

One Piece 231

Chapter 231 - 231: Volume 2 – Chapter 133: Tug-of-War and Mind Games

The atmosphere in the Admiral's office was suffocating.

It felt like the temperature in the room had plummeted, and even the potted plants in the corner seemed to be holding their breath.

Behind his black-rimmed glasses, Sengoku's eyes gleamed with an intensity never seen before. His hawk-like gaze locked onto the young Marine in front of him, and an overwhelming aura of authority radiated from his body, pressing down on Daren.

Daren's heart skipped a beat, but his face remained calm and composed.

Had he been exposed?

No, impossible.

He had full confidence in his skills and planning.

That incident in the North Blue, where a Celestial Dragon was killed—he had handled it perfectly. Not a single trace was left behind.

Subjectively, there was no reason anyone would think he had a motive to target a Celestial Dragon—he had a reputation to uphold.

Objectively, his alibi was airtight. Every clue had been completely erased. Neither the Marines nor the World Government should be able to dig up anything.

If there was anything remotely suspicious, it would be his strength and Devil Fruit ability—both matching the profile of the perpetrator a little too well.

But that alone wasn't enough.

So then... was Sengoku bluffing?

A flurry of thoughts raced through Daren's mind in an instant. He blinked in confusion, just the right amount of feigned surprise showing on his face.

"Saint Xildes-sama?"

"Admiral Sengoku, I don't understand what you're implying."

"The death of Saint Xildes-sama... wasn't it officially ruled an accident? That was your own conclusion."

"The esteemed World Noble, Saint Xildes-sama, was tragically killed when a massive Sea King attacked during a cruise through the North Blue. The World Government's official vessel was destroyed in an instant. Saint Xildes-sama and numerous CP agents aboard perished. The Marine Headquarters and the World Government extend their deepest condolences'... That was the conclusion of the final report."

"As for accusing me of killing Saint Xildes-sama..."

Daren quickly waved his hands, panic painted across his face.

"How could I possibly dare attack a Celestial Dragon?"

"I'm a law-abiding Marine!"

Sengoku's mouth twitched—he nearly lost his composure.

Right. Of course. The most "law-abiding" Marine in the entire force.

Watching Daren's performance, Sengoku couldn't help feeling a little exasperated.

At first, during the investigation into Saint Xildes's death, he really hadn't found any clues. For a time, he genuinely believed it was just an accident caused by a Sea King.

Back then, in the North Blue, there wasn't a single suspect to go on.

Until the battle against the "World Destroyer," Byrnni World.

In that fight, Daren revealed combat strength far beyond Sengoku's expectations, along with exceptional command skills and the sheer power of the North Blue fleet under his leadership.

Most crucially, Daren—this North Blue Admiral—demonstrated the ability to fly.

That was the turning point. From that day on, Sengoku began to suspect something.

Though it was just a faint inkling at first, he reopened the investigation into the North Blue incident in secret, just to be sure.

Yet strangely enough, the deeper he dug, the more he found... nothing.

No flaws. No gaps. No proof.

And that's exactly why Sengoku became more and more convinced—

Daren was the one who did it.

He had no evidence.

But his instincts told him he was right.

"Daren, I won't beat around the bush..."

Sengoku cleared his throat, his eyes stern as they locked onto Daren.

"We both understand the situation surrounding the attack on the Celestial Dragons."

"Setting aside the possibility of an accident—if there really was a perpetrator—then the attacker would need to meet the following three conditions."

"First, they'd have to possess overwhelming strength, enough to sink the government ship before the Cipher Pol agents could even react."

"Second, they'd likely have a personal grudge against Saint Xildes."

"Third, they'd probably have the ability to fly."

"At that time in the North Blue, the only person who fit all those criteria and had any history with Saint Xildes..."

Sengoku exhaled slowly.

"Was you, the Admiral of the North Blue—Rogers Daren."

As soon as the words left his mouth, Sengoku stared intently at Daren, searching for the slightest shift in expression.

But he saw nothing.

"Admiral Sengoku, that's not something to say lightly."

Daren smiled faintly, a trace of helplessness in his tone.

"If we're going by your logic, then I'm not the only suspect."

"Oh? And who else would there be?"

"Borsalino."

Sengoku: "..."

Faced with Daren's deadpan reply, he felt a sharp pain in his chest.

Daren gave Sengoku a brief glance, now even more certain he had no proof. He smiled.

"Since you're bringing up old matters, I might as well be honest with you about something."

"What is it?" Sengoku frowned.

Daren let out a soft sigh and spoke slowly.

"When the CPO agents arrived in the North Blue, they declared I'd be taking over the investigation into Saint Xildes-sama's death. You remember that, don't you?"

Sengoku nodded.

"Of course. The Five Elders took into account that, as an Admiral, I was tied up with pressing military affairs, especially with the urgent pursuit of the 'World Destroyer' Byrnni World... so they passed the case on to you..."

"—But was that really the reason?"

Daren cut him off, a half-smile playing at his lips.

"Admiral Sengoku, with your wisdom, do you really believe the Five Elders—those who sit above the clouds—actually care whether you're busy or not?"

"Or is it more likely... they simply didn't think you were the right person to investigate a Celestial Dragon's death?"

"That's ridicu—"

Sengoku instinctively moved to deny it, but the words stuck in his throat.

Daren's deliberate tone triggered a memory. Sengoku's expression stiffened.

It was true.

Despite being a high-ranking Marine Admiral, he was still nothing in the eyes of the Five Elders.

By protocol, when a Celestial Dragon was attacked, an Admiral should immediately drop everything to prioritize their protection and the follow-up investigation.

Yet before the case was even closed, the Five Elders had sent CP0 to reassign the case—to Daren.

What did that mean?

Back then, Sengoku had been so focused on taking down Byrnni World that he never gave it a second thought. He had even felt relieved, thinking he'd avoided a headache.

"Could it be..."

His eyes flickered, and his expression darkened.

"Daren... are you saying the World Government doesn't trust me?"

Chapter 232 - 232: Volume 2 – Chapter 134: The Real Suspect... Is Me?

The initiative was back in his hands...

Daren watched every shift in Sengoku's expression and finally let out a quiet breath of relief.

In a confrontation like this, if he had answered Sengoku's questions directly, he would've been cornered—easily led into a trap and exposed.

And Daren hated being led around by anyone.

The only way to escape this situation was to redirect Sengoku's focus.

From the very start, Daren had never expected to keep the Celestial Dragon incident a secret from everyone—not forever. Especially after revealing his Devil Fruit ability, he had long anticipated that this kind of conversation would come. It was only a matter of when.

What caught him off guard was how suddenly it came.

Now, looking at the setup, it was clear why Sengoku was known as the Marines' "strategic genius."

He'd first had Zephyr give him a false pretense—a standard mission debrief—lowering Daren's guard, leaving him unprepared.

Then, he struck.

Daren had to admit, the moment Sengoku opened his mouth, he had been momentarily caught off guard. He just didn't show it on his face.

If his mental resilience hadn't been this solid, someone else in his position would've already slipped up.

But from the way this conversation was unfolding, it was obvious—Sengoku had no evidence. Nor did he intend to pursue anything openly.

He just wanted to confirm his suspicions... and give Daren a warning.

If this were a real interrogation, he'd be surrounded by now.

Realizing this, Daren's thoughts grew even sharper.

A faint smile tugged at the corners of his mouth.

"Admiral Sengoku, what makes you so sure the World Government trusts you?"

Sengoku froze for a moment, then instinctively retorted,

"Why wouldn't they? As a Marine Admiral, I've carried out every order from the World Government flawlessly—"

"—Do you really believe that those lofty masters above truly 'trust' their watchdog?"

Daren cut in coldly.

He was making a gamble now—that the relationship between the Marines and the World Government wasn't as unshakable as it appeared.

To deal with smart people, you had to use the tactics of smart people.

And someone like Sengoku, sharp as he was, was also naturally suspicious.

Once doubt took root, trust would begin to fracture.

Even the tiniest crack would be enough for Daren.

Hearing those words, Sengoku opened his mouth... but didn't speak.

Before Sengoku could say anything, Daren cut in with a cold chuckle.

"Admiral Sengoku, let me tell you the truth."

"The order the World Government gave me that day... wasn't to continue investigating the Celestial Dragon incident."

"It was that the Five Elders had already begun to suspect... that the one who killed Saint Xildes was someone within the Marines."

Sengoku's expression shifted slightly.

"They suspected you?"

Daren said nothing. He just smiled, eyes fixed on Sengoku.

"Why are you looking at me like that? I'm the one who suspects you—"

Sengoku suddenly froze.

