing on the downward force of her dive, she pushed the sword down with everything she had.

The blade...

Was just millimeters from slicing into Daren's chest—

But even with her full power, Gion couldn't drive it that final inch.

In the end, even moving it a centimeter forward became an impossible dream.

Daren decided it was time to stop holding back.

His hand, clamped like a vice around the blade, clenched tighter. The impact of metal grinding against his fingers rang out in sharp, metallic chimes.

He yanked hard.

The moment Gion lost balance, caught off guard, his fist slammed straight into her stomach.

Bang!

A burst of white shockwave exploded from her back.

Gion's face went deathly pale. She dropped to her knees, hands clutching her abdomen, blood trickling from her lips.

Drip... drip...

Bright red blood from Daren's wound dripped onto the dusty training ground, soaking quickly into the earth and leaving behind dark, muddy stains.

Daren grinned as he looked down at the three Marines collapsed before him—Gion, Tokikake, and Momonga—all gasping for breath.

"Well, that's enough for today."

He winked at them as they lay there, each wearing their own version of a "pain mask."

"We'll pick up again tomorrow."

With that, he turned and strode off toward the base commander's office.

Momonga groaned and rubbed his temples.

Gion lay flat on her back, panting, still gripping her sword tightly.

Tokikake let out a wail of frustration and cursed loudly,

"Damn it!!"

It had been half a month since their trip to the Germa Kingdom to "evaluate" the weapons.

Ever since then...

That bastard Daren had dragged them into "special training" every single day, claiming it was to help them grow stronger.

But Tokikake couldn't shake the feeling that what that bastard was really doing—was finding new ways to beat the crap out of them.

Chapter 67: Life Is Simple

Evening, Base Commander's Office.

Daren stood shirtless in front of the massive floor-to-ceiling windows, a lit cigar clamped between his teeth as he looked down at the 321st Division from above.

Warships patrolled the island on their designated routes. On the training grounds, rows of Marines drilled in formation—their shouts and the sound of strikes echoing intermittently. Others, dressed in uniform, carried out routine maintenance on the artillery and docked ships.

The setting sun cast a golden glow through the windows, lighting up the tall frame of the Marine Captain and stretching his shadow across the floor. Smoke curled around his face, making his eyes appear even more intense.

"Progress really is slowing down..."

He exhaled a puff of smoke, muttering with a touch of resignation.

Looking down, he eyed the scabbed-over wounds on his palms and chest. A good night's sleep and they'd be mostly healed by morning. His superhuman physique granted him exceptional defense—and an equally terrifying ability to recover.

Routine training could no longer yield improvements. His body had already fully adapted to the intensity of such external stress and stimuli.

That's why, after returning from the Germa Kingdom, he decided to drag Momonga, Gion, and Tokikake into a round of "special training."

On one hand, it helped them unlock their potential faster and sharpen their skills. On the other, it gave him a way to challenge himself with new stimuli.

While the three combined weren't enough to truly pressure him, sparring and brawling with them did shake loose the stagnation in his physical growth, allowing his stats to tick upward.

No matter how you looked at it, the talent of those three could rank among the top across the entire sea.

With that thought, Daren gradually quieted his mind. Using his innate "perception," he honed in on his physical state, calling up his personal data panel:

Physique: 61.753

Strength: 57.192

Speed: 59.241

Fruit: 72.111

Aside from his Devil Fruit ability, his physique, strength, and speed had only increased by about 0.5 to 0.8 over the past month—and even that was grinding to a halt. Most of the gains were thanks to the past ten days of intense training with the trio.

As for developing his Devil Fruit power, progress was even slower.

Knock, knock, knock...

A gentle knock broke through Daren's thoughts.

"Come in," he said calmly.

The office door opened, and Momonga stepped in, dressed sharply in his uniform and military cap.

Daren poured him a glass of chilled whiskey and handed it over with a smile.

"How are you holding up?"

Momonga took the glass and gave a wry grin through clenched teeth.

