

One Piece 251

Chapter 251 - 251: Volume 2 – Chapter 153: Daren's Justice

Train me...?

Doflamingo's eyes narrowed as a strange emotion rose from deep within.

Is this guy serious?

The "monster" of Marine Headquarters—the one who took down "World Destroyer" Byrnni World and obliterated the Beasts Pirates' main base—wants to personally guide my training?

His first instinct was suspicion.

Sure, on paper, they were godfather and godson. And yes, the Donquixote family was expanding at a staggering rate across the North Blue, thanks to the backing of the North Blue Fleet. Even Doflamingo himself was astonished at how fast it was happening.

But he wasn't naïve.

He knew full well that a cold, ruthless man like Daren didn't trust him. The blockade of Rubeck Island by Momonga's heavily armed warships was all the proof he needed.

If Daren ever fell in the New World, he had no doubt Momonga would give the order to fire—wiping the Donquixote family off the map without hesitation.

And truth be told, Doflamingo didn't trust Daren either.

Their so-called harmonious relationship was nothing more than mutual exploitation in a game of veiled threats and political maneuvering.

He licked his dry lips, a cold smirk creeping up at the corners.

"You sure about that, Godfather?"

Daren smiled.

"Of course. What could make a godfather prouder than watching his godson grow stronger with his own eyes?"

Doflamigo inhaled sharply.

The veins on the backs of his hands bulged as he lunged forward, muscles surging with tension.

His face twisted into a grin of madness, eyes behind the shades glowing red with bloodlust. Both hands slashed out like talons!

A wild laugh echoed through the cold, empty hall.

"Fufufufufu!! Then don't mind if I go all out, Godfather!!"

Shhk!!

In an instant—

It was like countless invisible blades tore through the air. The sound of fabric ripping exploded all around.

Silent and deadly.

Gashes split across the ceiling, walls, and floor of the hall at once.

The coffee table between them burst apart, cleanly sliced into mirrored fragments.

Doflamingo... had unleashed a full-on assault on the Marine Commodore!

...

Ten minutes later.

The entire hall lay in ruins.

Countless thin, slashing marks covered every wall and inch of floor like claw scratches. Not a single piece of furniture was left intact—wine cabinets, glasses, tables, desks—everything had been shredded beyond recognition.

Trebol and the others stood frozen, wide-eyed, staring at the man calmly lighting a cigar amidst the wreckage. A wave of shock roared through their hearts.

"Hah..."

Daren blew out a puff of smoke, then turned with a smile to the panting boy kneeling on one knee before him.

"Now do you get it?"

"You've developed your Devil Fruit well, but your timing still lacks that killer instinct."

"As for your body—you've got to push your strength and speed further."

"That's the foundation of everything."

"And those close-combat techniques I showed you... you'll need to spend more time mastering them."

"With your current strength, maybe you're invincible here in the North Blue. But once you set foot in the Grand Line—or worse, the New World—"

"You'll face a level of despair that'll shake you to your core."

Doflamingo knelt, face pale, sweat dripping from his forehead, lips cracked, eyes filled with shock and a dazed sense of disbelief.

He was far too strong...

Even after using every trick he had, he hadn't been able to land a single hit on Daren.

He had truly believed that all his training over the past months had narrowed the gap between them.

But it hadn't.

The man standing before him seemed more distant than ever—so towering, so unreachable. The shadow he cast felt like a storm cloud pressing down from above, making it hard to breathe.

But the most shocking thing of all—

Daren was actually teaching him.

The breakdown of every move. The Marine Rokushiki training methods. The insight into the Ito Ito no Mi. The precision in reading attack timing...

It was all so surgical, so exact.

Like a scalpel peeling away the fog, showing Doflamingo a whole new level of understanding.

Hearing Daren's words, Doflamingo finally snapped back to his senses. He swallowed hard and said hoarsely,

"Thank you for your guidance, Godfather."

Daren gave a faint smile.

Up to now, Doflamingo's training had been aimless—more feeling his way through the dark than following any structured method. The people around him, like Trebol and the rest, were a mismatched bunch. Though fiercely loyal, they were of little real help.

But for someone with Daren's experience and perspective, mentoring the current Doflamingo was effortless.

In the original timeline, Doflamingo's strength topped out just below the level of a Yonkō commander. His eventual defeat at the hands of Luffy was largely due to his lack of a true mentor.

Kaidou might've filled that role, but Doflamingo chose "cooperation" over "opposition," and so he remained limited.

Now, though, things were different.

With Daren's pressure and guidance, this proud, untamed young flamingo might just soar into the sky—unfurling brilliant wings that could shake the world itself.

"This is what a godfather should do."

Daren paused for a beat.

"Grow quickly, Doffy..."

He turned, his gaze drifting through the glass window toward the endless sea beyond.

The curling smoke from his cigar softened the harsh, defined lines of his face.

"Compared to the brilliance of the Grand Line, the North Blue is just too small."

"I look forward to the day you step onto that stage."

"When that day comes, nothing in this world will be able to stop us."

Doflamingo listened to those stirring words, and a blaze of ambition lit in his chest.

He stared silently at Daren's profile, lips tightening, fists clenching.

Daren turned back with a smile and patted his shoulder.

"Go on—they're still waiting for you out there."

Doflamingo slowly rose.

As he watched Daren's back moving away, a surge of courage suddenly rose within him. Gritting his teeth, he called out,

"Daren! Why are you helping me?"

"Don't underestimate me—I saw the killing intent in your eyes!"

"And you should know this too... if I ever get the chance to kill you, I won't hesitate!"

Trebol and the others looked like they'd been struck by lightning. Their faces went ghostly pale as they gasped in unison.

Daren's steps paused.

He turned his head and gave Doflamingo a bright smile.

"Good. Keep that desire to kill me alive..."

"Hatred is one of the strongest fuels for growth—whether it's aimed at me, the World Government, the Celestial Dragons, or the Five Elders... doesn't matter."

"As for why I'm helping you..."

Daren blinked.

"Do you know what my idea of 'justice' is?"

Doflamingo froze.

"What is it?"

The corners of Daren's lips curled into a wicked grin.

"Because I think it'll be fun."

"An abandoned prince, burdened by blood-deep hatred, rising up to take revenge on his noble kin... isn't that entertaining?"

"And finally... Happy birthday, Doffy. My godson."

With a final smile, Daren vanished.

Leaving Doflamigo standing there, frozen in place.

...

A long time passed.

Under the anxious eyes of Trebol and the others,

his gaze slowly regained its icy gleam.

"Fufufufufu..."

Suddenly, he began to laugh maniacally.

His whole body trembled from the force of it. Tears streamed from the corners of his eyes.

"Interesting... this is just too interesting..."

"My dear godfather... your justice..."

"Fufufufufu..."

He tilted his head back, laughing like a madman, as his pink feathered coat billowed around him.

"—Self-serving Justice'!!"

Chapter 252 - 252: Volume 2 – Chapter 154: Almost

"Justice as I please..."

Watching their young master burst into near-maniacal laughter, his entire body trembling, Trebol and the other officers turned pale, muttering under their breath, frozen stiff.

They weighed the arrogance, the wildness, and the overwhelming determination hidden in those words, and it sent a storm through their hearts. No one dared speak.

Doflamingo raised a hand to his face, the corners of his mouth twisting into a savage grin beneath his palm.

"Fufufufufu... So you're the same kind of person as me!"

After a pause,

He slowly let his smile fade. His fingers curled unconsciously into claw-like shapes, and behind his sunglasses, a cold, unstable glint flickered in his eyes.

"You're a complete madman, Godfather..."

"In that case, I'll be counting on your guidance from now on."

He murmured softly.

Running both hands through his messy golden hair, he loosened the collar of his wine-red shirt, then stepped forward into the cold and silent hall, his footsteps echoing as he made his way toward the corridor.

"Nobody is to speak a word about that man's 'justice.' Is that clear?"

The corridor lights cast shifting shadows across DoFlamingo's figure, his pink feather coat billowing behind him as his cold, domineering voice reverberated through the hall.