In that instant, countless thoughts flooded his mind.

If the Five Elders had suspected Daren, there was no way they would've let him lead an internal investigation within the Marines.

The fact that they had assigned the North Blue Admiral to that task meant one thing clearly—they didn't think Daren had anything to do with Saint Xildes-sama's death.

So if not Daren... then who were they suspicious of?

A realization struck him, and his face turned grim.

His mind drifted back to the earlier profile he himself had built of the attacker:

Immense strength. A connection to the Celestial Dragons. Possible ability to fly. Present in the North Blue at the time...

Wait a second—doesn't that describe my own flagship?

The strength absolutely fit.

As a Marine Admiral, he had full access to the government ship's travel routes.

Flying ability wasn't even necessary—with a warship, the logistics were covered.

And at that time, he'd been on assignment in the North Blue, leading the campaign against Byrnni World...

Thought after thought piled up. Sengoku was suddenly at a loss.

Based on that analysis... the prime suspect in the Celestial Dragon incident might actually be me!?

The more he considered it, the more unsettling it became.

He met every condition—every single one.

In fact, when it came to insider knowledge of the World Government's ship routes, he fit the criteria even better than Daren!

After all, at that time, Daren was just the North Blue Admiral. It was highly unlikely he had access to Saint Xildes-sama's return route to the Holy Land.

That had been Sengoku's biggest reason for probing instead of outright accusing Daren—he couldn't explain how Daren would've known such sensitive intel.

Because at the time, the only person in the North Blue who could've known that information... was him. The Marine Headquarters Admiral.

No wonder the World Government took him off the case...

No wonder the CPO agents gave him such strange looks back then...

Wait!

He suddenly remembered the cryptic smiles the Five Elders had given him just a few days ago when he'd visited the Holy Land to deliver his report.

What did those smiles mean?

Were they warning him?

Were they... suspicious of him?

Sengoku's mind kicked into overdrive, faster than it had ever moved in his life. He began reviewing, reflecting, scrutinizing every past meeting, every exchange he'd had with the Five Elders.

...

"It's just about time..."

Daren noticed the changes in Sengoku's expression—confusion, dawning realization, inner turmoil, and rising anxiety. The corner of his mouth curled slightly.

When playing mind games with someone as sharp and suspicious as Sengoku, excessive rhetoric was useless. It would only make him more guarded.

The trick was to feed him just enough key information... and let his mind fill in the rest.

And the most crucial part?

What Daren had said was true.

The World Government had, in fact, ordered him to conduct a secret investigation into the Marines.

And there was no way Sengoku would ever march up to the Five Elders and ask, "Are you suspecting the Marines? Are you suspecting me?"

"I really do need to thank the 'wise' Topman Warcury-sama someday..."

Daren chuckled to himself and sighed, wearing a look of helplessness.

"Admiral Sengoku, now do you understand just how difficult my position was back then?"

"On one side, I had pressure from the very top of the World Government. On the other, my most trusted colleagues, my comrades-in-arms... and, well, my superiors."

Sengoku's mouth twitched.

What's with that extra emphasis on "superiors" ...?

"Um... Daren..."

He hesitated, then cautiously asked,

"You didn't say anything... did you?"

Even though Sengoku knew full well he had nothing to do with Saint Xildes-sama's death...

To people like the Five Elders, did that really matter?

In fact, whether the Celestial Dragon had actually died wasn't even the point.

What mattered was...

the World Government was beginning to suspect him.

And that—could ruin his entire political future.

Chapter 233 - 233: Volume 2 – Chapter 135: I Challenge the Top Seat

Even someone as composed and calculating as Sengoku couldn't help but feel uneasy at that moment.

As the most powerful law enforcement force on the seas, the Marines may have held considerable military autonomy—but at the end of the day, they were still subordinate to the World Government.

Many within the Marines quietly scoffed at the government's authority, but outwardly, they maintained a façade of obedience and respect.

For someone like Sengoku—a high-ranking officer and currently the only serving Admiral at Marine Headquarters—if he lost the trust of the Five Elders, the World Government's highest authority, his career would be finished.

At the very least, his ambition for the Fleet Admiral position—which required the Five Elders' approval—would be dead in the water.

"Admiral Sengoku, do you take me for someone who would betray his comrades, his partners... or his superiors?"

Daren smiled with a lazy squint.

Sengoku: ...

Why emphasize "superiors" again!?

"I'm well aware of where I stand,"

Daren continued with a calm smile.

"The orders from the Five Elders are, of course, important—but unity within the Marines matters even more."

"That's precisely why, in the final report I submitted to the Five Elders, I made sure to highlight the support and encouragement you gave me."

Sengoku let out a quiet breath of relief and gave a small, approving smile.

"Hm. I've always trusted you to handle things properly."

Daren nodded.

"My job is to make sure the World Government never loses faith in the Marines. That's something none of us can afford."

He looked up, meeting Sengoku's gaze directly, his tone subtly pointed.

"Wouldn't you agree, Admiral Sengoku?"

Sengoku paused.

As if understanding the deeper meaning behind the words, he stayed silent for a moment, then let out a long breath and nodded.

"You're right."

Daren smiled.

"Well then, if there's nothing else, I'll be heading back now, Admiral."

This "briefing" had clearly just been a pretense. Sengoku had summoned him here to test the waters.

Now that they'd reached an understanding, there was no reason for Daren to linger.

Toki was waiting for him at home for dinner.

"Hm."

Sengoku nodded. After a brief pause, a smile surfaced on his face.

"How's Toki adjusting to life in Marineford?"

Daren replied with a smile,

"She seems to like it here quite a lot."

Sengoku nodded thoughtfully, then suddenly asked,

"That's good. If I'm not mistaken... she's from Wano, isn't she?"

"Yes."

Daren didn't deny it.

The culture of Wano Country was too distinct from other islands and nations in the sea—there was no hiding Amatsuki Toki's origins from someone like Sengoku.

Sengoku fell silent for a moment, then spoke slowly.

"Treat her well... and if possible, try to gather some intel on Wano."

"Yes, Admiral Sengoku."

Daren gave a respectful nod.

"Then I'll be going."

With that, he turned and walked toward the door.

"Daren..."

Sengoku's deep voice came from behind. Daren paused instinctively.

"Let me give you one last piece of advice: the goddess of luck won't always be on your side."

Daren chuckled but didn't look back.

"I don't believe in luck, Admiral Sengoku."

And with that, he pushed the door open and stepped out.

As the heavy office door slowly closed behind him, Sengoku leaned back in his chair, closed his eyes, and gently massaged his temples.

A long silence followed.

Then, suddenly, Sengoku let out a quiet laugh.

"What a clever brat..."

He understood exactly what Daren had meant with that line—

"We must never let the World Government lose faith in the Marines..."

That sentence exploded like a thunderclap in Sengoku's mind.

"We really can't keep digging into this..."

He sighed deeply, his hand clenching into a fist.

The Celestial Dragon incident—must never be linked to any Marine.

...

It was nearly dusk by the time Daren stepped out of Sengoku's office.

The shimmering sunset over the distant naval port reflected off the waves, and the cool sea breeze brushed against his face. Only then did the tension in his body begin to ease.

He let out a long exhale, reached into the pocket of his uniform trousers, pulled out a pack of cigarettes, and lit one.

His thoughts drifted with the rising smoke.

Sengoku wasn't easy to fool—but at the very least, for now, Daren had managed to steady him.

He's a smart man.

He should understand the implication behind what I said.

The Marines can't afford to let the World Government start getting suspicious.

So even if Sengoku did dig up some kind of clue or evidence, he wouldn't dare report it—for the sake of the Marines as a whole.

That's the card Daren was playing.

Because now, Daren's status was far from what it used to be.

Former North Blue Admiral.

Zephyr's direct disciple.

The man who brought down the "World Destroyer," Byrnni World.

A rising future Admiral. A pillar of justice.

The one who leveled the Beasts Pirates' base...

Fame, achievements, talent, strength—he had it all.

If the World Government tried to move against him, it wouldn't be a simple matter.

Daren killed a Celestial Dragon?

Then what—should Zephyr be investigated too?

Should Admiral Sengoku, who was also stationed in the North Blue at the time, be held accountable?

Would the entire North Blue command need to be interrogated, maybe even sacrificed?

And beyond Daren, what about the rest of the Marines? Would this spark questions about latent hostility toward the World Government or the Celestial Dragons?

...

Once that door opens, it doesn't close again.

The World Government might tear the entire Marine structure apart.

They'd lose all trust, slash funding, maybe even start dismantling the Marine force itself...

That's what Daren was betting on.