"Not great. Not everyone's a lunatic like you who enjoys the thrill of getting beaten up."

These past ten days of "special training" had been brutal. He hadn't had a single decent night's sleep. Every session left his whole body aching, as if his bones had come apart. Even lying in bed, his muscles screamed in pain.

Daren just shrugged and laughed.

"Pain's a good thing—it reminds you you're alive."

"And in combat, feeling your opponent's blows with your own body lets you sense their strength, speed, physique, even their will... That's how you find their weakness."

Momonga rolled his eyes and drained the glass in one go.

That was just like Daren. He could easily dodge with his speed and explosive bursts, but more often than not, he just didn't bother.

His savage, brute-force fighting style was in stark contrast to his cunning and adaptable political tactics. Faced with a choice between dodging or taking a hit head-on, he always chose the latter.

It was a style forged over years—likely influenced by his former superior, Sakazuki.

He preferred trading blows, gambling everything at the most dangerous moment.

A man like that was the last kind of opponent anyone wanted to face.

Like a crazed, starving wolf...

Even with crushed organs...

Even with broken limbs...

He'd still grin through the blood and tear a chunk of flesh off you with his last remaining fangs.

Hearing Momonga's complaints, Daren just chuckled and topped off his glass.

"It's not a good habit to dodge in battle. It makes you timid, hesitant, and indecisive."

"Once you get used to dodging, you start relying on it subconsciously. Before long, your movements become predictable to the enemy."

"If you're always planning an escape route during a fight, sure, you might have a way out—but you're also giving up your shot at victory."

"Dodging, as a habit, isn't good for personal growth."

"Willpower, spirit, the determination to win, and the edge between life and death... those are the real keys to improving combat strength."

After a pause, Daren added thoughtfully:

"There's only one Borsalino in this sea."

The image of that "monster" with his weird, sarcastic smirk flashed through his mind. Even someone as serious and stern as Momonga couldn't help the twitch at the corner of his mouth.

He sighed and said, half helplessly,

"But if you keep betting your life every time with no way out... how many lives do you think you've got?"

Daren raised his glass and took a slow sip.

"Who knows?"

His deep gaze drifted out to the distant sea, the smoke from his cigar curling around his sharp, flawless profile. His steady voice echoed through the empty office.

"But you only live once. I just want to live freely."

"To me, life is simple. Either move forward or fall back."

"Falling back... sure, that's easy."

"And when it happens the first time, you lie to yourself. 'It's fine, just hold back this once. Just avoid it for now—there'll be another chance later...' But the thing is, once there's a first time, there'll be a second."

"Step by step—retreating, dodging, compromising... can you really say you're still the same person?"

"There are a thousand reasons to back down, but only one reason to keep moving forward. And that one reason... is enough."

A smile slowly tugged at the corners of Daren's lips.

"I'd rather die than lose."

He clenched his fist.

"I want to win."

Momonga fell silent.

Hearing those words, he knew Daren wasn't just talking about battle. Every sentence echoed the choices Daren had made again and again in the past.

One step back, and the rest follow.

It was true in combat.

True when facing Germa 66, one of the world's top military powers.

And true even when facing the Celestial Dragons, holders of supreme authority.

"Swallow your pride"... those words had never existed in Rogers Daren's dictionary.

Chapter 68: A Fair Game

After a long silence, Momonga let out a deep breath.

He looked again at Daren's silhouette standing before the floor-to-ceiling window. For a moment, it was as if he could see the soul within this so-called "scum of the Marines"—a soul housed in a body covered with scars.

Unyielding, untamed, always pressing forward.

Yes, it was because he was that kind of man...

That he would be—and could only be—the one Momonga was willing to follow for a lifetime.

"Those two have made a lot of progress lately."

Daren suddenly shifted the topic, his gaze turning toward the distant training grounds.

The training field, bathed in the golden light of the setting sun, swirled with dancing sand.