Trebol and the others immediately dropped to one knee, lowering their proud heads in respect.

"Yes, young master."

DoFlamingo walked the length of the corridor without expression, the sharp heels of his shoes tapping crisply against the marble floor.

As the banquet hall door came into view, the clinking of glasses and lively voices of guests from across the North Blue grew louder.

Standing just beyond the doorway, shadows masked DoFlamingo's youthful face.

Bang!

He suddenly pushed the doors wide open.

The blinding lights and explosive noise of the banquet hall roared to life, swallowing his figure whole.

Wearing a fake smile, he stepped into the guests' eager gazes and walked toward them.

He entered the light.

...

Donquixote Doflamingo's birthday party—an event thrown by the king of the North Blue underworld—came to a close in the midst of the guests' raucous celebration.

One month later...

North Blue.

A desolate, uninhabited island.

"10 Million Volts: Thunderbird!!"

A massive thunderbird, several meters tall, suddenly roared into the sky from the dense jungle.

Its wings, formed entirely of blazing blue lightning, tore through everything in their path. Towering trees collapsed one after another as a wave of dust and debris erupted into the air.

The intense heat of the lightning set the forest ablaze, red flames spreading rapidly across the ground while thick black smoke rose high into the sky.

Amidst the blast, a tall figure was hurled backwards from the fire, military boots carving a long trench in the dirt.

Daren, shirtless, had wisps of black smoke curling off his body. Several parts of his skin showed signs of burns from the lightning.

But his eyes were ablaze with fervor, burning with wild excitement. A nearly spent cigar clenched between his teeth, he burst out laughing.

"Is that all you've got, Momonga!?"

"Come on, can you even keep up!?"

From the distance came an enraged shout.

"Daren, you bastard! Don't you dare underestimate me!!"

The moment the words rang out—

From the center of the smoke and flames, a faint streak of lightning suddenly shot skyward at astonishing speed.

Daren's eyes narrowed sharply.

That feeling...

He could clearly sense the magnetic field within a hundred meters of him suddenly go haywire—chaotic and violent!

This technique... could it be—

Something clicked in Daren's mind, and he abruptly looked up, eyes gleaming.

The sky had gone pitch-black. At some point, massive thunderclouds had gathered above.

The dark sea of clouds churned like a giant black vortex, endlessly swirling and brewing immense power.

"30 Million Volts: Heaven's Judgment!!"

The next instant, a pillar of blue lightning crashed down from the heavens like a beam of divine wrath, slamming into Daren's position!

Boom!!

The ground within ten meters was instantly shattered, torn apart, and vaporized. A searing shockwave blasted outward like an inferno, devouring everything in its path.

Blinding lightning filled every corner of sight. Roaring winds surged outward, bending trees across the jungle. The closest ones were completely uprooted.

Scalding plasma burst from the point of impact.

And beneath the force of the lightning pillar, the figure of the Marine Commodore stood tall and unyielding, arms spread wide.

A wild, fearless grin stretched across his face.

It was as if he stood bathed in a magnificent galaxy.

...

After a full thirty seconds, the island finally began to settle down.

The ground was devastated, the forest left with massive "bald patches," and embers still smoldered in many places, sending thick black smoke into the air.

At the center of it all—

A massive charred crater lay sprawled across the earth, strikingly grotesque.

Everything around it had been reduced to ash by the thunderstrike. Some of the broken stones on the ground had even crystallized under the intense heat and voltage, glowing with a red-black sheen. Faint arcs of electricity occasionally danced across the scorched surface.

Bruised and battered, Momonga staggered out of the forest. The moment he saw the devastation before him, his heart clenched, and he instinctively picked up the pace.

"Daren..."

He rushed toward the center of the crater, only to see the charred figure of the Marine Commodore standing motionless, like a blackened statue. A sudden wave of panic surged through his chest.

Don't tell me...

"Hey, Daren! You alright?!"

Momonga's eyelid twitched uncontrollably.

The power of the Goro Goro no Mi had far exceeded his expectations. Did he... actually kill Daren?

"Cough, cough, cough!!"

Just then, the figure in front of him suddenly burst into a fit of coughing. Black smoke puffed out of his nostrils as burnt cigar ash spilled from his mouth.

"...Damn, that was a close one."

Momonga: "..."

Daren shook the ash off his head, pulled out a pack of cigarettes like nothing happened, and said with a click of his tongue,

"You've really got something going on, Momonga. Looks like giving you the Goro Goro no Mi was the right call—you picked that move up fast."

As he spoke, he bit down on a cigarette, then casually picked up a still-hot crystal shard from the ground and lit it.

Hearing Daren's words, Momonga couldn't help puffing out his chest.

Daren was known as a "monster" praised by Zephyr, Garp, and Sengoku alike. Getting acknowledged by someone like him stirred a surge of pride unlike anything he'd ever felt.

"I can tell—you and the Goro Goro no Mi are a perfect match."

Daren clapped him on the shoulder, nodding in approval.

"...I almost had to use Armament Haki to defend myself."

The proud grin on Momonga's face froze instantly.

Chapter 253 - 253: Volume 2 – Chapter 155: Dragon is in Trouble

"You know, sometimes I really feel like you need a good beating..."

Momonga pouted, grumbling under his breath.

"Oh."

Daren shrugged and replied casually, acting like he didn't hear a word of it.

After a month of "special training," Momonga's strength had undergone a massive transformation.

Over the past month, he had more or less mastered the abilities of the Goro Goro no Mi and could now wield them flexibly across different combat scenarios.

He could transform his body into lightning and travel at high speed through air or other conductive mediums.

He could fire high-voltage lightning bolts at mid-range with deadly accuracy.

He could harness the heat and piercing nature of electricity to unleash devastating attacks...

All in all, aside from not yet grasping Haki, Momonga's overall strength was now easily on par with a Vice Admiral from headquarters—possibly even approaching the level of an elite Vice Admiral.

After all, the sheer advantages granted by the Goro Goro no Mi were simply overwhelming.

As for how to further develop the fruit's potential, Daren didn't offer any outlandish ideas. Instead, he straightforwardly pointed Momonga to a reference model—Enel.

Enel, the self-proclaimed god of Skypiea, was the original user of the Goro Goro no Mi in the main storyline.

Although the guy was unlucky enough to run into Luffy—and got taken down by the whole "rubber doesn't conduct electricity" gimmick—there's no denying that his mastery over the Goro Goro no Mi was impressive.

Most importantly, Enel's approach to developing the fruit was simple and practical—easy to replicate.

This might just be a fundamental rule of Devil Fruits.

Every Devil Fruit seems to have a logical and consistent path for its development.

This is also backed up by canon examples.

When Blackbeard took the Gura Gura no Mi from Whitebeard, he immediately used shockwave-based techniques that Whitebeard had been known for.

Or take Sabo, who had been trained by Dragon since childhood and was highly skilled in close-quarters combat. After acquiring the Mera Mera no Mi, the first move he mastered was "Hiken"

The reasoning behind this isn't hard to figure out—

It's all about ease of mastery.

As for Momonga's role, Daren didn't plan on turning him into one of those "complete warriors" like Sakazuki, Kuzan, or Borsalino—powerhouses with no weaknesses.

Momonga simply didn't have the raw talent or potential to match those three monsters.

So Daren's vision was for Momonga to become an Enel 2.0—one who also mastered Haki, martial arts, and swordsmanship.

After all, Enel's raw combat power was no joke, and the destructive force of the Goro Goro no Mi made him a walking natural disaster.

With that kind of power added to his own sword and combat skills, plus dual-color Haki...

Sure, he might still fall short against the true top-tier fighters, but he wouldn't be as easily overwhelmed in close combat as Enel had been.

And that would be enough.

At the very least, it would give the North Blue fleet a human natural disaster—and an energy core—on the move.

He'd reach the threshold of admiral-level combat strength, which was more than solid.

Becoming a top-tier admiral, though, required a blend of talent, opportunity, luck, and timing—there were just too many variables at play.

