

One Piece 151

Chapter 151 - 151: Volume 2 – Chapter 53: The Meaning of Rokushiki

As he looked at Tokikake wailing and contorting his face in exaggerated grief, several dark lines practically formed across Daren's forehead.

At the same time, though, a strange hint of admiration rose in his heart.

Even Daren had to admit—this bastard Tokikake could really bow without an ounce of shame... and not lose face doing it.

"Are you sure about this, Tokikake? That's not something just anyone can handle."

Daren casually pulled his leg out of Tokikake's grip, his tone half-teasing, half-genuine.

"Endless rounds of socializing, fine liquor, expensive cigars, women, gambling, performances... That stuff eats away at your body and grinds down your will."

"Even someone like Momonga, a real man's man, is on the verge of breaking—and you? You're still the fourth-ranking cadet in our Marine Headquarters Officer Training Camp. You're the Navy's future. The hope of justice. I just can't bring myself to make you shoulder such a dreadful burden."

"No problem!!"

Tokikake suddenly yelled, springing to his feet. Chest out, tear-streaked eyes blazing with righteousness.

"Daren, precisely because I'm the fourth seat, because I'm a pillar of the Navy and the backbone of justice... I have to shoulder a responsibility even greater than anyone else!"

His tone radiated a sense of noble sacrifice. The Marine cloak on his back flared up behind him, despite the lack of wind.

"I must dive into the front lines and endure the baptism of those sugar-coated bullets! Only then can I transform into a truly great Marine!"

He bent deeply at the waist in a solemn bow.

"Please!"

"Please... let me take on this suffering!"

Daren: "..."

Classic Tokikake... I almost fell for that nonsense.

Shaking his head with a sigh, Daren couldn't be bothered to argue with the fool. He waved him off casually.

"I'll think about it."

Not that it mattered. Sengoku alone would never approve transferring Tokikake to the North Blue.

But Tokikake completely misread his response and beamed with delight.

"I get it, I get it."

He shot Daren a knowing look full of meaning.

"Don't worry, Daren! From now on, anyone who opposes you is an enemy of Tokikake the genius!"

He clenched his fists, his eyes practically spitting fire.

"All for the glory of the North Blue!"

Daren's mouth twitched.

Good grief, your enthusiasm is off the charts.

And Tokikake... that half-baked face of yours, paired with that shameless, sycophantic grin—seriously, you look exactly like one of those bootlicking extras in a low-budget war drama...

...

Half an hour later...

Training camp, drill grounds.

The scorching sun blazed overhead as yellow sand swirled in the air.

Zephyr, arms crossed and wearing sunglasses, looked over the assembled third cohort of training camp recruits. A satisfied smile tugged at his lips.

"After the duels three days ago, I trust you've all gotten a good sense of each other. So let's skip the pointless chatter and get straight to business."

His gaze swept across each face.

"Here at this camp, you'll receive the most elite, high-level military education the seas have to offer."

"Swordsmanship, hand-to-hand combat, navigation, meteorology, physical training... all of these are part of the curriculum—and they'll be on your final exam as well."

"But the most essential, the very core of your training, is learning to develop the strength of your own body."

"Starting today, I will begin instructing you in the physical combat system known as the Marines Rokushiki."

Zephyr shifted seamlessly into lecture mode, his expression stern and focused.

"The Rokushiki consists of six techniques: Soru, Tekkai, Kami-e, Geppo, Rankyaku, and Shigan. These six techniques complement each other, forming a powerful system that covers offense, defense, and high-speed movement."

"I'm sure, given your current ranks and positions, you've at least heard of the Rokushiki before—maybe even seen a Marine officer use them in actual combat."

At this, many nodded in agreement.

The Rokushiki wasn't exactly a secret in the Marine ranks. Plenty of officers had mastered one or two of the techniques.

Suddenly, Zephyr smiled and pointed to Doberman.

"Doberman, in your view, what's the greatest strength of the Rokushiki?"

Doberman paused briefly, then responded in a firm tone:

"Combat effectiveness, Zephyr-sensei."

"Shigan delivers explosive short-range damage, while Rankyaku is a medium-to-long-range technique that makes up for Shigan's limited reach..."

"Soru enables rapid movement—ideal for closing in or retreating quickly. Geppo builds on Soru, allowing for short-term aerial movement, essentially letting the user hover in the air."

"As for Tekkai and Kami-e, they're both defensive techniques."

"If you can master all six forms, the human body becomes a highly efficient combat machine—capable of attacking, defending, bursting, and advancing. No matter the situation, you'll be able to respond with ease and flexibility."

The others nodded in agreement at his response.

Only Daren frowned, just slightly—so subtle it was barely noticeable.

What the others didn't know—he did. He knew the plot.

The true powerhouses ruling the seas? Not one of them relied on the Rokushiki.

On the contrary, the so-called Rokushiki experts had all been defeated because of it.

The critical point? Unlike the others, Daren had already—through his own bodily development—naturally "grasped" several of the Rokushiki techniques.

So in this area, he had more credibility than anyone else here.

But in real combat, he'd discovered the Rokushiki wasn't nearly as "practical" as the rumors made it out to be.

Tekkai amplified one's perception of defense, but the moment Soru was activated, there was a brief window of stiffness—a momentary vulnerability.

For average fighters, that didn't matter much. But to a real powerhouse, it was an obvious opening.

Rather than calling the Rokushiki a set of combat techniques, it might be more accurate to call it...

"Well said. Looks like you've done your homework," Zephyr's voice cut into Daren's thoughts.

He smiled and gave Doberman an approving look.

"But you're not entirely right."

Zephyr's tone shifted.

"Let me tell you the truth right now..."

He raised a large hand and clenched it into a fist.

"The true purpose of the Rokushiki isn't actual combat."

"This isn't some powerful fighting style you think it is—it's a strict, refined, and intricately designed training system."

"Shigan and Rankyaku help enhance the explosive strength and control of your limbs."

"Tekkai and Kami-e—one boosts overall physical durability, the other sharpens your neural responses and bodily awareness."

"Soru and Geppo train your muscles for instantaneous bursts and control."

Zephyr's voice boomed like thunder, echoing with force.

"In short... Rokushiki is a well-grounded system of training, designed to push the human body to its limits!"

"It has nothing to do with real combat."

"Many people get it wrong. They treat the Rokushiki as if it's meant for battle and stupidly try to use it against true powerhouses. That's completely missing the point!"

"You're not mistaken—yes, I'm talking about those sneaky lackeys from CP!"

At that line, Zephyr's voice was dripping with undisguised scorn and contempt.

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Chapter 152 - 152: Volume 2 – Chapter 54 You're Not Going to Scam Me, Are You?

As soon as Zephyr's words landed, all the Marines present were visibly shaken, deep in thought.

Each of them was a top recruit, handpicked by Marine Headquarters from across the world's oceans. While their current strength might not rival "monsters" like Sakazuki and the others, their talent was undeniably top-tier. It didn't take them long to grasp the implication behind Zephyr's words.

Put simply, the Marines Rokushiki might not have been developed as combat techniques in the first place. Instead, they were likely intended as a comprehensive training system.

A system designed to help practitioners lay a solid foundation, unlock their physical potential, and ultimately gain access to even greater power.

Daren's eyes flickered slightly.

Zephyr-sensei's explanation confirmed the doubts he had long held about the Rokushiki.

Each technique had glaring weaknesses in real combat:

The brief stiffness after using Soru, the overconfidence encouraged by Tekkai, Shigan's lack of lethality, Rankyaku being far weaker than a swordsman's slash, the delayed reaction of Kami-e, and Geppo's limited application...

Using techniques like these in actual battle often felt more like a burden than an advantage.

But!

The value of the Rokushiki in developing raw physical power and potential? That was undeniable.

