

One Piece 221

Chapter 221 - 221: Volume 2 – Chapter 123: Heroes vs. Scum

"And besides, aren't those people pirates? I don't have a good impression of pirates..."

Amatsuki Toki gently bit her chopsticks, her calm gaze fixed on Daren.

Over the past 800 years, during countless journeys through time, she had witnessed sights that most people wouldn't see in a lifetime. The tides of eras, the passage of time, the rise and fall of seas, the collapse and rebirth of nations, the ever-shifting state of the world... but one thing remained certain: in every age, pirates were synonymous with chaos and plunder.

Not to mention, the moment she arrived in this era, she was deceived by a pirate human trafficker and nearly sold as a slave.

With all that combined, it was only natural for Amatsuki Toki to harbor no fondness for pirates.

What a grounded girl... Daren's eyes lit up slightly, and he couldn't help but admire her for a moment.

He had initially been worried that the influence of the world line might give Amatsuki Toki a different view of Kozuki Oden. He thought he'd have to spend time persuading her, but she turned out to be so perceptive—it saved him the trouble.

"So, you're not worried I might be a bad guy too, Toki?"

Daren asked with a smile.

"No, I'm not, Daren-san."

Amatsuki Toki returned the smile, then lowered her head slightly and said shyly,

"Besides, someone as handsome as Daren-san couldn't possibly be a bad person."

Daren paused, then let out a quiet laugh.

That was one reason he hadn't considered—but thinking it over, it made perfect sense.

On one side, you have a tall, handsome Marine who saved you from traffickers.

On the other, a pirate who looks like a swollen-headed brute, charging around like a monster.

Who to trust and who to follow—it couldn't be clearer.

"It's just, Daren-san, that guy who calls himself Kozuki Oden... The clothes he's wearing look like they're from Wano Country?"

Amatsuki Toki suddenly recalled something and couldn't help but ask.

"You've been holding back that question for a while now, haven't you, Toki?"

Daren glanced at her with interest.

She clenched her fists, a bit flustered that her thoughts had been exposed, and nodded with a blush.

"Yes."

Her goal in traveling through time was to reach the future Wano Country. After finally encountering someone wearing samurai garb, of course she'd be curious and pay attention.

But she'd faintly sensed that Daren held some hostility toward Kozuki Oden, so she hadn't dared to bring it up—until now. As they got more comfortable with each other and opened up, she finally asked the question that had been weighing on her mind.

To her surprise, Daren simply smiled and replied,

"Yeah, that guy's definitely from Wano Country."

He had no intention of hiding the truth from Amatsuki Toki.

Though she seemed gentle on the outside, she was sharp and strong-willed inside. If he kept too much from her, she might not say anything, but she'd definitely lose trust in him.

Better to be upfront than conceal things.

Women hated being lied to by men. That was true in any world.

So, as a man, you either had to be honest—or lie completely.

But Daren didn't like lying to the woman he liked.

"Kozuki Oden, heir to the Kozuki clan and Daimyo of Kuri in Wano Country. Born with an unusual appearance and exceptional strength."

Daren smiled openly, speaking patiently as he explained to Amatsuki Toki.

"He was a man with a wild sense of adventure. From a young age, he scorned societal norms and had little regard for fame, power, or loyalty to family and country. His heart was set on venturing out to sea and exploring a wider world."

"But as I told you before, Wano had long followed a strict isolationist policy, cutting itself off from the outside world. Its people were strictly forbidden to leave by sea."

"So in the end, Kozuki Oden chose to abandon his clan, his status, his people, even his homeland. He boarded Whitebeard's ship and became a free-spirited pirate."

"In short, Kozuki Oden was an unrestrained, eccentric, and bold man. In Wano, those who hated him absolutely despised him, while those who admired him worshipped him like a divine hero."

"And I'm sure you've already guessed it—he appeared on that island because he heard your voice. He came to save you."

As he said this, Daren caught a flicker deep in Amatsuki Toki's eyes—confirmation of his assumption.

"So, after talking about the 'invincible hero' Kozuki Oden, let's talk about me."

Daren gave a casual smile, pulled out a cigarette, and lit it.

With the sea breeze brushing against his face and smoke curling upward, he rarely opened up about his past.

"I come from the most chaotic of the Four Seas—the North Blue. I had no special talents. I started out as a regular Seaman Recruit and climbed my way up, step by step, to where I am today."

"To gain strength, I trained harder than anyone—so hard I'd often cough up blood."

"To earn promotions and military achievements, I never hesitated to use any method necessary against pirates and enemies."

"I once wiped out a mafia family of thousands in a single night. I've assassinated nobles and politicians who stood in my way using the dirtiest of tactics."

"Beyond my official rank, I control vast underground networks across many seas through all kinds of channels."

"My illegal income is too much to count, and as for the women I've been with... I've lost track myself."

"The nobles tremble under my threats. Pirates have nearly vanished from the waters I govern. And because of that... the crime rate under my rule is terrifyingly low."

"I'm ruthless, greedy, and merciless. I never let a single enemy go. But I never betray my friends either."

By the shore, beside the campfire...

The Commodore's face, veiled in smoke, held a pair of deep, brooding eyes filled with memories.

The world around them was unnervingly still.

Only the sound of waves crashing against the rocks echoed in the silence.

"Toki, soon you'll realize—I'm not a good man. I'm Rogers Daren."

"Despite my military honors and the title of 'monster,' most people out there curse me behind my back as the 'worst scum in the Marines.'"

With a hint of self-mockery, Daren curled his lips into a half-smile and turned to the woman in the kimono kneeling quietly beside him.

He looked at her and asked with a smile,

"So, do you regret it?"

"Choosing me—the scum—instead of Kozuki Oden, the hero everyone praises?"

Chapter 222 - 222: Volume 2 – Chapter 124: I'm Really That Amazing?

The cool sea breeze swept away the lingering smoke, and the Commodore's voice gradually faded into the sound of the waves.

Daren kept a calm smile on his face, quietly watching the breathtakingly beautiful Amatsuki Toki as he waited for her response.

One second, two seconds, three seconds...

Then, to his mild surprise, a soft smile slowly bloomed across Toki's face.

"No, Daren-san. I have no regrets."

A glow lit up in her eyes as she looked at Daren, gaze unwavering and full of resolve.

"My father once told me that a true man—one who stands tall in this world—never fears speaking of his own misdeeds, and never hides his flaws."

"For you to speak so lightly yet sincerely, to say 'I'm not a good person'... it proves your honesty toward me. It shows just how open your heart truly is."

"Willing to praise even your enemies, harsh on yourself, unafraid to admit your faults... That's what makes you a real hero!"

Her voice rang clear and firm, carrying a conviction that left no room for doubt.

Daren was stunned.

Wait... what?

He stared into Toki's eyes, half-expecting her to be messing with him.

Daren: ???

Amatsuki Toki:

Daren: ...

The corner of his mouth twitched, and his expression stiffened slightly.

He took a deep breath, struggling to keep his cool as he muttered,

"Yeah... that actually makes a lot of sense."

But inside, it felt like a stampede of wild horses was trampling through his mind.

Me!?

A real hero!?

Are you sure you're not mistaken?

Even I want to laugh hearing that!

But looking at Toki's serious, confident face—as if she could see straight through him—Daren opened his mouth, only to find he couldn't say a single word in return.

If you hadn't said it, I'd have never known I was this amazing!

Seriously though, what is it with people from Wano Country... their thought process is something else.

Still, he had to admit—it saved him a lot of trouble.

"Alright then."

Daren rubbed his temples in mild exasperation, putting on the look of someone who'd been seen through completely, and gave a wry smile.

"You sure have quite the imagination. But I promise—I'll do everything I can to help you get back to Wano."

Toki shook her head, her voice soft as she smiled.

"It's alright, Daren-san."

The starlight in her eyes as she looked at him seemed to shimmer with brilliance.

"Given how tense things are in Wano right now, even the Marines probably can't intervene easily, right?"

"Just stay on your path. Do what you need to do. I'm not in a hurry."

Look at that!

What a gentle, thoughtful girl!

Even someone as cold and ruthless as Daren—well, not "ruthless," more like... pragmatic—couldn't help but be touched by her understanding in that moment.

