

One Piece 271

Chapter 271 - 271: Volume 2 – Chapter 173: Amatsuki Toki and Gion

The night was enchanting, the stars shimmering like the Milky Way, dazzling as if painted across the sky.

From the direction of the civilian district, bursts of vibrant fireworks shot into the air, scattering like fireflies beneath the full moon, leaving specks of light in their wake. The laughter of children echoed beyond the courtyard walls, occasionally mixed with the sound of running footsteps.

The food on the table still steamed invitingly.

Miso soup with floating seaweed, glistening grilled eel, thinly sliced wagyu beef, chilled tofu with a jelly-like sheen, and three neatly prepared bowls of white rice...

The delicious aroma filled the air, whetting the appetite and giving the whole scene a warm, homely feel.

And with two stunning women of completely different styles seated beside him, the scene was like something out of a dream.

Such beauty, such timing.

Yet Daren felt like he was sitting on needles—completely on edge.

He cautiously glanced to his left. Amatsuki Toki sat beside him in a perfectly composed kneeling posture, wearing a loose kimono.

As always, Toki maintained her graceful elegance. Every movement, every smile, exuded the refined manners and poise unique to the culture of Wano Country.

Her light green hair was tied into a bun with a wooden hairpin, and a subtle, gentle charm of a newlywed wife lingered between her brows. Her slightly fuller hips rested delicately over her white stocking-covered feet—impossible not to notice.

Daren had barely taken a glance, not even enough to savor it, when he felt a dangerous gaze shooting from the right.

He immediately pulled his eyes back and turned to Gion.

Tonight, she wore the same fiery tight mini-skirt as always. Her long, arched brows and high-bridged nose added to her striking presence.

Her high ponytail gave her an alluring mix of girlish charm and mature sex appeal—an elegance and sultriness that felt beyond her years.

From Daren's angle, Gion was glaring daggers at him. Her arms were crossed beneath her chest, and the dramatic curve practically covered her fair-skinned arms.

What a nightmare...

Daren's mouth twitched slightly.

"Um... Gion, what brings you by tonight?"

Trying to break the awkward silence, Daren attempted some small talk.

But the moment the words left his mouth, he knew he'd messed up.

Sure enough, Gion raised an eyebrow, her lips curling into a cold smirk.

"Oh? What's the matter? Not happy to see me?"

"Or am I disturbing your cozy little love nest?"

Daren forced a dry laugh.

"Ahem, no, no. It's just... well, it's a holiday, and I figured Vice Admiral Tsuru might be waiting for you to have dinner with her..."

Sure, back in the North Blue, Daren had been smooth with the ladies. But Gion wasn't like the easygoing noblewomen and socialites he used to charm.

She was the beloved gem of several Marine Headquarters big shots—the so-called "flower of the Marines," the kind of woman who could casually call Garp "Garp-chan."

If this were just a regular flirtation, it might have blown over. But now, he'd actually "ruined" her.

Even if part of it wasn't exactly voluntary... who was he supposed to complain to?

Could he go up to Sengoku, Tsuru, Garp, or Zephyr and say, "I was forced into it"?

Yeah, no. That would end worse than whatever happened to Dragon.

Besides, no matter how you sliced it, he'd definitely come out ahead in that whole situation.

Four times ahead, to be exact.

"Tsuru-nee and Admiral Sengoku both went to see Vice Admiral Garp."

Gion sneered coldly.

Daren's eye twitched slightly.

Just then, Amatsuki Toki gave a gentle smile. She softly reached out and took Gion's hand, speaking with warm grace to ease the tension.

"I invited Gion myself. I thought since she was once your subordinate back in the North Blue, she must've helped you a lot. Now that you're both officer training camp alumni, it's only right for you two to reconnect."

She turned her bright eyes to Daren, smiling sweetly.

"And since it's a holiday, I went ahead and invited her over for a simple meal... I hope you don't mind, husband?"