As for Daren himself, the past month of Lightning Training had paid off as well.

His physique had increased by three points, with strength and speed each going up by one. His Armament Haki had also improved by two points—courtesy of all those times he "beat the crap out of" Momonga.

Now, his physical stats looked like this:

Physique: 82.812

Strength: 71.513

Speed: 71.899

Armament Haki: 39.035

Conqueror's Haki: 52.301

That said, over time, the effectiveness of the "Lightning Tempering" had started to decline.

Daren had even developed a resistance to electricity. Lightning below 10 million volts barely affected him anymore.

In fact, it had reached the point where it almost resembled "non-conductivity." Electric currents and plasma would just slide over his skin and scatter away.

'Looks like Lightning Tempering won't show any real results in the short term...'

Daren "looked" at his stats using his perception talent, that thought crossing his mind.

Maybe once Momonga could ramp the voltage up to 50 million volts, or even 100 million, the effectiveness of Lightning Tempering would pick up again.

But for now, there was no point in staying in the North Blue and wasting time.

"How's the cooperation with Vinsmoke Judge coming along?"

Daren took a drag from his cigarette and asked suddenly.

Momonga blinked, caught off guard. "You heading back to headquarters?"

Daren nodded with a helpless smile. "Zephyr-sensei's been trying to reach me for days. He completely chewed me out over the Den Den Mushi. If I don't go back soon, he might just show up in the North Blue and drag me back himself."

Just thinking of Zephyr's furious, red-faced yelling over the line gave him a headache.

And it wasn't like he didn't have a reason for staying. He had told Zephyr he'd found an extremely efficient training method out here in the North Blue.

But that only made things worse. The moment he said it, Zephyr exploded.

"What's that supposed to mean, you little brat? Are you saying my teaching methods are inefficient?!"

Daren couldn't exactly say, "Yeah, totally. When I was in the Beasts Pirates' prison, just coughing up medicine for a day was the same as two weeks of boot camp. It's been just like that here too..."

If he really said that, he could forget about staying at headquarters.

Once he got back to Marineford, there'd be hell to pay.

"Zephyr-san just wants what's best for you..."

It was rare to see Daren looking so miserable, and Momonga couldn't help but laugh a little at his expense. Then he added,

"There's not much progress yet on the warship engine upgrades, but we've made headway with the laser weapons."

"According to Vinsmoke Judge, Germa 66 has already cracked the energy core structure of the laser weaponry. Give it a bit more time, and they should be able to modify them successfully."

"Got it."

Daren nodded.

He looked up, his gaze drifting toward the horizon where the evening glow flickered across a sea of clouds.

The air was sharp and freezing. Snowflakes had started falling from the sky.

The weather in this sea was always strange—despite the snow, the sunset was dazzlingly beautiful.

Snowflakes glowed under the twilight sky, painting a scene of brilliant contrast.

Daren's eyes glazed slightly as he smiled faintly.

"The year's almost over. Yeah, it's time I headed back."

Momonga gave him a knowing look and blinked with a grin.

"True. End of the year's when families reunite."

Daren chuckled and was about to reply, when the military Den Den Mushi suddenly rang with a sharp, urgent tone.

"Brrrru brrrru... brrrru brrrru..."

Momonga eyed him teasingly as Daren reached for it.

"Maybe it's Toki-san calling you home..."

Over the past month, he'd learned that Daren had brought a woman back to live in the officer's housing.

"Shut it."

Daren rolled his eyes and cursed with a smile.

Momonga raised both hands, grinning as he stepped back a few paces.

Daren finally answered the call.

But from where he stood, Momonga could see the shift in Daren's expression. The smile vanished almost instantly, replaced by a heavy seriousness.

The moment he ended the call, Momonga walked up quickly.

"What happened?"

The sunset had already been swallowed by clouds, darkness creeping in to cover the land.

Snow fell harder, the cold slicing straight to the bone.

Daren licked his chapped lips and slowly exhaled.

"Something's happened to Dragon."

He didn't wait for Momonga to ask more before speaking again—his voice hoarse, and the words ice-cold.

"He killed a Celestial Dragon... at the border between the North Blue and the Grand Line."

The Commodore's low voice cut through the whirling snow.

"...in front of everyone."

Chapter 254 - 254: Volume 2 – Chapter 156: Kill on the Spot!?

Crystal snowflakes drifted from the bleak sky, settling on Momonga's hair, face, and shoulders—but he stood there as if frozen, completely unaware.

He stood rigid, like he'd been struck by lightning. His eyes widened, pupils contracting and trembling violently.

He could hardly believe what he'd just heard.

Monkey D. Dragon...

The biological son of the Marine "Hero," Garp.

A "monster" nurtured by Marine Headquarters.

The idol of countless young Marines.

A future Admiral—possibly even a Fleet Admiral.

The legendary Rear Admiral Dragon...

Had just killed a Celestial Dragon—one of the World Nobles—in broad daylight, right in front of everyone!?

If those words hadn't come straight from Daren, Momonga would've thought it was some sick joke.

It was unimaginable what kind of storm this would unleash within the Marines.

The thought sent a chill down his spine. He turned again toward Daren.

To actually kill a Celestial Dragon...

"Daren... what's Headquarters saying?"

Momonga swallowed hard, voice dry and strained.

Daren's brows were knotted tightly. After a moment of silence, he shook his head.

"Admiral Sengoku gave me the order himself. Drop everything I'm doing and head to the scene to carry out the arrest."

"He said since the incident happened in the North Blue—my old jurisdiction—and I'm most familiar with the surrounding seas, I'm the best candidate for the job."

"His exact words were: 'Do whatever it takes to stop Dragon from escaping. If necessary...'"

Daren paused.

"...kill him on the spot."

The words hit like a hammer, and Momonga instantly sucked in a cold breath.

Had it really escalated to this level?

His thoughts were in chaos.

He didn't know Dragon that well, but he had interacted with him a few times. He'd always had a strong impression of the man's natural leadership and unwavering sense of justice.

To think that someone like that—someone who once inspired an entire generation of Marines—had now drawn his sword against his own... The very idea was hard to stomach.

"So... what are you going to do?"

Momonga looked anxiously at Daren, who was lighting another cigarette.

"If I'm not mistaken... Dragon was a close friend of yours, wasn't he?"

Daren shook his head.

"Not close. But we got along fine."

"As for what I'm going to do... I honestly don't know yet."

A flash of memory crossed his mind—Dragon, passed out drunk in his courtyard, laughing like a carefree fool.

Daren's eyes darkened.

"But one way or another... I have to go."

He took a long drag, exhaled slowly, and flicked the butt to the ground, crushing it beneath his boot.

The metallic bracers on his arms clicked open, transforming into a sleek, silver hoverboard that hovered steadily before him.

Daren stepped onto it. In his eyes, an unspoken cold light flickered.

He didn't know how Vice Admiral Garp would react. But knowing Sengoku's personality, the man would likely suppress the news—or worse, resort to force.

With that thought, a surge of magnetic energy exploded from his body, launching the hoverboard with terrifying force.

In less than a second, he broke the sound barrier, vanishing into the blizzard and disappearing into the distant sea of clouds.

A fierce gale swept across the desolate island, churning the snowfall into spirals.

Momonga stood motionless in the wind, lips tightly pressed together.

He suddenly felt...

The cape draped over his shoulders—

Had never felt so heavy.

...

Chapter 156: Kill on the Spot!?

Marine Headquarters, Marineford.

Admiral's Office.

"Sengoku, you damn bastard!!"

Garp's furious roar nearly shook the walls of the office.

Panting heavily, he glared at Sengoku, whose face was dark as a storm cloud. Garp's bloodshot eyes burned with rage.

"What the hell is this arrest order!?"

"That's my son!!"

Bang!!

Sengoku suddenly stood up and slammed a hand on the desk—so hard that the entire thing splintered apart, shattering into pieces.

"Of course I know he's your son!!"

He roared, face pale with fury.

"But do you even know what he's done?!"

"A Celestial Dragon!!"

"He killed a damn Celestial Dragon!!"