"The situation in Wano Country might not be as troublesome as we thought... and while the Marines may be restricted from getting involved, that doesn't mean I can't."

Daren pondered for a moment before a slow smile spread across his face.

Since Kozuki Oden had already set sail, it meant there was no one left in Wano powerful enough to stop him. As for Oden's retainers—the warriors who would later be known as the "Nine Red Scabbards"—they were hardly worth fearing.

So perhaps... it was time to consider making a move on this country?

Wano's rich Seastone mineral veins were something he had coveted for a long time. If he could bring Wano under his control, he would gain a complete monopoly over the world's Seastone supply.

And beyond those mineral resources, Wano also had many samurai families that guarded rare and ancient legacies.

Take the Kozuki clan's techniques for carving and deciphering Poneglyphs, or the Shimotsuki clan's legendary sword-forging methods, for example.

The Marines had always kept their hands off Wano—not because of a lack of strength, but due to political reasons. The World Government maintained a long-standing partnership with Wano for its Seastone resources. Any large-scale military action against Wano would violate the Marine ideals of "peace" and "justice," and be seen as interference in another country's internal affairs.

Worse, it would risk creating unnecessary conflict with their direct superiors—the World Government.

To the Marines, Wano was a political landmine.

But Daren was different.

He didn't care about those complications.

Even if the World Government came to question him later, he had the strength now to push back.

In the end, it would just come down to negotiating the spoils.

And that, he was good at.

"I just wonder if Kaidou's forces have already made their move in Wano..."

Daren muttered under his breath, frowning slightly.

For now, the priority was to reestablish contact with Marine forces, gather intelligence, recover from his injuries, and return to peak condition. Only then would he properly deal with the Wano situation.

"They should be arriving soon..."

Back at the hotel, he'd left a message for Headquarters with his approximate coordinates. No matter how slow they were, they should've found him by now.

At that moment, Amatsuki Toki suddenly pointed excitedly toward the distant horizon.

"Daren-san, look! That looks like a Marine warship!"

Before her words had fully left her mouth, a brilliant light suddenly erupted behind Daren.

Golden photons gathered rapidly from all directions, condensing into the tall silhouette of a man.

He wore a yellow-and-white striped suit with a round cap atop his head, and a broad, white cloak fluttered lightly in the sea breeze.

Toki took one look at the man's face and instinctively took two steps back, hiding behind Daren.

This guy... he looks so shady.

"Oh?"

The man adjusted his oversized tortoise-shell sunglasses with a single finger, glanced at Toki with an odd expression, then stroked his stubbly chin with interest as he smiled at Daren.

"We went through all that trouble searching the entire sea for you...

and here you are, enjoying a vacation, huh, Commodore Daren?"

"I haven't had a single moment of rest..."

Daren chuckled. That slow, familiar voice brought with it an unexpected sense of comfort.

"But you... while I was locked up by Kaidou, I kept imagining you swooping down from the sky to rescue me..."

He turned around and looked at that infuriatingly smug face with a faint smirk.

"Too bad you're as late as ever, Rear Admiral Borsalino."

Borsalino shrugged with mock helplessness.

"Well... how should I put this? I always figured you didn't need rescuing."

"And look, turns out I was right."

"Oh—almost forgot..."

"Thanks to your actions and the intel you sent back..."

the Beasts Pirates' base has been completely wiped out. Aside from Kaidou himself and a handful of survivors, the rest of them are finished."

He grinned.

"Congratulations, Rear Admiral Daren."

Chapter 223 - 223: Volume 2 – Chapter 125: The Three Old Men Who Don't Play Fair

Kaidou's base got destroyed?

When Daren heard the news, he was momentarily stunned.

His recent promotion from Commodore to Rear Admiral didn't seem to faze him much. Though social ties were important, in the end, strength was what mattered most in this sea. With his power, the promotion was only a matter of time.

"You don't look too happy about it..."

Borsalino smiled as he watched Daren fall into deep thought.

"To jump three ranks from Captain to Rear Admiral in such a short time... that kind of promotion speed is unheard of. You've even caught up to me in rank now..." He rubbed the stubble on his chin. "I bet Sakazuki's got a massive headache right about now..."

But Daren's brows furrowed tightly.

"No, Borsalino. What I'm thinking about is... now that their base has been destroyed and the coordinates exposed, where did Kaidou go?"

Borsalino gave him a glance and shrugged.

"Who knows? Kaidou's a mythical creature who can fly. If he really wants to hide, who in this sea could find him?"

Daren's eyebrow twitched. A vague thought seemed to brush past the back of his mind, but it vanished before he could catch it.

"I heard back in the Rocks Pirates days, Kaidou and Big Mom got along pretty well."

Borsalino scratched his head.

"...Could he have gone to seek refuge with Big Mom?"

"Not likely."

Daren shook his head.

With Kaidou's personality, he would never willingly play second fiddle. Besides, the moment those two monsters meet, it's more likely the sky would collapse from their clash.

"Unless..."

He looked up at Borsalino, then blinked in confusion.

"What are you smiling at?"

Borsalino raised his hands in mock surrender.

"Who, me? I'm not smiling."

But that smug look on his face made a bad feeling well up in Daren's gut.

"You're totally smiling!"

"Alright, alright. So, have you figured out how you're going to explain your disappearance these past couple of days?"

Borsalino teased, pointing toward the sea.

Daren followed his gaze—and the scene that greeted him made him instinctively want to bolt.

Several imposing Navy warships had already docked. Hulking figures leapt down from them one after another, striding forward with furious momentum.

Was it just his imagination, or did their eyes seem to be glowing red?

The corner of Daren's mouth twitched uncontrollably.

"No... no way..."

Before he could finish, furious voices boomed out like thunder.

"Daren, you little brat!! Where the hell have you been these past two days!? If you're alive, you should've reported in!"

"Do you have any idea how many islands we've turned upside down looking for you?!"

Daren winced as he looked at the three figures storming toward him: Sengoku, Zephyr, and Garp—each cracking their knuckles with terrifying intensity. For the first time in his life, Daren felt a pang of panic.

"Um... Zephyr-sensei, Fleet Admiral Sengoku, Vice Admiral Garp..."

"Please, let me explain—wait, no, I mean, let me clarify—"

But the trio, full of pent-up rage, had no intention of listening. Their nostrils flared as they marched straight at him.

Three massive fists whipped up a gale as they shot toward him, growing larger in his pupils by the second!

These damn old geezers don't play fair at all!

Daren cursed internally, then suddenly had a flash of inspiration and blurted out:

"I fought with the Whitebeard Pirates!!"

Boom!!

All three fists halted just inches from his face, their fierce winds making the muscles on Daren's face ripple.

"What did you just say?"

Zephyr's eyes went wide.

"He said he fought the Whitebeard Pirates!"

Garp turned and shouted straight into Zephyr's ear.

"I'm not deaf! What the hell are you yelling for!?"

Veins bulged on Zephyr's forehead as he snapped back at Garp.

"You kept asking, I was just being helpful..."

Garp grumbled while picking his nose.

Zephyr clenched his fists:

Sengoku stood nearby, a dark expression on his face as he watched these two fools bicker. He pinched the bridge of his nose, then narrowed his eyes and turned to Daren with a grave tone.

"Daren... are you serious, or is this some kind of joke?"

A bead of cold sweat slid down Daren's forehead.

He nodded carefully.

Given how wrecked his body was right now, he couldn't take another round of beatings from these old men. Sengoku might be manageable, but Garp and Zephyr? Their punches were brutal. If they let loose, it'd set his recovery back by at least another day.

"Yes. It was... a complete coincidence."

Facing the three furious veterans, Daren didn't dare act cocky. After all, they had dropped their duties and traveled all the way to the New World just to rescue him. From their exhausted faces and weathered appearances, it was clear they'd been genuinely worried.

So Daren answered honestly:

"I broke the arm of one of Whitebeard's... well, sworn brothers, I guess. Almost took him out..."

"Then, to create an opening to escape, I launched an attack on the Moby Dick—but it was blocked."

"And then Whitebeard snapped."

"He unleashed the power of the Gura Gura no Mi, caused a tsunami, and sank an entire island."

"I barely escaped with my life."

At that, Daren flashed a proud grin at the stunned trio.