"Of—of course not. It's a good thing."

Daren paused for a moment before replying.

He noticed that when Toki took Gion's hand, the latter instinctively flinched a little—but ultimately didn't pull away. The coldness in her expression also softened noticeably.

Toki had already smoothed things over with Gion?

When did that happen?

Daren was completely thrown off.

But the next second, as he met Toki's clear, glimmering gaze, realization dawned.

Toki was... playing wingman for him!

"Well then, Gion, shall we eat?"

Amatsuki Toki turned back to Gion with a smile, speaking gently.

"I hope you won't find my cooking lacking."

Gion gave a soft shake of her head.

"Of course not."

And so, under Toki's warm hospitality, the three of them began their meal by soft candlelight.

"Here, husband, try some miso soup."

Toki ladled a bowl of soup for Daren and looked at him expectantly.

He took a sip, and his eyes immediately lit up.

"This is delicious!"

He couldn't help but praise it.

Truth be told, he usually wasn't a fan of miso soup—always found it too salty.

But Toki's version was perfectly balanced, and maybe it was the fish bones she used to make the broth, but it had this subtle umami sweetness that made his taste buds come alive.

"Gion, try some too—see if it suits your taste."

Hearing Daren's compliment, Toki beamed with joy. Her eyes shimmered with happiness as she scooped out another bowl and handed it to Gion with both hands.

Faced with the gentle and kind Toki, Gion found herself unable to refuse.

In fact, she hadn't wanted to come at all.

She'd been conflicted from the start. And when she saw Toki at her door, hair tied up and dressed like a proper young wife, an indescribable guilt welled up in her chest.

It felt like she had done something terribly wrong—like she was intruding on someone else's rightful happiness.

But somehow, just seeing that warm, tender smile and hearing Toki's gentle, welcoming words had made it impossible for her to say no.

Besides, deep down, she also had a competitive streak.

She wanted to see for herself—just what kind of woman Toki really was.

But the moment she stepped into the house, Gion regretted it.

Toki had the home so perfectly arranged that there was not a single flaw to be found.

She was like the ideal wife—keeping the house in order, cooking meals with care, waiting quietly for her beloved to return home safely.

And in that moment, Gion suddenly realized—she couldn't compare to the woman in front of her.

She felt... unworthy.

With that complex swirl of emotions in her chest, she picked up the spoon and took a small sip of the soup.

The moment the warmth touched her tongue, she couldn't help but close her eyes in bliss.

It was so good!

Chapter 272 - 272: Volume 2 – Chapter 174: A Great Undertaking

Gion swore this was the best miso soup she'd ever tasted in her life!

It was savory without being greasy, carrying the distinct freshness of seafood. After just one bowl, her whole body felt warm.

This taste... it felt like coming home.

"How is it, Gion? Do you like it?"

Amatsuki Toki's eyes sparkled as she looked at Gion with anticipation.

Her smile, the curve of her brows, the gentle flutter of her long lashes—everything about her looked soft and lovely.

Gion lightly pursed her lips, avoiding Toki's gaze. She gave a small nod and answered softly,

"Mm. Toki-neesan's cooking is amazing. The miso soup is really good."

"That's wonderful!"

Toki beamed, grasping Gion's hand as her cheeks flushed with a delicate blush.

"If you like it, then come over more often! I'll cook even more delicious things for you!"

'Come over to the house'...

It was a casual remark, but for Gion, it hit differently.

Hearing those words, her heart stirred with a mix of emotions.

Normally cool and confident, she now found herself unable to harden her heart against Toki's warm, expectant eyes. She simply gave a silent nod.

Daren watched this quietly and couldn't help but chuckle to himself.

Toki's charm didn't lie in breathtaking beauty that could topple nations, but in her gentle, nurturing presence—the kind that made people instinctively want to cherish and protect her.

It was this very quality that had earned her the deep love and loyalty of the people of Wano in the original story.

"Here, try some of my grilled eel too."

