

One Piece 261

Chapter 261 - 261: Volume 2 – Chapter 163: You Don't Even Know Swordsmanship!

Hey, hey, hey—are you serious right now?!

Idiot!!

Watching the massive hurricane in Dragon's hand swell even larger, Daren's eye twitched uncontrollably. He couldn't help but curse inwardly.

"Hahahaha!! Let's go!!"

By now, the towering wind column had been compressed to its limit. Dragon threw his head back with a wild laugh, stepped forward, and hurled the monstrous green hurricane straight at Daren!

Hurricane Roar!!

The colossal storm erupted instantly. Once released from Dragon's palm, it surged out like it had lost all restraint, expanding with terrifying speed. The eye of the storm spun faster and faster, turning into a whirlwind of destruction.

Buildings lining the street, towering several meters tall, were instantly devoured at the slightest touch—torn apart and shredded in the swirling gale.

The roaring hurricane ripped through everything in its path. The ground buckled and heaved like stormy waves. Street signs, lamps, bricks—all were sucked skyward and flung high into the air, rain splashing in thick sheets as debris tore through it.

A storm like a natural disaster was bearing down on him!

Crack... crackle...

Even with the hurricane still dozens of meters away, Daren felt an overwhelming pressure slam into him. The wind was already so fierce he could barely stand, as if he'd be blown away any second.

The ground beneath his feet splintered with deep, spreading cracks.

"What a lunatic..."

Staring at the absurd scale of destruction, Daren couldn't help but curse with a grin.

But his eyes blazed with unshakable fighting spirit, like flames roaring to life.

A smirk full of defiance tugged at the corner of his lips.

How strong was Dragon right now?

Admiral-level?

Daren wasn't sure.

But one thing was clear—if he wasn't already at Admiral level, then he was without a doubt the closest person on the seas to it!

Trained by two legends, Zephyr and Garp. A genius capable of developing the powerful Ryusoken martial arts. Add to that one of the most elite Logia-type Devil Fruits...

From the intel he and Sakazuki had gathered during their brief alliance, Daren was convinced: Dragon's strength was at least equal to Sakazuki's—maybe even a notch above.

And what about Daren himself?

Even he didn't know how strong he'd become.

Maybe now...

He looked up at the oncoming storm—this raging force that tore through everything in its path—and let out a sharp, fearless smile. Wind whipped his black hair as his eyes blazed like twin beacons.

"Time to find out."

He suddenly raised his hand to the side.

A sharp streak of black light came shrieking from the distance, stopping firmly in front of him.

A black hilt. A blade etched with ghostly markings that pulsed like cursed fire...

Enma.

The moment Enma appeared, the air around it froze under the weight of its demonic aura, turning cold and heavy.

"Alright then... show me what you've got."

A crimson gleam of madness flickered in Daren's eyes as he gripped Enma's hilt.

Rain poured in sheets.

The storm loomed, darkening the sky.

In that instant...

It became clearly visible to the naked eye—

One strand after another of deep purple-black light emerged silently from within the storm, like eerie fireflies, swirling out of Daren's body.

They coiled through the air like serpents of darkness, stirring the howling wind.

As if endless streams of Armament Haki had taken form, each strand wove and surged toward the blade of Enma, wrapping around it with crackling energy.

"Ahhh..."

Daren let out a low, bestial growl, his eyes bloodshot and wild. The veins bulging on his muscular arms writhed like centipedes under his skin.

In that moment, standing with sword in one hand, he looked like a warrior defiantly facing down a raging storm.

Enma, like a ravenous beast, devoured his Haki with reckless hunger, releasing a ghostly, chilling aura that twisted into a visible vortex.

The storm was shut out completely.

It was like ghostfire set ablaze!

"That's... a cursed blade!!"

From afar, Dragon's eyes went wide with shock.

"Daren, what the hell are you doing?! You don't even know how to use a sword!!"

He stared in disbelief, mouth agape.

Even he felt a jolt of dread at the amount of Haki Enma was absorbing. But what left him most baffled—Daren wasn't a swordsman. Yet he pulled out a cursed sword and poured his Haki into it like a lunatic.

What was he trying to do? Swing it like a club?

"Who says you need to know swordsmanship to use a sword?"

Daren, who had kept his head slightly lowered like he was enduring intense pain, slowly looked up. His eyes blazed with savage madness.

Suddenly, he let go of Enma.

Lifting his chin with defiance, his cloak whipped violently behind him in the wind.

"Shoot it, Enma."

As soon as the words left his mouth, Dragon's pupils contracted sharply—he felt it.

Boom!!

A massive magnetic field exploded outward, propelling the cursed black blade forward like a cannon shot!

The resulting burst of air ignited into a blinding orange-red electromagnetic shockwave. Enma's speed instantly rocketed to its limit.

In Dragon's trembling gaze, Enma—wreathed in a vortex of purple-black Haki—pierced straight into the heart of the towering hurricane!

A single point shattered the whole storm!

What should have been a stalemate ended in an instant. The massive storm suddenly detonated, releasing a shockwave that shattered the glass and walls of buildings across a radius of nearly a kilometer.

The eye of the storm—gone!

Enma's strike destroyed it completely, like a surgeon's scalpel cutting into the storm's strongest yet most vulnerable core, snuffing it out in one clean blow!

Then—

With a sharp slash of wind,

Enma became a streak of black demonic light and surged forward, crossing hundreds of meters in a blink.

The speed was so fast it was as if it vanished into the void.

Dragon's eyelids twitched hard. His Observation Haki surged to its peak. He transformed his hands into dragon claws and lunged forward.

"Ryusoken!!"

Clang!!

A sound like a meteor crashing to earth erupted in the air as the impact exploded outward in a shockwave.

In front of him, Enma was gripped tightly in Dragon's three-fingered claw, sparks flying madly from their clash. A drop of cold sweat rolled down Dragon's forehead.

Then, suddenly—his pupils shrank.

He had seen something unreal.

A nearly imperceptible fine line...

Gradually appeared—emerging and spreading out across the cluster of buildings around them.

If anyone had looked from high above at a diagonal angle, they would have seen a terrifying scene unfold—

From where Daren had stood, a massive fan-shaped zone had extended outward...

All the buildings within that kilometer-wide arc—

Sliced cleanly in half like blocks of tofu.

Split neatly through the middle.

The cut surfaces...

Smooth as mirrors.

Chapter 262 - 262: Volume 2 – Chapter 164: Don't Look Back

Boom...

The upper halves of dozens—maybe hundreds—of buildings slid down along clean, smooth cuts, collapsing in a chain reaction. The ground trembled, thick smoke billowed up, and clouds of dust filled the air.

Dragon's eyelids twitched again.

Just the air pressure from the blade slicing through the sky at high speed had cleaved through everything in its path.

The power of Daren's "slash" felt almost indistinguishable from that of a true great swordsman!

But unlike a true master's smooth, natural, and exhilarating strikes, Daren's technique was all about raw speed!

He first infused his blade with Armament Haki to boost its toughness and cutting power, then in the blink of an eye, pushed the Cursed Sword's force to the absolute limit...

"This is insane!"

Dragon felt his grip around Enma grow so tight that blood began seeping from between his fingers, pain flaring sharply as he cursed under his breath.

Who the hell uses a sword like that!?

It's like hurling a cannonball with your bare hands—completely barbaric!

"My turn."

Just as Dragon was momentarily stunned, a low voice suddenly rang out behind him.

"Eh!?"

His eyes widened, and he instinctively turned.

"You're sneak atta—"

Bang!!

A fist, shrouded in a dense layer of jet-black Haki, zoomed into his view and slammed hard into his face.

The blow was so powerful, the muscles in his cheeks rippled like waves.

Boom!!

The next second, it was like a speeding warship had rammed into him—Dragon was sent flying dozens of meters like a cannonball, smashing through several partially collapsed buildings.