He was betting that Sengoku wouldn't dare let that happen.

"Haa..."

The cigarette burned down fast.

He blew out the final puff of smoke, flicked the butt to the ground, and ground it out beneath his boot.

"Time to head home."

He muttered the words quietly, gazing out at the setting sun.

But just as he lifted his foot to leave, a tall figure suddenly stepped into his path.

Bathed in the glow of the sunset, Gion stood with her long sword in hand, slightly out of breath. Her pristine Marine cloak fluttered in the breeze, and her eyes were locked coldly on Daren.

"Gion?"

Daren blinked in surprise.

He noticed the bruises on her arms, the weariness on her face—clear signs of a grueling day of training.

What was she doing here?

"Marine Headquarters, Officer Training Program, Third Term... Rogers Daren."

Gion drew in a deep breath. Both hands gripped the hilt of her golden Meito tightly. Her gaze was resolute.

"I'm here to challenge you—for the top spot."

Chapter 234 - 234: Volume 2 – Chapter 136: You're Not Allowed to Leave

Training camp—drill grounds.

Golden sand danced in the twilight glow.

"Are you sure about this, Gion...? You're clearly not in the best shape right now."

Daren looked at the resolute woman before him, his tone tinged with helplessness.

Even without using his bio-magnetic perception, he could see the exhaustion written all over her face.

Unmoved, Gion replied coldly,

"You're not at full strength either, are you?"

Daren gave a small shake of his head.

"If you want to challenge me, I'm always open to it. But it doesn't have to be now."

"No—it has to be now."

Gion glanced at the crimson-tinted sky, the sun halfway swallowed by the horizon. She grit her teeth and said,

"I know it sounds unreasonable, but you know I've got a temper, don't you?"

Daren: ...

Great. Those two offhand remarks from before? Yeah, she's probably going to hold onto them for life.

He hadn't realized she could hold a grudge like this.

"Alright, if you insist—"

Before he could finish his sentence, Gion had already drawn her sword. Her figure burst forward like a gust of wind, blade flashing straight for him.

Her Meito, the Konpira—a top-tier Great Grade blade—flared with a dazzling light. The sword's edge shimmered like lightning, slicing through the air with explosive speed.

The air rang with a piercing hum. The force behind that strike was nothing short of impressive.

Daren's eyes lit up.

As expected of a future Admiral candidate. Gion's swordsmanship and talent were such that even a powerhouse like Zephyr had openly praised her.

He opened his magnetic field perception in a flash and shifted his body to the side.

Her blade missed by a hair's breadth, cutting deep into the ground just past his shoulder.

Slash!!

A surge of energy burst forth, carving a massive gash across the field, kicking up a storm of sand.

Seeing the power in that single slash, Daren's eye twitched.

She's seriously pissed...

Missing her mark, Gion immediately switched tactics.

With a twist of her wrist, her blade gleamed black—Armament Haki quickly coating the Konpira—then swept horizontally at Daren's waist.

Her swordsmanship really is top-tier.

That thought flashed through Daren's mind as blue arcs danced along his fingertips.

An invisible magnetic field pulsed outward, and Gion's expression shifted. She suddenly felt a heavy pull locking onto her sword.

The momentum of her slash faltered.

Daren stepped lightly back, avoiding it with practiced ease.

"Why aren't you fighting back?! You think I'm not worth it!?"

Gion bit her lower lip and lunged again, blade slashing down on him once more.

The attacks rained like a violent storm—relentless and wild, cloaking Daren in a downpour of steel.

He sighed silently, calmly parrying each blow. Inwardly, he shook his head.

He had never formally trained in swordsmanship, but he wasn't a novice either. He had, after all, once faced Roger's godlike Kamusari firsthand.

Not to mention that on this journey alone, he'd fought beasts like Bullet, Queen, and Kaidou—gathering combat experience by the fistful.

It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that, compared to when he first left the North Blue, Daren's strength and insight had skyrocketed to unimaginable levels.

From his perspective, Gion's every move—while fierce and forceful—lacked control. Her strikes were wild and emotional, not calculated.

Like a child flailing a sword in frustration—this was no duel, it was a release.

She was burning through her remaining stamina and newly honed Haki without restraint, pouring everything into a single emotional outburst.

Like a dam breaking loose, letting her rage flood out completely.

Realizing this, Daren steadied his footing and stopped dodging altogether. Instead, he coated his hands with Armament Haki and stood firm—taking her attacks head-on like a living target.

Clang! Clang! Clang! Clang!

The sharp clash of metal echoed across the drill grounds, sparks flying in bursts as they reflected in Gion's bloodshot eyes.

One minute.

Three minutes.

Five minutes.

Ten minutes...

With each passing moment, Gion's strikes slowed. The overuse of Haki was taking its toll—her stamina was fading fast.

Her breath grew ragged. Her face turned pale.

Daren saw it and suddenly reached out with one powerful hand.

Clang!!

A piercing sound exploded as his obsidian-covered fingers clamped down on the Konpira's blade, sparks spraying in every direction.

The training field fell silent.

Gion stared at her sword—gripped tightly in Daren's hand—and tried with all her strength to pull it free.

It didn't move an inch.

"Feeling a bit better now?"

Daren spoke calmly, watching Gion closely.

His words struck a chord—Gion's expression froze.

The light in her eyes faded fast. Exhaustion from overexertion crashed over her like a wave. Her usually stoic eyes turned red, and her body swayed slightly, unsteady on her feet.

Daren gently released her sword, his voice soft.

"Go home and get some rest."

He looked up at the sky.

The sun had fully dipped below the horizon. Darkness was setting in, with only the last remnants of twilight barely clinging to the sky.

Off in the direction of the residential district, smoke curled up from chimneys—families cooking dinner.

Noticing Daren's gaze, Gion bit her lip.

"No. This isn't over yet."

Clutching the hilt of her sword, she forced her weary body upright.

Her legs trembled.

Daren frowned.

"You're already at your limit..."

"I said it's not over!! You're not allowed to leave!!"

Gion snapped through gritted teeth.

Blade in hand, eyes rimmed with red, she charged toward him again.

But the moment her foot landed, her legs gave out.

Daren rushed forward just in time to catch her.

She fell hard against his chest. Her neatly tied bun unraveled, and long black hair tumbled down like a waterfall.

"L-Let go of me!"

A faint blush flashed across Gion's face—but it quickly vanished.

She started struggling in his arms, trying to push him away.

"You can't even stand..."

Daren said with a chuckle.

"I'll walk you home first, then go back myself... Relax, I'm not going to take advantage of you."

"No..."

Her lips had turned pale, but she still shook her head.

Daren's brow furrowed.

Then something struck him.

Ever since Gion showed up, she'd been glancing at the sky again and again.

And her swordplay hadn't been her usual sharp, decisive style—it had felt more like she was stalling, trying to drain his stamina.

Wait a minute...

An absurd thought suddenly popped into Daren's head.

Was she intentionally trying to wear him down to stop him from going home?

Or more specifically... to stop him from going home and doing something bad?

No way...

His mouth twitched, but he decided to test the theory.

"Gion, there's something I should be honest about..."

"Ahem..."

"The truth is—Toki and I haven't done anything like that."

The moment he said it, Daren's entire body froze.

Because in that exact instant...

The Gion in his arms stopped struggling.

Chapter 235 - 235: Volume 2 – Chapter 137: I've Actually Become a Gentleman?

So it really turned out like this...

Is this Gion's tsundere version of "don't act all smug"?

Daren's mouth twitched, then he shook his head with an amused smile.

Looking at the girl lying motionless in his arms, he couldn't help but feel a bit of a headache.

Her long hair, draped over her shoulders and set against the white of her cloak, looked even darker than ink. Her onyx-like eyes were slightly red-rimmed, filled with grievance and reluctance.

But her proud and stubborn nature wouldn't allow her to show the slightest trace of weakness. Combined with her delicate and refined face, she had a unique charm.

Maybe it was the preconceived image from before he crossed over, but he had always associated Gion with the cool, mature aura from the original storyline.

In reality, though, Gion at this point in time was just a teenage girl.

A girl her age, especially one with such an exceptional background, being a little willful and tsundere was completely normal.

"Feeling any better now?"

Daren looked down at Gion, who was nestled quietly in his arms like a kitten, her earlier willfulness completely gone. He grinned playfully.

"W-What does that have to do with me..."

Gion turned her head away, not daring to meet Daren's eyes. Her voice was low and soft, barely audible.

Daren chuckled, feeling the softness pressing against his chest. He couldn't help but sigh inwardly as he spoke gently,

"Go back and get some rest, alright?"

"Your body's already at its limit."