Daren: b

Sengoku: ...

Zephyr: ...

Garp: ...

The next moment—

"You little brat! You still think you haven't caused enough trouble!?"

Sengoku roared, visibly in agony.

Whitebeard. It was Whitebeard!!

The most protective, most dangerous Yonkō in the New World!!

"And Garp, Zephyr, you two idiots—shut your mouths already!! Quit laughing!!"

Sengoku spun around furiously, glaring at the two who were standing there arms crossed, heads thrown back in laughter.

Zephyr: "Hahaha!! As expected of my student!!"

Garp: "Bwahaha!! That's the adjutant I've been counting on!!"

Sengoku: ...

He looked like he was about to crack all his teeth from clenching.

"First Byrnni World! Then Roger! Then Kaidou! And now Whitebeard!?"

He clutched his head in despair, eyes bloodshot as he stared at Daren.

"Are you trying to pick a fight with every legendary pirate out there!?"

"So who's next? Big Mom? Ochoku? Captain John? Or even Shiki!?"

Hearing that, Daren tilted his head, thinking aloud.

"Hmm... well..."

"—You're actually thinking about it!?"

Sengoku's furious roar echoed across the entire island.

Chapter 224 - 224: Volume 2 – Chapter 126: Young People, Learn Some Restraint

A massive, rusted anchor slowly rose from the water, chains clinking as it broke the surface, sending ripples across the sea.

As the sun dipped low on the horizon, it cast a long, stretched shadow of the warship across the waves.

After a heated tug-of-war with Zephyr, Sengoku finally managed to win "custody" of Daren.

He had Daren placed in the cabin of his own warship and instructed the accompanying military doctor to treat his injuries. Then he turned toward Garp, who was casually sitting on the dog-headed ship munching on a doughnut.

"Hey, Garp! You sure you're not heading back to headquarters?"

Garp waved him off with a wide grin.

"Nah. I just got word—Daren and Sakazuki's previous mission target... that brat Douglas Bullet has joined the Roger Pirates. I've gotta go after him."

"Can't let that Roger guy keep getting stronger, can we?"

Sengoku blinked, momentarily surprised.

He had almost forgotten about that.

Douglas Bullet had been captured alongside Daren by Kaidou, but after they returned, Bullet was nowhere to be found. He'd definitely have to question that brat Daren about what happened.

"Well, take care out there."

Sengoku didn't bother trying to talk him out of it.

They'd been comrades for years—he knew better than anyone that once Garp made up his mind, no one could stop him.

Besides, when it came to Roger's strength... Garp really was the only one in the Marines who could keep him in check.

Sengoku himself was still a bit lacking. As for old man Kong, his Haki was solid, no doubt. But age was catching up with him, and for safety reasons, they usually didn't let him take frontline missions anymore.

Watching the uniquely designed dog-headed warship slowly vanish into the sunset, leaving long trails across the sea, Sengoku let out a weary breath.

"Set course for Marine Headquarters."

He gave the order offhandedly to his adjutant, then turned around with an annoyed expression.

"I mean, Zephyr, don't you have your own damn ship? What are you always doing on mine?"

Arms crossed, Zephyr glared at Sengoku with suspicion and scoffed.

"I'm not falling for your tricks. You just want to send me off so you can get close to Daren."

Sengoku twitched with irritation.

"That's because my ship has a military doctor on board! And the cabin is more spacious and comfortable!"

Zephyr sneered with mockery.

"Right, right. We all know admirals get the deluxe warships. What are you showing off for?"

Sengoku: ...

You were a Marine Admiral too! You're the one who resigned, so your ship got downgraded—how is that my fault!?

A few veins popped on his forehead.

One retires, another slacks off... in the end, all the crap ends up on my plate!

When things go well, I'm 'The Resourceful General.' When something goes wrong, I'm suddenly the 'Idiot in Charge'...

Sengoku felt emotionally drained.

Seriously... maybe the world should just blow up already.

He couldn't be bothered with Zephyr, who was clearly starting to pick up Garp's annoying habits after hanging around him too much. Huffing, he stormed into the ship's cabin.

Zephyr quickly followed.

"Doctor, how's Daren doing?"

Inside, Sengoku looked at the young Marine, now fast asleep with an IV drip hooked up, then glanced at the kimono-clad girl sitting faithfully at his side. Finally, his gaze landed on the military doctor, and he asked with concern.

"Commodore Daren's physical condition is unlike anything I've seen in all my decades of medical practice," said the middle-aged doctor wearing rimless glasses, clearly amazed.

"Roughly every ten minutes, his injuries show clear signs of improvement... It's almost unbelievable."

He looked at Daren as if he were observing a priceless and rare artifact.

"Admiral Sengoku, please rest assured. At this pace, Commodore Daren should make a full recovery within a day or two."

Only then did Sengoku and Zephyr both let out a long sigh of relief.

First, he was imprisoned and tortured by Kaidou for an extended period. Then, despite being gravely injured, he managed to escape from the Beasts Pirates' siege...

And not long after breaking free, he went toe-to-toe with Whitebeard—the "Strongest Man in the World"—and nearly killed his sworn brother.

In less than ten days, Daren had gone through more danger, chaos, and dramatic twists than most people would face in a lifetime.

Even though they had faith in his strength, Sengoku and Zephyr were still worried that facing so many top-level powerhouses in a row might leave him with some lasting damage.

"So what's going on with him now?"

Zephyr frowned as he looked at Daren's gaunt, skeletal face.

Sengoku's expression was equally tense.

The doctor replied slowly,

"This is a sign of extreme physical and mental exhaustion."

He pushed up the bridge of his glasses and continued with a thoughtful tone.

"I've already administered nutrient injections. With a few days of proper rest, he should be fine."

...Physical and mental exhaustion?

Sengoku and Zephyr exchanged a look, a flicker of doubt in their eyes.

"That doesn't sound right. Doctor, are you sure you're not mistaken?"

Zephyr frowned.

"No one knows Daren's physical endurance better than I do. He can drag a warship by hand, run ten kilometers with a ton on his back without breaking a sweat... His stamina and resilience are beyond what any human should be capable of. There's no way he'd burn out that easily."

Sengoku nodded in agreement.

Forget just training.

Back in the North Blue, he had personally witnessed Daren's absurd stamina. He entertained nobles, attended endless social functions, partied and drank day and night—yet still acted like it was nothing. Cigarette in one hand, alcohol in the other.

If you told Sengoku Daren had run out of energy, he'd be the first to call it nonsense.

"Could it be the aftereffects of the previous battles or the torture in prison? Maybe some hidden injuries?" he asked.

"Well..."

The doctor hesitated, then said slowly,

"Generally speaking, a state like Commodore Daren's wouldn't be caused by combat."

"Then what did cause it?"

Zephyr pressed.

The doctor paused again, visibly uncomfortable, and then muttered under his breath:

"...Excessive indulgence."

Sengoku: ...

Zephyr: ...

Realization seemed to hit both of them at the same time—they turned their heads simultaneously toward the young woman in the kimono sitting quietly by the bed.

Amatsuki Toki blinked in surprise at their stares. Then, as if something clicked, her face turned scarlet and she jumped to her feet in a panic.

"It wasn't me!"

"I didn't—"

"No! I didn't do anything with Daren-san—"

...Her voice trailed off until it was barely louder than a whisper.

But inside, she was frantic—there was no way she could explain this clearly...

Watching her flustered attempts to deny it, the doctor calmly adjusted his glasses without saying a word, but his confident expression said everything.

Zephyr's mouth twitched.

He glanced at the beautiful Amatsuki Toki, then at the shriveled, energy-drained Daren, and after a long pause, finally grunted,

"Ahem... Young people should learn some restraint."

Amatsuki Toki's face instantly flushed to the base of her neck, her eyes welling up like she might burst into tears.

...Such a pure and gentle girl, and she ended up getting dragged into this by that damn brat!

Seeing her like this, Sengoku sighed and rubbed his forehead.

He forced a kind smile, walked over, and said gently,

"It's alright. I'll make sure that brat treats you properly. Come back to headquarters with us, alright?"

"Exactly!!"

Zephyr chimed in, patting his chest and growling,

"If that bastard dares to let you down, I'll be the first one to beat him senseless!"