Daren's white cape fluttered as he landed firmly, knees bending slightly. The ground beneath him exploded as if struck by anti-aircraft fire, blasting open a massive crater.

Using the recoil from that impact, Daren launched himself forward again with a thunderous burst.

No way he was giving that bastard Dragon a moment to breathe!

Like a wild beast, he dove straight into the wreckage of the collapsed buildings.

A second later—

Two figures, locked in a furious melee, shot out of the rubble.

Boom!

Boom!

Boom!

Under the terrified and stunned gazes of the trembling crowd in the distance, Daren and Dragon were locked in a brutal brawl, their rapid-fire clashes triggering one explosive shockwave after another, the noise so deafening it left their ears ringing.

"Daren, you bastard!! You hit me in the face!?"

Dragon's body suddenly unraveled into a whirlwind and reformed ten meters away. Enraged, he swung his arm.

Several massive, dark green wind blades instantly formed and slashed through the air toward Daren.

His face was visibly swollen, nose black and blue, with blood streaming from both nostrils.

Daren shattered one wind blade with a punch, but the remaining two carved a cross-shaped wound into his chest. Without pause, he lifted his leg and fired off a Rankyaku.

Whoosh!

The pale green Rankyaku tore across the ground, slashing straight through Dragon's form—and vanished into a distant building, slicing it clean in half from top to bottom...

"Damn, Logia types are such a pain."

Daren impatiently spat out a mouthful of blood, his gaze sweeping across the approaching sea near the port.

It looked like he'd finally found something. A sharp glint flashed deep in his eyes.

Finally...

With that thought, Daren suddenly burst into laughter.

"Come on, Dragon! Let's settle this once and for all!!"

Dragon froze for a moment, then his eyes flared with even greater intensity.

"Bring it on!!"

But before the words had even faded, the surrounding environment suddenly shifted in a bizarre way.

Countless steel bars and scraps of metal shot up from the ground and the ruins of nearby buildings, twisting and writhing like a swarm of black giant serpents, lunging at Dragon to crush him.

"It's useless! I'm a Logia!"

Dragon laughed it off and once again transformed into a hurricane.

The metallic serpents missed, tearing up the ground and stirring clouds of dust.

In the next instant—

A figure, wild and unhinged, burst through the dust cloud like a feral tiger, closing in on Dragon with terrifying speed.

"Another sneak attack!?"

Dragon faltered for a split second before bursting into laughter.

"Not this time!!"

His five fingers curled into sharp dragon claws, instantly coated in black Armament Haki, ready to seize Daren's oncoming fist.

But just then—

The Marine Commodore suddenly grinned at him and, without warning, closed the distance.

Dragon's pupils shrank into pinpoints!

He tried to pull back—

But it was too late.

Slash!!

The dragon claws, strong enough to shred steel and crush mountains, tore through the Commodore's chest, carving a deep, bone-exposing gash.

Scalding blood sprayed out in a torrent, splattering across Dragon's face.

It was like a bolt from the blue.

Disbelief spread across Dragon's face.

Why... didn't he dodge or defend!?

"Don't look back, my friend."

A low voice echoed by his ear. Before Dragon could react, he felt Daren's steady grip tighten around his hand.

The blood-soaked Commodore kept a straight face, twisted in midair, and—

With all his might, delivered a crushing kick into Dragon's gut!

Bang!!

Dragon spat blood, his body curling like a boiled shrimp, his eyes nearly bulging out.

Boom!!

Another blast rang out as the second wave of Armament Haki exploded. The sheer force behind Daren's kick launched Dragon through the air.

He flew so fast, he left behind rings of white shockwaves.

After crashing through several buildings, Dragon grimaced in pain—then suddenly, everything opened up before him.

The sky.

No—the sea!

Damn it, Daren, are you really trying to kill me!?

But at that moment, Dragon noticed something strange.

A small, nondescript merchant ship was speeding toward him across the water at an incredible pace.

Given his current falling trajectory...

His eyes lit up.

The next moment—

Bang!!

Dragon slammed hard into the deck of the small merchant ship, smashing a hole straight through it.

"Hold tight, guest."

The ship's owner, back turned, calmly steered the vessel and spoke in a low voice.

"We're setting sail soon."

Dragon climbed out of the hole, wincing as he rubbed his head, then instinctively looked back toward the port.

There stood the Marine Commodore, drenched in blood and kneeling on one knee, silently watching in his direction—calm, as if bidding farewell.

"Daren..."

Dragon muttered under his breath, eyes misting.

He fought the urge to wave and was just about to give a quiet nod when suddenly, a dazzling golden light burst through the dark sky in the distance.

"I can't let you get away that easily..."

Chapter 263 - 263: Volume 2 – Chapter 165: I Am the Storm

The moment that blinding golden light rose on the distant horizon, both Dragon and Daren instinctively narrowed their eyes.

That damn voice!

Borsalino!

Daren panted and clenched his teeth. He hadn't expected that lazy slacker—who was always late—to show up this fast!

He had planned everything as carefully as he could.

From the start, he used the power of the Jiki Jiki no Mi to block all Den Den Mushi signals on the island, cutting off any chance for civilians to contact the Marines or local authorities. That wasn't just to buy time for him and Dragon to say their goodbyes...

The most important reason was to wait for that ship disguised as a "merchant vessel" to arrive!

That's why, even mid-fight and mid-speech, his eyes kept flicking toward the sea.

Dragon's hurricane-based Logia ability let him "hover" in the air for short bursts, but there was no way he could fly long distances over the endless ocean.

Just like Smoker and Crocodile, his elemental form only allowed limited range and floating mobility. He couldn't cross vast seas like those with Devil Fruits that truly grant flight.

In fact, this applied to all Logia-type Devil Fruit users.

Daren had confirmed it with Momonga.

Even a Goro Goro no Mi user, who can transform into lightning and move at the speed of light, couldn't actually travel long distances across the sea. Their mobility was restricted to a single island or nation.

Maybe it had to do with stamina, though even Daren wasn't sure of the exact reason.

Still, it made sense.

If Enel could really become lightning and travel freely across the world, he wouldn't have needed to build the Ark—he could've just flown to the moon himself.

By the same logic, Borsalino was likely the same.

With his ability to turn into light, he could move at light speed, but that didn't mean he could cross the ocean without a ship.

After all, in the original storyline, no matter how urgent the mission, Borsalino always traveled by warship. That was all the proof one needed.

Devil Fruits that granted long-range flight were even rarer than Logia types in this sea!

That's why, if Dragon was truly going to escape, he couldn't rely on his powers alone—he needed a ship.

But now...

"Damn it!"

Daren cursed under his breath, fists tightening.

A thousand thoughts raced through his mind, but all he could do was watch helplessly as Borsalino's figure reassembled high in the sky from countless golden photons.

At this point, there was nothing he could do.

Not knowing where Borsalino truly stood, he couldn't risk making a move—what if that guy stabbed him in the back?

And more importantly, if Borsalino was already here... Sakazuki probably wasn't far behind.

As his thoughts churned, that dazzling golden light flared up like a second sun, momentarily cutting through the pitch-black sky.

"Borsalino!!"

Dragon roared, blood at the corner of his mouth, his long black hair whipping wildly in the storm.

"Dragon... you've done something irreversible. Sorry, but I'm going to have to take you down now..."

Reflected in Borsalino's sunglasses was Dragon's figure, while a teasing smirk curled at the corner of his lips.

He raised both arms outward, fingers forming the familiar orchid pose.

The golden glow blazed to its peak.

"Here it comes!"

Dragon's eyes sharpened, a grin tugging at his lips.

As a former comrade, he knew better than anyone just how terrifying this yellow monkey really was.

An overwhelming sense of pressure and looming death surged toward him—but even so, Dragon's gaze shone brighter than it ever had in his life!

"My story's only just begun, and I'm gonna make it a tragedy!"

He took a bold step forward, laughing wildly.

"A brand-new era is waiting for me—what reason could possibly stop a man from charging into the free seas!?"