Daren even suspected that his own grueling endurance training had essentially mirrored Tekkai practice—he had just gone a little overboard.

At its core, the Rokushiki wasn't a set of combat skills—it was a method of training.

To put it in simple terms: push-ups are a way for a boxer to build arm strength. But if a boxer tried to use push-ups during an actual match, they'd be an idiot.

From Zephyr-sensei's tone, it also sounded like he wasn't exactly fond of the CP division.

"So listen carefully—don't rely too heavily on the Rokushiki," Zephyr said with a faint smile.

"In real combat, you have to adapt to the situation."

"And one more thing: training in the Rokushiki will directly impact your future ability to develop power—and even your ability to master Haki."

"That's because the Rokushiki helps you break past the limits of the human body. Once you've truly mastered that strength, you'll be able to pursue greater heights and even stronger power... and at that point, mastering Haki will come naturally."

"I imagine Daren has some thoughts on that."

He turned to Daren, his smile carrying a note of encouragement.

"You've all seen it—Daren has already pushed his body beyond human limits. Even under normal conditions, his body's durability is comparable to the level of Tekkai. So it's only natural that he's able to wield Armament Haki."

Suddenly, everything clicked into place for the others.

Zephyr's clear and simple explanation shattered their previous misconceptions about the Rokushiki.

At first, they had assumed that only after becoming "superhuman" could someone use the Rokushiki.

But in truth, it was the other way around.

Through constant training in the Rokushiki, over time, once all six techniques were mastered, the body would naturally evolve into a "superhuman" state.

Cause and effect—it made perfect sense.

"Alright then, I'll now demonstrate the Rokushiki for you."

Zephyr spoke in a low voice, sweeping his eyes over the group before settling on Tokikake, who was craning his neck curiously.

"Tokikake, you're up."

"Me?"

Tokikake pointed to himself, a little hesitant.

"Yes. Come at me with everything you've got—punch me!"

Zephyr grinned.

Tokikake's face twisted with hesitation.

"Zephyr-sensei... is this really a good idea?"

Zephyr blew out a breath, mustache bristling, and glared.

"What's wrong? You think I can't handle a punch from you, kid?"

"That's not it..."

Tokikake looked conflicted and muttered,

"It's just... Zephyr-sensei... you're not going to scam me, are you?"

Everyone: "..."

Zephyr: "..."

"Get outta here!!"

Zephyr barked angrily, then scanned the crowd again.

"Daren, you do it."

Daren frowned slightly, also a bit unsure.

"Zephyr-sensei, are you sure?"

Frustrated from Tokikake's nonsense, Zephyr shot back,

"Even if I'm retired, I'm still a Marine Admiral! Taking one punch from you is nothing!"

"Don't worry. To show the effect clearly, I won't use Haki for defense. Of course, you shouldn't use Haki either—just pure physical strength," he instructed.

"Well... alright then."

Since Zephyr had said as much, Daren didn't argue further. He stepped out from the group.

Everyone's eyes lit up immediately.

They had seen firsthand how terrifying Daren's strength was. One punch from him had crumbled an abandoned military outpost into ruins.

"Listen up, all of you. Tekkai, one of the Marine's Rokushiki techniques, hardens the body by reinforcing the muscles—boosting impact resistance until the body's tough as steel, able to withstand blades and bullets."

Zephyr gave a low shout. As his blood surged, his muscles swelled like molten magma, stretching his uniform taut.

"Come on, Daren."

Daren nodded.

He took a deep breath, eyes locked on the former Marine Admiral standing ten meters away. His entire body tensed, muscles compressing like tightly coiled springs.

In past duels, whether against Dalmatian, Yamakaji, or Kuzan, he'd never truly gotten the chance for an all-out, close-quarters battle.

This time, he wanted to see what kind of strength he could unleash when going full force!

Crack... snap...

The ground beneath him began to fracture visibly, unable to withstand the surging pressure.

Everyone held their breath, eyes wide, afraid to blink and miss what was about to happen.

Boom!!

Like a spring pushed to its absolute limit, the ground beneath Daren erupted as if a high-yield explosive had gone off. The terrain caved in layer by layer, blasting open a massive crater.

Using that terrifying recoil, Daren shot forward like a cannonball, his speed instantly maxed out.

That burst of power... something's off!

Zephyr's pupils contracted. A sudden sense of foreboding crept into his mind.

His body moved instinctively, activating Haki for defense—

But just then, he caught sight of his students' eager eyes.

His mouth twitched.

In that split-second of distraction—

Bang!!

Daren's punch slammed into his abdomen like a meteor hammer.

A ripple of white shockwave burst from Zephyr's back. The sheer impact drove him sliding backward several meters before grinding to a stop.

His boots carved two deep trenches in the ground.

Dust flew up.

Under the astonished gazes of the crowd, Zephyr exhaled slowly, then looked up with a calm smile.

"Not bad. That's some impressive strength..."

"It's on par with how I was in my youth."

Daren let out a long breath. Seeing that his full-powered strike had barely left a mark, he couldn't help but feel a tinge of regret.

"So strong!!"

"Zephyr-sensei's Tekkai has reached this level?!"

"He really is a former Marine Admiral!"

"That was so cool!"

"..."

The crowd erupted in cheers and awe.

"Hmmm..."

Zephyr chuckled. Surrounded by admiration, he silently turned and walked to the edge of the training field, pausing for a moment.

Then—

He bent over.

"Ugh!!!"

A loud splash followed as a massive amount of liquid hit the ground.

Everyone: "..."

A few seconds later, Zephyr wiped his mouth, turned back around, and said calmly,

"Hm. I overate at breakfast."

Unfazed, he continued,

"Alright, next, I'll demonstrate and explain the Marine Rokushiki, how to exert force, and the basics of training."

"Zephyr-sensei, do you still need my help?" Daren asked.

"No need. The next part's too dangerous—I'd rather not injure you."

"Oh."

...

Chapter 153 - 153: Volume 2 – Chapter 55: Teaching in Progress

"Oh."

Daren replied with a hint of regret.

"Don't be discouraged. Your strength is evident to all. Given time, you'll surely catch up to—and perhaps even surpass—me."

Zephyr smiled grandly, arms crossed over his chest.

"What about me? What about me?"

Tokikake darted out from the crowd again, his face full of excitement.

"You?"

Zephyr gave him a sidelong glance, took a deep breath, and slowly said,

"You're not bad either... very clever."

Tokikake: ...

Zephyr shook his head and began officially demonstrating the Rokushiki to the crowd.

He walked over to a heavy stone target.

"Shigan. You gather all your strength into a single point and unleash it through a hardened finger in an instant. The strike is fast as lightning, powerful enough to pierce stone—or even steel. Naturally, it can penetrate the human body as well, making it a lethal technique."

As he spoke, Zephyr lifted the large stone target with one hand and gently tossed it into the air.

"But the key point here is that Shigan training helps you master strength control and how to concentrate force."

With a sudden thrust of his index finger—

Bang!

A hole the width of a finger appeared in the floating stone target. A spray of dust burst from the back.

"Next is Rankyaku."

Zephyr casually kicked the stone target high into the air. His booted foot exploded with power, tearing through the air. In an instant, a deep green, crescent-shaped slash flew out, slicing the airborne target cleanly in two.

At the same time, Zephyr's low voice echoed across the schoolyard:

"As one of the Rokushiki 'foot techniques,' Rankyaku doesn't rely on the kick itself to attack. Instead, it creates a vacuum with high-speed, powerful leg movements to generate a mid-range slash."

"Training in Rankyaku helps improve your body's explosive power."

"And then comes Soru..."

The moment the words left his mouth, everyone saw a blur in front of their eyes.

Zephyr's figure suddenly appeared dozens of meters away like a ghost.