...

To Daren's surprise, the meal was unexpectedly peaceful.

No arguments. No passive-aggressive sniping. Under Toki's warm hospitality, Gion didn't flare up, and Daren managed not to say anything stupid. The three of them genuinely felt... like a family.

After dinner, Daren pulled a pack of cigarettes from his pocket and stepped out into the courtyard.

Under the trees, two deck chairs stood quietly.

His gaze lingered.

Just a few months ago, a young man full of idealism and ambition for "justice" had sprawled drunkenly across one of those chairs, shouting about dreams and youth.

Now, that same youth—once burning with passion and recklessness—had matured. He'd hardened.

The "hero's son" had, in the blink of an eye, become one of the world's most wanted criminals.

Times had changed.

Even someone like Daren, known for his steely resolve, couldn't help feeling a wave of emotion.

He pressed his lips together, walked over, and sank into one of the chairs beneath the trees.

As he stared quietly at the starlit sky above, he lit a cigarette and let his thoughts settle.

"So... did Dragon-senpai really kill a Celestial Dragon?"

A voice suddenly sounded beside him.

Daren glanced to the side and saw Gion standing there. He gave a small smile and replied in a low voice,

"Yeah. I was the first one sent to arrest him."

"Too bad he got away... Otherwise, I might've earned another promotion."

Gion bit her lower lip, then suddenly muttered,

"Liar."

"Huh?"

Daren blinked.

Gion turned to him, her eyes fixed sharply on his.

"I said you're a liar."

"You're clearly hurting, aren't you?"

Daren went quiet for a second, then gave a dismissive smile.

"Come on, I barely knew Dragon."

"He's a hero's son. I'm the worst kind of scoundrel. I'm just annoyed I didn't catch him myself."

Gion let out a cold laugh.

"So how long are you planning to keep pretending?"

"You're still injured, aren't you?"

"And yet you walked through that door smiling like nothing happened... You're way too kind!"

Whoa, whoa, whoa. That's... not really a compliment for a guy.

Especially in certain anime circles, being called "yasashii"—gentle—is usually reserved for soft, indecisive protagonists.

So Daren replied irritably,

"I'm not pretending. I really am a scoundrel."

"As for Dragon... it's not so much sadness as it is admiration—and envy."

He exhaled a stream of smoke slowly.

"For a man to find a great cause to dedicate his life to while still young and strong—that's the greatest fortune he can have."

"What about you?"

Gion's eyes locked onto him, as if waiting for an answer that truly mattered.

"What's the great cause you want to devote your life to?"

"Me, huh..."

Daren let out a sigh that sounded almost reflective. He thought for a moment, then his expression turned serious.

"Now that you mention it, yeah... I guess there really is something off about how I've been living."

Gion paused, momentarily stunned.

Could it be... was he actually reflecting on himself?

Over the past month, she'd struggled to accept the fact that she'd fallen for someone like him—a self-proclaimed "scoundrel."

But if he could change... if he could turn things around...

A spark of hope began to rise in her chest.

"I've thought about it a lot—especially after what happened with Dragon. I've started to seriously reevaluate my life."

Daren furrowed his brows, voice tinged with emotion.

"What should a person live for?"

"If I spend my youth indulging myself—feasting, drinking, chasing love, enjoying power, money, luxury..."

"Making more than most people could in ten lifetimes, living a life so extravagant it's hard to imagine—then someday, when I'm old, I'll come to realize..."

Gion's eyes lit up with anticipation.

"Realize what?"

"...That I have absolutely no regrets."

Daren exhaled leisurely, eyes half-lidded, sounding like a man who'd just discovered the ultimate truth of life.

Gion: "..."

"You bastard! Scumbag! Absolute trash!"

Her chest rose and fell with fury as she trembled in rage, gritting her teeth.

And to think she had actually gotten her hopes up!

He hadn't changed a bit!

Still the same infuriating jerk who drove her crazy!