"And not in secret—he crushed one's skull right out in the open!"

"Do you have any idea how many witnesses there were in that town?!"

"Hundreds! Hundreds of people saw him crush that bastard's head like it was a block of tofu!!"

Garp's bloodshot eyes flared as he bellowed back,

"He was protecting civilians!!"

"Even so—he laid hands on a Celestial Dragon!!"

Sengoku ground his teeth so hard it sounded like they might crack, his voice squeezing out from between them.

"Garp, do you realize how serious this is?!"

"This wasn't just any Marine. We're talking about your son—Monkey D. Dragon. The future Admiral. The son of the Marine 'Hero'!"

"He murdered a Celestial Dragon!"

"Nothing like this has ever happened in Marine history!"

"And more importantly—if we don't handle this the right way, what do you think the World Government is going to think of us? If they start doubting us, there's no going back!"

"The World Government is already furious. The Five Elders sent a direct order—they want immediate action!"

"Effective now, as Admiral of Marine Headquarters, I'm issuing a formal order... Until this matter is resolved, you—Monkey D. Garp—are forbidden from leaving Marineford!"

"Don't even think about doing anything reckless. Daren's already en route. Sakazuki and Borsalino's warships left the naval dock ten minutes ago. Whatever you're planning—it's too late."

"Oh? Is that so?!"

Garp let out a furious, almost mocking laugh.

An overwhelming aura began to rise from his body, vast and oppressive like a deep ocean. Faint black-red lightning crackled in the air around him.

"Then let's see, Admiral Sengoku—can you stop me?!"

Sengoku's expression hardened, golden light beginning to radiate from his body.

But just then—

"Garp, that's enough."

A hoarse, deep, aged voice suddenly came from behind him.

Garp's entire body jolted.

The moment he heard it, it was like the air had been sucked out of him. His aura collapsed like a deflated balloon, and the fierce light in his eyes dimmed instantly.

The explosive pressure surrounding him abruptly faded, washing away like a receding tide.

A deep, helpless weariness took hold.

He turned slowly.

A broad, towering figure stood before him.

"Old man Kong..."

Kong, sporting his familiar mohawk, cast a calm glance at Garp, then gave a nod toward Sengoku.

"I'm leaving the arrest operation in your hands, Sengoku."

Then he turned back to Garp.

"You should know very well—I won't let you leave port."

His sharp gaze locked onto Garp's bloodshot eyes. His voice was low, but every word carried the weight of a sledgehammer.

"You're the 'Hero' of the Marines. What you represent... isn't just yourself."

The words of the Fleet Admiral struck Garp like cold, steel nails, driving deep into his heart.

The anger drained from his face, and with it, all color. He turned pale.

"If you act on this... the entire Navy will be dragged into chaos by your foolishness."

Chapter 255 - 255: Volume 2 – Chapter 157: Too Difficult

Marine Headquarters, Marineford.

Fleet Admiral's Office.

The office was silent.

"Stay here until this incident is over, Garp."

Kong sat behind his desk, calmly working through a mountain of paperwork without even glancing up.

Garp stood motionless, like a statue that had lost its soul.

On the grayish-white wall hung a plaque with the word "Justice" in bold black characters, looming above him like a mountain pressing down on his shoulders.

At some point, it had started raining outside.

Dark clouds blanketed the sky like a giant hood, smothering the earth beneath them, making it hard to breathe.

The cold rain splattered against the tightly shut glass windows, then ricocheted off. A heavy gloom and killing intent blanketed the world.

Garp stared blankly through the window at the distant military port.

In the vast oval-shaped harbor, elite Marines in hooded coats patrolled back and forth in the rain, their expressions grim and solemn.

He noticed that not a single warship was docked.

"Don't bother looking. I've already ordered every ship to set out on temporary patrol. You won't have any chance."

Kong's low voice came from behind.

Garp's numb face twitched into a bitter smile.

That decisiveness... Truly worthy of the old man Kong.

"So... old man Kong, is there really no hope?"

Garp's pale lips trembled as he muttered the words with difficulty.

Kong didn't raise his head, his eyes still cast down.

While flipping through the files, he spoke offhandedly,

"Garp... You've always been my most outstanding student—and the one who gave me the most headaches. You know I've always been proud to have you as my disciple."

"As for that kid Dragon, I genuinely admire him."

"His strong sense of justice, his charismatic presence, natural leadership, brilliant mind, unmatched strength, and astonishing talent... Even in the hundreds of years of Marine history, it's rare to find another young man who could compare."

Garp's eyes reddened as he gritted his teeth.

"Then save him!"

His clenched fists trembled as he took a step forward, and the ever-cheerful grin on his face was replaced by a desperate plea.

"He's only twenty-five!"

"He told me he wanted to become a Marine Admiral! He wanted to change this rotten world in the name of 'Justice'!"

"Damn it... I should've realized it back then!"

Garp covered his face with his hands, teeth clenched, but scalding tears still leaked through his fingers.

Kong finally stopped flipping through the papers.

He looked up, his gaze calm as he stared at the choking Marine hero in front of him.

The middle-aged Garp standing before him gradually overlapped with the image of that grinning brat from his memories.

Kong let out a deep sigh.

"Garp, it's not that I don't want to help."

"But you know exactly what it means to kill a Celestial Dragon—especially in front of a crowd."

"The seriousness and sensitivity of this incident are already far beyond what Sengoku can handle... and even beyond me."

A flicker of helplessness crossed his eyes.

"According to World Government regulations, if a Celestial Dragon—the world's nobility—is harmed, the Marine Admirals are required to respond unconditionally... But do you know why Sengoku didn't handle this matter himself?"

Garp froze, a blank look in his eyes.

Kong pulled a cigar from the box on his desk, bit down on it, and lit it.

Thick smoke curled around his sharp, weathered face.

Then he said something that left Garp utterly stunned.

"Because it's an order from the Five Elders."

Kong leaned back in his chair, tilted his head slightly upward, and exhaled a puff of smoke.

"Because of Dragon's sensitive status, the government has begun to question the loyalty of our Navy's high-ranking officers."

"Can you imagine that?"

"The bloodline of a Marine 'hero,' a future Admiral—or even Fleet Admiral—someone who should be absolutely loyal to the government, dared to raise his hand against a noble Celestial Dragon..."

"This is something the Five Elders cannot accept."

"This isn't just about that brat Dragon anymore. His actions have seriously shaken the government's trust in us."

Garp's face turned pale.

His concern for his son's life had completely blinded him to the broader implications of the incident.

He opened his mouth, just about to speak—

But Kong waved a hand, cutting him off.

"The Five Elders have already made it clear. If we let Dragon escape this time, the government will slash the Navy's military budget by fifty percent."

"On top of that, the promotion plan Sengoku and I had already settled on has now been scrapped."

"Until this incident is resolved and the Five Elders' trust is regained, Sengoku won't become Fleet Admiral, and I won't be going to the Holy Land to serve as commander-in-chief of the World Government forces."

Garp looked like he'd been struck by lightning.

A surge of overwhelming guilt flooded his chest, and he staggered two steps back. His lips parted.

"Kong... old man Kong..."

Kong gave a faint, indifferent smile.

"It doesn't matter. I was never that interested in the commander-in-chief post anyway."

"And Sengoku has no complaints."

"So, Garp, do you understand now?"

"Whether it's the position of commander-in-chief or Fleet Admiral—if there's even the slightest chance of saving Dragon, we're not going to give up that easily."

"But the situation right now is... too difficult."

"Your kid made a mistake that can't be undone."

At those words, Garp was speechless.

He stood there blankly, eyes unfocused, as if his body and spirit were swallowed by a chilling emptiness, completely numb.

"So... that brat... really can't be saved?"

"Even Sakazuki and Borsalino have already left..."

He muttered.

Sakazuki had never gotten along with Dragon. There's no way he'd hold back.

And Borsalino... that guy's thoughts were impossible to read.

With the two of them joining forces, no matter how strong Dragon was, he couldn't possibly survive.

"No!"