Daren's pupils narrowed slightly.

He'd clearly noticed—Zephyr's speed while using Soru was at least five times faster than his own!

And there was no visible stiffness or lag in his movement!

"In just an instant, you stomp the ground dozens of times in rapid succession, creating explosive recoil to move at high speed. The trick isn't in brute force, but frequency."

Zephyr explained crisply. As he stepped forward again, it was as if the air beneath his feet turned solid. In the blink of an eye, he was rising through the sky, stepping on air.

"This is Geppo. It's an advanced, extended form of Soru that requires even faster footwork and greater control of body balance."

"Whether it's Soru or Geppo, training these techniques will significantly improve your command over body rhythm and explosive movement."

Zephyr's voice echoed from above. Only now did the stone target, which had been split by Rankyaku, start falling under gravity's pull.

"Lastly, Kami-e."

Zephyr smiled as he caught up to the falling target. With a few midair steps, he twisted his waist and turned, striking the target with a spinning kick that shattered it into fragments.

In the next moment—

His figure vanished.

When he reappeared, he was already standing beneath the rain of falling stone shards.

A shocking scene unfolded. Debris fell like a storm of bullets.

Zephyr's large frame suddenly seemed to turn as soft as paper, fluttering like a willow leaf in a gale.

Countless stone fragments grazed past his now "pliable" body without causing a single scratch, slamming into the ground and leaving behind dozens of craters.

Everything fell silent.

Zephyr turned around and smiled at the group of students watching him with admiration.

"This is one of the defensive techniques of the Rokushiki. By releasing all the tension in your body and sensing changes in your opponent's air flow, you can make your body as light as paper and move with ease to dodge attacks."

"Training in Kami-e strengthens your ability to sense danger... and this particular practice clearly points toward the development of Observation Haki."

"It's no exaggeration to say that mastering Kami-e can be a shortcut to awakening the power of Observation Haki."

He brushed the dust off his hands and lit a cigar.

"This is the Marine Rokushiki—a structured set of techniques refined and developed over generations by powerful Marines. It's not just about close combat."

"Remember this well. Incorporate the Rokushiki into your daily training. It will be the key to unlocking greater strength—and a crucial part of your journey to becoming stronger."

Zephyr exhaled a long stream of smoke that curled like a dragon, his voice calm yet heavy with meaning.

As a teacher, he always wanted to pass on the best to his students, to help them avoid detours on the path to strength.

"Now I'll demonstrate the actual mechanics of power generation. Watch closely..."

As Zephyr explained with meticulous care, everyone focused intently on observing and copying his movements. Even Tokikake, usually a fool, was completely absorbed, his expression unusually serious.

Every single one of them understood deep down that joining the training camp and becoming Zephyr's student wasn't an honor for the Marines—it was the greatest stroke of luck in their lives.

A legendary Marine Admiral, one of the strongest men in the seas, teaching them personally—this was something money could never buy.

Even a single offhand comment or casual pointer from Zephyr might benefit them for the rest of their lives, or increase their chances of surviving on the battlefield.

Daren, too, trained with utmost dedication.

Though his body had already been honed to "superhuman" levels through sheer willpower and hellish training, he knew he was still far from being a true powerhouse.

Zephyr's deep yet easy-to-understand teachings gave him valuable insights. Combined with his own experience, he could grasp lessons more profoundly than the others.

At the same time, watching Zephyr's serious, focused expression as he taught, Daren couldn't help feeling deeply moved.

Only someone with Zephyr's selfless nature could take on the role of Marine Head Instructor.

If it had been Garp instead, he'd probably just give a quick demo, pick his nose, wander off to snack on rice crackers, and throw in a lazy comment like:

"Isn't this something you can do with your hands?"

Zephyr—a name that will never fade from Marine history.

The one who forged the legend of the Marines' "Golden Generation" with his own hands.

Maybe... he's the true greatest hero of the Marines.

...

Chapter 154 - 154: Volume 2 – Chapter 56: Learned After Just One Look?

Half an hour later, Zephyr had finished explaining the power generation techniques and introductory training of the Marine Rokushiki.

After answering each student's question, he wiped the sweat from his face and smiled.

"Alright, the rest of the time is yours for self-practice. If you have any questions, feel free to ask me."

The Marines all nodded and quickly spread out across the training grounds. They began carefully reviewing Zephyr's instructions, attempting to train in the Rokushiki techniques.

Although all six styles were designed to push the human body beyond its limits, each person had different training priorities. Most chose one or two techniques to focus on at the start.

For example, Dalmatian, a Zoan-type Devil Fruit user, focused on Soru and Shigan. His goal was to maximize his Inu Inu no Mi's speed and claw penetration through sudden charges and explosive strikes.

Officers like Doberman and Yamakaji, who specialized in swordsmanship, leaned toward Tekkai, Rankyaku, and Soru.

Tekkai enhanced physical defense and resistance to impact, increasing close-combat durability.

Rankyaku, on the other hand, resembled the flying slash techniques of swordmasters, making it more intuitive for them to learn.

Unsurprisingly, Soru—being the most practical and versatile of the six forms—was a universal focus for every Marine present.

As for Rogers Daren, whose body had long since surpassed human limits and reached a "superhuman" level, he practiced all six forms simultaneously.

Daren walked to a vacant space nearby and faced a humanoid stone target. He gradually entered a meditative state, closing his eyes.

He began replaying Zephyr's instructions in his mind, sharpening his perception and gaining precise control over his muscles.

Shigan required gathering the body's full strength into a single point. The source of that power was the legs. As his muscles contracted, Daren's boots twisted slightly, gripping the ground like driven spikes.

He carefully attuned himself to the movement of each muscle and bone.

Power channeled from the feet to the pelvis. The pelvis and spine had to remain stable. Then came the shoulders, arms...

A dry breeze drifted by. The scorching sun beat down on the land.

But Daren's heart was perfectly still.

Then—

He suddenly opened his eyes, a flash of sharp light flickering deep within.

With a sharp breath—

All the strength stored in his body surged into his index finger and shot forward in one clean motion.

Shigan!

Bang!!

The stone target burst open, a hole blown through it as fragments of chalk flew everywhere.

Hoo...

Daren exhaled slowly, a smile appearing on his face.

Mastering the Rokushiki... was easier than I expected.

But then he reconsidered. His strength, explosiveness, stamina, and bone density had already surpassed the thresholds of the Rokushiki. It made sense he could grasp it so quickly.

He looked up—

And found himself facing a sea of stunned faces.

"What's with those looks?"

Daren asked, puzzled by the frozen expressions around him.

"Daren..."

"You..."

"You... You just mastered Shigan in one go!?"

"This..."

Doberman and the others stared blankly between Daren and the gaping hole in the target, utterly in disbelief.

"It's not that hard. You just gather all your strength into one point—that's all it takes."

Daren replied with a smile.

Yeah, right... Their expressions said otherwise.

Only a freak like you would think that's easy.

"Hahahaha! Let me give it a shot!"

Kuzan's eyes lit up as he stepped forward.

"I'm not going to lose to you, Daren!"

With high spirits, he walked up to another stone target, took a deep breath, and focused his energy.

Everyone watched with wide eyes.

"Shigan!"

Kuzan shouted, thrusting his index finger like a cannon.

Pfft!

The chalk exploded, and a finger-sized hole appeared cleanly in the center of the stone target.

"Hahahaha! I did it! Daren, did you see that?"

Kuzan beamed as he turned to Daren, his face lit up with excitement.

It really worked!?

Everyone else was screaming internally, completely stunned.

The Marine Rokushiki techniques were anything but easy to master. Even some high-ranking Officers at Marine Headquarters had only managed to learn one or two styles, using them to break through limits in specific areas of their training.