Dragon's eyes burned red as he roared, the veins on his scarred face bulging with intensity.

Borsalino's figure was now completely engulfed in radiant gold, but the mocking smile on his lips still lingered.

"You can't resist the storm that's coming."

The next second—

A barrage of golden light bullets tore through the rain like a violent downpour, sweeping down toward the small vessel below.

Yasakani no Magatama!

"No!"

Dragon, drenched in the storm, threw his head back and laughed.

"I am the storm!"

He stretched both arms wide and raised them high. Behind him, his dark green cloak suddenly billowed in the wind.

Wind!

A roaring wind!

A colossal, tornado-like storm erupted from the surface of the raging sea, churning the waves into a frenzy!

The ocean howled, and the sky screamed.

The storm surged upward in massive tidal waves, layer upon layer, rising to meet the torrent of golden light bullets pouring from the sky.

Boom!!

Scarlet explosions blasted one after another through the mountainous tsunamis, carving massive craters in the sea—only to have them immediately refilled by the overwhelming force of the rising water.

The heat from the light bullets evaporated vast quantities of seawater, wrapping the sea in a dense fog of white steam that refused to fade.

And it wasn't over. Dragon's roar echoed through the storm as unrelenting winds pushed the tsunami higher still, crashing upward with savage force toward Borsalino in the sky.

"Oh?"

Borsalino's eyes narrowed behind his sunglasses.

"Well, I guess I've got no choice..."

His form suddenly split into countless photons, effortlessly dodging the crashing waves.

But his unhurried voice still echoed from above.

"Still, are you sure you can handle what comes next?"

The moment those words fell...

Daren and Dragon both froze.

BOOM!!

A mighty warship suddenly burst through the thick mist and surging waves, like a blade cleaving ice, surging forward with unstoppable force.

The raised bow stood tall and proud, trailing a wide current of seawater behind it—its massive anchor glinting sharply in the stormlight.

"You're not getting away, Dragon!!"

At the bow stood a towering figure, his presence as unshakable as a cliff face. A wide cloak billowed violently behind him.

On the chest of his black suit, a vivid, blood-red rose gleamed—a symbol of merciless power—its presence radiating a suffocating bloodlust beneath the crackling sky.

Rear Admiral Sakazuki, of Marine Headquarters!

Chapter 264 - 264: Volume 2 – Chapter 166: Sailing Towards Dawn

The warship surged through the waves with defiant force, its momentum thundering across the sea.

Sakazuki stood at the bow, unshaken by the storm. His mere presence radiated a suffocating pressure. Under the brim of his military cap, his eyes were dark and cold, fixed on the distant ships tossed by the waves. His entire right arm began to glow with a deep crimson light.

"The real troublemaker has arrived..."

Dragon's face turned slightly pale under the pounding rain, his lips pressed into a tight line.

If someone like Borsalino—so hard to read—might still consider his comrades' bond, Sakazuki, who upheld "absolute justice," would never hold back!

Boom!

A cannonball suddenly dropped from above, but it was deflected by a swirling gust of wind and sank into the sea. The underwater explosion sent up a towering column of water, rocking the ship violently as it struggled through the turbulent waves and shockwaves.

One after another, orange-red flashes burst from the warships in the distance. Shells screamed through the air in rapid succession.

On the swaying deck, Dragon clung tightly to the mast.

"Guest, at this rate, the ship's going to sink!"

The ship's owner called out from the helm, voice trembling slightly.

"I know!"

Dragon gritted his teeth and growled back.

His eyes locked onto Sakazuki on the warship as a decision formed swiftly in his heart.

Don't look back...

A dark green hurricane, visible to the naked eye, rapidly formed in the palm of his hand.

"Then let me see your resolve, Sakazuki..."

Blood filled Dragon's eyes in an instant as he hurled the wind sphere forward with force.

"The sea is my battlefield!!"

The moment it left his hand, the wind sphere expanded uncontrollably, erupting into a massive waterspout that stretched from sea to sky.

Fueled by the storm, the waterspout grew even more violent, surging forward like a solid wall toward Sakazuki's warship, carrying with it a force capable of leveling everything in its path!

It was cataclysmic!

"What is that..."

"That tornado is massive!!"

"Damn it! At this size and speed, there's no way we can dodge it!"

"..."

The Marines on the warship turned pale in an instant, their eyes filled with terror as they stared at the colossal waterspout that seemed to swallow the sky. Their fear was overwhelming, and their bodies trembled involuntarily.

Even Daren, watching from the port, felt his pupils contract and his heart skip a beat at the sight.

In these stormy conditions, the power of Dragon's Kaze Kaze no Mi was at least twice as strong as usual!

There was no doubt about it—this raging sea was his home turf!

"A force of nature... When Fleet Admiral Kong handed that Devil Fruit to Dragon, he must've hoped it could be used to challenge Whitebeard and Shiki..."

A slow, casual voice suddenly rose behind Daren.

He glanced to the side at Borsalino, who had just walked up next to him, and narrowed his eyes.

"Not going to help?"

Borsalino scratched his head with mock helplessness.

"I gave it everything I had, but it still wasn't enough to stop him..."

"From here on out, it's up to Sakazuki. After all, everyone at Marine Headquarters knows—among the new generation, only he can stand on equal ground with a genius like Dragon."

"Besides..."

He pointed at the gruesome state of Daren's injuries and sighed.

"Someone's got to look after the wounded, right?"

"With injuries like that, if you don't get treatment soon, you might not make it..."

Daren's gaze flickered.

He exchanged a glance with Borsalino—and both of them chuckled.

"Yeah, we've already done all we could."

Daren nodded in agreement, then immediately coughed up a mouthful of blood, his face pale.

"Appreciate it, Rear Admiral Borsalino."

One stood, the other sat. They remained in perfect sync.

Meanwhile, the towering sea tornado had already descended in front of the warship, like the gaping maw of a ferocious beast about to swallow the entire vessel whole.

The storm had arrived!

Time seemed to freeze.

Through the swirling vortex and crashing waves, Daren faintly saw a crimson figure suddenly leap from the bow of the warship.

Then—

It was like a fiery explosion beneath the sea.

Like magma erupting from within a glacier.

A crimson light swelled rapidly in the center of the dark green waterspout.

And then—

BOOM!!

A blazing column of molten lava erupted upward, tearing straight through the waterspout and blasting a massive hole in the raging sea.

"Die, Dragon!!"

Sakazuki charged like a hound locked onto its prey, feet stomping through the air as his figure tore through the rain, streaking toward the ship.

"The future of the world is waiting for me!!"

Dragon leapt up as well, eyes blazing, his arms transforming into a raging hurricane.

The two soared into the sky, their eyes locked, overflowing with fighting spirit.

A tattered dark green coat and a pristine white Marine cape whipped in opposite directions behind them.

Dark clouds gathered above, lightning flickering and thunder rumbling, heralding a coming storm.

Dark red magma surged and expanded, forming into a massive hound of molten rock.

The roaring hurricane twisted violently, coiling into the shape of a green dragon.

A punch!

A claw!

"Inugami Guren!!!"

"Hurricane: Dragon's Breath!!!"

Boom!!

Fist and claw collided!

Their attacks crashed together like meteors striking the earth!

The howling wind dragon and the infernal magma hound sank their teeth into each other's throats at the same time!

A shockwave erupted from the epicenter, rippling out in every direction.

Their Devil Fruits and Haki manifested into two spiraling vortexes—one dark green, one crimson—clashing, devouring each other.

Molten magma dripped from Sakazuki's chin as he roared, eyes bloodshot.

"You betrayed the Marines!!"

Boom!

His magma fist exploded forward again, beginning to overpower the dragon's hurricane claws.

Blood leaked from the corner of Dragon's mouth from the blow.

For a moment, his mind blurred, flooded by a rush of memories—

A little boy flying a kite.

The loathsome sneers of the Celestial Dragons.