There was no explaining it now. And with such high-ranking officers saying things like this, Amatsuki Toki could only nod with a crimson face, softly replying with a "Mm."

Beast!!

Looking at her shy and obedient demeanor, a surge of fatherly instinct erupted from deep within Sengoku and Zephyr.

One a lifelong bachelor, the other having lost family... combined with their Marine sense of duty, it was no surprise that they naturally wanted to protect a girl like Toki.

And as much as they hated to admit it, Daren—while undeniably talented—was still a damn scoundrel!

That only made them feel even more protective toward her.

Thinking back on Daren's "colorful" romantic past, Sengoku and Zephyr even felt their eyes redden. They seriously wanted to drag him out of bed and beat him half to death!

"Hmph!"

After "comforting" Amatsuki Toki, Sengoku suddenly remembered something. He turned to the Marines standing guard in the cabin and barked,

"Everything you heard here—keep it to yourselves! If I hear even a word of this getting out, I'll make you regret it! That's an order!"

The Marines, who had been silently spectating, shivered and nodded frantically like chickens pecking rice.

"Especially you, Borsalino!!"

Sengoku shouted in another direction.

Borsalino raised both hands with a grin.

"Got it~"

Chapter 225 - 225: Volume 2 – Chapter 127: I Heard

Marine Headquarters, Marineford.

"What a beautiful day..."

Tokikake stepped out of the military academy in a brand-new uniform, a brown round hat perched on his head. Lighting a cigarette, he walked with his hands in his pockets toward the civilian district.

He was in a fantastic mood today!

And not just because it was a day off—no grueling training with that hot-blooded maniac Kuzan, no getting beaten black and blue. Well, no need to "train" with that guy, to put it nicely.

No, today was special for another reason—he had finally awakened Armament Haki!

He was the first among this training camp's recruits, after Kuzan, to grasp Armament Haki!

Thinking back to yesterday, when he successfully used it for the first time and saw the envious looks from Onigumo, Yamakaji, and Strawberry... Tokikake couldn't help but float a little. The sky looked extra blue, and the clouds extra white.

Sure, Kuzan had mastered it a few days before him—but so what?

That guy's a monster. There's no point comparing himself to a monster.

"Tokikake, you really are a genius!"

He smiled to himself, blowing a smoke ring as he walked.

Suddenly, something caught his eye.

Up ahead, a tall and graceful figure stood in line at a breakfast stall surrounded by the bustle of morning life. A high ponytail tied behind her head, a gleaming Meito hanging from her waist, and a cool, distant look in her eyes.

It was Gion!

Tokikake's eyes darted. He quickly smothered the sly grin forming on his face, straightened his expression, and casually strolled over with a relaxed greeting.

"Good morning, Gion."

She glanced at him and replied coolly, "Morning."

Tokikake cleared his throat and called out to the stall owner.

"Auntie Rocky!"

The woman in an apron looked up and broke into a hearty smile when she saw him.

"Tokikake! You're here early today. Don't you usually show up later?"

Auntie Rocky beamed.

She had watched Tokikake grow up. He might not have been much to look at, but he had a good heart. Ever since joining the Marines, he'd often looked after this street. They were all close, so their tone was casual.

"What's this? Your face isn't swollen like a pig today... Did you finally win one? What's that kid's name again—the one who always makes you grind your teeth?"

"Cough, cough..."

Tokikake turned red from coughing. He noticed the faint amusement in Gion's gaze and immediately darkened.

"Oh dear, look at me, running my mouth."

Auntie Rocky chuckled, glancing between him and Gion, then quickly changed the subject.

"What do you want for breakfast? It's on me! Steamed buns? Oden? Ramen?"

Tokikake suddenly looked "shocked."

"Auntie Rocky! How did you know I awakened Haki?!"

Auntie Rocky: ???

She stared at him, puzzled, as he kept giving her meaningful looks, scratching her head in confusion.

"Haki what now? I'm asking what you want to eat. I'll make it for you."

Tokikake: ...

He glanced at Gion, who stood calmly beside him as if she hadn't heard a thing. Gritting his teeth, he forced out a line.

"This! Haki! The power only true warriors can master!"

As he spoke, he raised his hand, clenched his fist, and gave a soft shout.

Swish!

A dark coating instantly spread across his arm, enveloping his fist in a cold, metallic sheen.

"See that, Auntie Rocky? This is Haki! Once you master it, bullets and blades can't even scratch you!"

Tokikake proudly puffed out his chest, sneaking glances at Gion from the corner of his eye.

"That does look pretty impressive."

Auntie Rocky reached out and touched Tokikake's arm, now hardened with Haki, her face full of surprise.

"So, can you beat that young guy now? What was his name again... Ku-something?"

Tokikake: ...

His mouth twitched. He took a deep breath, then slowly exhaled, muttering,

"...No."

Seeing Tokikake looking so defeated, Auntie Rocky gently comforted him,

"Don't worry, you're already amazing, Tokikake."

"There are more and more geniuses in the military these days. Just now, I overheard someone saying a young man named Daren did something incredible in the New World!"

Daren!?

Daren's back!?

Tokikake froze, following Auntie Rocky's gaze.

Inside, a group of dusty and travel-worn Marines had gathered, clearly just returning from a mission.

Their table was covered with various snacks and half-empty beer bottles scattered everywhere.

One of the flushed soldiers suddenly leaned in, lowering his voice and speaking with a gossipy tone,

"Hey, hey, did you hear? Commodore Daren brought back a total knockout from outside! She's already moved into the military family quarters!"

Just as the words left his mouth, Gion, who had just picked up a bag of steamed buns and was about to leave, abruptly stopped.

She stood there silently, her fair ears twitching slightly.

Another soldier chimed in,

"You don't know the half of it! They say it's that beauty who drained Commodore Daren dry—that's why he looks so exhausted lately."

"I'm so jealous... I saw her too. She's hands-down the most beautiful girl I've ever laid eyes on."

"Such a shame. I heard Commodore Daren is a total playboy."

"Come on, how can you call a hero like Commodore Daren a playboy? When a man has the ability, of course he's gonna have more love to give!"

"Exactly, that's not being a womanizer—it's universal love! Commodore Daren is our role model! Our pride!"

"No doubt about it. This is the guy who managed to escape from the Beasts Pirates' base!"

"Kaidou is such a fool, hahaha! Thought he could capture our Marine 'monster' alive? What a joke!"

"Escape? That's not what I heard. Word is, Commodore Daren let Kaidou catch him on purpose to gather intel on the Beasts Pirates' hideout..."

"Huh? That actually makes a lot of sense. I mean, a powerhouse like Commodore Daren getting caught by a pirate? Even Kaidou couldn't manage that!"

"Don't forget, the legendary pirate 'Destroyer of the World' Byrnni World died at Daren's hands..."

"Right, right. I heard that at the Beasts Pirates' base, Commodore Daren faced thousands of pirates on his own—and even Kaidou couldn't lay a finger on him. In the end, he carved his way through the entire crew singlehandedly!"

"Commodore Daren is a beast!"

"Word is, he's about to be promoted to Rear Admiral soon! That's amazing..."

"Not just that—after tearing through the Beasts Pirates, he apparently clashed with the Whitebeard Pirates too!"

"What!? You're kidding, right!?"

"No joke! My uncle's sworn brother's uncle's son works under Admiral Sengoku himself—he heard it firsthand!"

"They say the battle was so intense, Whitebeard unleashed his Devil Fruit power to 'destroy the world'—and sank an entire island into the sea!"

"Hissss—!!"

"And? What happened in the end?"

"What do you think? The Whitebeard Pirates couldn't even touch the hem of Commodore Daren's coat!"

"Hahahahaha!!!"

...

Laughter erupted among the Marines, filling the entire breakfast shop with a cheerful buzz.

At the shop entrance, Tokikake stood stunned in the wind.

One thought echoed endlessly in his mind:

—Beauty, fame, promotion... If I'd known, I would've gone too.

"No way. No way..."

He suddenly snapped out of it, gritting his teeth and turning to Gion,

"There's no way this is true. That bastard Daren, taking down the Beasts Pirates and winning over a beauty? Hey—Gion, where are you going?"

Plop!