They'd heard rumors before—tales of monstrous prodigies on the seas who could pick up the Rokushiki after seeing it once or twice.

But now that it had happened right in front of them, they still found it hard to believe. It was utterly mind-blowing.

That Daren could learn the techniques so quickly was shocking, but at least somewhat understandable. His strength and physique spoke for themselves.

But Kuzan!?

What kind of terrifying talent was that...?

Daren's heart stirred at the sight of Kuzan's performance. His pupils narrowed.

From a distance, Zephyr sat on a beach chair, puffing on a cigar. His eyes brightened.

No wonder they called him a monster... Kuzan's speed in grasping the Rokushiki rivaled that of Sakazuki and Borsalino back in the day.

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"I want to try too!"

A voice suddenly rang out.

Everyone turned toward the source and saw Tokikake striding out from the crowd with his hands on his hips.

Watching all the attention focus on Daren and Kuzan left him feeling bitter and overshadowed.

The group watched as Tokikake approached the stone target, exchanging uncertain glances.

Could it be that Tokikake had also learned Shigan in such a short time?

As he felt all eyes on him—especially Gion's—Tokikake started to feel a little full of himself.

It's just Shigan.

How hard can it be?

Striking a pose he thought was cool, he took a deep breath under the crowd's watchful gaze.

Then, just like Daren and Kuzan, he suddenly thrust his index finger at the center of the stone target!

Crack—

A loud snapping sound rang out.

"Ssshhh!!"

Everyone in the crowd gasped in unison.

They stared at the perfectly intact target... and at Tokikake's finger, now bent a full ninety degrees in the wrong direction.

Their expressions twitched. Several people instinctively pulled their hands back in sympathy.

Tokikake's face went pale for a split second, but he quickly recovered his composure.

He took a deep breath, then calmly clasped his hands behind his back to hide the damage and said with a straight face:

"Hm. I haven't exercised in a while. Just loosening up the finger joints."

Everyone: "..."

Zephyr silently covered his face with one hand.

...

Chapter 155 - 155: Volume 2 – Chapter 57: The Meaning of Being Top of the Class

A month passed in the blink of an eye.

In the newly constructed teaching building of the training camp—Top floor, Kendo Club.

Bang!!

Two figures flashed past each other at incredible speed inside the training room, like blurs. Both had just used Soru, the high-speed movement technique from the Marine Rokushiki.

The tip of a wooden sword spun through the air before landing on the ground with a thud.

Yamakaji stared blankly at the broken wooden sword in his hand. A wry smile formed on his lips.

"I lost again, Commander Gion."

He wiped the sweat from his forehead and turned to the tall figure in the indigo kendo uniform. His expression was full of emotion.

"You really are the swordsmanship genius praised by both Admiral Sengoku and Zephyr-sensei..."

Gion lifted her hand to remove her faceguard and set down her wooden sword. Sweat clung to the strands of her hair as they fell across her cheek, her features radiant and composed.

"Captain Yamakaji, you're flattering me," she replied with a smile.

Then—

The two walked toward each other and bowed in unison.

"Thank you for the match."

Such is the etiquette of kendo.

Just as they were about to rest, a distant, muffled rumbling came from outside the window.

"It's starting again..."

Yamakaji gave a dry chuckle, walked over, and looked out.

Out on the far end of the training grounds, yellow sand swirled in the heat.

A massive figure, shirtless, revealed a body of bulging muscle and scar-covered flesh. He was dragging an enormous decommissioned warship, inch by inch, under the blazing sun. Huge black chains were clenched in both hands.

It was midday. The sun beat down like fire, turning the outside world into a boiling furnace.

His skin had tanned into a wild, bronzed hue. Beads of sweat streamed down the grooves of his chiseled physique.

What was truly frightening—every step he took caused the ground beneath him to visibly tremble. Dust and gravel jumped into the air with each impact.

That colossal warship, which would normally require hundreds of people to haul into the sea, was being pulled forward by one man. The searing earth was gouged into a deep, jagged trench in his wake.

From afar, his nearly three-meter-tall frame looked insignificant, like an ant, beneath the towering 20-meter-high warship.

"Commander Gion... was Daren like this during his training in the North Blue?"

Yamakaji's throat was dry as he spoke in a low voice.

He still remembered the first time he witnessed Daren training like this. Not just him—everyone at the camp had been stunned speechless.

Even the ever-composed Zephyr-sensei looked like he'd seen a ghost.

No matter how many times you saw it... that sight never stopped being overwhelming.

"No..."

Gion's gaze was just as complex as she watched the figure on the field radiating a wild, beast-like aura. She shook her head slowly.

"Really?" Yamakaji blinked, turning to her.

"Mhm. Back in the North Blue, the warship he was dragging was only half that size."

Yamakaji: "..."

He gulped hard.

"Don't dwell on it too much."

Gion caught the frustration and bitter resolve in Yamakaji's eyes and offered a quiet reassurance.

"That guy's a monster."

Yamakaji sighed and nodded.

Gion slipped off her indigo kendo uniform and turned to leave the training room, leaving Yamakaji alone at the window.

Silence lingered for a while.

Then Yamakaji chuckled.

"Commander Gion, you said not to take it too seriously... but you clearly care a lot."

He could hear the sound of weight training from downstairs.

It was Gion, putting herself through strength training after just finishing a grueling kendo bout.

Taking a deep breath, Yamakaji reached for a roll of bandages and began wrapping his hands—raw, blistered, and bleeding.

He grabbed a fresh wooden sword and returned to training.

Sweat poured down his body. Blood seeped through the bandages. But he paid it no mind.

He was completely immersed in the world of swordsmanship, forcing himself forward on the path to becoming stronger.

Meanwhile, in the combat training gym—

Kuzan, drenched in sweat, looked out the window toward the figure on the training grounds and muttered with a smile,

"Daren, you're seriously cool... If that's the case, I've got to work even harder too..."

He turned his head and glanced over at Tokikake, who was slumped on the floor nearby, face bruised and swollen, gasping for air. Kuzan's eyes burned with determination.

"Keep going!"

Tokikake immediately let out a miserable wail.

You can train all you want, but why drag me into it too!?

...

And it wasn't just them.

Across every corner of the training camp—the armament division, the endurance training hall, and beyond—the moment they heard the thunderous echoes from the drill field, every Marine in the camp clenched their teeth and pushed themselves harder.

That monster of a man was still subjecting himself to hellish training, day after day, never resting, not even in the fiercest storms...

If the top-ranked trainee, who was leagues ahead of the rest, hadn't slacked off for a second—then how could they afford to?

...

Chief Instructor's Office

"Did you hear that, Sengoku...?"

Zephyr looked at Sengoku across from him, pride creeping onto his face despite himself.

Sengoku, "listening" through his Observation Haki to the distant commotion, was just as moved.

Not only had Daren surpassed everyone in sheer strength, his spirit and determination were inspiring his fellow recruits, guiding them down the right path—one that made them all stronger.

Perhaps... that's what being the top of the class truly means.

"I really didn't expect Daren's presence to transform the training camp this much," Sengoku said with a sigh.

Zephyr's mouth twitched. Something clearly came to mind.

He still remembered the mess of that first training camp.

Sakazuki had cut his training period short, storming off early to go hunt pirates—dragging along a pack of like-minded followers.

And the rest? Well... with Borsalino as top of the class, the whole thing had felt more like playtime than training.

"Maybe... this batch will be the best the camp's ever had."

Zephyr smiled.

"By the way, Sengoku. What brings you to my side of the base this time?"

Sengoku waved his hand casually.

"Oh, nothing. Just wanted to check in on the current trainees..."

He paused for a moment, then asked, a little too casually,

"So, how's that kid Daren doing in his training lately?"