Gion bit her lower lip and muttered,

"I-I don't need you to tell me what to do..."

Daren shrugged with a smile.

"That won't do. If you ended up injured from challenging me and suffered any long-term consequences... I doubt Admiral Sengoku, Staff Officer Tsuru, or Zephyr-sensei would let me off easy."

Before she could say anything else, Daren moved.

With a small cry from Gion, he slipped one arm around her waist and scooped her legs up with the other, lifting her into a bridal carry.

Warm, soft curves filled his arms, and even someone as battle-hardened as Daren couldn't help but feel a little distracted.

Years of training had given Gion an incredibly slender waist—barely a handful—and her ample chest only made the contrast more striking. Her thighs were smooth and springy, legs long and shapely, swinging slightly in the air.

From Daren's angle, her toes—encased in high heels—were clearly defined and looked almost translucent under the light.

"D-Daren... what are you trying to do!?"

Gion suddenly panicked, her eyes wide with alarm.

Held in such an embarrassing position, she could no longer maintain her usual aloof composure. Her face turned bright red as she pushed against Daren's shoulders.

"Stop squirming, or I really will take advantage of you."

That single line made her go quiet in an instant. She froze, not daring to move again.

"Hold on tight."

With Gion in his arms, Daren lightly tapped the ground with his foot and launched into the air.

As they sped through the air, Gion had no choice but to wrap her arms around his neck to stay balanced.

Feeling this damned scoundrel holding her tighter and tighter, her face burned even more.

'Good thing it's already night... he probably can't see.'

She muttered inwardly.

In less than five minutes, Daren had carried her all the way to her residence.

He curled a finger, and with a sharp click, the door lock popped off and flew away.

"D-Don't go in!"

Gion's face turned pale in alarm.

"No can do."

Seeing her flustered and uneasy expression, Daren was thoroughly amused and became even more curious about her place.

Ignoring her protests, he pushed the door open and walked in.

Unlike Daren's own modest, elegantly decorated home—courtesy of Toki—Gion's place was warm and inviting... maybe even a little too cute.

Fluffy rabbit plushies were scattered all over, and the dominant color in the room was a soft, delicate pink.

"That's honestly a bit unexpected. With how cold you usually act, I didn't take you for someone with such a girly side."

Seeing the scene in front of him, Daren's expression turned odd. He couldn't help but chuckle, a mischievous thought surfacing as he glanced teasingly at Gion and exaggerated dramatically,

"Gion-san, you wouldn't want the secrets of your bedroom getting out, would you?"

Gion's face turned red enough to drip.

"Y-You... put me down right now..."

"Alright, alright."

He had to admit, the contrast between her usual aloof demeanor and this shy, flustered reaction was surprisingly charming.

Daren gently laid her on the bed.

After a moment of thought, he suddenly crouched down and reached for her ankle.

"What are you doing?!"

Gion froze, alarmed—was this bastard trying to take advantage of her?

"I already told you, I'm not trying anything."

Daren sighed, annoyed, and calmly untied the laces of her high heels, helping her remove them.

As she looked into Daren's clear, focused eyes, and saw that his actions carried no hint of lewdness, Gion's tightly clenched fists slowly relaxed.

She said nothing, but her teeth sank a little deeper into her lip.

"All done."

Daren gave a satisfied smile as he stood up.

"Well then, sparring with you today was a pleasure."

"I should get going."

Gion lifted her head to glance at him, but as soon as their eyes met, she looked away.

Then, as if realizing she was showing too much weakness, she gritted her teeth, gathered her courage, and stared him down again.

"Today... that kind of thing... only happened because I was completely drained! Don't think you'll get away with taking liberties next time!"

"Otherwise... I won't let you off easy."

Daren raised both hands.

"Alright, alright, I get it."

"You hate scumbags like me—degenerates, womanizers, total sleazeballs..."

"I understand."

He walked over and gently pulled the covers over her.

"Get some rest."

With that, Daren turned and quickly left the room.

...

Several seconds passed before Gion cautiously poked her head out from under the blanket.

Through the window, she watched as the scoundrel's silhouette disappeared into the night beyond the courtyard. She stayed silent for a long moment, then muttered softly,

"Surprisingly gentle... and kind."

The memory of being carried in his arms came rushing back—her flushed embarrassment, the comforting solidity of his chest. Gion wasn't sure what was going through her head, only that the spots where he'd touched her still tingled like they'd been shocked.

Her face, which had just returned to normal, started to heat up again.

"Get a grip!"

She suddenly slapped her cheeks hard, gritting her teeth.

"That guy is the scum, the degenerate, the flirt you hate the most!"

...

Outside Gion's residence, Daren leaned against the wall under the moonlight and quietly lit a cigarette.

Smoke curled around his face as his expression shifted again and again.

By the time the cigarette burned out, he suddenly slapped himself across the face and cursed under his breath,

"Damn it!"

"I actually acted like a gentleman!?"

He looked completely regretful.

Chapter 236 - 236: Volume 2 – Chapter 138: It Doesn't Matter and It Does Matter

The night was quiet and alluring.

Moonlight filtered through the window in scattered beams, casting a soft glow over the pink bunny plush beside the bed.

Gion had been lying there for a full half hour before the flush on her face finally began to fade.

She pushed her exhausted body upright and sat up, taking off her Marine cloak.

After a full day of intense training followed by a duel with Daren, she was drenched in sweat, and her skin felt uncomfortably sticky.

As someone who liked to stay clean, there was no way she could fall asleep without taking a bath.

Just then, the image of Daren carrying her back surfaced again—along with the way he had looked at her toes while helping her take off her shoes. Her cheeks reddened once more.

"He... probably didn't smell my sweat, right?"

Random thoughts ran wild through her head as she dragged her tired body into the bathroom and turned on the hot water for the tub.

Suddenly—

Knock knock knock—

The unexpected knock startled Gion.

Is he back!?

Panic kicked in. For reasons she couldn't explain, her usual tough demeanor vanished completely, and like a startled bunny, she dove back under the covers.

"Ahem... Gion, it's me."

Tsuru's voice came from outside the door.

Gion froze.

It's Tsuru? Not that jerk?

Relief washed over her—but at the same time, an inexplicable twinge of disappointment crept into her chest.

Thinking back to how she'd reacted just now, her face warmed again.

"I'm here, Tsuru-nee."

She took a deep breath, trying to steady herself, and called out.

Staff Officer Tsuru pushed the door open.

When she saw Gion sitting at the edge of the bed, bruises on her arms and legs, a flash of pain flickered in her eyes. She shook her head slightly.

"I just came to check on you."

Gion blinked, then smiled.

"I'm fine, Tsuru-nee."

"You... are such a stubborn girl."

Tsuru pointed at her, half exasperated, half amused, and walked over to sit beside her.

"I ran into Tokikake earlier this evening."

"That kid had a black eye and a swollen nose, his upper body wrapped in bandages and casts. The moment he saw me, he dropped to his knees, bawling and begging for mercy..."

She rubbed her temples.

"You took your frustration out on him again, didn't you?"

Gion pursed her lips and muttered,

"He wasn't actually hurt at first... but during sparring, he tried to grope my butt, so I went all out."

Tsuru: ...

"...Good job."

After a pause, she finally let out the words slowly.

Then, after thinking for a moment, she asked,

"So what made you go after Daren?"

Gion froze.

"H-How did you know..."

Tsuru gave her a look.

"The way you showed up at Sengoku's office with a sword in hand—do you know how many Marines you scared half to death?"

Gion's face turned red, and she lowered her head without a word.

Seeing her like this, Tsuru frowned slightly and asked out of nowhere,

"Gion, be honest with me. Do you like Daren?"

"—How could I possibly like him!?"

Before Tsuru could even finish her sentence, Gion exploded, flustered and angry.

"He's a total pervert! Sloppy, careless, arrogant, cocky...!"

Tsuru said nothing. She simply watched the disheveled girl in front of her with a calm, steady gaze.

"...He's the worst scumbag in the history of the Marines. I-I could never..."

Under that gaze, Gion's voice trailed off into a whisper.

Tsuru let out a long sigh in her heart.

With her experience, it was obvious what Gion was feeling.

"Well, it's good if you don't like him."

She smiled and patted Gion's shoulder.

"Then there's nothing more to say. I just wanted to check on you."

"Now that I see you're doing alright, I can rest easy."

She stood up slowly.

"Get some rest, Gion. And don't be so reckless next time."

"Oh, and..."

She pointed to the dusty boot prints on the wooden floor and smiled.

"Next time that brat comes in, remind him to take his shoes off."

Gion's face flushed bright red.