He suddenly clenched his fists.

Just as he was about to act, Kong's cold bark stopped him.

"What are you doing!?"

Garp gritted his teeth, his face twisted with unwillingness.

"Old Kong, I'll repay your kindness someday. But Dragon is my son!"

"No matter what, I have to save him!"

"I know your position is difficult. I know Sengoku's in a tough spot too, so..."

He raised his hand and grabbed his Marine cloak by the shoulder, yanking it tightly until it wrinkled.

"This Marine—I quit—"

Bang!!

A single punch sent him flying, smashing him into the wall with a thunderous crash.

Garp stared blankly at Kong, who had suddenly attacked. His mind was reeling, and blood trickled down from his forehead.

"You idiot!!"

Kong roared.

"I said it's difficult—not impossible!"

Garp blinked in shock.

"But Sakazuki and Borsalino—"

"Do you know why Sengoku notified Daren first!?"

Kong rolled his eyes with a snort and began cursing under his breath.

Garp froze.

And then—something clicked.

His bloodshot, dull eyes lit up once more.

Chapter 256 - 256: Volume 2 – Chapter 158: Comrades or Enemies

"Be patient, Garp."

Looking at Garp, who had calmed down slightly but was still pacing anxiously, Kong sighed and spoke.

Garp stopped in his tracks and asked urgently,

"Old man Kong, do you think Daren can get there before Sakazuki and Borsalino?"

If Sakazuki found Dragon first, things would spiral out of control.

Kong didn't seem worried. There was the same calm and firmness in his expression as always.

He pondered for a moment, then slowly shook his head under Garp's expectant gaze and said hoarsely,

"That kid Daren knows the situation in the North Blue better than any of us."

"Although Sakazuki and Borsalino have both served in the North Blue, don't forget—when it comes to who really holds control over those waters, it's Daren. He's the 'King of the North Blue.'"

"He won't let you down."

Hearing Kong's judgment, Garp finally let out a long sigh of relief.

"That's good... that's good."

He repeated the words under his breath.

When it came to his own son's life, he no longer looked like the bold, hot-blooded Marine hero of the past. Now, he was cautious, uneasy.

"But... are you ready?"

Kong suddenly asked.

Garp was taken aback. He looked at Kong in confusion, only to meet his solemn gaze.

"From today on, your son will become the World Government's... and even our Marines' greatest enemy."

"No, that kid Dragon has a strong sense of justice. He would never turn against the Marines—"

"That has nothing to do with his personal will!"

Kong cut him off coldly.

"No matter what he wants in the future, from the moment he killed a Celestial Dragon, he stepped onto a road of no return!"

"He will inevitably stand against the World Government—and against us!"

"There's no doubt about it. Even if you ignore his power and talent, Dragon knows too much about our Marines and the government."

"He knows our personnel, our combat capabilities, fleet deployments, base layouts, intel networks, and even the encryption methods for our military Den Den Mushi communications..."

"And now, his 'defection' is a foregone conclusion. When the time comes, the World Government will likely place an unprecedented bounty on his head."

"Your son will become the most dangerous criminal in the world!"

"So, Garp... are you ready to face that?"

Kong's sharp questioning made Garp's face pale.

His own son... would become his enemy?

That thought echoed in his mind like a nightmare.

He stood in place for a long time, struggling internally, before taking a deep breath. He clenched his fists and gritted his teeth.

"I... I'm ready, Fleet Admiral Kong."

"Good."

Kong smiled with satisfaction.

He reached out, picked up the military Den Den Mushi, and dialed a number.

"Brrruu... Brrruu..."

As the call rang, Kong stood from his seat and walked toward the door.

As he passed by Garp, he paused briefly, placed a hand on Garp's shoulder, and said quietly,

"Now, think about what you want to say to Dragon. Daren will pass it along."

With that, he walked out of the office, leaving Garp the space for a final farewell.

"Buru!"

At that moment, the Den Den Mushi connected.

"Fleet Admiral Kong, this is Daren."

A low voice came from the other end, with the sound of fierce wind howling in the background.

Garp stared at the Den Den Mushi, his steps heavy as he walked over slowly.

"Daren... it's me."

He said hoarsely.

There was a clear pause.

A second later, Daren's voice came through again.

Only this time, the background wind had vanished—leaving a quiet, solemn silence.

"Vice Admiral Garp, I'm listening."

Garp's lips trembled. His eyes were blank as tears streamed down his face.

Then, he suddenly grinned and said,

"Tell that kid... to live."

...

Dragon's hands were still trembling.

Even though more than half a day had passed since the incident, the blood on his hands hadn't dried, and the trembling hadn't stopped.

The military uniform and cape he had once worn with pride were gone, replaced by a military-green hooded coat that covered most of his face.

He forced himself to recall the reconnaissance and counter-recon tactics he'd learned at the naval academy, wiping all traces of his presence as best he could. He slipped aboard a nondescript merchant ship and quietly arrived on this island.

Staying in these waters wasn't an option.

Given the reach of the World Government, it was only a matter of time before they tracked him down.

As a former core commander of Marine Headquarters, and with his unique identity and background, Dragon knew all too well how the CP dogs under the World Government operated.

Those vicious, violent beasts had an unerring nose for blood.

He had to find a way to reach the Grand Line—maybe even the New World!

Only in those vast, chaotic seas could he find the slightest chance to catch his breath in the face of endless pursuit—and maybe, just maybe, a sliver of hope.

His thoughts were in disarray, tangled like a knotted mess of thread.

He walked down the bustling commercial street in a daze, overwhelmed by the noise, the crowds, the heat.

He instinctively pulled the hood of his coat tighter, as if the faint sunlight was too much to bear.

He could still remember the stench of blood.

The reek of sweat, hard liquor, and gunpowder mixed with screams, crashing sounds, cries, and guttural laughter.

Just thinking about that moment—when the fury surged through him—made his heart clench.

There was no hesitation between the decision and the action.

And then it was over.

That hideous, arrogant face twisted into fear and desperate pleading before the man's head burst open like a watermelon right in front of him.

What did it feel like?

Dragon still couldn't make sense of it.

He licked his cracked lips, tightened the hood around his face, and found a small roadside tavern. Lowering his voice, he ordered a bottle of wine from the owner.

He sat down at a table under the shade of a tree.

"Just you?"

The owner brought over the wine with a smile, seemingly unfazed by someone wrapped in a heavy coat on such a sweltering day.

Dragon was about to nod, but the words came out on their own.

"Two glasses, please. Thank you."

The owner chuckled, set down two glasses, and walked away.

Dragon sat quietly, staring at the deep green wine before him, lost in thought.

He didn't drink.

It felt like he was waiting.

Waiting for someone.

Maybe to say a few words. Maybe to say a final goodbye.

Anyone would do.

He waited patiently.

One minute.

Five minutes.

Ten.

Half an hour...

He sat quietly beneath the tree, his heart filled with unease and anxiety.

It was as if an invisible curtain had fallen, cutting him off from the noisy, bustling street around him.

An hour passed.

Then, suddenly, a voice broke the silence in front of him.

"A wine this strong shouldn't be drunk alone."

Dragon let out a long breath.

That hour had felt like waiting for fate to hand down its verdict.

And now, the moment had come.

"I didn't expect the first Marine to find me would be you."

He looked up at the man who had leisurely picked up the bottle of "Sherry" and offered a genuine smile.

His eyes were slightly red.

Daren poured the wine into both glasses, then looked up and met Dragon's gaze, smiling.

"The North Blue is my territory, after all."

Chapter 257 - 257: Volume 2 – Chapter 159: The Claws That Crush Power

"The North Blue is my territory, after all."

Under the shade of the trees, the Commodore's voice carried a faint smile, yet it exuded overwhelming confidence and determination.

Dragon was momentarily stunned, then couldn't help but laugh.

"Right, I almost forgot—you're the world-famous 'King of the North Blue'."

Maybe it was just his imagination, but the moment he saw Daren standing before him, the anxiety and confusion in Dragon's heart instantly faded. It was the kind of relief one might feel in the face of death or despair, when a trusted friend arrives just in time—deep, genuine comfort from the soul.