"Not bad. That kid trains like a man possessed. His willpower's almost scary..."

Zephyr responded without hesitation.

"You've seen how he trains—like some feral beast. His control over Armament Haki has gotten much better, and his Haki's strength has improved quite a bit too... Wait a second—what are you plotting!?"

Zephyr's eyes narrowed with suspicion. He locked onto Sengoku with a sharp stare.

"You never care about the training camp. What are you up to?"

Caught red-handed, Sengoku let out an awkward laugh and coughed twice.

"Ahem... actually, the truth is, I'm here because there's an urgent mission. I want to borrow someone."

"Who?" Zephyr had a bad feeling.

"Daren."

"Not a chance!"

"..."

Chapter 156 - 156: Volume 2 – Chapter 58: Sudden Assignment

Sengoku's smile froze, his face twitching slightly.

Hey, hey, hey, Zephyr, you old bastard, that rejection was way too quick.

Can't you at least show a little respect for this Marine Admiral?

"Don't think I don't know what that cunning brain of yours is scheming. Daren is my adjutant..."

Zephyr lit a cigar at a leisurely pace, narrowing his eyes at Sengoku.

"You already have Borsalino."

At those words, Sengoku nearly choked on his own spit. He gritted his teeth and snapped,

"Don't even mention that guy to me!!"

He took a deep breath, forcing down his irritation.

"Zephyr, this emergency mission has nothing to do with who becomes his adjutant. In the end, it's Daren's own choice. But this mission—this one—we really need his help."

Zephyr exhaled a puff of smoke and glanced at Sengoku. Seeing the seriousness in his expression, he frowned.

"Is there really something you can't handle on your end? There are so many high-ranking officers at headquarters—why does it have to be Daren?"

"Sengoku... you know better than anyone that the training camp is a critical period for elite officers to rapidly grow stronger. It's especially important for their long-term development..."

"If it's just about needing manpower, wouldn't Sakazuki, Dragon, or Borsalino be better options? They've already matured, and their strength is close to the level of an Admiral."

"But Daren is still in the midst of his rapid growth phase. Sending him on a dangerous mission now... it's just not appropriate."

Zephyr shook his head firmly as he spoke.

Though the training camp isn't a sealed-off system and doesn't restrict student movement—

After all, these aren't clueless rookies, but elite Marines carefully selected from across the world, and it's not uncommon for them to be dispatched on missions—

After a month of observation, Zephyr had been shocked by just how fast Daren was progressing.

He was like an endless sponge, soaking up everything Zephyr taught—knowledge, techniques, combat training. His strength had skyrocketed since the day he first set foot in the camp!

Zephyr had only seen this kind of explosive growth in Sakazuki and Borsalino before. And truth be told, Daren might even be surpassing them.

It was clear that Daren had laid a solid foundation back in the North Blue. Under Zephyr's guidance at the headquarters training camp, all that accumulated potential had finally exploded, resulting in an outrageous leap in power.

It was the classic case of long preparation yielding sudden breakthroughs.

Naturally, Zephyr didn't want to disrupt this perfect growth period.

There would be plenty of opportunities for pirate-hunting missions in the future—no need to rush it now.

Dragging him into Marine operations at this point would undermine the very purpose of the training camp.

As Daren's teacher, Zephyr was determined to protect his best interests.

"Zephyr, I've thought about your concerns too. But this mission is particularly tricky,"

Sengoku said seriously.

"And you know as well as I do—strength doesn't just come from training. Real combat experience is crucial."

Seeing Zephyr still frowning, he added,

"How about we ask Daren for his opinion first, and decide after that? He knows his own situation better than anyone."

Hearing that, Zephyr could only sigh and nod.

He could still forcefully say no, but Sengoku was, after all, the Admiral of Headquarters.

Since he'd gone this far, he had to give him some face.

'If worst comes to worst, I'll just talk Daren out of it myself,' Zephyr muttered inwardly.

...

On the training grounds.

The scorching sun stabbed into the skin like blades, searing with pain.

Beads of sweat dripped onto the ground, only to vanish instantly into the parched soil.

Bang!

A thick iron chain crashed down, kicking up dirt and gravel.

Daren was gasping for air, his chest heaving like a bellows, rasping with each breath.

Yet his face showed nothing but satisfaction and enjoyment.

The past month had been incredibly fulfilling. It had been a long time since he'd experienced such peaceful days.

No endless military duties, no tiresome social obligations, no hollow political games—just training, sweat, and the quiet camaraderie of classmates competing while encouraging each other with genuine smiles.

Free from the distractions of official affairs and trivial socializing, Daren had fully immersed himself in personal cultivation.

To his surprise, under Zephyr's guidance and a deeper understanding of the training methods, his strength had finally made a breakthrough.

Though his progress with Observation Haki had yet to improve, his physical stats had risen noticeably.

Physique: 69.335

Strength: 66.331

Speed: 66.591

Fruit: 76.111

Armament Haki: 28.319

Development in physique, strength, speed, and Devil Fruit control—all four had increased by at least two points, some even more, over the past month of intensive training!

It was a staggering leap.

On the panel, a two-point gain might not look like much, but taken together, that meant a near ten-point increase across the board.

In actual combat terms, that equated to a boost of over 20% in personal combat effectiveness.

Of course, Daren knew well that as he adapted to the intensity of this training and the new methods, the pace of his growth would inevitably slow down.

And over the past two or three days, that slowdown had become increasingly apparent.

Still, beyond the rise in his base stats—

Thanks to Zephyr's guidance and a clearer breakdown of the theory, Daren had gained a more precise understanding of Armament Haki.

Based on that understanding, and after careful measurement and evaluation, a benchmark for the strength of Armament Haki had been established.

Thinking of this, Daren looked down at his rough, callused, and blistered palms.

Then he shouted in a low voice,

"Armament!"

Swish!

A visible black sheen spread across his arm like liquid, covering his entire hand in a dense, cold, metallic gloss.

If 100 points was the standard benchmark, then by rough estimation, Zephyr-sensei's Armament Haki strength hovered around 90 points.

His own... was 28.

That might not seem impressive next to Zephyr, but considering it had only been a month since he first grasped the concept to now being able to use it proficiently, Daren knew this progress was already enough to put most people to shame.

What made it even more intriguing was that he had personally witnessed two Marine legends—Garp and Sengoku—fighting at full strength.

By his estimation, Sengoku's Armament Haki likely fell somewhere between 80 and 85 points, while Garp was about equal with Zephyr.

However, Garp had the added bonus of Conqueror's Haki, which made his actual combat output superior to Zephyr's.

At that moment, a figure ran up from the edge of the training field.

He snapped a salute at Daren.

"Commodore Daren, Zephyr-sama requests your presence!"

...

Three minutes later.

Daren, now dressed in a clean military uniform, knocked on the door of the chief instructor's office.

"Zephyr-sensei, you wanted to see me?"

He greeted as he stepped inside—only to spot Sengoku sitting on the sofa, wearing a confident smile as he looked over at him.

"Admiral Sengoku."

Daren paused briefly, then quickly raised his hand in a formal salute.

Zephyr had already stepped down from his position as an Admiral of Marine Headquarters. Within the training camp, their relationship was strictly that of master and student, without a rigid superior-subordinate structure.

But Sengoku was different. He was still an active Admiral, and Daren's direct superior. So, at least on the surface, proper decorum still had to be observed.

"Well, Daren, how's your training going lately? Any problems?"

Zephyr asked with a smile, his eyes filled with obvious pride and admiration.

Daren shook his head and smiled.

"Not at the moment. Your teachings have been rich and insightful, Zephyr-sensei. It'll take me some time to fully digest and absorb everything."

Look at this kid, such a smooth talker!