The hot steamed bun slipped from her hand and hit the ground.

Gion didn't respond.

Expressionless, she unsheathed her golden Meito and stormed off with a terrifying aura.

Tokikake shivered.

"Gion's face... it's terrifying!"

Then his eyes widened.

Because he saw it—A thick, ominous blackness slowly spread across the golden blade in Gion's hand.

Tokikake froze.

He thought back on what he just did. His toes, exposed in his clogs, curled tight.

"Damn it!!!"

He suddenly cursed and quickly chased after her.

"Gion! Wait for me!!"

Chapter 226 - 226: Volume 2 – Chapter 128: The Heart of Gion

As they walked through the streets of the Marineford civilian district, Tokikake followed behind Gion, trembling with fear.

He could feel the intense killing intent radiating from the figure ahead, along with the sharp clack of high heels striking the ground...

He didn't even dare to breathe loudly, keeping his head down and his hands folded as he muttered under his breath,

"When did Gion master Armament Haki? Don't tell me it was before I did..."

"No, no, this isn't the time for that."

He slapped himself.

"Focus!! Tokikake, focus!!"

"Think! How could Daren possibly cut through the Beasts Pirates all on his own? That's something not even Admiral Sengoku could pull off!!"

"Yeah, it must be fake—definitely just a rumor!"

"Fake news!"

Tokikake tried to console himself, forcing a dry laugh.

"And going toe-to-toe with the Whitebeard Pirates... That's even more impossible. Are we seriously supposed to believe that Daren, after being captured by Kaidou of the Beasts for less than ten days, suddenly powered up enough to fight the 'strongest man in the world' head-on!?"

"The Beasts Pirates aren't some kind of elite training academy. If someone could really level up like that, why would Marine Headquarters even need an officer training camp?"

"Exactly, that makes way more sense!"

"And that talk about some stunning beauty... Come on, how could that be real..."

Tokikake laughed awkwardly, a bead of cold sweat forming on his forehead.

"No real beauty would ever fall for scum like Daren, right? If anyone, they'd go for someone like me—a genius who's gentle and considerate..."

"Yeah, yeah, that's definitely it."

"Those soldiers are clearly just spouting nonsense!"

It was like grabbing at straws in the middle of despair—Tokikake's eyes lit up again, and he clenched his fist.

"The woman Daren brought back probably isn't even pretty..."

"—Yeah, right!!"

He ground his teeth.

Knowing Daren, there's no way he'd go after someone who wasn't beautiful!

There was Margery, the alluring and seductive Governor of the Yadis Kingdom in the North Blue;

Sylphine, the cheerful and youthful Princess of the Rost Kingdom;

The tall, long-legged captain of the Noor Caravan;

And Maria, the nurse from the military hospital—blonde, wavy-haired, and curvy in all the right places...

Face after face flashed through Tokikake's mind, each with their own charm, and it made him so angry he could almost crush his teeth.

"No, I refuse to believe it!"

He suddenly let out a growl, eyes bloodshot, fists clenched tight.

"I won't accept this!!"

Flames of rage seemed to blaze from his eyes, and both fists ignited with Armament Haki.

He quickly stepped up beside Gion.

Together, the two stormed toward Daren's mansion.

The surrounding civilians could sense the rising fury from the pair and hurried to get out of their way, not daring to approach.

In less than three minutes...

They came to a stop in front of a quiet courtyard.

The low wall was covered in lush green vines, and the branches of an oak tree stretched out from within. The small wooden gate ahead looked quaint and aged...

"Let's just storm in there, Gion! With how much stronger we've gotten, the two of us together can definitely beat the crap out of that bastard Daren!"

"Let him see what we've gained from our time at the training camp!"

Tokikake stared at the wooden door in front of them. For some reason, he suddenly felt a wave of nervousness and couldn't help but urge Gion forward.

But Gion didn't respond.

Her expression was icy as she looked at the courtyard ahead. She unconsciously pressed her lips together, the hand gripping her Meito Konpira trembling slightly.

"Huh? Gion, what's wrong?"

Tokikake blinked and turned to her, suddenly realizing the intense killing intent she'd been radiating had mysteriously faded.

Still, Gion said nothing.

She lowered her head, her eyes blankly fixed on the sword in her hand. Her gaze flickered, and a complex, unreadable mix of emotions slowly took over her expression.

What's wrong with me...

Why am I so angry?

That shameless bastard brought a woman home—so what? Isn't that completely normal?

It's not like I just met him yesterday.

Besides, what does it have to do with me?

There's clearly nothing between us!

We're not even friends!

So what right do I have to get upset?

A flood of thoughts raced through Gion's mind.

She stood there in a daze, unmoving.

"Gion? Gion?"

After calling out several times with no response, Tokikake's mouth twitched. His face instantly fell, looking as wilted as a frostbitten eggplant.

"Damn it!"

He cursed inwardly, took a deep breath, braced himself, and stepped forward to knock hard on the door.

"Please wait a moment."

A soft, gentle voice answered from inside.

Tokikake froze.

That voice... so sweet, so gentle!

It sounded like a spirit calling from a mountain valley, carrying a classic, elegant tone.

Tokikake swore to the heavens: if this was over a Den Den Mushi, he could down several bowls of rice just from her voice alone!

What he didn't see was Gion's face turning pale the instant she heard that voice.

Soon, the soft clack of wooden clogs approached.

As the wooden door creaked open, a gentle and beautiful face appeared before them.

Bathed in the morning sunlight,

Amatsuki Toki stood there in a kimono and clogs, her long pale green hair flowing gently. Tilting her head with a sweet smile, she looked at the two guests before her and asked,

"May I ask who you are?"

Time seemed to freeze in that moment.

A breeze passed by, lifting her hair and the hem of her kimono. Behind her, fallen leaves danced in the courtyard, painting a scene of stunning beauty.

"So... so beautiful..."

Tokikake stared, dumbfounded.

His eyes turned into hearts, jaw hanging open, drool dripping from the corner of his mouth.

Suddenly,

He dropped to his knees with a loud thud, weakly pounding the ground with his fists as he wailed,

"Damn it!! It's real!!"

"That bastard Daren!!"

His cries were heart-wrenching.

Amatsuki Toki: ???

Gion, too, was frozen in place, staring at the gentle, sweet smile on Toki's face, unsure of what to say.

Her gaze fell to Toki's hands—she was holding a freshly washed military uniform, clearly about to hang it out to dry...

In that instant, Gion felt her chest tighten. Her face went pale.

So it's come to this?

Standing before her was a kind, wife-like woman... and she...

Gion looked at the cold, sharp blade in her hand. Her own murderous reflection stared back at her from the sword's surface, and a wave of shame and self-loathing hit her.

Of course...

A bitter feeling spread in her chest, thick and suffocating.

Exhaling slowly, Gion sheathed her blade and forced a stiff smile.

"Sorry to bother you. We're here to inform Commodore Daren that he needs to return to the training camp."

With that, she abruptly turned and said through clenched teeth to the sobbing Tokikake beside her,

"Tokikake, we're leaving!"

"Huh?" Tokikake was still drowning in grief, looking up blankly.

"You're training with me today."

Gion's voice was cold.

"Training?"

Tokikake blinked, then suddenly shivered as if remembering something.

"Nooo..."

"Why is it always me who gets hurt..."

His crying grew even louder.

Chapter 227 - 227: Volume 2 – Chapter 129: A... Love Battlefield?

"What a strange pair..."

Amatsuki Toki murmured softly as she watched Gion stride off with her usual commanding presence, while Tokikake trudged behind her like a man mourning his own funeral.

She withdrew her gaze, turned back toward the drying rack, gave the freshly washed uniform a good shake, then carefully hung it up.

The white shirt and black trousers fluttered gently in the sunlight and breeze. A satisfied smile appeared on Toki's face.

The doctor had said Daren-san still needed plenty of rest.

He had saved her life and even promised to help her return to Wano. For such a tremendous kindness... doing what little chores she could was the least she could offer in return.

Today too—do your best, Amatsuki Toki!

Cheeks slightly flushed, she clenched her small fists and gave herself a quiet cheer.

"Was that someone knocking just now?"

A low, mellow voice laced with a faint smile drifted out from inside the house.

"Ah!"