Among the 321st Branch Marines undergoing their usual drills, two figures stood out.

On the left side of the grounds stood a figure wielding a long blade, a cape fluttering behind her. Holding her breath, she focused intently, swinging her sword again and again.

The golden Meito slashed wildly like the wind, leaving behind dazzling streaks of light.

With Daren's keen eyesight, he could clearly see countless sparks erupting along the edge of the blade with each furious swing.

Those were bullets.

It was Gion—precisely cutting through the bullets fired from dozens of meters away using her swordsmanship alone!

On the other side of the field, Tokikake's face was flushed red as he gritted his teeth and dragged a small, abandoned warship forward with immense effort.

His muscles bulged under strain, veins standing out as if about to burst, and he muttered under his breath:

"I'm not some damn mutt! I'm not a damn mutt!!"

Following Daren's line of sight, Momonga couldn't help but chuckle.

"You've given them both PTSD. Now they chant about getting stronger every single day..."

"They really have gotten stronger. They just haven't realized it yet."

He glanced at Daren and added silently to himself—

'After all, their training partner is you.'

Daren gave a small laugh.

"Gion is no surprise—she's always been the perfect student in that old man Sengoku's eyes."

"But what I didn't expect... is that someone like Tokikake, who seems so unreliable, would have that kind of tenacity."

Momonga nodded in agreement.

"Lieutenant Commander Tokikake... really has something special."

"After every day of intense training, he pushes himself even further with extra routines. His workload goes way beyond standard."

"Even when he's the one who gets roughed up the most, showing up battered and bruised, he's back on the field the next day, full of energy like nothing happened."

"You've put him through the wringer dozens—maybe hundreds—of times, and not once has he shown signs of giving up. No matter what happens, he keeps coming back. Gotta admit, that's admirable."

"Yeah... though his focus is a little off sometimes."

"Off?" Daren raised an eyebrow and looked at Momonga, curious.

Momonga gave a helpless smile.

"Lately, there's been a growing number of complaints at the branch... seems Lieutenant Commander Tokikake has been spending way too much time in the female soldiers' dormitory."

Daren: ...

Figures it's you, Tokikake.

There was actually one more thing Momonga didn't dare mention—that Tokikake often showed up at all kinds of noble parties under the pretense of "caring for the people," only to return in complete disgrace. Yet he never seemed to get tired of it.

Daren shook his head, then asked,

"How's that little brat Doffy doing lately?"

Momonga's expression turned serious as he replied in a low voice,

"Progress has been fast. In just half a month, he's already taken over 30% of the mafia territory and underground businesses in the North Blue. The Donquixote family has expanded significantly—its numbers have surged past what they were before, nearly reaching two thousand."

"Doflamingo is definitely capable. He crushes rebels with ruthless efficiency, uses brutal methods to intimidate, but shows mercy to those who submit. He keeps drawing in subordinates... while also restraining them, trying to avoid harming civilians as much as possible."

"If I hadn't seen it for myself, I wouldn't believe he's just a twelve-year-old kid."

"And... his methods always remind me of someone else."

There was a complicated tone in his voice as he said the last part.

"Who?"

"You."

Daren suddenly chuckled.

"Sounds like I didn't make the wrong choice in naming him my godson."

He shook his head again.

"But there's probably a 'but' coming after that, isn't there?"

Momonga froze for a second, then gave a bitter smile.

"...Nothing gets past you, huh."

Daren took a sip of whiskey from his glass.

"Go on. This is the North Blue we're talking about. The underworld here isn't exactly easy to deal with."

Momonga began slowly,

"Yeah. The Donquixote family's expansion has been aggressive—but it's exactly because Doflamingo's rise has been so fast and so attention-grabbing that the mafia forces across the rest of the North Blue are now on high alert."

"Under shared pressure, they've already torn up their agreement with the Marines. They're frantically recruiting and launching bloody turf wars, trying to grow their influence to counter the Donquixote family's rise."