Hearing that, Zephyr's smile deepened, and he raised an eyebrow at Sengoku in a teasing, almost provocative way—

As if to say, See? Daren growing under my guidance was clearly the right choice.

So childish!

Sengoku rolled his eyes in open disdain.

At that moment, Daren turned to Sengoku and smiled politely.

"It's been a while, Admiral Sengoku. You're looking as sharp as ever."

"Mm, not bad yourself," Sengoku replied, his face instantly blooming into a wide, pleased grin.

Zephyr: "..."

"Cough cough..."

Sengoku quickly reined in his smile, cleared his throat twice, and looked at Daren with a more serious expression.

"Daren, the reason I came to the training camp this time is to see you specifically. There's an urgent mission."

For me?

Daren frowned slightly.

A mission?

The training camp during this period wasn't anything like the formal, closed-off military academies of later generations.

In the original timeline, training camps were eventually replaced by proper military schools with much broader enrollment. During that time, cadets weren't allowed to freely enter or leave the campus—it followed strict modern standards.

But the training camp now was different.

It gathered elites from all over the world, and cadets could be deployed on missions during their training if needed.

That said, in order to maintain the quality of instruction, the military generally avoided sending students out unless absolutely necessary.

"What exactly do you mean, Admiral Sengoku?"

Sengoku replied in a solemn tone.

"To maintain operational secrecy, I can't tell you the details of the mission until you officially accept it."

"There's only one thing I can tell you."

He slowly straightened up, his expression turning grim.

"The target of this mission is extremely powerful—ruthless, brutal, soaked in blood. Countless people have died at his hands."

"According to evaluations by the staff department, his combat power is likely approaching that of the 'World Destroyer,' Byrnni World."

Daren's brows furrowed tighter.

"So, Admiral Sengoku, you want me to accept a mission this dangerous without even knowing who the target is?"

Sengoku's expression stiffened for a moment before he nodded.

He knew full well how unreasonable this request sounded. That's exactly why he'd first tried to get Zephyr's support—hoping they could stand on the same side.

Seeing the looks on both Daren and Sengoku's faces, Zephyr's heart settled. He smiled and said:

"Daren, you don't need to worry. If you don't want to go, just say so. It won't affect you in any way."

"At this stage, what matters most for you is to stay focused on your training and growth."

Sengoku added, a little impatiently:

"Daren, while the mission target is indeed formidable, your Devil Fruit ability happens to counter him perfectly."

"That's exactly why I came to you."

"Also, you won't be acting alone. You'll be serving as a deputy on this mission—someone else will be leading it."

"For you, the risk is within a manageable range. It'll be easier than the fight against Byrnni World, at the very least."

My ability can counter his...?

Daren fell into thought, his mind racing as he sifted through everything he knew.

He might be arrogant and headstrong, but he wasn't a fool with a death wish.

Ever since taking a direct blow from Roger, he'd fully realized just how far he still was from standing at the top of the sea.

Right now, he was in a crucial phase of growth. Unless absolutely necessary—and unless he had a solid chance—staying in the training camp to build up his strength was clearly the wiser choice.

Still, who could this target be, that even someone like Sengoku would be this cautious?

A combatant on par with the "World Destroyer" Byrnni World...

Violent, brutal, soaked in blood...

And given the current timeline...

A name quickly rose from the depths of Daren's mind, growing clearer by the second.

"Admiral Sengoku, if I agree to join the mission—who's the commander?"

Daren asked after a brief pause. Zephyr looked slightly surprised by the question.

Before Sengoku could answer, a low, hoarse voice cut through the air behind them.

"It's me."

At some point, the door to the chief instructor's office had been pushed open.

A cold, oppressive aura swept in like a chilling wind.

Daren froze as he heard the voice, then slowly turned around.

A tall figure in a military cap stood there, stern and imposing, his eyes clouded with an ever-present gloom.

"So... ready to throw down, Daren?" the man asked coolly.

Daren met Sakazuki's gaze, his own expression calm.

The two locked eyes in silence.

One second.

Two seconds.

Three seconds.

Then a smirk slowly curled on Daren's lips, sharp and defiant.

"It's been a long time since we fought side by side, Rear Admiral Sakazuki."

...

"Sengoku, you bastard!! You set me up!!"

After Daren had left with Sakazuki, Zephyr finally exploded.

Slamming the table, he puffed out his cheeks and glared.

"You didn't say the mission commander was Sakazuki!!"

He was fuming.

What a joke!

Before Sakazuki left the North Blue, Daren had been his adjutant!

There was no way Daren could refuse a mission from his former commanding officer!

Sengoku lounged in his seat, casually munching on senbei, digging into his ear with a relaxed expression as he played dumb.

"Really? I didn't mention that?"

"Hahahaha... not important."

Zephyr was grinding his teeth now.

He knew Sengoku was cunning—but he hadn't expected this level of sneakiness!

"There are so many outstanding Vice Admirals at HQ—why did it have to be Daren?!"

"And if the target's so dangerous, why aren't you, the Admiral of Headquarters, handling it yourself?!"

Zephyr demanded.

Sengoku suddenly set his senbei aside. His tone dropped, grave and cautious.

"Because something even more dangerous is happening at the same time."

He wiped his mouth. A serious glint flashed in his eyes.

"According to Garp's intel, the Roger Pirates have entered the New World. Judging by the course of the Oro Jackson, Roger's likely headed to meet Whitebeard."

Zephyr's expression shifted at those words.

...

Chapter 158 - 158: Volume 2 – Chapter 60: I Want to See It Again

Although Zephyr had long since left the front lines and stepped down from his position as an Admiral of the Headquarters, he still kept a close watch on legendary pirates like Roger, Whitebeard, and Shiki.

After all, Zephyr had fought them numerous times and knew just how dangerous they were to the seas.

"Are you sure they're meeting?"

Zephyr's brows furrowed deeply, his expression grave.

Unlike the ambitious Shiki, Roger and Whitebeard had no desire to conquer the world. After the Battle of God Valley, the two clashed on multiple occasions. Each confrontation was overwhelmingly destructive—shattering landmasses and even sinking small islands.

Even so, most of those battles were sparked on a whim—out of rivalry or curiosity—not because of any deep-seated hatred. That made the relationship between their crews strangely delicate.

In fact, Roger and Whitebeard seemed to have a certain mutual respect, even admiration.

If Roger met Shiki, it'd likely be a battle to the death. But if it was Whitebeard... things weren't so clear.

If those two ever came to an understanding and joined forces...

Sengoku pinched his temples, mulling it over.

"We don't know the exact details yet, but that's what the navigational paths suggest... The government's already on alert."

"Ever since the Battle of God Valley, Roger's been wandering the world. The Five Elders are beginning to suspect that he knows something—or is searching for something."

As he spoke, a glint of sharp light flashed across the lenses of Sengoku's black-rimmed glasses.

"So, Zephyr... you understand. I need to go to the New World myself and link up with Garp."

"Even if the chance of Roger and Whitebeard forming an alliance is low, if something unexpected does happen, I can't leave Garp isolated."

"Garp alone can't face both of those maniacs at once."

Zephyr was silent for a while, then shook his head.

"The odds of them teaming up are slim. If Roger really is searching for something, Whitebeard definitely wouldn't get involved in that mess."

"I've crossed blades with Whitebeard more times than I can count. That guy... doesn't have much ambition."

"He just wants to protect his 'family'."

Sengoku glanced at Zephyr and sighed.

"Let's hope it's a false alarm. But no matter what, I need to prepare for the worst."

"I'll be taking most of our available fighting strength—including Borsalino. If I had any other choice, I wouldn't even consider asking Daren to take on such a dangerous mission."

"That's all for now. I need to get going."

With that, Sengoku stood up and made his way toward the door.

But just as he was about to leave the office, he paused.