Toki gave a soft yelp, then turned and bowed politely.

"Good morning, Daren-san. You shouldn't be up—your doctor said you need rest."

Her cheeks reddened slightly as she added, flustered,

"Also... why aren't you wearing a shirt?"

She turned her head away instinctively, though the corners of her eyes couldn't help sneaking glances at Daren's powerful frame.

Daren-san is really handsome... and so well-built. Even though he's covered in those scary scars, none of them make him look the least bit frightening.

She sighed inwardly.

Daren smiled helplessly.

He was wearing pants—just skipped the shirt. It was a bit hot, and he was used to training shirtless anyway, so he hadn't given it much thought.

After a brief pause, he casually grabbed a Marine cloak off the wall rack and draped it over his shoulders.

"This better?"

It made him look even more alluring, with just the right hint of mystery!

Toki flushed again at the thought but simply responded with a soft "mm," then answered his earlier question.

"Two young Marine officers came looking for you. They said they were from the officer training camp and wanted to remind you to return for drills."

"For some reason, their expressions turned really strange when I opened the door."

"The man stared at me with this dazed, lecherous look, then suddenly dropped to his knees and started bawling. He kept shouting something like 'damn it!' ..."

"The woman didn't look very happy either."

"Oh?"

Daren's expression shifted slightly.

"Could you... describe what they looked like?"

Toki raised her slender finger to her cheek, gently tapping her dimple as she tried to recall.

"The male officer... hmm, how do I put it... looked kind of scruffy. He reminded me a little of Rear Admiral Borsalino, just without that overwhelming pressure."

After thinking for a moment, she added,

"Oh right, he was wearing a brown—"

"Toki, I know who it was."

Daren's lips twitched.

To be honest, the moment she said "lecherous" and "bawling," he'd already guessed it was Tokikake.

And sure enough—aside from Borsalino, the only one in the Marines who could be called scruffy was Tokikake.

"What about the female officer?"

Daren asked again, shaking his head, a growing sense of unease creeping in.

Please don't tell me...

Toki glanced at him, pursed her lips slightly, and said slowly,

"She was really pretty. Beautiful, actually. She might have seemed cold on the surface, but I could sense she had a gentle, warm heart underneath."

"She had long black hair tied in a high ponytail, wore high heels, and had a long golden sword at her waist... very tall..."

As she spoke, Toki rose up on her tiptoes, raising her hand to roughly show the woman's height.

Daren: ...

Crap. It's Gion.

He pinched the bridge of his nose, a headache settling in.

So... this is a love battlefield?

Truth be told, Daren did have feelings for Gion.

Though she had caused her fair share of problems back in North Blue, it was just part of her character and the way she'd grown up. After everything that happened there, she'd matured quite a bit.

And ever since Gion had found out about the secret behind him "saving that father and daughter," Daren had begun to notice the subtle changes in her.

On the surface, she still seemed cold. But those occasional, fleeting glances she gave him at the training camp—they said everything.

It's just that Gion's pride wouldn't allow her to show it openly.

Not that Daren minded.

Those flings back in North Blue? Just passing dalliances.

Mutual consent, no strings, no regrets. He'd enjoyed it guilt-free.

But Gion was different.

How to put it... she was a good girl.

Of course, most importantly—Daren would never admit the real reason he kept his distance was the thought of getting pummeled into the ground by Sengoku, Zephyr, Garp, Tsuru, and Commander-in-Chief Kong all at once.

"That... Daren-san... you know those two Marines, don't you?"

Seeing Daren's changing expression and long silence, Amatsuki Toki bit her lower lip, unable to hold back her curiosity.

"Huh? Oh, yeah. Back in North Blue, they were my subordinates... now we're all part of the same training camp," Daren replied casually, still nursing a headache.

"The scruffy-looking one is Tokikake. Bit of a perv, doesn't have much shame, but he's reliable."

"As for the tall female Marine... that's Gion. Bad temper, sharp tongue—don't take it personally, Toki. She just—hmm?"

Suddenly, Daren felt a bone-chilling killing intent lock onto him. His scalp tingled, and he instinctively looked up.

What he saw made his heart drop.

Gion stood silently at the doorway, face icy cold, a bulging vein throbbing on her temple. She was holding a fruit basket, staring daggers at him without a word.

Meanwhile, Tokikake peeked out from behind the wall, just his head sticking out like some shady spy. He was grinning lewdly, eyes gleaming with a clear "Hehehe, you're screwed" vibe.

Daren: ...

Didn't they leave? When the hell did they come back!?

Damn it! I should've activated my magnetic field senses!

But seriously, who stays on full alert in their own house!?

Frozen in place, he forced a stiff smile.

"Uh... Gion..."

Even though neither Gion nor Tokikake was a threat to him, getting caught badmouthing someone behind their back—especially someone like Gion—was awkward, even for someone as thick-skinned as Daren.

"Oh, I forgot to drop this off earlier."

Gion suddenly smiled and cut him off.

But to Daren, that smile was terrifying.

She tossed the fruit basket at his feet.

"I heard you were seriously injured and worn out... So rest up, Commodore Daren."

With that, she turned and walked off without a second glance.

Tokikake stuck his tongue out, made a goofy face at Daren, and followed after her with a smug grin.

Daren: ...

He opened his mouth, but not a single word came out.

Chapter 228 - 228: Volume 2 – Chapter 130: So Sweet

A gentle breeze stirred the fallen leaves.

Gion's sudden return had caught Daren completely off guard.

He stared at the fruit basket lying on the ground. The fresh fruits inside had burst through the elegant plastic wrapping and were now scattered everywhere—like the broken heart of a heart-struck girl.

"I'm such an idiot..."

Daren gave a helpless, bitter laugh, his headache only getting worse.

"Daren-san... are you alright?"

Amatsuki Toki, seeing his twisted expression—like he'd just swallowed a mouthful of mud—and watching him pinch the bridge of his nose in silence, couldn't hold back any longer and asked softly.

"I'm fine, Toki."

Daren shook his head.

Toki fell quiet again. Then, she suddenly walked to the door, carefully picked up the scattered fruits, wiped the dust off them, and put them back into the basket. She carried it over to Daren, then looked up at him and asked curiously,

"That girl named Gion... seems to like you."

Daren instinctively nodded in agreement—but immediately caught himself and slammed the brakes.

He looked up to see Toki standing there with the fruit basket in her arms, lip slightly bitten, staring quietly at him.

That slightly pouty look in her eyes, paired with her faintly puffed-up cheeks, left Daren completely at a loss for how to respond.

Daren: ...

Damn it!!

In all his life, Daren had never felt this flustered. He was completely thrown off.

Sure, he'd never claimed to be a good guy—and the nickname "the Marines' biggest scumbag" didn't bother him.

But there's a difference between a scumbag and a beast.

Even scumbags have standards!

"Ahem... Toki, actually, my relationship with Gion... isn't what you think."

Daren forced a smile and tried to explain, but was cut off by Toki's next question.

"So... Daren-san doesn't like Gion-san?"

Daren: ...

He opened his mouth, but under Toki's calm, serious gaze, he couldn't bring himself to deny it.

He didn't like lying to women.

But what she said next left him completely speechless.

"Then you should pursue her!"

Toki gave a bright, sincere smile.

In that moment, her smile bloomed like a swan dancing gracefully on a still lake—stunning and serene.

"Wha—what!?"

Daren's eyes went wide. He looked like he couldn't believe what he'd just heard.

Over the past few days, his relationship with Toki had progressed by leaps and bounds, far beyond that of ordinary friends.

While there hadn't been any major steps taken physically, the two of them shared a natural rhythm now—so in tune they could often read each other with just a glance.

Living together in the family quarters, Toki had effortlessly taken on the role of a gentle, caring partner—handling chores, tidying up, and filling what was once a cold, empty home with warmth and life.

The living room was now dotted with cute plush toys, paper cuttings brightened the once-gray windowpanes, and the kitchen gradually filled with pots, pans, and the sound of home.

Daren hadn't minded any of it—in fact, he enjoyed it. Sometimes he even helped Toki with the housework.

And then there were the regular visits from those two old men, Zephyr and Sengoku, who would drop by with overly cheerful grins, looking all too pleased with their little "family." Occasionally, they'd shoot Daren warning looks that practically screamed, "If you dare hurt Toki, we'll make you regret it."