Daren narrowed his eyes.

"I thought they'd have a bit more backbone."

Seeing that expression, Momonga felt his heart clench.

He knew someone was about to have a very bad day.

"What are you thinking?"

The Captain sneered.

"If they were capable of setting aside their differences and uniting against the Donquixote family, I'd have no reason to get involved in this underworld power struggle."

"They've shown me enough respect."

"The game was fair... but the Donquixote family broke the North Blue's rules, so I wiped out over a thousand of their men as punishment."

"If he wants to become the kingpin of the North Blue underworld, then he's got to start from zero. I'm not giving him a single ounce of help."

"He has to prove himself."

"Donquixote family versus the entire North Blue underworld—that's the game I set."

"If he loses, if he can't even take the North Blue, then that's all he amounts to."

"What I didn't expect... is that the North Blue underworld turned out to be so damn useless."

"They dared to tear up the deal, break my rules, target civilians, and snatch territory in the chaos."

Daren's eyes narrowed further.

"...That pisses me off."

Momonga took a deep breath.

"When do we move?"

He didn't bother asking for reasons or details.

Because they didn't matter.

In the North Blue, no one defied the rules of Rogers Daren.

As for so-called fair play?

There's no such thing as a truly "fair" game.

Even the house will step in when needed.

And when that happens, the game ends instantly.

Because in the North Blue...

The underworld was nothing more than a word from Daren.

"Let's head out now... Give my adorable godson a little gift."

Daren yanked his uniform off the hanger and slipped it on without hesitation.

"After all... I don't have much time left in the North Blue."

Momonga froze.

"You've... hit a bottleneck?"

He had a rough idea of Daren's unusual talent—and he knew the man had been pushing his body to the limit with all kinds of hellish training.

Daren nodded.

"Yeah. I need stronger opponents... There's not much left for me here. The Grand Line—that's where the real stage is."

The Officer Training Camp at Marine Headquarters!

There, he'd compete with elite Marines from across the world, inherit the legacy of the Admirals, master the superhuman skills of the Rokushiki... and gain the most powerful force in this sea—

Haki!

As he spoke, Daren fastened his black necktie.

Then he threw on his wide, white Marine cloak.

His face cold, he said,

"Before I go... I want the entire underworld of the North Blue unified."

Chapter 69: Greetings

North Blue, Fleurieu Island.

Late at night.

Blood and fire lit up the sky.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Boom!

Gunfire and explosions thundered through the streets as hundreds of Marines launched a fierce assault on a mafia stronghold.

Thick smoke rolled across the battlefield. The compound's fortified walls were torn apart by the relentless shelling, blasted open with gaping holes as rubble flew in every direction.

"Damn Marines! Where the hell did they get these weapons!?"

A mafia officer in a black suit crawled out from under a collapsed wall, face smeared with blood and eyes bloodshot as he roared in fury.

As one of the top mafia powers on Fleurieu Island, the Snoke family controlled over half the underground operations within several hundred nautical miles—illicit trades like brewing, smuggling, gambling, and brothels.

Within their territory, they ruled like kings, raking in mountains of wealth. With hundreds of members under their command and stockpiles of firearms and explosives, even mid-sized pirate crews didn't dare provoke the Snoke family lightly.

But it all fell apart in an instant.

Their once lavish, carefree lives were shattered by the sound of explosions—blown to pieces, dreams turned to ash.

A sudden blast snapped York Snoke out of chaotic sleep. Countless attacks screamed past his ears—he couldn't even tell what was hitting them anymore.

The family estate, the armory, the courtyard, the meeting hall, the commerce chamber, the ground itself, the buildings, the very air... everything trembled.

Under the nonstop barrage, the Snoke family officers couldn't react in time and were buried under the rubble, crushed by overwhelming firepower.

York Snoke's ears rang. Then everything went numb.

He stared blankly as wave after wave of well-trained North Blue Marines closed in on the compound, wielding all manner of advanced weapons, crushing everything in their path with chilling precision.