"Zephyr, I meant what I said last time."

With his back to Zephyr, the dark "Justice" on his white Marine cloak felt especially heavy.

"This era isn't giving us much time."

"And in times like this... I really need my comrades by my side—fighting alongside me."

Zephyr stared quietly at Sengoku's weary back, at that snow-white, sacred cloak. After a long silence, he shook his head and smiled.

"Sengoku, haven't I always been fighting alongside you?"

Sengoku froze, then realized what Zephyr meant.

He said nothing more.

He simply strode out the door.

As he walked down the path to the military port, the blazing sunlight poured down, and Sengoku felt the weight in his heart grow heavier.

Zephyr... are you really content like this?

The once-famous "Black Arm" shouldn't be buried in that rundown academy building, right?

I get it, really.

You want to spend your remaining years at the military academy—putting your hope in the next generation...

That's your answer to "justice." That's your answer to the Marines.

It's also how you fight alongside your comrades.

Even if you're not at my or Garp's side.

But...

Sengoku exhaled slowly, lifting his head as the sunlight stung his eyes.

His fists clenched tightly.

"I really want to see you again—spirited and fierce—leading the Marines into battle..." he murmured.

...

The warship cut steadily through the waves, leaving a long white trail across the vast, endless sea.

On the deck, Sakazuki stood at the bow with his arms crossed, a grim look in his eyes as he stared toward the distant horizon where sea and sky met. A lit cigar hung from his mouth, its smoke whisked away by the ocean breeze, blending into the flutter of his Justice cloak.

"So, what's the objective of this mission?"

Daren walked over slowly, coming to stand beside Sakazuki. He lit a cigar of his own.

Sakazuki took an intelligence file from a young Marine and handed it to him.

"Half a month ago, something major happened in Galzburg on the Grand Line."

His tone was cold and sharp.

"In that war-torn country, tens of thousands of soldiers were wiped out overnight. The entire nation was reduced to ashes—nobles, civilians... no one survived."

"When the World Government heard the news, they were stunned. At first, they suspected it was the work of a Great Pirate, someone like Byrnni World, the World Destroyer. After all, the power to annihilate a country usually belongs to a large pirate crew."

"But after a Marine investigation, we uncovered a shocking truth."

A cold smile tugged at the corner of Sakazuki's mouth.

"The one who destroyed that military nation wasn't a monstrous pirate or some underworld power—it was a soldier."

"A soldier from the very army of Galzburg."

Daren exhaled slowly, watching the smoke drift upward as his eyes settled on the photo in the file—a young man in uniform with long blond hair.

He narrowed his gaze and finished Sakazuki's sentence.

"Douglas Bullet."

So he was right.

A man with destructive power on par with Byrnni World, someone both Sengoku and Sakazuki regarded with caution, appearing at this particular time...

It could only be Douglas Bullet.

A former member of Roger's crew in the original story, said to have fought the Dark King Rayleigh to a standstill—the "Demon Heir."

What he wondered now was... just how strong this man really is right now.

...

Chapter 159 - 159: Volume 2 – Chapter 61: Meeting

Douglas Bullet, known as the "Demon Heir," was once a top-tier combatant and a former member of the Roger Pirates.

It's said that even back in Roger's era, he possessed strength on par with the Dark King, Rayleigh. But after learning Roger was terminally ill, he began to question Roger's power. Eventually, he left the crew, went on a rampage, and turned the entire sea upside down.

In the end, the Marines had to issue a full-scale Buster Call. Even Garp and Sengoku were mobilized to bring him down, and he was finally imprisoned in Level 6, Eternal Hell, of Impel Down.

During the Summit War at Marineford, Bullet took advantage of the chaos caused by Blackbeard and Luffy to break out of Impel Down. Two years later, he launched the Pirate Festival and effortlessly crushed a wave of Supernovas. Unfortunately, he still couldn't overcome the inevitable fate brought by plot armor and the miraculous power of the Sun God...

Staring at the photo of a blond young man with a fierce, defiant gaze and a hardened, militaristic presence, Daren quickly recalled all available intel on Douglas Bullet.

He frowned slightly and cast a glance at Sakazuki.

At this point in time, Douglas Bullet had just wiped out his own country and army. He hadn't joined the Roger Pirates yet—but if his combat strength truly rivaled Rayleigh's...

Then taking him on with just the two of them—Sakazuki and himself—was going to be a long shot.

After all, Sakazuki hadn't reached his peak yet and still had a long way to go before becoming a top-tier powerhouse.

"Douglas Bullet—this guy destroyed his own country and army alone, shocking the royal families of several Member Nations along the Grand Line..."

"To keep that fear from spreading and causing political unrest, the World Government has enforced a strict information blackout regarding Douglas Bullet."

Sakazuki spoke slowly, a stream of white smoke curling from his mouth like a dragon.

"That's why Admiral Sengoku kept the mission objective classified from the very beginning."

Daren nodded in understanding.

For a lunatic like Bullet, it was only natural that the World Government and the Marines would keep things under wraps.

In fact, for notorious world-class criminals, the government and Marines would go to any length to erase their traces—anything to prevent mass panic.

"As for his combat strength..."

Daren hesitated, then asked,

"Do we have any solid assessments or intel from headquarters?"

Sakazuki shook his head.

"All we know for now is that he's capable of destroying a nation."

"Five days ago, a Grand Line branch deployed a Vice Admiral, a warship, and several hundred Marines to capture him. They were completely wiped out."

"But you know as well as I do—that doesn't prove much."

Indeed, a Vice Admiral with a warship was a dominant force in the Four Seas or the first half of the Grand Line.

But for monsters like him, that kind of force wasn't even a real test.

In these seas, intel on the Great Pirates usually comes at the cost of countless Marine lives.

Daren's eyes narrowed.

So HQ didn't have a clear handle on Douglas Bullet's true capabilities.

Noticing the heaviness in Daren's gaze, Sakazuki suddenly said,

"You're being awfully cautious. That's not like you, Daren."

Caught off guard, Daren blinked, then let out a small laugh.

"No, I was just wondering... Sakazuki, how strong are you now?"

Sakazuki glanced over at him, then turned back to the sea.

The brim of his cap cast a shadow over his eyes.

"You'll find out soon enough."

"When the time comes, help me pin down his weapons... especially make sure he doesn't escape with that submarine."

...

Meanwhile...

New World, somewhere at sea.

"They're here!!"

"Father! They're coming!!"

"The Oro Jackson!!"

...

Cries of alarm rang out from the deck of the Moby Dick, massive and majestic on the calm blue sea like a great white whale.

At the sound, members of the Whitebeard Pirates rushed to the railings, gripping the edge and leaning forward, eyes wide as they stared out at the ocean.

In the distance, a grand three-masted pirate ship with a golden prow and blood-red sails sped toward them on the sea breeze. The skull-and-crossbones flag bearing golden wave whiskers fluttered ominously from the sail, filled with pressure and presence.

The Oro Jackson.

The Roger Pirates' ship.

"So you've finally come, Roger."

Whitebeard grinned from the main seat on the deck. His towering, broad figure nearly swallowed the chair, and his overwhelming aura radiated in all directions.

"Prepare to dock!"

In less than a minute, the swiftly approaching Oro Jackson pulled alongside the Moby Dick. A gangplank was lowered, linking the two titanic ships together.

"Hey, hey, hey—newbies, listen up! Head inside and stay out of the way—"

Marco, his golden pineapple-shaped hair swaying as he leaned on the railing, tried to warn the crew, but the moment the words left his mouth, he knew it was already too late.

Bang!

Behind him, a newly recruited crew member suddenly rolled his eyes and collapsed face-first onto the deck.

Then a second. Then a third...