Somehow, without even realizing it, Amatsuki Toki had already slipped into the role of a "wife."

As if she'd been made for it from the very start.

"But Toki, if I go after Gion... wouldn't you be upset?"

Daren actually started to stutter.

For someone usually so smooth and confident, he was completely thrown off by Toki's "crazy" idea. It felt like a barrage of formulas and theories flashed through his mind, his brain running at full capacity.

What did she mean by that?

Was she testing him?

Or... was she really not mad?

But how could she not be mad? She's a woman too!

Or maybe Toki never liked him in the first place, so she didn't care?

No, no, no, that couldn't be it. He had some charm.

Otherwise, back in the North Blue, he wouldn't have had so many sleepless nights.

Not to mention how Toki would get flushed and her heart would race when they locked eyes up close.

"Nope."

Amatsuki Toki smiled, bright and serene.

She tilted her head slightly, her gaze full of innocent cheer.

"You already told me about this before, didn't you, Daren-san?"

"I understand what kind of person you are. Since I chose you, I also chose to accept everything about you—both the good and the bad."

"My father once told me that true heroes don't sweat the small stuff, and that the strong deserve more privileges than the weak. That's what real fairness in the world looks like."

"And someone like you, Daren-san—bold, responsible, with great ambition—being loved by multiple women at the same time... that's a blessing for those women."

Na—Na—Nani!!?

Daren was dumbfounded, staring at the look of absolute certainty on her face.

What a girl. Seriously.

So Toki was saying... she supported him having more than one woman?

Not only was she not angry, she was actually encouraging it!?

This... this... this was too good to be true!

Daren's brain completely shut down.

Sure, he was a scoundrel—but even scoundrels had their limits.

Even after all these years since crossing over, he still clung to a few moral standards from his old life.

Yes, he was a flirt, but it was always mutual, nothing more than a fleeting moment of fun.

You're happy, I'm happy.

But this felt different...

People from Wano really did think differently, didn't they?

Never mind the outdated stuff like Bushido, but Toki's way of thinking... now that was a truly excellent "noble tradition"!

Daren's eye twitched for a solid minute before he finally squeezed out a sentence:

"...I can see your father's a very wise man."

"Mhm, he really makes a lot of sense."

Even Daren couldn't believe he'd just said that.

Toki beamed.

"Yes, I think so too..."

She set the fruit basket down, went inside, and returned with a clean military uniform, holding it out to him with both hands.

"You should head out, Daren-san. Aren't you going to training camp today? Oh, and don't forget to apologize to Gion-san."

Still in a daze, Daren let her help him into the uniform and walked out of the compound.

"Good luck! Don't forget to come home for dinner, Daren-san."

Toki stood in the doorway, smiling and waving goodbye.

Daren waved back stiffly, his body moving on its own toward the training camp.

He still hadn't fully processed what just happened.

...

Once the Commodore's figure disappeared down the street, Toki lowered her hand.

She closed the wooden door, crossed the courtyard scattered with falling leaves, and carried the fruit basket back inside.

After washing the fruit in the kitchen, she quietly moved to the living room and brought out an intricately carved fruit plate.

Kneeling on the tatami mat, she patiently arranged the fruit, one piece at a time.

She looked to be in a great mood.

The same sweet, innocent smile from earlier still lingered on her face as she softly hummed a gentle, melancholic tune from her homeland.

One pale arm propped up her chin, the hem of her pink kimono flowing across the spotless floor. With the newly bought folding screen behind her, she looked like a beauty straight out of a ukiyo-e painting.

"The fruit is really fresh. Gion-san is such a kind girl. I hope Daren-san won't make her cry."

She spoke softly to herself, picked up a pear, and took a small bite.

Juice burst across her lips.

Her smile remained gentle, graceful...

But her eyes were slightly red.

"So sweet."

Chapter 229 - 229: Volume 2 – Chapter 131: Too Young to Be Done For?

On the way to the training camp, it took Daren a while to finally snap out of it.

So... it seems like I've just been officially ordered to go flirt with girls?

Is that what she meant?

Daren mulled over Toki's words, the smile at the corner of his lips slowly twisting.

"A virtuous wife at home, huh..."

His mood lifted instantly, and he even started whistling.

Although nothing had actually happened between him and Toki yet, how could he possibly let a duck that was already cooked and at his lips fly away?

It was just a matter of time.

Having a beauty like Toki by his side was like putting a tub of cream in front of a fat orange cat—don't expect the glutton not to lick it.

Of course, Daren had no intention of betraying Toki's feelings.

But soon, he noticed something strange.

Everyone he passed—both civilians and patrolling Marines—kept sneaking glances at him with bizarre expressions.

Their eyes were full of awe, admiration, curiosity... and a hard-to-describe trace of pity.

"What's going on... I've only been recovering at home for a couple of days..."

Daren instinctively perked up his ears, trying to catch their whispers.

"That's Commodore Daren, right? He's so handsome!"

"Of course! He wiped out the Beasts Pirates all by himself! Even Kaidou of the Beasts, that so-called 'strongest creature,' couldn't stand against him and ended up fleeing in defeat!"

"I heard he nearly wiped out the Whitebeard Pirates too!"

"He really is the 'monster' of headquarters!"

Daren: "..."

The more he listened, the more off it sounded. Black lines started creeping across his forehead.

How the hell did the story evolve into this version!?

When did I become that ridiculous?

Getting captured by Kaidou was a deliberate move to bait him, risking everything just to locate the Beasts Pirates' hideout?

Breaking out of prison solo and slaughtering nearly every member of the Beasts Pirates' thousands-strong crew?

And that test run with the Whitebeard Pirates—wasn't I the one who got forced to retreat?

Now suddenly it's me who almost wiped them out?

This is—

Wait!

He suddenly caught a few murmurs that made his face twitch.

It was a group of gossiping uncles and aunties, gathered together, pretending to read newspapers upside-down while constantly sneaking glances at him from the corner of their eyes.

"Such a tall, strapping young man..."

"What a shame..."

"I heard his body's not doing so well..."

"Cackle cackle... must've been drained dry..."

"Totally looks the part too. Look at how his face keeps getting darker..."

"Tsk, kids these days just can't cut it. Not like me—I'm still going strong at fifty!"

"Yeah right! Your wife said you can't even last a minute!"

"Still, what a waste... so young and already can't do it..."

"His body still looks pretty sturdy though..."

"..."

Without realizing it, Daren's face had gone pitch black, like the bottom of a pot. The veins on his forehead bulged, twitching wildly like they were about to burst.

Who the hell... spread this crap!!?

Daren's teeth ground audibly.

When the hell did I become 'not functional'!?

Damn it!!!

Under the barrage of weird stares, Daren instinctively picked up his pace, broke into a jog, and eventually burst into a full-on Soru.

Daren arrived at the gates of the military training camp at nearly top speed, letting out a long breath as he wiped the sweat from his forehead. With a wry smile, he muttered,

"Who the hell am I supposed to argue with about this...?"

It's not like he could go back and debate with those gossiping old folks. That would only make them even more enthusiastic.

"What a damn headache..."

Sighing, he stepped through the camp gates.

"Move it, all of you!! Yamakaji, you brat, smoking cigars during training again!? And you, Onigumo! What's with that sour face? You looking at me like I owe you millions!"

"Bunch of softies! When I was your age, I carried hundreds of kilos on my back and hacked my way from the entrance of the Grand Line across the Reverse Mountain into the New World—didn't even blink once!"

Hearing that all-too-familiar bellow, Daren's mouth twitched uncontrollably.

He really wanted to go over and ask, "And your eyes didn't dry out back then?"

But thinking about the beating he'd probably get—likely a Black Arm-class thrashing—he wisely decided to keep that thought to himself.

As he walked into the training field, he spotted Zephyr-sensei, decked out in sunglasses, unloading a heavy machine gun—da-da-da-da—without pause.

(Don't doubt it. Pirates really have stuff like this. Zephyr's mechanical arm can spit out bullets like a damn minigun. The tech tree in this world is all kinds of weird.)