Flamethrowers spitting scorching fire.

Stun guns crackling with arcs of blue lightning.

Compact machine guns blazing.

And York Snoise could hardly believe his eyes—an entire row of Marines, each with a rocket launcher hoisted on their shoulders!

Weapons he had never seen before. The cutting edge of warfare.

BOOM!

A portable missile suddenly detonated overhead. The domed church building exploded into rubble in an instant.

Debris rained down as stones shattered and collapsed around him.

A massive shadow loomed above, swallowing York Snoise whole.

Despair filled his eyes.

Just before the rockfall buried him, he saw a scruffy-looking Marine step out from the crowd, hands casually in his pockets, wearing wooden clogs...

Then—

He lifted an entire house.

...BOOM!

The civilian building soared into the air, then crashed down with a deafening impact, obliterating the Snoke family estate and reducing it to rubble.

Surrounded by black smoke, Tokikake stared at his hands in stunned disbelief.

When... did I get this strong?

He had only meant to test his strength—he never thought he could actually throw an entire house into the air with his bare hands.

"Lieutenant Commander Tokikake is incredible!!"

"Even Germa's tech can't compare to Tokikake's raw power!"

"He's way too strong! Truly the pride of Marine Headquarters!"

The nearby North Blue Marines stared at Tokikake in awe, breaking into thunderous cheers.

As the shouts of praise rang out, Tokikake was instantly overwhelmed with emotion. He threw his hands on his hips and let out a hearty laugh.

"Damn right! I'm a genius!"

He glanced dismissively at a Marine holding a rapid-fire machine gun and scoffed,

"Guns... what a crude and outdated way to fight."

...

At the same time...

On another island in the North Blue, a similar scene was unfolding.

At a secret base of a mafia family, Marine forces had already launched a swift assault.

"Marines! Damn Marines! You're not leaving us any way out!"

A mafia boss with a thick mustache shouted furiously.

Gripping a massive steel shield in both hands, he charged like a raging bull into the oncoming Marines, knocking them flying with brute force.

"Hahahaha!! You see that? That's my strength!"

He laughed wildly—only for his laughter to stop cold a second later.

Clang!

A sharp sword ring echoed through the air.

Following the sound, he saw a tall, black-haired figure emerging slowly from the raging inferno.

The click of high heels on the ground was crisp, almost pleasant to the ear—but carried with it a bone-chilling coldness.

It was a woman.

A beauty mark adorned the corner of her lips. Her long black hair was pinned in an elegant bun, and a pink short skirt hugged her graceful curves.

With every step she took, the pristine white Marine cloak on her back seemed to sway and dance in the firelight.

In her hand, she carried a long blade—slender and gleaming gold, reflecting the flickering flames.

She was striking—intensely so.

Under normal circumstances, the mafia boss might have done everything in his power to seduce and conquer her.

But now...

He didn't dare think such thoughts.

A narrow cut had begun to spread down his massive metal shield.

From the toughest part of the shield... to his arm... to his throat—

A thin red line slowly surfaced.

"Such a fast blade..."

He rasped.

Then both the shield and the man split cleanly in two and crashed to the ground.

Gion stood before him, expression icy, calmly sheathing her sword.

"In the name of justice... capital punishment."

The moment her words fell, Marines surged in behind her.

Shouts of battle and agonized screams rang from all directions.

Gion remained where she was, silent, lost in thought.

"I've... gotten much stronger," she murmured to herself.

In that moment, she understood many things.

Just over ten days of intense training had boosted her strength by at least thirty percent.

But because her opponent had always been that monstrous man—someone who constantly dominated her, the gap between them always so vast—she had never realized how far she'd come.

But the reflection lasted only a few seconds. Gion quickly clenched her fists again, silver teeth gritting.

"Not enough... Still nowhere near enough."

...

Elsewhere—

A lavish private mansion built at enormous expense.