She opened her mouth to respond, but Tsuru waved it off with a smile.

"It's fine. You're growing up—I understand."

"That punk Daren may have a lousy personality and questionable morals, but he's got his good points."

"And at your age, bad boys can be pretty appealing."

"If you really do like him, you'll have to work for it."

"That girl he brought back from the New World? I've met her. She might look soft and delicate, but she's actually calmer and stronger than you."

"...I know, I know. You don't like him. I'm just saying."

Seeing Gion about to flare up again, Tsuru quickly added with a helpless smile.

"Get some rest."

...

Steam filled the bathroom.

Gion soaked in the hot water, arms wrapped around her bent knees, her chest pressed into a dramatic arc. Her face, half-buried in bubbles, was flushed with warmth.

Blub... blub...

Like a fish blowing bubbles, she stared blankly into the water, exhaling softly beneath the surface.

Even though she kept denying it outwardly, Tsuru's words lingered in her mind, refusing to fade.

Could it be... she really had fallen for that bastard?

No way... right?

How could she possibly like someone that lecherous?

She hadn't said it aloud, but she clearly remembered the subtle shift of his fingers when he carried her back. There had definitely been... some movement.

And the way he looked at her feet—he might've hidden it well, but now that she thought about it, it was definitely a little pervy.

"Gion, are you an idiot? You can't fall for someone like that..."

Frustrated, she plunged her head beneath the water, a mess of emotions churning inside her.

When did this start?

When had her impression of him changed?

Was it when he singlehandedly took down Germa 66?

When he helped her out in front of the Celestial Dragons?

...

If she had to pinpoint it, Gion realized—it was probably the moment she saw that father and daughter still alive.

"I take the money, I get the job done."

Daren's voice echoed in her mind—low, calm, domineering, and filled with unshakable confidence.

He protected the people she couldn't.

That was when she realized just how naïve she'd been.

She... had misjudged him.

Even while keeping up her cold front, from that day onward, she'd been watching him in secret.

During training, she would quietly position herself behind him.

Watching him push himself to the limit... even when she was dead tired, seeing his drive would reignite her own, making her want to keep up with him.

Her thoughts would often drift back to the time they spent together in the North Blue—bickering, challenging, going head-to-head.

And then it hit her...

He had been indulging her all along.

Silently. Gently. Always yielding without a word.

From then on, her feelings had grown more and more tangled.

She found herself growing curious about his past. So much so, she even used Sengoku and Tsuru's connections to pull his file.

Climbing from the very bottom, clawing his way up step by step.

Fighting, bleeding, battling through injury and fire...

The more she learned, the more she realized how turbulent Daren's path had been.

Behind the prestige of his title as "King of the North Blue" was a mountain of burdens.

Political maneuvering, power struggles, life-and-death fights, financial manipulation...

Daren protected the North Blue and pursued justice in a way that was entirely his own.

And knowing how hard his life had been only made Gion feel guiltier, her heart tightening even more.

But what shocked her most—and made her admire him even more—was that a Marine like Daren, who had risen from the lowest ranks, should have been cautious and calculating.

But he wasn't.

Even in front of the Celestial Dragons, the ones who controlled the world, he didn't flinch.

He killed them without hesitation.

Sure, there was no solid proof, but Gion trusted her instincts.

For the sake of his "justice," Daren didn't care about the Celestial Dragons in the slightest.

And when she returned to headquarters, she suddenly realized...

All those countless suitors from before—wealthy, well-born, promising young elites—compared to Daren, that so-called "scum," they were nothing but trash.

Once you've seen the brilliance of the sun, how could you ever be content with the dim glow of a candle?

When a woman starts to feel curiosity, pity, and admiration for a man, affection is sure to follow.

That's why, when she heard about what happened to him in the New World, Gion had been truly worried.

Seeing Amatsuki Toki at his home left her both angry and ashamed.

But thinking of Daren's injuries, she forced herself to swallow that anger and went out to buy the freshest fruit she could find, bringing it over for him.

But then...

"How could he say something like that to me!?"

Fuming, Gion finally broke the surface of the water, gasping quietly for breath.

She leaned back against the tub, staring up at the foggy ceiling, lost in thought.

After a long while...

"Is my temper... really that bad?"

She covered her flushed face with both hands and murmured softly.

Then, her eyes suddenly turned resolute.

"It's fine... I was here first."

...

Daren had always thought of himself as a free spirit. Back in the North Blue—or even after moving to Marine Headquarters—he would usually stay out late, only returning to that empty "home" well past nightfall.

He wasn't the sentimental type. He had few close friends and had long grown accustomed to living on his own.

But in this moment...

When he saw that single light left on for him in the family quarters late at night, and the quiet silhouette waiting by the oil lamp, even someone as emotionally reserved as him couldn't help but be moved.

A small house, a warm light, a waiting woman, and a table of food gone cold...

Maybe that's what it means to have a home.

His heart softened. Stepping inside, Daren said apologetically,

"Sorry I'm late."

"You should've eaten first. You must be starving."

Amatsuki Toki, dressed in a delicate pink kimono, slowly opened her eyes and looked at the travel-worn Daren. Without hesitation, she walked over, took the cloak from his shoulders, and gently hung it up. A soft smile curved her lips.

"It's fine. I'm not hungry."

"And... I wanted to wait for you."

As Daren turned to change his shoes, he muttered,

"I'll try to come home earlier from now on."

"Mm. Did you get her home safely?"

His hands paused mid-motion.

Amatsuki Toki smiled faintly.

"You smell like her... It's lovely. Roses. I remembered the scent from when she visited this morning."

The corner of Daren's mouth twitched.

He was just trying to think up an excuse when her voice came again—soft, almost distant—from behind him.

"I thought it wouldn't matter... but in the end, it does."

"Toki..."

"Daren-san."

He turned around.

His pupils shrank. His mind went blank.

Boom—!

A burst of heat exploded in his brain.

He saw something he would never forget for the rest of his life.

Her slender kimono slowly slipped from her shoulders, cascading down along smooth, pale skin and pooling silently on the floor. Her graceful figure was revealed in the flickering light.

Amatsuki Toki raised her hand and removed her hairpin, letting her hair fall freely as she stood before him. Her face was tinged with a soft blush, but in her eyes shone a calm, unwavering courage.

With a gentle voice, she said,

"...become my husband."

Chapter 237 - 237: Volume 2 – Chapter 139: Unparalleled Beauty

Toki... she's completely lost it...

So bold!?

Daren's eyes widened in shock.

His brain short-circuited. Blank. Frozen.

He couldn't even put into words what he was seeing.

The oil lamp in the room cast a soft, dreamlike glow. The breathtaking beauty in a kimono had untied her sash, her pale green hair cascading over smooth, snowy shoulders.

Aside from a pair of long white stockings—she wore nothing else.

Her deep blue eyes shimmered with a gentle haze as they met his, her cheeks blushing with shy warmth.

Amatsuki Toki stood before a classical ukiyo-e screen, rising slightly onto her toes. Timid yet willing, her long lashes fluttered like wings. That delicate green hair swayed gently in the night breeze, her slender arms subtly opened in welcome, radiating a heartbreaking, radiant beauty.

Daren had seen countless women in his life—but in this moment, he was utterly stunned.

The frustration he'd carried from earlier with Gion was instantly obliterated in the face of this delicate, ethereal vision.

His instincts overwhelmed all logic and restraint.

"If you don't go for it now, are you even a man?"

...

By the time Daren snapped out of it, the room was a complete mess.

His uniform was scattered across the floor. He lay on the soft tatami mats, next to an oil lamp that had long since gone out.

The night was calm. Moonlight filtered in gently.

The stars overhead blanketed the sky like a net of glimmering pearls, their light spilling through the courtyard window and landing softly on the girl asleep in his arms.

Daren let out a long breath. Amatsuki Toki lay against him, her body soft and weightless, like she had no bones at all.

Now fully awake, he gave a helpless smile.

He hadn't expected her to be this forward—to pull such a bold move out of nowhere.

Who could've resisted that!?

Toki's beauty was unlike any other.

She carried the grace of a traditional Wano woman—elegant, restrained, gentle—but beneath that gentleness was a quiet, resolute fire. Something wild. Something fierce.

If Gion was a rose—proud, brilliant, and untouchable—then Toki, just as she once said herself, was a cherry blossom. Beautiful, fleeting, and tragic.

This was the soul of Wano: a land shaped not just by samurai and their Bushido code, but by a cultural belief that a brief moment of splendor could outweigh the sorrow of a short life.

There's a line of poetry that captures it perfectly:

"Live like a summer flower, die like an autumn leaf."

To dance. That is enough.