Parents trembling as they raised their pistols.

A faint ache on his cheek...

Faces and fragments of his past flashed before him like a reel of film, all converging into a single ancient, resounding word:

People!

In that instant, an indescribable surge burst from Dragon's chest—as if all the fury and resentment he had buried for years finally erupted at once!

BOOM!!!

A vast and powerful aura exploded outward. The entire island seemed to tremble.

Crackling streaks of black and red lightning split the sky.

"Conqueror's Haki?!"

Sakazuki's stunned shout rang out—just as Dragon let out a fierce, laughing roar.

"But I never betrayed justice!!"

The three-fingered dragon claw surged with astonishing force, as if a true dragon exhaled through it!

Sakazuki's pupils shrank, blood flooding his eyes.

Bang!!

The magma hound exploded violently. Sakazuki's body was sent flying, slamming hard into the warship's deck amid the Marines' cries of shock.

Dragon, too, was blasted back, landing on the small ship with blood trickling from his mouth.

His face was ghostly pale—but his eyes burned with brilliant light.

"Hahaha!! Raise the sails! Set sail!!"

He didn't look back.

With a loud snap, the merchant ship's sails unfurled. Caught by the howling wind, it soared forward like a fledgling eagle, piercing through the storm.

Dragon burst into laughter, smashing open a crate on deck with one hand and pulling out a bottle of strong liquor. He threw his head back and drank deeply.

The burning liquor scorched his throat, turning his eyes blood-red. Conqueror's Haki erupted from him in waves, slamming into the Marines on the distant warships—dizzying them, forcing them to one knee.

Lightning flashed across the night sky. In the reflection of the bottle, Dragon saw his own battered, bloodstained face.

He grinned.

Without hesitation, he dragged his three-fingered claw across the left side of his face, tearing open his cheek and marking his scar with a bold, crisscrossed streak of blood.

Reborn!

He stood in the storm, arms spread wide, letting the rain wash away the blood and wounds.

The road ahead was heavy and lonely. There was no one to confide in.

So be it—he would let the world hear him!

Suddenly, lines from an epic he once read in an ancient tome surfaced in his mind. With boldness and fire, he began to sing:

"For the will of the people

For the progress of society

Let the fiery spirit of rebellion fill your heart

Tomorrow, my friends, we'll meet again

We'll forge the light, no matter how long the night

Illuminate this land and change our fate..."

Dragon's voice rose higher, carrying farther. His arms flailed like a conductor orchestrating the sea itself.

The rain, the wind, echoed his cheers and roars.

The sea rose in thunderous waves, pushing the ship forward, celebrating his rebirth and transformation.

The song of freedom resounded across the ocean—across the world.

"I offer all that I am

And if I must die for it,

Let me be the first

To have my name carved

on the monument of hope..."

There he stood, aboard a battered little ship—singing, laughing, weeping, bleeding—sailing through the storm, toward the distant dawn.

Chapter 265 - 265: Volume 2 – Chapter 167: Cleaning Up The Mess

In the midst of the storm, the rebellious and passionate song slowly faded into the distance.

Yet its echoes lingered in everyone's hearts, refusing to fade.

It was as if the ancient epic carried within it a mysterious and powerful force—one that stirred the blood and set hearts ablaze.

On the warship, the Marines knelt on one knee, gazing blankly at the worn-out little boat disappearing over the horizon. Unknowingly, their faces were streaked with tears.

They couldn't understand the lyrics, but the bold, mournful melody was filled with overwhelming power.

At the island's port, a dense crowd had unknowingly gathered.

They, too, stood silently, emotions roiling.

"This just got a lot more complicated... He's actually awakened Conqueror's Haki..."

Borsalino spoke with a faint, half-smile, both hands tucked into his pockets.

Daren gave a knowing, thoughtful smile.

Looks like his hunch might not have been wrong after all.

For a Marine, killing a Celestial Dragon could indeed be the fastest and most direct way to awaken Conqueror's Haki.

But maybe it wasn't just that.

Daren suddenly shook his head, overturning the idea.

Dragon's Conqueror's Haki hadn't awakened the moment he killed the Celestial Dragon—it had erupted naturally when his mindset shifted and his convictions solidified.

Which meant that killing the Celestial Dragon was only part of the equation.

Conqueror's Haki was the power of spirit—an inner force.

At its core, the awakening of Conqueror's Haki often stemmed from a transformation of the heart triggered by external events.

Like the desperate will to protect a loved one in mortal danger.

Or the burning ambition to roam free when crushed by oppression.

Or a defiant spirit chasing the dream of freedom...

Seen in this light, killing a Celestial Dragon alone wasn't enough for a Marine to awaken Conqueror's Haki.

At the very least, it wasn't the whole reason.

Whether that Marine had a strong enough will, whether the mental strain they faced was crushing enough, and whether they could, amid the confusion and pressure of killing a Celestial Dragon, rediscover a belief they'd devote their life to...

That was the real key to awakening Conqueror's Haki.

Still, it's no surprise—he is, after all, the future leader of the Revolutionary Army... the "most dangerous criminal" in the eyes of the World Government.

Even though Dragon had only just awakened his Conqueror's Haki, its intensity had already reached the point where it manifested in streaks of black and red lightning.

That wave of spiritual force was so overwhelming that even Daren, who had also awakened Conqueror's Haki, felt a momentary daze and a tingling across his scalp.

It was precisely this burst of Conqueror's Haki that allowed Dragon to overpower Sakazuki in that final clash, buying just enough time to escape.

As Daren's thoughts drifted, Sakazuki's flagship and another late-arriving warship slowly pulled into port.

With a dark expression, Sakazuki stepped off the deck, a smear of blood still at the corner of his mouth.

Daren noticed blood dripping from his right hand.

"Borsalino, why didn't you go after them?"

Sakazuki's voice was flat, but his tone carried the weight of interrogation as he locked eyes with Borsalino.

Borsalino raised his hands in mock surrender, looking completely innocent.

"A 'monster' who's awakened Conqueror's Haki... and Dragon's powers are a massive advantage at sea. Even if I chased him, it wouldn't have ended well..."

"Besides, doesn't Commodore Daren need someone to look after him?"

He suddenly lowered his voice, the corners of his mouth curling into a meaningful smile.

"Sakazuki, sometimes it's better not to push things too far... You heard him—Dragon didn't betray 'justice'..."

Sakazuki went silent for a while.

He glanced at Daren's battered body. Then, without a word, he pulled out his military Den Den Mushi and dialed headquarters.

Before long, the call connected.

"What's the situation, Sakazuki?"

Admiral Sengoku's anxious voice came through the Den Den Mushi.

Sakazuki pressed his lips together, then replied hoarsely,

"Reporting, Admiral Sengoku... During the fierce battle, the target criminal, Monkey D. Dragon, awakened Conqueror's Haki."

"Commodore Daren and I were seriously injured. Rear Admiral Borsalino..."

He glanced at the hem of Borsalino's coat, soaked with seawater, and the corner of his eye twitched almost imperceptibly.

"...Sustained minor injuries."

"The target managed to escape. The arrest mission... has failed."

There was a noticeable silence on the other end.

"...Understood. You've done well, Sakazuki."

Sengoku's voice clearly relaxed a little, and his tone steadied once more.

"Take some time to recover, then return immediately."

After a pause, he seemed to recall something and added,

"By the way, is that kid Daren conscious?"

Sakazuki blinked and looked over at Daren, who gave a small nod.

"Yes. He's conscious."

"Good. Hand him the military Den Den Mushi. I need to speak with him privately."

Sakazuki frowned slightly but didn't say anything. He passed the Den Den Mushi to Daren, then walked a few steps away with Borsalino, heading toward the sea.

"Cough cough... Admiral Sengoku, it's me."

Daren coughed weakly, breathing a little unsteadily as he spoke into the receiver.

"How's your condition?"

Sengoku couldn't help but ask after hearing his cough.