The estate of the Rockefeller family boss, one of the most notorious mafia clans in the Great Britannia Islands.

Inside an ornate bedroom—

Germansa, head of the Rockefeller family, suddenly jolted awake from sleep.

Without even glancing, he yanked a pistol from under his pillow and fired repeatedly at a shadow in the room.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Clang! Clang! Clang!

Bullets collided with steel—sparks flew, revealing the face of a stern man beneath a Marine cap.

Germansa's pupils shrank.

"You—!"

His mistress shrieked and backed away in terror, clutching the sheets around her.

Momonga stepped out of the darkness, a bloodstained military saber hanging loosely in his hand.

"You broke the rules," he said coldly.

"So... Rogers Daren, Supreme Commander of the North Blue, sends his regards."

As the words fell, a flash of steel lit up the shadows.

Slice.

Blood sprayed across the satin curtains, staining the luxurious bed canopy red.

The next second—

"Aaaahhhhhh!!!"

A woman's terrified scream pierced through the entire mansion.

Chapter 70: The Greatest Darkness in the North Blue

The largest and most economically prosperous commercial port in the North Blue—

Port Tas.

When Doflamingo led the Donquixote family into its harbor, the scene that greeted them was a chaotic blend of noise and opulence.

Ships of all shapes and sizes jostled for docking space. Sails bearing different crests billowed like waves, while sailors shouted over each other from their decks. Nobles and wealthy merchants stood ashore with pipes in their mouths, barking orders at the laborers scrambling to unload cargo. Their voices even drowned out the crashing of the waves.

Farther off, the streets were lined with endless rows of shops, bustling with crowds. Goods from all across the North Blue—and even other seas—filled every corner.

Looking further down the main road, a sprawling city stretched outward, seeming to grow the farther one looked. A network of white inland canals cut through blocks of buildings like ribbons, weaving through tightly packed homes and towering structures.

It was prosperity, filth, and wealth all tangled together—crowded, rich, messy, and reeking of money and rot.

"I say... I say... No wonder they call this the largest trading port in the North Blue..." said Trebol, eyes wide, a string of snot dangling beneath his nose.

"There's gotta be a whole lot of fat to skim off here," muttered Diamante, licking the corner of his mouth, his face smeared in bright paint.

Vergo stayed silent, a piece of bread stuck to his cheek.

Pica let out a sharp, high-pitched laugh. "Pretty soon, this place'll belong to the Donquixote family!"

Their faces brimmed with raw ambition and arrogant pride.

And they had every reason to be arrogant.

In just half a month, the Donquixote family had risen from practically nothing—seizing over 30% of the mafia territory and underground businesses across the North Blue. Their rise had been unstoppable, like a blade cutting through paper, elevating them to one of the region's top criminal powers.

No one in the history of the North Blue had ever pulled off something like this.

But the Donquixote family had.

And now, the thriving trade port before them was their next target.

"Rodriguez family..."

Doflamingo stood at the bow, overlooking the bustling, noisy town. A cold smile slowly curled his lips.

He still looked the same—sunglasses, a casual shirt, cropped pants, and pointed shoes.

But this time, he wore a pink feathered coat, fluttering proudly in the salty sea breeze like a young, defiant flamingo.

"Doffy... I say, I say, once we take out the Rodriguez family and swallow up all their operations, we'll have control over half of the North Blue's underworld, won't we?"

Trebol hobbled over on his cane, chuckling in his usual greasy tone.

Doflamingo nodded, grinning wickedly.

"Exactly. The Rodriguez family controls Port Tas. Their influence runs deep on this island. With the port's commercial advantages, they've got their hands on at least 30% of the North Blue's illegal trades..."

"Take them out, and the rest—Snoke, Vincent, Rockefeller—they're nothing we can't handle."

Hearing their young master speak with such confidence, the four Donquixote officers grinned with admiration.

"Young master... actually, we don't need to bow to that Marine at all," Diamante suddenly said, voice low and sinister.