Seeing Daren travel-worn and still carrying fatigue on his face, Dragon couldn't help but wonder just how far he had come to get here ahead of everyone else.

His smile grew even brighter.

The tree's shade swayed gently in the damp breeze, casting dappled light and shadow across the ground.

The two of them sat across from each other at a wine table, silent for a while.

It stood in stark contrast to the lively bustle of the streets and the crowd around them.

"Quit grinning like an idiot."

Daren suddenly snapped.

He pushed a full glass of wine toward Dragon, then picked up his own, took a sip, and let it soothe the dryness and fatigue from the long journey.

"You shouldn't have been so reckless."

Dragon's smile disappeared instantly.

Seeing this, Daren sighed.

"One of us had to bring it up."

Dragon was silent for a moment. He pursed his lips, lowered his gaze to his bloodstained hands, and said softly,

"I couldn't stop myself."

After murmuring those words, a deep, unspeakable bitterness filled his eyes.

"How bad is it?"

"Very bad."

Daren shook his head and said bluntly, "Vice Admiral Garp is now forbidden from leaving headquarters. Marineford's port has been completely sealed."

"The higher-ups have issued an absolute order to capture you—dead or alive."

"Besides me, Sakazuki and Borusarino have both already set sail. It won't be long before they find this place."

Boom!!

Thunder rumbled from afar.

A strong wind swept through the streets, dark clouds gathering quickly overhead.

Leaves fluttered down in the gusts. Pedestrians picked up their pace.

The sunlight dimmed. The sky turned gray.

Rain was coming.

Dragon pressed his chapped lips together even tighter.

Daren didn't rush him. He just waited quietly.

"That was a child."

After a long pause, Dragon finally spoke, his hoarse voice low and heavy, filled with sorrow and helplessness. It echoed faintly at the street corner where people hurried by.

"His kite had accidentally landed on a Celestial Dragon's mount. The kite string scratched his robe."

"It barely tore the edge. At most, it should've called for an apology and compensation. But the Celestial Dragon wanted his life."

"The boy's parents knelt down, begging desperately, their heads bloodied from kowtowing."

"But it didn't matter."

"I just happened to be there."

"Until then, I had never actually encountered a Celestial Dragon, though I'd heard plenty of the awful rumors. Still, I didn't really believe it... No matter how cruel a person is, how bad could they be?"

"So I stepped forward, identified myself, and offered to apologize on the boy's behalf."

"It should've been nothing—at least that's what I thought."

"But I was wrong. I was unbelievably wrong."

"I completely underestimated their evil. There really are devils in this world."

He let out a self-mocking chuckle.

"When that Celestial Dragon heard who I was, he didn't back down. Instead, he flew into a rage, grinning madly as he ordered the entire family killed."

"Daren, I just don't get it..."

"Why did he insist on taking their lives over something so trivial?"

Dragon looked up, eyes filled with confusion, and stared at Daren.

Daren said nothing.

He pulled a crumpled pack of cigarettes from his pocket, lit one, and took a drag.

Happy families are all alike; and every unfortunate family is unfortunate in its own way.

That's how the world works.

But the cruel irony is that, in the face of the so-called "supreme" Celestial Dragons, all unfortunate families meet the same end.

...

"For some people, hurting others—even taking lives—is how they show their power."

Daren's calm gaze pierced through the drifting smoke as he looked at Dragon and said quietly,

"So you killed him."

Dragon nodded with difficulty.

"Yes, I killed him."

"It was the only way to stop it all from happening."

His expression kept shifting, his breathing growing erratic, as if the shock from killing a Celestial Dragon hadn't fully faded.

"I couldn't let myself hesitate, not even for a second. I knew that if I did, I'd lose the courage to go through with it."

"At that moment, my mind went completely blank. All I could feel was this searing heat in my chest, like something was about to explode—I had to let it out."

"...By the time I came to, everything around me was in chaos."

"People were screaming, running, some passed out from fear... and that guy who called himself 'God'? His head was already crushed in my hands."

"It was as easy as smashing a watermelon... I could hardly believe it—Celestial Dragons can actually die."

He smiled, not sure if it was out of mockery or disbelief.

"So even gods can die."

"But you know what, Daren? Before I did it, I was terrified."

"Really, truly terrified..."

"I knew I was a Marine. I wasn't allowed to touch a Celestial Dragon."

"The moment I made a move, everything I had would be gone."

Daren raised an eyebrow.

"You regret it?"

"No."

Dragon grinned.

"Because the second I crushed that Celestial Dragon's head, my mind cleared."

"With blood spraying through the air, a rush I'd never felt before surged through me."

"That feeling... it was exhilarating. You get it, Daren?"

Daren was silent for a moment, then slowly said,

"I get it..."

"No! You don't get it!"

Dragon cut him off.

"And I hope you never do."

Daren thought, I really do get it.

But before he could say anything, Dragon suddenly raised his bloodstained right hand.

His fingers curled slightly—index and middle fingers pressed together, ring and pinky fingers together—forming a three-fingered dragon claw.

"Remember this move?"

Daren nodded.

"Ryusoken."

Dragon's eyes lit up, a smile spreading across his face.

"That's right, Ryusoken!"

"You gave me that reminder back then—that's what led me to create this technique."

"But you know what? Ever since that day, I kept working on ways to push it further, to make it stronger. But no matter what I did, something always felt off..."

"But right when I attacked that Celestial Dragon, I used it without even thinking—and in that moment, I finally found what Ryusoken had been missing all along."

He drew a deep breath.

"It was soul!"

"It was will!"

"Ryusoken isn't just about finger strength—it's about the strength of the 'claw' itself!"

"These are the claws forged to tear through oppressive power!"

As his words fell, thunder cracked across the sky filled with heavy clouds.

A pale bolt of lightning briefly lit up the darkness.

The pitch-black Dragon Claw, coated in Armament Haki, glinted with a cold, overwhelming aura under the flash of lightning.

Chapter 258 - 258: Volume 2 – Chapter 160: I Don't Blame Them

"How was that? Pretty impressive, right?"

Dragon tried to smile brightly at Daren.

But he failed.

His smile carried nothing but sorrow and loss. Under the flickering lightning in the sky, it looked desolate.

Daren immediately caught on. He frowned and suddenly asked,

"This story isn't over yet, is it?"

Dragon forced a smile.

"Yeah... it's not over yet."

He hadn't finished speaking when a fierce wind, the herald of an impending downpour, swept through the street, scattering fallen leaves across the ground—and blowing back the hood that had covered Dragon's face.

Daren's pupils contracted slightly.

Dragon didn't look much different—his high nose, deep-set eyes, and sharply defined features were all the same, and his messy black hair was as unkempt as ever.

But now, there was a new scar.

It ran across the left side of his face, fanning out like an umbrella, with rotting flesh and scorched edges.

"A gunshot wound..."

Daren was momentarily stunned.

Then—

"It's him!!"

"That's the World Government's most recently wanted criminal!"

"Monkey D. Dragon!!"

"Why is he here?!"

"Damn it! Don't move!"

"Notify the Marines—now!!"

...

A chorus of fear, fury, hesitation, and dread erupted from the street.

As Dragon's hood flew off, the nearby pedestrians recognized him, their faces twisting in shock and terror. Panic consumed the entire street.

Some people went pale as they grabbed their children and ran.

Others, eyes glinting with greed, shakily raised their pistols and aimed them at Dragon.

A few scrambled to use the Den Den Mushi in phone booths or shops to contact the local authorities or Marines—only to find, to their horror, that none of the Den Den Mushi could get a signal...

Amid the chaos, Dragon sat calmly, as if none of it concerned him, smiling quietly at Daren.

"I get it now."

Daren's eyes flickered. His fists clenched on their own, faint arcs of electricity sparking along his skin.

"With your strength, if you were even a little prepared, not even a CP agent armed with Seastone bullets could hurt you. That leaves only one explanation..."

"Exactly..."