Daren gave a faint smile.

"Don't worry about me, Admiral Sengoku."

"Mm. That's good to hear..."

Sengoku paused briefly, then lowered his voice.

"I'm leaving the cleanup to you. What's your plan?"

Daren looked like he had expected this and gave a helpless expression.

So in the end, it still falls on me to clean up this mess.

That bastard Dragon—fine, kill a Celestial Dragon if you want—but why the hell did it have to be in my territory?

After a moment of thought, he said slowly,

"Admiral Sengoku, tomorrow, every newspaper and publication in the North Blue will publish a headline..."

"The main story will report that the vicious criminal Monkey D. Dragon and his gang were completely wiped out by the Marines. Dragon himself is missing, and all 500 of his subordinates have been captured."

"...But Dragon doesn't even have a criminal gang—"

Sengoku blurted out instinctively.

But as soon as the words left his mouth, he realized.

This was a statement meant to appease the World Government.

After all, they couldn't exactly admit that even after deploying so many forces, Dragon still escaped. That would make the Marines look hopelessly incompetent.

And it would sound completely ridiculous.

"I'll take care of it. Besides, the North Blue's been too quiet for a while now."

Daren said with a faint smile.

Chapter 266 - 266: Volume 2 – Chapter 168: Bounty — Monkey D. Dragon

"Well, I can always rely on you, kid."

Sengoku's satisfied laughter rang out through the Den Den Mushi.

But Daren's next words immediately wiped the smile off Sengoku's face.

Daren said with a half-smile, half-sneer,

"Admiral Sengoku, look at what happened in the North Blue. In less than a day, the North Blue Marines wiped out a criminal gang of no less than 500 people. Does Headquarters have any response?"

"What do you mean, 'response'?" Sengoku asked, confused.

"Well, you know, the cost of military weapons, medical treatment for the wounded and casualties, and compensation for the people... All of that adds up to a lot of money."

Sengoku: "..."

He was silent for a second, then his teeth-gritting voice came through the Den Den Mushi:

"Three hundred million Belly! That's the maximum amount of funds that headquarters can allocate! Daren, you brat!"

Three hundred million Belly...

Wiping ass is a technical job, and it's also hard work.

Although Daren now had the huge treasure of gold from Sky Island and lacked nothing but money, he had always adhered to the principle of "take the money, do the job."

From another perspective, this meant "if you want me to do something, you have to pay me first."

As for the difficulty of the task?

Sorry, that'll cost extra.

Three hundred million Belly isn't a lot, but it's quite a lot in this timeline—after all, the value of Belly hasn't been inflated yet.

Moreover, with the Dragon incident, he estimated that the headquarters would have to tighten their belts in the future, so he couldn't be too greedy.

Fine, it's better than nothing.

Thinking of this, Daren smiled contentedly and said,

"On behalf of the soldiers of the North Blue, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Admiral Sengoku and headquarters for their assistance and support."

Sengoku rolled his eyes and instantly felt bad.

"That's it then. You follow Sakazuki and the others back to headquarters. Don't run around."

"Zephyr is already getting impatient. I can't persuade him."

Daren nodded:

"Yes, Admiral Sengoku."

Brr!

The Den Den Mushi communication was immediately cut off.

"Admiral Sengoku's instructions are..."

At this moment, Sakazuki and Borsalino walked over, and the former took the military Den Den Mushi from Daren.

"Nothing important, just told me to finish up some loose ends."

Daren stood up, supporting himself with his knees, and replied casually,

"After all, this happened in the North Blue, so in a way, it's more convenient for me to clean up the mess... Well, I'll continue the pursuit of Dragon."

Sakazuki nodded.

"How are your injuries? Do you need to rest for a day?"

Daren smiled and said,

"It's fine, we can set sail at any time."

He could feel that the bleeding from his wounds had stopped under his blood-stained military uniform.

Sakazuki said nothing more, turned coldly, and boarded the warship with the Marines.

By then, the storm had subsided.

At some point, the sun had risen silently in the distance.

Warm sunlight scattered across the calm sea, and the sky was clear and blue.

The dawn light spread across the land.

Daren stood where he was and subconsciously looked toward the distant sea where Dragon was sailing away, a faint smile gradually appearing on the corner of his mouth.

"Don't look back, my friend."

He murmured softly.

...

At the same time.

Marine Headquarters, Admiral's Office.

Sengoku slowly put down the military Den Den Mushi, sank back into his office chair without saying a word, and let out a long, relieved sigh.

"In any case, this is the best outcome,"

said Chief of Staff Tsuru softly, seated on the sofa beside him.

"Yes," Sengoku nodded.

"This is the best outcome."

Both emotionally and rationally, they couldn't bear to see that brat Dragon fall into the hands of the Celestial Dragons.

From the perspective of "justice" and "principle," neither of them truly believed that Dragon had done anything wrong.

Protecting the weak had always been the duty of the Marines.

A young man with an unparalleled sense of justice, unable to tolerate the cruelty of the world, had lashed out in fury, blood spilled in the process—could anyone really blame him?

Perhaps if Dragon hadn't been that kind of person, they wouldn't have placed such high hopes on him in the first place.

And on a personal level, they were even more unwilling to see Dragon die at the hands of his own comrades—or worse, at the hands of the Celestial Dragons.

Even if he wasn't Garp's son, Dragon was still someone they had watched grow up. After all these years, deep bonds had naturally formed.

"So, what do you plan to do next, Sengoku?"

Tsuru looked at him with concern.

Sengoku rubbed his temples, thought for a moment, then spoke slowly,

"Erase all traces of Dragon's existence within the Marines. Seal all his records and data. We can't afford to let this cause any unpredictable consequences."

"Impose a gag order. No one is allowed to discuss any news or intelligence about Dragon."

Tsuru nodded in agreement.

Dragon's "defection" from the Marines was already an established fact. As much as they regretted losing such a promising young man, as the upper ranks of the organization, their top priority had to be controlling the situation.

Dragon's status was special, and his strength was formidable. Add in his magnetic personality and natural leadership, and he had gathered quite a following within the Marines.

Sengoku had to act quickly to prevent those loyal followers from "defecting" alongside him.

Otherwise, the entire Marine system could be shaken by a devastating "earthquake."

"What about Garp?"

Tsuru's expression turned grave.

Sengoku shook his head.

"He probably won't be too affected."

"With his reputation and strength, even the higher-ups or Celestial Dragons would have to seriously think twice before coming after him."

"Besides, what can the Five Elders really do to Garp? The government still needs him to pursue Roger..."

"So what could they even do? Demote him? Cut his pay? Strip him of his post?"

He let out a helpless chuckle.

"Garp wouldn't care about any of that."

"And as for surrounding him or issuing a bounty?"

"That's even more out of the question..."

"You know Garp's not Zephyr. That bastard doesn't hold back when he's been wronged."

Sengoku's voice lowered as he finished the sentence.

Tsuru's eyes dimmed, as if she, too, recalled something.

Sengoku sighed deeply and said slowly,

"Issue the bounty. Target: Monkey D. Dragon. Bounty amount..."

He paused.

"2 billion Belly."

Chapter 267 - 267: Volume 2 – Chapter 169: A Game

"Five hundred pirates or criminals, right?"

"Yeah, I got it. Before midnight tonight... no problem."

North Blue, Rubeck Island. Inside the Donquixote family's residence hall.

Momonga put down the encrypted Den Den Mushi and looked up at the blond teenager in front of him, draped in a pink feathered coat. His expression remained calm.

"You heard it too. We'll need your cooperation this time."

"Fufufufufu... Of course, no problem. It's an honor to help godfather."

A sinister gleam flashed across Doflamingo's sunglasses as he let out a twitchy laugh.

"I should be able to deliver around two hundred. A bunch of idiots stirred up trouble in my casino and got caught on the spot by Diamante. I was just wondering how to deal with them..."

Momonga remained indifferent.

"That's not my concern. Two hundred is enough."