His face was twisted with dissatisfaction and resentment.

"Once we take full control of the North Blue's underworld, with the power we'll have, the Navy won't dare lay a finger on us."

"Besides, he loves to talk like the underworld is yours—but let's be real. We're the ones who fought for every inch of that territory. Has Rogers Daren ever lifted a finger to help us?"

The moment those words left his mouth, silence fell over the group.

The smile on Doflamingo's lips slowly disappeared.

He turned to look at Trebol and the other three.

"Is that what you all think?"

The four of them lowered their heads, unable to meet his icy gaze.

"We just believe you're a born king."

"A king should never bow to anyone."

Their voices were barely above a whisper.

Doflamingo stared at them for a few seconds in silence. Then he turned away, and after a pause, said calmly,

"I'll pretend I never heard any of that."

"And I don't want to hear it again."

"Understood?"

The four bowed deeply, answering with respect,

"Yes."

But as they spoke, their eyes met briefly.

Doflamingo's tone had been calm—too calm.

And they knew their young master all too well.

The calmer he sounded, the more it meant fury was boiling beneath the surface.

Would a proud, untamed king really kneel to anyone?

The name Donquixote didn't allow for that.

"Let's move."

Doflamingo took a deep breath, the corners of his mouth rising into that familiar cold, mocking grin.

"Fufufufufu... Let's take what's ours."

He raised both hands high. Countless invisible threads erupted from his fingertips, shooting into the sky and vanishing into the distance—toward the town ahead.

The fierce wind whipped up his pink feathered coat, sending it flaring behind him.

Doflamingo let out a wild, savage laugh.

"The rules of this world... are nothing but survival of the fittest!!"

"Fufufufufu!!"

The moment his words fell—

Bang!

A Donquixote family member fired a shot into the sky.

"The Donquixote family is conducting business—civilians and unrelated parties, clear out immediately!!"

The sudden gunshot startled the nearby townsfolk.

Their faces went pale as they looked up at the rising Jolly Roger. Dropping everything they were doing, merchants, civilians, and sailors fled in terror.

Donquixote members sneered as they leapt from the ship, charging toward the Rodriguez family's stronghold.

The battle had begun.

...

At the same time...

Inside a lavish estate.

In a sealed conference room.

Fire crackled in the hearth, casting flickering light over two figures seated on opposite ends of a long meeting table.

One was a middle-aged man in a black peak-lapel suit, his expression heavy as he stared at the Marine Captain across from him—who was casually puffing on a cigar.

His voice was hoarse.

"I know you're angry, Admiral Daren."

"But don't you think... for the house to step into the game... it's a little unfair?"

Daren narrowed his eyes, a cold smirk tugging at his lips.

"Yeah, it's unfair. But that's how the world works."

The man's forehead bulged with veins as he gritted his teeth.

"For all these years, I've followed your rules. And now, I just—"

"But you still broke them," Daren cut in without a hint of mercy.

The man's face went ghostly white.

His bloodshot eyes locked onto the Marine, fists clenching and unclenching over and over.

"Why me?" he asked, breath ragged.

"It's not just you," Daren replied coldly. "Anyone who breaks the rules will be punished."

The man froze. Then, unexpectedly—he laughed.

Loud, manic laughter—tears streaming down his face.

"Hahahaha!! So that's how it is! Fine by me! We've been butting heads all these years, never giving in... At least now we end up in the same place. Hahahaha!!"

"Rogers Daren... they call you the 'scum of the Marines'... but I know better. You're a viper."

"Cunning to the extreme. Cold-blooded beyond reason. Sometimes I wonder if there's even a shred of sympathy or hesitation in you."

"Go ahead. Do it. From the day I chose this path, I knew this day would come."

"They call me a titan of the North Blue underworld..."

He let out a self-mocking laugh, his body trembling, eyes locked onto Daren.

"What a joke..."

"In the North Blue... the greatest darkness wears the flag of justice."