It's the essence of the real world's Eastern tradition—and Wano carries that same spirit.

Still, even Daren hadn't expected someone as serene as Toki to be capable of something so wildly... out of character.

Jealousy really does make people reckless.

He'd just soothed the jealous Gion, only to come home to this?

It was just...

Too...

Too damn amazing.

Daren's lips curled into a faint smile. As he held the girl close, his hands started to wander again.

A perfect fit in his grasp.

"Mm..."

Toki let out a soft murmur and shifted gently in his arms, her petite nose wrinkling slightly. Her lashes quivered, a rosy hue blooming across her cheeks.

Daren chuckled, voice low with mischief as he whispered beside her ear,

"Quit pretending to be asleep, Toki."

Her lashes fluttered as she slowly opened her eyes.

Her deep blue gaze, shimmering like polished agate, held a misty glaze. She shot him a look—part shyness, part annoyance. But the gentle, lazy curve of her brows added a mature, seductive elegance.

The innocence of a young girl and the allure of a grown woman—melded perfectly in that moment.

Under the moonlight, her face glowed with a soft, mystical light, giving her an almost otherworldly charm.

That unparalleled beauty hit Daren like a freight train.

It crashed through his chest, making it impossible to stay calm.

For a brief second, it all felt unreal—like he was dreaming. Too perfect to be true.

He swallowed.

The fire in his heart flared up again.

"How about... we go again?"

Toki shot him a side glance. That one look—infused with a hint of married-woman charm—was devastatingly seductive.

But her tone remained as soft and gentle as ever.

"Wasn't... that enough?"

Daren's eyes gleamed. As if recalling something, a devilish grin tugged at his lips.

"How about this time... you keep the kimono on?"

Toki froze—then seemed to catch on.

Her face turned scarlet in an instant.

...

The next morning.

Daren woke up in bed.

"...I'm screwed."

He shifted slightly—only to realize, to his surprise, that his whole body felt stiff. Muscles sore, legs weak.

He felt completely drained.

Daren: ...

"Don't tell me I've actually gotten... worn out?"

His mouth twitched. Instinctively, he checked his "physical stats," and after confirming that nothing had changed, he finally breathed a sigh of relief.

Must've been the lingering effect of overexerting his Haki during that attempt to suppress Enma—hadn't fully recovered yet. Combine that with last night's "battle"... yeah, no wonder he felt exhausted.

He glanced down at Amatsuki Toki, still fast asleep on his chest, and couldn't help but recall the madness of last night—a scene that would require a 100,000-word redacted version to explain.

A knowing grin crept onto his face.

Toki was officially his woman now.

So... does that mean Momonosuke won't be born?

Daren rubbed the stubble on his chin, thoroughly amused by the thought.

After lying there for a few more minutes, he gently kissed Toki's smooth forehead, carefully slid his arm out from under her, and quietly got out of bed without waking her.

Unlike his monster-level body, Toki's physique was just that of a normal woman. No way she could keep up with his "assault" without some serious rest.

He threw on his uniform, headed to the kitchen, and quickly made breakfast—left a portion for Toki—then grabbed a hard-boiled egg and, still feeling sore all over, leaned against the wall and made his way to the door.

But the moment he opened it, Daren froze.

His entire body went rigid.

Standing right outside was Gion, holding a steaming breakfast in one hand. Her other hand was raised, about to knock.

Their eyes met.

Gion stared at Daren, who was supporting his back against the wall like he was barely holding himself up. She blinked, stunned.

Daren: ...

He gave a smile that looked even worse than crying.

"Dear, are you heading out?"

A soft, gentle voice called out from behind him.

...Dead.

Daren felt like he'd just been struck by lightning.

His neck creaked as he turned around bit by bit.

There stood Toki, framed in the doorway, casually wearing one of his white dress shirts. Her cheeks were still tinged with the glow of last night's warmth.

She glanced at Gion and offered a serene smile.

"Good morning, Gion-san."

Gion stood there silently.

Clatter...

The breakfast in her hand fell to the ground. Soy milk spilled across the pavement.

Daren felt a cold shiver crawl up his spine. A murderous aura slowly began to radiate from Gion.

She turned her head ever so slowly, eyes expressionless as she stared at Daren.

Shadows clouded her gaze.

"Husband?"

Daren's eye twitched.

Then Gion smiled.

To Daren, it looked terrifying.

"Well then, congratulations, Commodore Daren."

With that, she spun around and walked away, her stride fast and forceful.

With her back to him, her eyes quickly turned red.

Tears streamed down her cheeks, and she couldn't stop them.

Daren: "..."

He reached out instinctively, then stopped and pulled his hand back.

After a long silence, Daren clenched his teeth.

"I really need to learn Observation Haki."

Chapter 238 - 238: Volume 2 – Chapter 140: Such a Strong Desire to Win!

Watching Gion's figure disappear at the end of the street, Daren could clearly see the tears sparkling beneath her chin. He couldn't help but feel a little defeated.

Just great—he had only managed to coax her into a good mood yesterday...

Who would've thought that cold, tsundere little Gion would wake up early to buy him breakfast... and even bring it to his doorstep?

And honestly, even if he had mastered Observation Haki, what difference would it make?

Who the hell uses Haki to scan their own house?

That'd be downright perverted.

He looked down at the scattered breakfast on the ground and sighed, crouching to gather it up.

If it had been anyone else, his usual shameless, flirtatious self probably would've hugged Gion on the spot and tossed out a cheesy, "You came at the perfect time."

But things were different now.

Toki had just given herself to him. No matter how much of a bastard he was, he couldn't bring himself to flirt with another woman in front of her.

He might be a degenerate, but he wasn't a scumbag without limits.

He could be open-hearted, but not heartless.

...

"Gion-san seems to care about you a lot."

Amatsuki Toki walked over, her voice soft and gentle.

Daren shook his head, choosing not to respond to that comment. Instead, he smiled at her and asked with concern,

"You're up so early? Don't want to sleep a little more?"

He paused.

"...Still sore?"

Toki's cheeks flushed pink at the memory of last night's madness. She lowered her voice.

"Still... a little."

She linked her arm through his and leaned her head on his shoulder, whispering,

"I'm really happy to be your wife."

Then, with a natural motion, she took the breakfast from his hands and gave him a little nudge.

"Go catch up to her. Gion-san's a good girl. Don't let her down."

She winked mischievously.

"This time, it really doesn't matter... because I was the one who became your wife first."

Under Daren's stunned gaze, she smiled sweetly, her eyes curving like crescent moons—like a mischievous little cat that had just snatched a fish.

"I win. Hehe."

...

Activating his bio-magnetic field perception, Daren quickly located Gion.

Inside the Marine residential compound, from the rooftop of a distant building, he spotted her curled up against a wall, shoulders trembling as she quietly cried.

He hesitated for a moment. He didn't approach right away.

In front of the house, Gion sat hugging her knees, eyes red and swollen, tears rolling endlessly down her cheeks.

She looked like a wounded little rabbit, hiding in a corner, silently licking her wounds.

"Bastard!!"

"Bastard!!"

"Daren, you're the worst!!"

She sobbed, cursing in a choked whisper as she kicked a pebble beside her. Her teary eyes were soon puffy and red from crying.

Gion didn't even know what exactly hurt more—

Was it because Daren had lied?

Was it the way he awkwardly reacted when he saw her?

Or... was it that subtle, barely noticeable look of triumph on her face when she glanced her way?

"Shameless... lecherous... absolute bastard..."

She muttered bitterly through her tears.

"If you keep cursing me, I'm gonna start fighting back."

A helpless voice rang out from behind, making Gion freeze in panic.

She looked up in surprise—and saw the tall figure drop down from the wall.

Her eyes grew redder on sight.

"What are you doing here?!"

"You bastard!! Get lost!! I don't want to see you!!"

All the bottled-up pain burst out in sobs she couldn't hold back anymore.

Daren sighed.

"I figured you hadn't eaten yet... You've got to be hungry."

"Yell at me after breakfast, okay? You'll need the energy. Or, if it makes you feel better, I'll let you beat me up."

He lifted the breakfast bag and gave her a faint smile.

Gion stared at the food Daren had just brought. Her mind flashed back to the embarrassing scene she'd made earlier, and her nose started to sting. Tears welled up in her eyes again as she cried out, voice full of grievance:

"I don't need you to care!"

"You already have her!"

"You liar! You giant, giant liar!"

"Yesterday you swore nothing had happened between you... but today—today—she's wearing your shirt!"

"I was the one who came first! Waaaahhh..."

Tears fell like a string of broken pearls, dotting the ground.

Daren's mouth twitched.