Students, each carrying heavy loads and panting as they ran laps around the field, were instantly sent into chaos by the hail of bullets. It was pure bedlam—chickens flying, dogs jumping, the works.

Daren didn't rush. He simply stood in the distance, quietly waiting for them to finish.

Ten minutes later...

Training wrapped up.

All the trainees were doubled over, hands on their knees, soaked in sweat and looking pale. Some who couldn't keep up physically were already hunched over, puking on the spot.

This training camp wasn't child's play. Zephyr's "Devil Instructor" title wasn't for show.

With his overwhelming strength and sharp eye for theory and practice, he could assess each trainee's condition precisely, pushing them past their limits without breaking them.

After all, everyone's body is different.

Not everyone could be like Daren—finishing Zephyr's hellish training plan and still bouncing around like he could go tow a warship afterward.

Daren smiled and stepped forward, raising his hand in salute.

"Third class cadet of the training camp, Marine Headquarters Commodore Rogers Daren—mission complete, requesting to rejoin the team!"

The voice immediately drew everyone's attention.

They turned in surprise toward the figure standing at the edge of the training field.

"Daren! You're back!"

Yamakaji's sweat-soaked face lit up with a grin as he waved.

"Dahaha! Daren, you're finally back! I've gotten stronger since you left—let's spar again soon!"

That was Kuzan, eyes shining, practically leaping from where he stood.

"Welcome back."

That came from Strawberry, Doberman, and Dalmatian.

The usually cold Onigumo simply gave Daren a silent nod.

Daren was well-liked at the training camp.

Strong, charismatic, good-looking, and eloquent. And on top of that, he was generous—always handing out good booze and quality smokes, often treating everyone to meals.

Who wouldn't welcome a classmate like that?

...Oh, right. Two people didn't.

Tokikake scoffed in annoyance.

Gion, on the other hand, stared coldly at Daren—her glare practically sharp enough to kill.

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Gion's cold, almost murderous stare made Daren chuckle bitterly to himself.

Now he finally understood why she was so pissed.

So it was because of those ridiculous rumors about him being "squeezed dry"...

And his own two very honest remarks.

"Seems like everyone's living quite a lively life these days..."

Daren smiled, waved, and walked forward.

From the moment he'd accepted the mission to take down Bullet to everything that followed, barely more than twenty days had passed.

But now, using his biological magnetic field perception, he could clearly sense that the strength radiating from his fellow trainees had increased by over thirty percent!

A person's bio-magnetic field reflects their life energy. It's an essential measure of their core vitality and overall growth.

This kind of absurd rate of improvement was clearly linked to Zephyr-sensei's training, but in the end, it came down to talent—and relentless effort.

Truly worthy of being called the Marines' "Golden Generation"...

"Mm. Good to have you back."

Zephyr finally set down the comically heavy machine gun, gave Daren a quick once-over, then smiled in satisfaction.

"Looks like you've recovered pretty well."

Daren nodded.

"Yes, Zephyr-sensei. I'm ready to return to the camp and resume regular training."

Zephyr waved a hand.

"No rush. Take a few more days to rest."

Then he turned to the rest of the group.

"Alright, that's it for today's physical training. You're all free to go now."

"As usual, if you run into any issues with your training, you can knock on my office door anytime."

"And Daren, make sure to drop by Sengoku's place later and give a full report on the mission details."

"Right—dismissed!"

Zephyr gave his students a sharp salute.

Daren and the rest of the trainees bowed deeply in unison.

"Thank you for your guidance, Zephyr-sensei!"

With a small smile, Zephyr turned and headed toward his office.

...

"Dahahaha! Daren! I heard everything!"

As soon as Zephyr was out of earshot, Kuzan dashed over and threw an arm around Daren's shoulders, waggling his eyebrows.

Daren's mouth twitched.

"What exactly did you hear...?"

Please don't let it be...

A sinking feeling crept up inside him.

It was one thing if civilians were gossiping, but if the rumors had reached the training camp... that was a whole different problem.

"Your battle record, of course! I heard from Zephyr-sensei! He said you escaped from the Beasts Pirates' base all by yourself!"

Kuzan's eyes sparkled with excitement as he threw punches into the air.

"And I heard you blew up the Beasts Pirates' industrial facility—the one they spent years building up! Is that true?!"

He stared at Daren, practically on fire with admiration.

Ah... so that's what he heard.

Daren let out a quiet sigh of relief, then smiled and nodded.

"More or less. Honestly, I just got lucky—"

"—That's so damn cool!!!"

Kuzan cut him off, flushed with excitement.

But the next second, he grabbed his head in frustration, fingers digging into his black curls as he howled with regret.

"I—I can't believe I didn't get to go on such a badass mission with you!!"

Daren: ...

"There'll be more chances."

He slipped out of Kuzan's grasp with practiced ease and patted him on the shoulder.

Yeah... as long as the others don't find out, he might still be able to hold onto his dignity.

"How's the injury coming along?"

Yamakaji, chewing on a cigar, walked over and pulled out another one, handing it to Daren. He gave his shoulder a light punch and grinned.

"Make sure there are no lingering effects."

Daren took the cigar, bit it, lit up, and took a satisfied puff. Smiling, he replied,

"Don't worry. What doesn't kill me only makes me stronger."

Yamakaji blinked in surprise.

He mulled over Daren's words, eyes gradually lighting up.

"That's deep!"

He laughed heartily.

"Good! Someday I'll let you see that slash of mine again!"

"I'll be looking forward to it."

Yamakaji gave a nod.

"Alright, I'm off to feed my cat... Oh, right—"

Just as he was about to turn and leave, he suddenly paused, glanced back at Daren, and lowered his voice.

"Back when I was stationed in the South Sea, I heard rumors of a tribe there... said to have a special kind of secret medicine. Supposedly works wonders..."

"For what?"

Daren looked puzzled.

Yamakaji's bearded, square face flushed as he stammered,

"That—uh—that thing. Ahem. You know... the one you might need!"

"That thing?"

Daren still didn't catch on. But when he saw Yamakaji subtly glance at his crotch, his face froze, and his heart skipped a beat.

No... no way...

So he's heard the rumor too...

"I don't need that!! I'm as strong as a monster!!"

Daren growled through gritted teeth.

"Alright, alright, calm down. But if you change your mind, let me know."

Yamakaji, seeing Daren's overreaction, looked even more convinced. He gave Daren a "don't worry, I get it" look, patted his shoulder, and walked off.

Daren: ...

"Take care of yourself."

Doberman came over and gave Daren's shoulder a firm pat, speaking in a low voice.

Daren: ...

"Don't worry about it. Maybe you've just been under too much combat stress."

Dalmatian gave Daren a reassuring pat as well.

Daren: ...

"Take care of your health."

Strawberry added quietly.

Daren: ...

Onigumo gave him a glance.

"As long as it doesn't affect your fighting."

Daren: ...

The cadets, seemingly in sync, lined up one by one to pat Daren's shoulder, each offering their heartfelt "comfort."

They all gave him the same sympathetic look before walking away with solemn expressions.

Daren stood there alone in the breeze, completely dumbfounded.

He remained frozen for a long time before clenching his jaw and shouting:

"Damn it all!!!"

...

"Yamakaji... wait up!"

Just as Yamakaji stepped out of the training base gate, a voice called out behind him.

He stopped and looked back suspiciously at Tokikake sneaking over.

"What is it?"

Tokikake glanced around, making sure no one was nearby. He rubbed his hands together and chuckled.

"That secret medicine... is it real?"

Yamakaji nodded seriously.

"Absolutely. Nobles in the South Sea are paying top dollar for it—it's practically priceless. I wouldn't have recommended it to Daren if I wasn't sure."

Tokikake's eyes lit up, and he grinned fawningly.

"Well, I've got a friend..."

...

Daren had no idea how he ended up at the Admiral's office.

He wandered in a daze and knocked on the door.

"Come in."

The deep voice of Admiral Sengoku came from inside.

Daren pushed the door open and entered, speaking weakly to Sengoku, who sat behind the desk.

"Admiral Sengoku, you asked for me?"

"Yes."

Sengoku glanced at him, and his expression suddenly turned ice-cold. His voice carried such chill that the room felt like it froze over.

"You killed Saint Xildes, didn't you?"

Daren's pupils shrank into pinpricks.