Dragon gave a bitter smile, then continued his story.

"After I killed that Celestial Dragon, I dealt with the CP guards easily.

But when I turned around, I saw something I couldn't believe.

Civilians were running in terror, some frantically calling the Marines, others sobbing uncontrollably—but that wasn't what mattered most."

Dragon paused. Then, he finally picked up his glass and downed it in one go. He choked on it, coughing hard, his face flushing slightly.

Gasping, he said,

"The parents of the boy I saved... they were trembling in fear, and picked up one of the CP agents' pistols..."

A twisted smile crept to his lips.

"...and aimed it at me."

It felt like something in the air suddenly snapped.

Silence fell.

BOOM!

Another pale bolt of lightning split the pitch-black sky, its roar deafening.

"Just like now."

Daren looked coldly at the surrounding crowd.

They watched, coveting, fearing.

Some fled, while others picked up their guns.

Under the sharp, icy glare of the Commodore, the civilians who had been ready to fire dropped their weapons in panic and fled.

"I don't understand, Daren... I was standing up for them. I was protecting them. They shouldn't be afraid of me..."

Dragon's eyes were slightly red, his expression hard to read.

"I was doing the right thing. I was a just Marine."

Daren took a slow drag from his cigarette and replied,

"Yeah. That's why good people end up staring down gun barrels."

Dragon said quietly,

"They kept saying 'sorry' to me. I tried to calm them down..."

"But they still pulled the trigger."

Daren cut in.

Dragon fell silent for a moment.

"...Yeah."

"Because you let your guard down. You never thought they'd actually shoot."

"Yeah."

"You know why they did it?"

"I do. They didn't want to die."

Daren gave a cold laugh.

Of course. They didn't want to die.

Dragon had killed a Celestial Dragon. As witnesses, they had to kill him to 'atone,' to even have a chance at surviving. Even if he killed that Celestial Dragon to save them.

The world... what a twisted place.

Dragon let out a long sigh and smiled.

This time, his smile held a trace of ease—of acceptance.

"I don't blame them."

"I get it... They're just ordinary people. They have their own lives, their own paths. All they want is peace—a quiet life. They were protecting themselves, and their families."

"I don't blame them. It was what they had to do. They already apologized."

"But the moment that bullet hit me, I understood something."

"All those people who kneel before the Celestial Dragons... they're not bowing to power. They're bowing to this damned, broken world."

"A decaying system. Corrupt morals. Selfish hearts... The Celestial Dragons are nothing more than monsters born from all that filth."

As he spoke, Dragon's gaze drifted to a corner of the street.

Daren followed his eyes.

A woman sat on the muddy, filthy roadside, her face pale from hunger, body gaunt, clothes in tatters.

In her arms, wrapped in dirty rags, was a child.

Less than five meters away stood a lavishly decorated restaurant.

Through its large floor-to-ceiling windows, they could see the chaos caused by Dragon's presence had cleared out the diners inside.

But the tables remained, full of steaming, extravagant dishes.

Dragon looked at the untouched food, then at the starving woman. He pressed his lips together and said quietly,

"You see it, don't you, Daren?"

"This is the truth of this world."

"The Celestial Dragons live in obscene luxury, and to fund that, they squeeze the Member Nations for everything."

"The leaders and nobles of those nations then exploit the landlords and merchants, who in turn crush the common folk."

"Countless lives trapped at the bottom of society—starving. Some become beggars. Others turn to theft, prostitution, gambling... but most become pirates."

"These poor souls... they spend every last ounce of strength just to stay alive."

Dragon gave another small smile.

"So no, I don't blame them for shooting me."

"I get it. People side with whoever's winning. And I haven't won yet."

This time, Daren saw it clearly.

There was no more sorrow or disappointment in Dragon's smile.

Only a calm acceptance... and a hint of guilt buried deep in his eyes.

"It's not just them. Everything we see—disasters, hunger, war—it's all a glimpse of the future. In a world ruled by survival of the fittest, happiness never stays."

Dragon looked straight at Daren, his voice low and firm, every word weighty.

"One day, I will change this world."

Hearing that, Daren couldn't help but sigh.

His mind wandered back to the day when Dragon had gotten drunk and caused a ruckus in his yard.

It had only been two months since then, but Dragon looked like he'd aged years.

That naive, cheerful hothead was almost gone now—replaced by a man who had seen through the world's ugliness and learned to laugh anyway.

He was a true man now.

But still...

He was destined to walk the same path.

Chapter 259 - 259: Volume 2 – Chapter 161: Farewell

The streets were still in chaos.

Civilians were fleeing in terror, frantically trying to contact someone through their Den Den Mushi.

Daren and Dragon, however, sat calmly in place, as if the surrounding turmoil had nothing to do with them.

Thunder rumbled louder and louder, lightning streaking through the pitch-black sky.

Daren stared quietly at Dragon's scarred face, then suddenly asked,

"What are you planning to do?"

Dragon scratched his head, looking a bit sheepish.

"I'm not sure. But first, I need to get away from you, right?"

"The order you received must've been to arrest me at all costs—even kill me on the spot if necessary, correct?"

"But if I do manage to escape... I want to build a brand-new organization."

"One founded on harmony, freedom, equality, and dreams. I'll need more people for that."

He glanced at Daren and gave a wry smile.

"I did consider inviting you at first. But I realized there's no way you'd say yes."

"You're the head of the North Blue Fleet, top of the training camp... With how you've laid out your plans in the Marines all these years, and your personality, it's just not possible for you to join me."

Daren smirked.

"Of course not."

"Sleeping rough, being hunted, not knowing if I'll see tomorrow... No beauties, no cigars, no strong booze? I wouldn't survive."

They shared a quiet laugh.

No more needed to be said.

...

Time passed.

Daren finished his cigarette.

Snuffing it out, he said suddenly,

"Dragon, this road you're taking... it won't be easy."

"I know."

"No one will understand you."

"I know."

"Even the people you want to protect—they'll be afraid of you. They'll fear you. And one day, without warning, they might shoot you in the back and turn you over to the World Government."

"Yeah, I know."

Dragon smiled—brightly.

This time, it was a real smile.

The kind that comes when someone lets go of their ideals and pride, and chooses to face a harsh, uncertain future with unwavering resolve.

"Daren, the world needs a serious shake-up."

"I know they're just afraid, and that fear will keep spreading. But I can't stop the transformation just because the masses are scared and weak."

Daren smiled.

"It seems you're mentally prepared."

Dragon nodded.

Daren smiled with satisfaction.

"Very good. Before we begin, Vice Admiral Garp asked me to pass on a message to you."

Dragon was taken aback.

"He asked me to tell you..."

Daren repeated Garp's words, word for word.

"—To live."

Dragon was struck like lightning.

"Damn it..."

His eyes turned visibly red. He grabbed his face with both hands and choked out,

"I'm so sorry... to the old man, to everyone... and for causing you trouble..."

Tears slipped through his fingers as he clenched his teeth hard.

"Damn it, I wanted to be a hero like the old man... But now I've become a fugitive wanted by the whole world."

Daren exhaled.

"Dragon, what do you think a hero is?"

Dragon froze, looked up at Daren, and instinctively replied,

"A hero is someone strong enough to protect the weak and uphold justice."

Daren shook his head.

"No, strength matters—but a hero is actually a banner."

"A banner?"

"Yes. The people of this world are too weak, and the forces they face are too overwhelming. Maybe they want to resist, but they lack the inner strength... so they need a banner."

Daren smiled, eyes burning with conviction.

"To guide the lost, inspire courage in the timid, and solidify the faith of the hesitant. Like a blazing torch lighting up this dark world, igniting the buried flame in people's hearts, and giving them the strength to move forward..."

"That is the true meaning of a hero."

"Maybe, to me, you're more of a hero now than Vice Admiral Garp."

"Because you did what none of us dared to do."

He pointed at the stunned Dragon, his voice layered with meaning.

"You killed a Celestial Dragon in full view of the world."

"You shattered this world's myth... You dragged that so-called 'god' down from his pedestal."