Technically... nothing had happened yesterday...

But who could've guessed Toki would go full-on surprise attack?

What was supposed to be a drawn-out war of jealousy ended with her swooping in and steamrolling the battlefield.

Can you really blame him?

Under those conditions, if he'd managed to hold back—would he even still count as a proper degenerate?

But of course, Daren wasn't dumb enough to say that out loud.

Not unless he wanted to get sliced in half.

So Daren smiled and said,

"Come on, don't be mad. Eat something first."

"No! I'm not eating anything from you!"

Gion wiped away her tears, glaring at him with stubborn defiance.

This girl's really damn stubborn... guess I'll have to use some force.

The thought flashed through Daren's mind.

He set the breakfast down and slowly stepped toward her.

"D-Don't come any closer!"

Seeing him approach, Gion instinctively stood up, trying to step back—only to find her back already against the wall.

As the Marine Commodore closed the distance, her heart began to race in panic.

What's he trying to do...?

She noticed the heat in his eyes.

He's a degenerate, she reminded herself, trying to stay composed.

Daren stopped right in front of her and looked directly into her eyes.

"Do you like me, Gion?"

"You... You're standing too close..."

The overwhelming scent of testosterone hit her like a wave. For a moment, Gion forgot her anger and turned her head away, not daring to meet his gaze.

She could smell him—masculine, wild, domineering...

He's a scoundrel... Am I seriously falling for a scoundrel?

Her eyes began to waver.

"Do you like me?"

Daren asked again.

"W-Who would like you? Don't flatter yourself..."

Smack!

Daren suddenly grabbed both her wrists, pulling them over her head and pinning them against the wall.

Gion struggled, but she couldn't break free from his strength.

And in the next moment, she froze.

His other hand gently cupped her face. Warm fingertips lifted her chin until she had no choice but to meet his gaze.

Her whole body stiffened.

It felt like electricity shot through her—paralyzing her.

W-What is he...

Then she saw it.

Eyes filled with dominance, arrogance, and cold sharpness—

but beneath it all... a gentleness she couldn't deny.

"Gion," his voice cut through the confusion clouding her mind,

"This is the last time I'll ask."

"Do you like me?"

"If you say no, I'll walk away. Right now. I won't bother you again."

"After training camp, I'll apply for a transfer to the New World. You'll never have to see this annoying bastard again."

Gion froze.

Her face went pale.

"I... I..."

Her lips trembled, but she couldn't force herself to say "I don't like you."

And then—

"Mmm...!"

Her lips were sealed.

The moment of hesitation told Daren everything he needed. He stopped holding back.

He kissed her—firmly, deeply, without hesitation. He broke through her defenses.

His kiss was hot. Fierce. Possessive.

Gion's mind went blank.

Her still-reddened eyes flew open, pupils shrinking.

She instinctively wanted to push him away—but Daren didn't let up.

One second,

Two seconds,

Three seconds...

She felt her strength melt away, her body tingling and numb.

Her focus blurred. Her eyes slowly closed.

And then, without even realizing it, she was kissing him back.

Her arms wrapped around his neck.

Her mind, emotions, and body were spinning.

...

At some point, Daren released her pinned hands.

And Gion, without thinking, clung to him tighter, lost in the moment.

Until—

"Tch...!"

Daren winced as Gion suddenly shoved him away hard.

Blood appeared on his lips.

She looked up at him with dazed eyes, gasping for air, her whole body trembling, legs weak.

"So you do like me," Daren grinned smugly.

"Shut up!"

"If you're not pushing me away, then just admit it."

"No—you shut up!"

Gion suddenly lunged at him like a wild leopard. She grabbed him, spun around, and slammed him back into the house.

With a loud thump, he landed flat on that same girly bed—still covered with pink bunny plushies.

Before he could react, Gion straddled him. Her long, toned legs locked around him as she glared down, her tear-streaked eyes burning with fury.

"How many times did you two do it!?"

"Eh?"

Daren blinked, completely caught off guard.

"Uh... Th-Three... times?"

A dangerous glint flashed in Gion's eyes. She reached for his belt.

"Gion, wait! Don't be reckless—I'm still not fully recovered!"

Seeing her determined, wild expression, Daren panicked instantly.

Daren:

She's fired up...

My back and legs are already sore—if this turns into some kind of twisted competition...

But the next second—

Daren:

Chapter 239 - 239: Volume 2 – Chapter 141: Seven, Seven Times...

Two hours later.

The door suddenly burst open.

A hand gripped the doorframe as Daren staggered out, pale and unsteady, using the wall for support.

Practically fleeing from the family quarters, he finally found a stone bench, sat down heavily, and silently pulled out a cigarette.

Clenching it between his teeth, he lit it and took a few deep drags before he finally caught his breath.

"Insane... absolutely insane..."

"A woman with a burning desire to win is terrifying..."

Four times.

And that was Gion still holding back because of the pain.

Unlike the soft and delicate Amatsuki Toki, Gion had been training for years. Her stamina was off the charts, and those long, powerful legs of hers were no joke.

They could even launch a full-on Rankyaku!

Sure, the view from below was all pale and full—no, wait, beautiful. But that kind of thing just couldn't be endured...

Feeling his legs still trembling from exhaustion and his lower back sore and tight, Daren wore an expression like he wanted to cry but had no tears left.

Seven times...

His mouth twitched, and he suddenly flicked the cigarette to the ground with force.

What's the point of this monster-level physique to me!?

Shaking his head with a long sigh, he slowly stood up, oriented himself, and walked off toward a nearby restaurant.

Yeah... I need to refuel.

Clutching his lower back the whole way, Daren walked slowly, long since numb to the odd and pitying stares from the people he passed.

"Daren?"

As soon as he stepped inside the restaurant, he spotted Kuzan waving excitedly at him.

"What a coincidence!"

"Over here! I just ordered—come eat with me!"

Daren blinked in surprise, but didn't hesitate and sat down without fuss.

"What are you doing here?"

He asked casually, signaling the owner for a bottle of liquor.

Kuzan huffed.

"I live in this neighborhood, alright? You're my chosen rival—how do you not even know that?"

Daren rolled his eyes.

He took the bottle from the owner, poured Kuzan a glass, then filled his own and downed it in one go.

Kuzan eyed Daren's gloomy face and asked curiously,

"What's with the long face? You just got back from a mission at sea... fought monsters like Kaidou and Whitebeard!"

His eyes sparkled.

"Everyone in Marineford is talking about your epic feats!"

Daren's mouth twitched again.

Yeah, my "epic feats" are all over Marineford right now...

Just then, the waiter arrived with a stream of dishes—

Juicy roasted wild boar with crispy fat, fragrant strawberry pie, a giant vegetable salad, two bowls of hell ramen, and a variety of fresh seafood sashimi...

Not bothering with Kuzan and his non-stop chatter, the starving Daren dove straight into the food, devouring it like a beast.

"Incredible eating speed..."

Kuzan stared in shock, muttering under his breath. Then, as if struck by inspiration, his eyes lit up.

"Is this... the secret to your strength!?"

Daren: ...

Before Daren could respond, Kuzan's fighting spirit flared.

"I've decided! This is a duel!"

And with that, he started shoveling food into his mouth at full speed.

Both of them, eyes bloodshot, looked like starving ghosts as they swept through the dishes like a storm.

They kept yelling at the staff to bring more and more food.

Other diners in the restaurant gradually noticed the spectacle and stared in stunned silence as the plates stacked up like mountains in front of the two.

"This is insane..."

"The waitstaff can't even keep up..."

"How long have these two not eaten?"

"..."

Half an hour later...

Stuffed to the brim, the two finally put down their utensils and leaned back, their round, overfed bellies puffed up beneath them.

"I'm full..."

Kuzan let out a loud burp, then looked at Daren with excitement in his eyes.

"You really are my lifelong rival. In the end, I still lost to you."

A few dark lines appeared on Daren's forehead.

I was just hungry!!

I never had any intention of dueling you!

But he knew there was no reasoning with this hot-blooded youth. Shaking his head, he changed the subject.

"How's it been since you got to headquarters? Getting used to things?"

Kuzan scratched his head.

"There's nothing to get used to. It all feels the same."

"Training, eating, resting—that's the whole cycle at the training camp. Same thing every day. When I get back to the dorms, I just stare into space."

"But you—rumor has it you're dating someone now? Don't slack off on training just because of love..."

He looked at Daren with a face full of emotion.

...Yeah, and apparently not just one.

Daren muttered to himself.

Still, Kuzan's words served as a reminder.

With Toki's sharp mind, there's no way she hasn't noticed something.