He couldn't care less about the Donquixote family's operations in the North Blue—if anything, he was repulsed by them.

But since Daren had tacitly approved it, and Doflamingo had been measured enough not to meddle in the kinds of illegal businesses Daren strictly banned from the region, Momonga turned a blind eye.

Casinos, loan sharks, private banks, pleasure houses, theft, arms smuggling... These old trades couldn't be fully stamped out, and they weren't really under Marine jurisdiction anyway.

So rather than trying to eliminate them, it was better to let Doflamingo monopolize control.

On one hand, it made it easier to collect massive tax revenue—vital for funding the expansion of the North Blue fleet.

On the other, centralized management made accountability simple. If anything went wrong, they could settle things directly with the Donquixote family.

As for human trafficking, organ deals, and drugs—those were absolutely forbidden by Daren.

That was the line he had drawn for the North Blue. No one was allowed to cross it.

"The North Blue fleet will take care of the remaining three hundred."

With that, Momonga picked up a glass of wine from the marble coffee table, tilted his head back, and drank it in one go—his eyes brimming with killing intent.

One could only imagine the bloody storm that simple sentence would bring down on the North Blue.

"Thanks for the hospitality. The wine's excellent."

"And also, Daren asked me to pass on a message—he's very pleased with your recent performance."

"Fufufufufu... That's great to hear."

Doflamingo let out a strange cackle.

"But Admiral Momonga, I do have one question."

As he watched Momonga turn to leave, a defiant smirk tugged at the corner of Doflamingo's lips.

Momonga's steps paused.

"Hm?"

Doflamingo remained seated as a strange, oppressive aura began to seep from his body.

His fingers curled slightly, subtly flexing—like he was manipulating invisible threads in the air.

"Oh, it's nothing. I'm just curious..."

"As the current Admiral of the North Blue—do you really have what it takes to inherit the Godfather's position?!"

Before the words had fully left his mouth, he let out a wild, vicious laugh and suddenly swung his arm.

Swish!

It was as if an invisible blade tore through the air.

Shhkk!

Deep, silent gashes appeared along the walls and floor of the hall.

Doflamingo's pupils shrank into thin slits. His grin froze in place—as if he had just witnessed something incomprehensible.

The North Blue Admiral, Momonga, stood completely still with his back still turned.

His body had been sliced cleanly in two by invisible threads.

But not a single drop of blood spilled from the wound.

Where there should have been flesh and bone, there was only a searing, glowing surge of plasma.

"What do you think?"

Momonga's severed head slowly turned to look at Doflamingo, a cold smirk curling at his lips.

In that instant, a bone-chilling cold surged from beneath Doflamingo's feet, sending goosebumps rippling across his entire body.

Then—Momonga vanished.

At least from Doflamingo's vision, the North Blue Admiral's figure disappeared like a ghost into thin air.

Sensing something, Doflamingo's expression changed drastically. He spun around and stood up abruptly—

But it was already too late.

A black leather-gloved hand had already wrapped tightly around his neck.

"Doflamingo, you're Daren's godson. I'll let it slide this time."

With his left hand gripping Doflamingo's throat, watching as the latter's face flushed red from the pressure, Momonga spoke with no expression at all,

"But if there's a next time... and you still have a death wish..."

His right hand, which had been hanging loosely by his side, suddenly crackled with violent blue lightning, flooding the dark hall with a blinding burst of light.

"I won't mind testing out what it feels like to kill a Celestial Dragon."

"To see whether it's really like Daren said... that it'll awaken my Conqueror's Haki."

Doflamingo's eye twitched violently.

Momonga gave a faint smile and released his grip.

He calmly reached out and straightened Doflamingo's disheveled collar, then took a step back, extended a hand, and smiled politely.

"Well then, I'll be counting on your cooperation for the rest."

Doflamingo still hadn't recovered from the shock of what he had just witnessed. His expression was frozen in stunned disbelief, and he reached out on reflex to shake Momonga's hand.

It wasn't until a full minute after Momonga had left the hall that Doflamingo collapsed onto the sofa with a heavy thud.

Without saying a word, he grabbed a bottle of red wine, tilted his head back, and drank straight from the bottle.

Glug, glug...

The blood-colored liquid spilled from the corners of his mouth, soaking and staining his white shirt, but he seemed completely unaware.

Only when the bottle was drained did he slam it down onto the floor.

It shattered instantly, shards flying everywhere, the remaining wine splashing across the pale gray walls.

Doflamingo gasped heavily, sucking in deep breaths, needing several moments to catch his breath.

He leaned back, head resting against the sofa, staring up at the hall's ornately decorated dome—his expression flickering between emotions.

And then, suddenly—

"Fufufufufufu..."

That crazed, obsessive, twisted laughter echoed through the dim and empty Donquixote residence like a devil's whisper.

"How interesting... How truly interesting..."

"The legendary, invincible Devil Fruit..."

"You actually found it... Well done... My most respected Godfather!"

"Are you really that afraid of me?!"

"To the point of giving the Goro Goro no Mi to that worthless Momonga?!"

"Fufufufufufufu!!"

"This game... is getting more and more exciting!!!"

He burst into maniacal laughter, veins bulging grotesquely across his forehead, pulsing like writhing worms.

"Then let's see... whether it'll be you who loses control and kills me first..."

"Or if I'll find the chance to take you out!!"

"Fufufufufufufu!!"

Chapter 268 - 268: Volume 2 – Chapter 170: Happy Holidays

"Happy Holidays!"

"Happy Holidays to you!"

A neutral island in the New World.

The nighttime streets were filled with noise and excitement, illuminated by colorful lights and festive decorations. People in all kinds of cheerful clothing filled the marketplace, exchanging joyful greetings.

...

In the bathroom of a modest hotel, Dragon turned on the shower and tilted his head back, letting the scalding water wash away the exhaustion built up over the past few days.

Streaks of blood ran down with the stream. After a while, he reached out and shut off the water, then stepped out of the shower and approached the mirror.

He raised a hand to wipe the fog from the glass, revealing his scarred body and a face that felt somewhat unfamiliar.

The wound on his cheek had begun to scab over, and the web-like scars etched into the left side of his face looked almost like tattoos—deep, unyielding. They erased the softness that once defined his features, replacing it with something wild, sharp, and commanding.

Staring at the gaunt, unfamiliar face in the mirror, Dragon let out a long breath and forced a slight smile at his reflection.

He could tell he had grown up—quite a lot.

"From here on out... it's a path only you can walk, kid."

He murmured softly.

Afterward, Dragon pulled on a loose-fitting robe and stepped out of the bathroom.

...

In the hotel's private suite, a man dressed in a cheap black suit stood quietly like a shadow, waiting.

As Dragon exited the bathroom, the man gave a slight bow.

"Sir, you're safe now."

"This island lies within the New World. I've prepared a full sea chart and Eternal Pose for the nearby islands. They're on the desk."

Dragon looked at the man—so ordinary that you could lose him in a crowd—and asked suddenly,

"Do you know who I really am?"

The man answered respectfully,

"That's not important. My task was to get you to the New World. Now, my job is done."

"But if you really want an answer, I can give you the truth..."

He spoke in a low, steady voice.

"I know that you're Monkey D. Dragon. The biological son of Marine hero Monkey D. Garp. Once a 'monster' within the Navy—now a world-class criminal with a 2 billion Belly bounty issued by the World Government and the Marines."

Dragon fell silent for a moment, then asked,

"You know what I did?"

"I do. You killed a Celestial Dragon."

Dragon frowned.

"Then you must also know your so-called mission could very well cost you your life."

"And what if I decide to kill you to silence you?"

The man shook his head.

"To serve that man is the greatest honor of my life."

"As long as I carry out the task he entrusted me with, I'd give up my life without regret."

Dragon gave him a long look.

"You're one of Daren's men?"

The man didn't deny it. He simply bowed deeply.