As the sound of steady, powerful footsteps echoed across the gangplank, the weaker recruits on the Moby Dick dropped one after another, unconscious before the presence now stepping aboard.

Marco rubbed his temples in frustration, cold sweat starting to bead on his young face.

The moment that imposing figure, cloaked in a blood-red captain's coat and crowned with a captain's hat, stepped onto the Moby Dick, the ship's deck let out low creaks, faint cracks spreading beneath his boots.

Other than the Whitebeard Pirates' core crew, most of the deck was already littered with fallen men.

"Wahahahaha!!"

"It's been a long time, Whitebeard!!"

The black-haired man radiating overwhelming Haki lifted his head and laughed boldly, completely ignoring the Whitebeard Pirates who stood warily around him. His eyes locked only onto the man seated above.

His booming laughter rolled like thunder, shaking the sky and the sea. Winds howled, waves surged, and in the air, black and red lightning faintly flickered, crossing and vanishing in bursts of power.

Aboard the Oro Jackson...

Rayleigh pinched the bridge of his nose with a helpless sigh. They had clearly agreed that this meeting would be peaceful—but with Roger's explosive fighting spirit, this was anything but a friendly visit.

The rest of the crew stood tense, ready to throw down at a moment's notice.

They knew their captain all too well. Once he got fired up, no one could hold him back.

Buggy clutched his head in panic, trembling as he muttered,

"This is bad, really bad... That's Whitebeard! And the captain's provoking him like this... We're seriously gonna fight!!"

Beside him, Shanks stared at Roger's bold figure with awe and admiration, heart pounding wildly.

Standing before the "Strongest Man in the World," facing Whitebeard and his legendary crew, Captain Roger remained utterly unshaken—his Haki flaring without restraint.

Watching Roger standing tall, surrounded by fallen members of the Whitebeard Pirates, Shanks trembled with excitement. His cheeks flushed, fists clenched tightly.

The image etched itself deep into his young heart.

And in that moment, an unshakable thought surged in his mind—

Someday, he too would become a man as full of Haki as Captain Roger!

...

Chapter 160 - 160: Volume 2 – Chapter 62: The End of the Sea

Black and red lightning flickered constantly in the void, stirring up monstrous waves across the sea. Above, the clouds churned and rapidly converged into a massive black vortex that blotted out the sky.

A fierce gale roared amid the crackling thunder, forcing everyone aboard the Moby Dick to go pale. The weaker ones couldn't withstand the overwhelming pressure pressing down on their souls and spirits—they dropped to one knee, gasping for breath.

Marco and the others stared in shock at Roger, who was shrouded in arcs of black and red lightning. They clenched their jaws, cold sweat running down their backs.

That overwhelming presence, that godlike aura... no matter how many times they witnessed it, it never failed to shake them to the core!

"Oi oi oi, is blasting your Haki around like that the moment we meet really a good habit?!"

Whitebeard, seated at the head, spoke up with displeasure.

The instant his words fell, his golden eyes snapped open wide, and a powerful aura burst from his towering frame, visible to the naked eye.

Crackle!!

Black lightning exploded forth, roaring like a beast unleashed.

Two immense, abyssal forces clashed in the space between Roger and Whitebeard!

Countless bolts of black lightning shot into the sky as a massive shockwave tore upward, piercing straight through the cloud layer.

The sea of clouds trembled violently—breaking apart, recondensing, then breaking again.

The sky and the earth changed color.

In the stunned eyes of both pirate crews, it felt as though the entire world flipped upside down. All color faded, leaving only stark black and white.

A massive tremor, like the earth itself groaning, rocked the Moby Dick and the Oro Jackson.

Towering tsunamis, dozens of meters high, surged upward and outward from the two pirate ships, rolling across the ocean in every direction, engulfing a radius of several dozen nautical miles.

At that moment, the two legendary pirates, radiating awe-inspiring might, moved simultaneously.

Clang!!

As their supreme grade swords were drawn, Roger and Whitebeard leapt forward in unison, slashing with full force!

Silence fell in an instant.

Black and red lightning compressed wildly between their two peerless blades, forming a dense sphere of energy. The violent wind blew their captain's hats off at once, sending their black and golden hair whipping through the storm.

Flashes of lightning illuminated their faces—alight with battle spirit and bursting with hearty laughter.

"Hahaha! Newgate! Besides Garp, only you can make my blood boil like this!"

Roger grinned wide, his face glowing with the unfiltered joy of a child finally getting to play with a long-coveted toy.

"It's been ages, and the moment we meet again, you greet me with your sword... This how you say hello, Roger?"

Whitebeard's gaze burned with fighting spirit, his white captain's cloak billowing behind him.

At that moment—

"Roger, that's enough!! Don't forget why we're here!!" Rayleigh suddenly appeared on the deck of the Moby Dick, shouting at the top of his lungs.

"Oyaji, if this keeps up, our ship's going down!!" Marco called out anxiously.

Just as the two of them shouted, the energy sphere compressed between the two supreme blades finally detonated.

Boom!!

A blinding white light swallowed everything, turning the pitch-black night into broad daylight for an instant.

The sea churned even more violently, howling under the sheer dominance of the two kings.

It's unclear how much time passed, but eventually, calm returned to the world.

The waves eased, and the sea turned clear and blue once more.

As Roger and Whitebeard slowly lowered their weapons, both pirate crews let out a collective sigh of relief, choosing to ignore the massive rift torn across the sky above.

A tear in the sky? They'd seen that too many times to be surprised anymore...

"Tch! What a buzzkill!"

Roger sheathed his sword, grumbling in frustration—only to shrink back when Rayleigh shot him a deadly glare.

Whitebeard, too, looked displeased as he turned to his sons, but before he could say anything, Marco cut in with a deadpan, "We don't have the money to fix the ship."

Whitebeard choked on his words and begrudgingly held his tongue.

Watching the two of them sulk like children, both Marco and Rayleigh twitched at the corners of their mouths.

'Seriously... what a handful of an old man/captain...'

The same thought crossed their minds as they exchanged apologetic smiles.

"So tell me, Roger—what exactly did you come to me for this time?"

Whitebeard pulled out a massive jar of sake, nearly half a man's height. He poured a large bowl for Roger before sitting down on the spot and taking a swig, clearly impatient.

Roger's eyes lit up at the sight of the sake. Grinning, he grabbed the bowl and chugged it all in one go. Then, with a shameless grin, he nudged the empty bowl back toward Whitebeard.

"No rush. It's been ages since we last met—let's drink first."

Seeing the empty bowl and Roger's eager face, Whitebeard couldn't help but wonder if this guy was broke and had come here just to mooch some sake.

Sighing, he refilled the bowl for Roger, then spoke with a pointed tone.

"Our time is short. Garp and Sengoku already brought their elite forces to the New World. I only just managed to shake them off."

Whitebeard wasn't afraid of Garp or Sengoku, but if it could be avoided, he didn't want to spark a full-blown clash with the Marine's main force.

The Marines were strong, backed by the World Government. A fight like that would drag on endlessly and achieve nothing.

More importantly, he didn't want to see anyone from his "family" hurt—or worse.

No matter how powerful he was, a war with the Marines would leave him unable to protect everyone.

He wasn't like the reckless fool sitting across from him, who could sail the seas without a care in the world.

The bigger the crew, the larger the territory, the greater the responsibility. It wasn't just strength—it was a burden that bound him.

"What's there to be scared of? Worst case, we just go all out and have a good fight with them..."

Roger chuckled, unconcerned.

Clang!

Rayleigh smacked him on the head with a hand chop, leaving a smoking lump behind.

"Stick to the point!"

Rayleigh growled through clenched teeth.

Roger winced in pain, rubbing his head. Slowly, his expression turned serious.

"Newgate... you know I've been searching for the end of this sea..."

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