If he went home tonight and her competitive streak kicked in, he was doomed.

Not even a man of steel could handle that.

Toki might appear gentle and serene, but she was every bit as driven when it came to winning.

Maybe it was best to lay low for a while?

More importantly, Daren now had enough strength to start seeking out some of the "treasures" only Transmigrators knew about.

There was one thing in particular he'd been fixated on for a long time.

If he could get it, even though he didn't need it personally, it would be a major asset for building up his power.

With his decision made, Daren got straight to the point.

"Kuzan, help me ask Zephyr-sensei for a few days off. And while you're at it, pass a message to my family... and Gion too."

Kuzan looked confused.

"Time off?"

Then his eyes lit up as he stared at Daren, practically vibrating with excitement.

"You're heading out to sea again?"

"Who are you going after this time? You've already fought Whitebeard and Kaidou—are you going to take on Big Mom? Or Shiki?"

"Daren, take me with you!"

"I'm strong now, I swear I won't drag you down!"

He flexed his biceps proudly.

"If we team up, we'll be the strongest pair in the entire Navy!"

Daren shook his head and snapped.

"You're overthinking it. I'm just going back to the North Blue."

"It's my hometown, after all. I haven't been back in ages—I miss it."

Kuzan wasn't exactly great at keeping secrets. Taking him along could lead to unpredictable problems, so Daren had no choice but to leave him out of this one.

"...Fine."

Hearing it was just a trip to the North Blue, Kuzan instantly lost interest.

Being from the South Blue, he knew the Four Seas were pretty weak in comparison.

What he longed for were stronger opponents—dangers only found in the boundless New World.

"Yeah. I appreciate it."

Daren patted him on the shoulder and walked out of the restaurant.

Standing on the street, he suddenly seemed to remember something and waved in a certain direction, small arcs of electricity flickering between his fingers.

Three seconds later, a long, pitch-black blade sliced through the air and came to a sudden stop, hovering steadily in front of him.

One of the twenty-one Great Grade Swords, the cursed blade—Enma.

Looking at the now noticeably more obedient Enma, Daren gave a satisfied smile.

A metallic hoverboard quickly formed beneath his feet. He stepped on, and propelled by magnetic force, shot into the sky at an incredible speed, vanishing into the distance.

"So cool..."

Kuzan watched Daren's retreating figure with admiration, eyes gleaming as he murmured to himself.

"The check, please."

The owner suddenly appeared behind him with a pleasant smile.

"That'll be 916,000 Belly."

Kuzan: ...

He pulled out his wallet with trembling hands, face full of despair.

Chapter 240 - 240: Volume 2 – Chapter 142: Human Dreams

Jaya Island, Mock Town.

"Hey, is that something up in the sky?"

"Hahaha, must be a bird, right?"

"No, it's not a bird! It's way too fast! That's a person!"

"Hahaha, how could there be a person in the sky? Old Will, I told you to stop spending so much time at Leah's. Sure, that woman's ass is nice, but now you're seeing things!"

Boom!

A flash of silver light shot down from the sky at terrifying speed, slamming into the ground. A shockwave erupted, sending up a huge cloud of dust.

The pirates, who had just been joking around, froze in confusion, now completely covered in dust. Only their eyes were visible, blinking rapidly.

A second later—

"Damn it! Who the hell?!"

"You've got a death wish!"

"I'm One-Armed Vic! A great pirate with a 25 million bounty!"

"You're so dead!"

"..."

They shook off the dust and glared toward the shadowy figure standing in the swirling haze. The sound of weapons being drawn rang out in unison.

Drawing swords at the slightest provocation—such was the way of pirates.

"Oh? Pirates, huh... Looking to pick a fight? Lucky for you, I'm in a terrible mood."

A low, cold voice echoed out. A tall shadow slowly loomed over the group.

"M-Marine..."

"A Commodore... from headquarters..."

"What a monster..."

The pirates looked up in shock to find a towering, black-haired Marine, at least three meters tall. Their faces turned pale, and they gulped instinctively.

He stared at them with a blank expression, like he was already looking at corpses.

Despite the Marine's sickly appearance—sunken eyes, an undernourished frame, and the occasional hand clutching his lower back—his sheer presence was suffocating, crushing their fragile confidence.

"M-Marine-sama..."

The dreadlocked pirate with a missing arm forced an awkward smile.

"I-I lost my temper back there. My apologies—"

He didn't get to finish.

A flicker of black light flashed past.

A thin trail of blood seeped from his neck—then his head shot skyward!

Blood sprayed from his severed neck like a fountain, splattering across the horrified, pale faces of his crewmates.

A stunned silence fell.

"—Hhssh!!??"

Gasps of horror erupted from the crowd of onlookers.

They stared in disbelief at the headless body slowly collapsing to its knees. Fear gripped them.

What had just happened?

None of them had seen the Commodore move.

That infamous pirate, "One-Armed Vic," with a bounty of 25 million Belly, had his head taken clean off... just like that?

Only then did the crowd notice the black blade.

Long and slender, its surface etched with purple flame-like patterns, the sword hovered silently at the Marine's side.

Blood gathered along the blade's edge but didn't drip—it was being absorbed.

Not a single trace remained.

"A-a cursed sword..."

Someone with sharp eyes recognized its eerie nature and whispered, trembling.

Thud!

Thud!

The remaining pirates suddenly dropped their weapons and fell to their knees with a thud, their faces full of panic and fear.

"Marine-sama, we were wrong!!"

"We swear, from today onward, we'll never be pirates again!"

"We know what we did was wrong—please, spare us..."

The black-haired Marine gave them a cold glance and shook his head.

"No. You don't know you were wrong."

"You only know you're about to die."

The pirates froze.

A glint of viciousness flashed deep in their eyes. The hands that had never let go of their weapons suddenly tightened. In the next moment, they sprang up, lunging at the Marine.

Whoosh!!

Black light flickered once again.

Like a phantom of death, it swept through the crowd of pirates at unimaginable speed.

Their movements faltered.

Sshhk!!

Countless sword marks burst open across their bodies, blood spraying in every direction.

Under the stunned and silent stares of the onlookers, this wicked pirate crew... was completely wiped out.

Enma returned once more, quivering slightly with a delighted hum, as if eagerly awaiting the Marine youth's praise.

Daren lit a cigarette and muttered irritably,

"I'm not in great shape right now, so don't even think about touching me."

What a joke.

He was already running on empty.

If Enma drained him again, he probably wouldn't even have the strength to stand.

"So... this is Mock Town on Jaya, right?"

Daren exhaled a smoke ring, pulled a recording pointer from his coat, checked it, and then asked the person beside him for confirmation.

The surrounding crowd—pirates included—nodded like bobbleheads the moment this harbinger of death posed the question.

"That's right."

Daren smiled in satisfaction.

He had gotten the Log Pose from headquarters.

The Marine HQ had the most comprehensive and detailed sea charts and Log Poses in all the seas.

Though the device was considered classified and normally required formal approval to use, that had never been a problem for Daren.

A famous name, a commodore's rank, and a generous 500,000 Belly tip...

The Intelligence Division staff had practically wept with gratitude as they personally handed him the Log Pose, bowing deeply with heartfelt reverence for Commodore Daren.

"Better grab a bite first. Think I didn't eat enough earlier..."

Daren mumbled.

He hadn't paid the earlier skirmish much mind.

Jaya sat in the first half of the Grand Line, a lawless zone.

It wasn't under the jurisdiction of any World Government member nation, and there were no Marine bases nearby.

As a result, this island had become a haven for pirates—a hub for restocking, trade, and transit.

Islands like this existed all across every sea.

There had been plenty in the North Blue too, until Daren's purges and bloodbaths had wiped most of them out.

Though some pirates still showed up on those islands now and then, as long as they kept quiet and paid taxes like everyone else, the North Blue Marines turned a blind eye.

After all, pirates could never be completely eradicated.

The earlier action was just a test of his new magnetic sword technique.

Of course, Marines didn't need a reason to kill pirates anyway.

As for why Daren came to Jaya this time... the answer was clear enough:

Sky Island.

The City of Gold, Shandora.

And the "Invincible" Devil Fruit—

The Logia-type Goro Goro no Mi.

But before heading to Sky Island, he had to fill his stomach first.

The non-stop trip here using the Jiki Jiki no Mi had drained a lot of his energy.

"I heard the cherry pie here's supposed to be pretty good?"

The thought surfaced in Daren's mind.

He remembered that iconic scene from the original story, and without thinking, looked up at the endless blue sky, a smile curling at the corners of his mouth.

People's dreams never end.

That much is true.

But...

I can cut your dreams short before they ever begin.