"Three years ago, Daren-sama saved my entire family. He gave us enough wealth to last several lifetimes... This is the least I can do."

"And, Dragon-san, Daren-sama asked me to pass along a message."

Dragon blinked in surprise, responding instinctively,

"What message?"

The man raised his head and smiled.

"He said... 'Actually, I understand your feelings better than anyone else. After all, the Celestial Dragon who died in the North Blue... wasn't the only one.'"

More than one Celestial Dragon... died in the North Blue?

Dragon stood frozen as if struck by lightning.

Then, suddenly, his eyes flew wide open—realization dawning like a thunderclap.

"No... it can't be..."

Dragon's expression twisted, a storm of emotions flickering across his face—shock, confusion, realization, embarrassment—each flashing vividly in a tangled mix.

So that's it!

Everything suddenly became clear.

Why the truth behind Saint Xildes' "attack" could never be uncovered.

Why Daren had told him, "I understand how you felt when you killed a Celestial Dragon."

Why he had said, "You shouldn't have been so impulsive."

Why that look in his eyes always carried a helpless, disappointed weight.

...If that was the case, then it all made sense!

Recalling how proudly he had boasted to Daren about killing a Celestial Dragon, Dragon suddenly felt a cramp in his toes—curling instinctively from sheer awkwardness.

Wait!

Another realization struck him.

If Saint Xildes had really been killed by Daren, then with Admiral Sengoku's level of intelligence and insight, there was no way he wouldn't have noticed something.

After all, Sengoku had been in charge of that case from the very beginning.

And yet, Daren had walked away completely unscathed—rising steadily through the ranks.

There was only one explanation.

Daren hadn't left a single trace.

He had done it too cleanly.

Dragon's thoughts quickly fell into place.

"So that's how it is..."

A faint, helpless smile tugged at the corners of his lips.

"In Admiral Sengoku's eyes, I must seem like a reckless fool compared to Daren's precision..."

He murmured to himself.

Now, Dragon finally understood why Sengoku had sent Daren to "hunt him down" immediately.

Did he regret it?

No. Dragon felt no regret.

Even if time could be turned back, he would still kill that Celestial Dragon without hesitation.

That was just who he was.

He was nothing like Daren—unable to calculate every step ahead.

Still, after hearing the words from the man before him, the weight in Dragon's chest—his loneliness, frustration—seemed to vanish all at once.

So there really was someone else in this world...

Someone else who dared to draw their blade against the "noble and mighty gods."

It was like stumbling through a cold and endless night, clutching a dim lantern in solitude...

Only to discover that somewhere out there, someone else was walking forward too, their candle burning just as bright.

A warmth—intense and overwhelming—rose in his heart.

"Daren..."

Dragon whispered, his eyes tinged with red, fists clenched tightly.

"I thought we'd drift apart... even become strangers walking different paths."

"I didn't expect we'd still be walking together."

"No..."

He shook his head. Thoughts of the legendary North Blue fleet and Daren's unshakable, calculating confidence flooded his mind.

In a voice only he could hear, Dragon murmured,

"Maybe... you've already walked farther than I ever have."

...

"Then, Dragon-san, I'll take my leave."

The man's voice was soft.

He gestured toward the cake sitting on the table and smiled.

"This is my gift to you."

"I couldn't understand the lyrics of that song, but I could feel an incredible power in it."

"I imagine the path ahead of you will be difficult, even sacred. I hope this small gesture can add a touch of sweetness to your great and arduous journey."

He bowed deeply, his expression sincere and heartfelt.

"Happy holidays."

Bang!

Fireworks burst across the night sky outside the hotel, brilliant and breathtaking in the dark.

Dragon stared in a daze for a moment before remembering—it was already a new year.

He smiled gently.

"You too. Happy holidays."

"Go home. Be with your family."

"That's what matters most, isn't it?"

Chapter 269 - 269: Volume 2 – Chapter 171: Don't Think I Don't Know What You Did

Marine Headquarters, Marineford.

Fleet Admiral's Office.

Sakazuki, Rogers Daren, and Borsalino stood in a line, freshly returned from the North Blue. The first two were still reeking of blood from their injuries, faces haggard from the long journey. Borsalino, as always, stood lazily with his hands tucked into his coat pockets.

Kong, with his signature mohawk, stood with arms crossed, his bronze skin and thick, muscular arms visible under his uniform. His gaze held open admiration as he looked at the three of them.

"You've done well on this mission."

As he spoke, he slowly closed the detailed battle report in his hands.

Sakazuki's voice was low and hoarse as he stepped forward.

"Fleet Admiral Kong, the failure to capture the traitor Dragon was due to my misjudgment and incompetence. I'm prepared to accept any punishment you see fit."

Kong chuckled softly, waving it off.

"This mission's failure isn't on you, Sakazuki. You don't need to blame yourself."

"We all saw what Dragon is capable of—his strength and talent are undeniable. And at sea, his abilities are even more potent, giving him a tremendous advantage."

"Besides, no one expected him to awaken Conqueror's Haki."

"You did well, all things considered."

Hearing that, Sakazuki clenched his fists and gritted his teeth.

"Fleet Admiral, I request permission to continue leading the mission to hunt down Dragon!"

"Just give me enough time, and I swear I'll bring that traitor—"

Before he could finish, Kong raised a hand to stop him, shaking his head.

"That's enough for now, Sakazuki."

"Your priority is to recover. Don't let your injuries leave lasting damage... As for the pursuit of Dragon, I'll appoint someone else more suitable for the job."

He then turned to Borsalino with a smile.

"Borsalino, how's the laser cannon research coming along in the newly established Naval Science Division?"

Borsalino let out a dramatic sigh, sounding a bit regretful.

"I'm terribly sorry, Fleet Admiral. The laser cannon development is still stuck at the final critical phase. We're still working out the energy system."

At that, a subtle flicker passed through Daren's eyes—so fast it was almost undetectable.

Kong nodded, seemingly unbothered by the update, and muttered thoughtfully,

"Hmm... Dr. Vegapunk is a genius five hundred years ahead of his time. With his intellect and foresight, he should be able to solve that problem."

"We must speed up the development of those weapons. If we can deploy them widely on our warships, it would be a tremendous boost to Marine combat power."

Borsalino nodded slowly in agreement.

"I'll do my best to expedite it."

"Good. You two can go now. I'd like a word with Daren—alone."

Sakazuki paused, a slight frown on his face. He gave Daren a quick glance, then saluted Kong, turned on his heel, and left without another word.

Borsalino followed, wearing a faint, knowing smile.

The office doors shut once more.

Daren remained alone, standing in front of the desk, facing the massive "Justice" plaque mounted on the gray wall ahead.

"Daren, you handled this beautifully. I'm very pleased."

Kong looked up calmly, smiling faintly as he met the eyes of the commodore standing before him.

Daren gave a slight nod, his tone modest.

"It was all thanks to Admiral Sengoku's support. I only did what I could—everything for the sake of justice."

Kong chuckled and shook his head.

"Sengoku wasn't wrong. You're a sharp one."

He raised the battle report in his hand and read off excerpts with a smirk.

"In a fierce battle against the vicious criminal Monkey D. Dragon, Commodore Rogers Daren displayed courage and strength, successfully preventing the target's escape."

"Over a thousand eyewitnesses saw Commodore Rogers Daren seriously injured, yet he firmly kept the battle zone clear of civilians."

"The battle between the two destroyed no fewer than 80 buildings."

Kong's smile turned cold, a trace of mockery in his voice.

"I never expected it... Not only are you clever, but your acting skills are top notch."

The icy edge in his voice carried an undeniable weight, enough to chill any ordinary officer to the bone.

But Daren showed no hint of panic. His gaze was steady, his tone slightly confused.

"Acting? Fleet Admiral Kong, I'm not sure I understand."

Kong sneered, his large hand pressing down on the desk as he leaned forward, his presence overwhelmingly forceful.

"Oh really?"

"Don't think I don't know what you've done, Daren."