A faint smile surfaced on Dragon's face—yet before it could fully bloom, he fell silent again, expression darkening.

"But in the end, I still couldn't protect them."

After the incident, he had immediately fled the island.

Then he heard the news:

World Government agents arrived soon after and began a search.

The little boy who had flown a kite—and his parents—were brutally tortured by the agents. In the end, they didn't survive.

"Regret is always the norm in this world. You can't protect everyone. But you must keep moving forward, Dragon."

Daren offered a faint smile.

Hearing this, Dragon unconsciously straightened his back. His weary smile held a touch of sorrow—but also pride.

BOOM!

Another thunderclap tore through the sky, illuminating the world.

In the howling wind, streaks of ink-black spread across the land.

Drip, drip...

Raindrops began to fall—soon turning into a downpour.

The storm had arrived.

Daren suddenly muttered under his breath,

"It should be about time."

Dragon didn't hear him. He was lost in the rain, feeling the cold drops strike his hair and face. He murmured,

"Even the sky weeps for this world?"

"No. The sky is seeing you off."

Daren smiled and raised his wine glass.

Dragon blinked—then smiled again.

He picked up his own glass.

The two glasses, filled with "the most strong wine," collided heavily in the air. The amber liquid shimmered with the color of departure and farewell.

They drank it all in one go.

Dragon rose abruptly.

The hesitation and loss in his eyes had vanished—only firm resolve remained.

His black hair whipped wildly in the wind, his silhouette lit by lightning.

From this day forward,

his former comrades were his enemies, the enormous power that ruled the world was his enemy, the decaying system was his enemy, and the ignorance of humanity was his enemy.

Rain poured across the world. The road ahead was heavy and harsh. He could only walk it alone.

The world had become his enemy.

Yet he laughed with fearless pride.

"Bring it on!!"

Daren slowly stood, raised his hand, and tore off the hooded coat hiding his face and identity.

Underneath was a black suit and a pure white cape of justice.

Before all eyes, his voice cut through the wind and rain, louder than the thunder, echoing across the island.

"Criminal Monkey D. Dragon! I am Rogers Daren, Commodore of the Marine Headquarters... In the name of justice, I officially place you under arrest!"

"Surrender now!!"

Chapter 260 - 260: Volume 2 – Chapter 162: He's About to Lose—Send Reinforcements!

The sudden turn of events made the chaotic crowd freeze in place.

Before anyone could react, Daren and Dragon moved almost simultaneously.

Their military boots splashed through puddles as they lunged at each other like ferocious beasts. The sheer force of their clash shattered the nearby table and wine glasses into pieces.

Black dragon claws and explosive fists tore through the downpour, colliding midair with overwhelming power!

Bang!

A powerful shockwave burst out from the point of impact, sweeping outward in all directions. The torrential rain was blown sideways, and the stone pavement beneath them was lifted and flung like ocean waves.

Windows of nearby taverns, restaurants, and shops shattered with a deafening crash. Terrified civilians clutched their heads and scrambled to escape, their ears ringing.

"Hahahaha!! Your strength... has improved a lot!!"

Facing the fierce Marine Commodore, Dragon's eyes lit up with battlelust as he laughed heartily.

Daren just smiled in silence and closed the distance in a flash.

Bang bang bang bang!!

The two clashed at high speed. Fists, claws, knees, and whip-like kicks—each coated in Armament Haki—collided violently in the rain, sending out deep, booming echoes.

Everywhere they fought, streetlights, tables, signs, even buildings—were swept away like debris in a hurricane, reduced to rubble.

And yet, as if by mutual understanding, their battle moved toward uninhabited areas, keeping civilians out of harm's way.

"They're really fighting..."

Farther away, fleeing civilians stared in shock as building after building crumbled under the force of the clash. They gasped, unable to believe what they were seeing.

Someone snapped out of the daze and shouted through gritted teeth:

"Quick!! Keep calling the Den Den Mushi! Notify the Marines—we need backup!!"

"That Commodore alone won't be enough to handle that guy!"

"That man is a criminal wanted by the World Government!!"

Without hesitation, the civilians dialed again.

This time—the line connected!

"We got through! It must've been the storm messing with the signal earlier."

"Hello! We've spotted the criminal—Dragon!!"

"Yes, yes!! A Marine is risking his life holding him off! Send reinforcements now!!"

Just then, the civilian holding the Den Den Mushi saw Daren—his Marine cloak fluttering—sent flying like a cannonball. He crashed through two buildings, blood gushing from his mouth.

The civilian's pupils shrank in horror. Heart pounding, he roared into the Den Den Mushi:

"The Marine named Daren—he's about to lose!! He's spitting blood! He can't hold on much longer!!"

"Yes, that's the location!!"

"Damn it—stop wasting time!! Get someone here now!!"

...

At the same time...

Over a hundred nautical miles from the island where Dragon and Daren were locked in battle, two Marine warships struggled forward through a violent storm.

Lightning flashed, thunder roared.

A Marine in a raincoat burst into the cabin, panicked and breathless, saluting with trembling hands.

"Rear Admiral Sakazuki! Rear Admiral Borsalino! We found him!!"

Sakazuki, who had been reviewing the nautical chart under the dim glow of an oil lamp, stood up abruptly, face darkening.

"Where?"

Borsalino, standing to the side, adjusted his sunglasses with a smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth.

"Here, right here!"

The young Marine pointed to an island on the chart, swallowed hard, and said with difficulty,

"Eyewitnesses on the island report that Commodore Daren is in fierce combat with the target. He's been seriously wounded and is being overwhelmed. He might not last much longer!"

Sakazuki's expression turned stormy.

"Damn you, Dragon!"

His clenched fists began to glow red-hot, black smoke curling from his skin.

"Borsalino!"

He spun around, eyes icy as they locked onto Borsalino.

Borsalino raised both hands and shrugged, clearly resigned.

"Yeah, yeah... I'll head over now."

Sakazuki rasped out,

"Hold him back. Don't let Dragon get away."

"...I'll be there soon."

As Borsalino walked out of the cabin, he muttered,

"I'll do what I can... But you know as well as I do, that guy's not exactly easy to deal with..."

"He's Zephyr-sensei's student, and Vice Admiral Garp's son."

With those words, his body dissolved into a flurry of golden photons, which shot into the sky and vanished into the storm in an instant.

"Of course I know that..."

Sakazuki's gaze darkened as he watched the light disappear in the distance, muttering under his breath.

He and Dragon had always been at odds—constantly clashing over their opposing ideals of justice. He knew all too well how powerful Dragon truly was.

And he also understood the unspoken meaning in Borsalino's words.

'Do you really want to go after Dragon? Strength aside... he's Zephyr-sensei's disciple, and Garp's own flesh and blood...'

Sakazuki was silent for a few seconds. Then, without a word, he picked up his duckbill cap from the table and pulled it down low over his face.

The brim cast a shadow over his eyes.

His fists clenched tighter.

"Set course!"

...

Boom!!

Daren staggered out of the building's rubble, spitting a mouthful of blood onto the ground.

"Damn, that hit hard."

He squinted toward Dragon, who stood in the distance, brimming with fighting spirit. Wiping the blood from the corner of his mouth, he muttered,

"You really go all in once a fight gets going, huh..."

The corner of his mouth twitched slightly.

"Hahahaha!! Daren, how about that one?! That was Ryusoken's finisher!"

Dragon laughed with excitement, pride glowing on his face.

"Channeling the technique of the dragon's claw, I condensed all my power into a single burst—like a dragon's breath!"

"Well? Ready for the next one?! I've been dying to have a proper fight with you!"

With that, he raised his arm. A swirling mass of dark green wind began to whip around in his palm.

The air churned like blades, spinning with terrifying speed. The vortex expanded rapidly, growing until it formed a towering column of wind over twenty meters high!

Its sheer force and distortion were so extreme that buildings nearby were ripped from their foundations and sucked into the eye of the storm, shredded to splinters in an instant!

Watching the devastating scene unfold, Daren's eyes twitched violently.