"You let Dragon go on purpose, didn't you? Rumor has it you and he had a good relationship."

Daren blinked, his expression even more perplexed.

"Dragon and I were just colleagues. Aside from that, we didn't have much interaction."

"I'm a new graduate of the Officer Training Camp—he finished long before I enrolled."

"And in terms of personality, we couldn't be more different. There's no common ground between us."

"Everyone knows he's a symbol for countless young Marines, an icon who carries the blood of a hero and an unparalleled sense of justice."

"Me? I've got a record full of stains, a notorious reputation. I just happened to get lucky and took down a legendary pirate... There's nothing admirable about that."

"I'm ambitious. I want power and promotion. Dragon killed a World Noble—he's a threat not just to the Marines, but to the entire world. If I captured him, I'd be guaranteed a promotion. Why would I ever let him go?"

Kong narrowed his eyes, scrutinizing every inch of Daren's face, hunting for even the slightest crack in his performance.

But he found nothing.

Daren's posture, tone, and logic were flawless—airtight from every angle.

Finally, Kong gave a satisfied grin.

"Good. If the CP agents from the World Government come knocking with questions, that's exactly how you'll answer."

Daren's lips twitched.

That almost scared me.

Keeping his composed smile, he nodded politely.

"Understood, Fleet Admiral. I'll report just as I've said."

He paused, then asked with genuine curiosity,

"But will the government really send someone?"

Kong's brows furrowed slightly, and he let out a sigh.

"You're already stepping into the core decision-making circle of headquarters. Even if I don't tell you, I'm sure you can see it for yourself."

Chapter 270 - 270: Volume 2 – Chapter 172: I've Come at a Bad Time

"I'm just a fool. This is my first time at headquarters, and there's still a lot I don't really understand."

Daren replied with a calm smile, leaving no openings.

Kong: ...

You dared to kill a Celestial Dragon, and you're claiming ignorance?

Sengoku tried to probe you before, and you dodged it with ease—yet you still say you're unfamiliar with Marine Headquarters?

With an annoyed expression, Kong pulled a cigar from his case and tossed it to Daren.

"You really are a natural-born politician. I'm not going to beat around the bush with you."

Clenching a cigar between his teeth, Kong lit it and said slowly,

"After these two Celestial Dragon incidents, the government's distrust and suspicion toward the Marines have reached new heights."

Daren had just struck a match to light his cigar, but hearing Kong's words, he casually corrected him,

"No, just one."

"The cause of the North Blue incident has been identified... Saint Xildes-sama's official ship was attacked by a large Sea King and he died in the encounter."

"I personally extend my deepest apologies and condolences."

"...Yeah, yeah. If you say it was a Sea King, then it was a Sea King."

Kong waved dismissively, clearly unimpressed. He took a deep drag from his cigar, then after a pause of several seconds, continued,

"Anyway, the government's mistrust has reached the highest point since I became Fleet Admiral."

"As for whether they'll send someone to investigate this incident, to be honest, I don't know."

"But one thing's certain—the promotion plan that had already been pretty much finalized has now been put on hold."

"Promotion plan?" Daren asked with some curiosity.

"Yeah."

Kong nodded.

"Originally, within the next three months, I was supposed to head to Mary Geoise and take up the role of 'Commander-in-Chief of the World Government's Armed Forces,' and Sengoku would naturally succeed me as Fleet Admiral of Marine Headquarters."

"But now, thanks to what happened with Dragon, that finalized promotion plan has been suspended."

So that's what happened!

A sense of clarity washed over Daren.

In fact, he'd already caught wind of rumors—about Sengoku's upcoming promotion from Headquarters Admiral to Fleet Admiral.

Back then, he was puzzled.

After all, he vaguely remembered that Sengoku's promotion to Fleet Admiral wasn't supposed to happen this early.

After the Great Pirate Era began, it was Sengoku who authorized the Buster Call during the Ohara incident—and at that time, he was still an Admiral.

Thinking back now, everything lined up.

It was likely that Sengoku's leadership came under scrutiny from the government because of Dragon's "defection," leaving him stuck at the Admiral rank for years and delaying his promotion to Fleet Admiral.

But that wasn't surprising.

Dragon wasn't just any Rear Admiral.

The bloodline he bore, the identity he held, and what he symbolized—all of it went beyond the typical responsibilities of a Marine Admiral.

And yet, this "son of a hero," the pride of the Marine Corps, had openly killed a Celestial Dragon!

This was undoubtedly a heavy blow to the Marines as a whole.

"This is only temporary. It won't be long before the doubts fade with time, and the World Government forgets all about it."

Daren smiled as he spoke.

"After all, they still need us Marines as their main fighting force."

"Before that happens, allow me to congratulate you in advance on your promotion, Fleet Admiral Kong."

Kong looked at Daren and suddenly chuckled.

"Don't be so optimistic. This time, it's not just me and Sengoku who are caught up in this."

Daren's smile froze.

...?

Then he heard Kong continue, smiling as he said,

"Your battle report was beautifully written, almost flawless—but regardless, the Celestial Dragons were killed in the North Blue."

"Both incidents involving the deaths of Celestial Dragons happened in the North Blue... within the jurisdiction of the so-called 'King of the North Blue.'"

"So I regret to inform you that your own promotion, which had already been confirmed, has also been put on hold."

Then, with a hint of smug amusement, he added,

"Of course, it's only temporary. I imagine it won't be long before the doubts fade with time, and the World Government forgets about it."

Daren: ...

Well, the old man's still sharp.

Looks like that 300 million Belly bonus is gone.

Should've asked for more.

That was a promotion to Rear Admiral at Marine Headquarters!

A rank most Marines never reach their entire careers!

For many, it's the highest they'll ever go!

And now it's been delayed.

Daren had been thinking that once he made Rear Admiral, he could finally hold his head high in front of Sakazuki and Borsalino, stand on equal footing... no longer needing to fake salutes to his so-called "superiors."

Now look what happened—just when it was within reach, it slipped away.

Damn it, Dragon. If I'd known, I would've kicked you harder...

Did you really have to stir up trouble in the North Blue?

Cleaning up after you wasn't enough—now I have to take the fall too.

Thinking this, Daren let out a quiet sigh.

"I'm willing to accept any arrangement from headquarters."

Still, he didn't actually feel much about it.

The position of Rear Admiral didn't mean much to him personally.

"Alright, just giving you a heads-up."

Kong nodded, glanced out the window at the night sky, and said with a grin,

"That's enough talking. Go on, get going. That woman from Wano Country is probably getting impatient."

At that last line, the old man even winked at Daren with a teasing tone.

"Yes, Fleet Admiral."

Daren saluted.

"Mm. Off you go. Happy holidays, kid."

Kong waved him off.

...

Marine Headquarters, Officers' Residential Compound.

Daren looked at the lanterns hanging from the front porch and the warm glow spilling out from behind the courtyard walls. A soft warmth rose in his chest.

He paused, took out a handkerchief to wipe the grime from his face, and removed the bandages wrapped around his body.

He gave his face a few pats, trying to look a little less exhausted, and forced a smile.

He knew he was far from a model Marine, but at least for Toki's sake, he didn't want her to worry.

He pushed open the courtyard gate.

"Toki, I'm back! Happy holi—"

Daren froze, his raised boot pausing mid-step.

Inside the house, in the living room, sat two breathtaking women with completely different auras, facing each other across a table filled with food. The atmosphere felt... off.

"Husband, you're home."

Amatsuki Toki turned toward him with a radiant smile.

The corner of Daren's mouth twitched.

"I—I came at a bad time... Wait! I just remembered, Admiral Sengoku was looking for me!"

"No, Admiral Sengoku isn't looking for you."

Opposite Toki, Gion sat with her high ponytail and sharp, commanding presence. She looked at Daren with a dangerous glint in her eye and smiled.

"You're right on time."

Daren: ...

That line... definitely sounded ominous.