With a deadly glare, she stormed off and slammed the door behind her without so much as a backward glance.

Daren sighed, helpless.

But he had been telling the truth.

Why shouldn't he enjoy life while he still had power and status?

Wait until the World Government finds out he killed a Celestial Dragon and starts hunting him across the globe?

By then, it'd be way too late.

Dragon was living proof of that.

A textbook cautionary tale.

He let out a long sigh.

"You really shouldn't have provoked Gion like that, husband."

Amatsuki Toki walked up beside him, her expression exasperated as she gently tugged at his hand.

"Go after her. Try to comfort her. Gion actually cares about you a lot."

"A few days ago, Vice Admiral Tsuru came by to visit me and told me something."

"Do you remember back when you were imprisoned by Kaidou in the New World? At the time, even though she refused to admit it out loud, Gion went to Tsuru multiple times—begging her to persuade Admiral Sengoku to send a rescue team for you..."

As Toki's words trailed off, Daren stood there, stunned.

Chapter 273 - 273: Volume 2 – Chapter 175: Who Am I to You?

Wait, seriously?

That tsundere Gion actually begged Tsuru to talk Admiral Sengoku into sending troops... for me?

Daren could hardly picture it. The ever-cool, aloof Gion, blushing and stumbling over her words in front of Vice Admiral Tsuru—it was almost too surreal to imagine.

"Husband, you're really not very observant... or maybe it's better to say you don't really pay attention to a girl's heart."

Amatsuki Toki nudged his arm with a soft reproach in her tone.

"Gion is a wonderful girl. Sure, she's a bit stubborn, but she's kind at heart. She may not say it, but she really does like you."

"Go on, now."

This... this sounded like a trap.

Daren's eye twitched slightly. He glanced cautiously at Toki and asked tentatively,

"You... you're not mad?"

Toki responded with a dazzling smile. Pride glowed on her pretty face as she lifted her chin.

"Of course not! I'm your first wife, after all!"

This kind of subtle rivalry between women was both baffling... and terrifying.

Daren silently grumbled in his mind.

Then Toki paused, clearly thinking, and added,

"Besides, Gion holds a special status in headquarters. If she also becomes your lover, wouldn't that be a huge help to your future career?"

Look at that! What a woman!

Daren was so moved he nearly teared up. Without thinking, he wrapped Toki into a tight hug.

"Toki, you're amazing."

Where in the world could you find a wife this understanding, gentle, and gracious?

In that moment, Daren couldn't help but admit—maybe those old-fashioned customs of Wano Country weren't so bad after all.

"Go on, hurry."

Flushed from Daren's sudden affection, Toki shyly twisted in his arms. She looked down with a gentle blush, her voice barely above a whisper.

...

The pitch-black night sky shimmered with bursts of vibrant fireworks, like falling stars streaking through the heavens.

Under that flickering glow, Gion's lone figure walking down the empty street looked particularly small—lonely, even.

"That bastard!"

"I actually let myself have a sliver of hope!"

Arms wrapped tightly around her slender shoulders, Gion pouted in frustration, muttering angrily under her breath.

She kicked at the small pebbles scattered across the road with growing irritation.

Her thoughts drifted back to that peaceful, warm "home"...

And to that gentle, flawless woman—so perfect that even Gion couldn't find it in herself to be mad at her.

For some reason, a hollow emptiness settled in Gion's chest.

A cold year-end breeze blew past, and she instinctively hugged her shoulders a little tighter.

Off in the distance, the sounds of laughing children echoed through the streets, mingled with the lively voices of families and the warm glow of festive lights.

But none of that... belonged to her.

"Bastard!"

A wave of emptiness surged in Gion's chest—an unfamiliar, aching hollowness.

She muttered a curse under her breath and angrily kicked a loose pebble off the street, eyes rimmed faintly with red.

"If you keep kicking like that, the whole street's gonna run out of stones."

A lazy, familiar voice drifted from behind.

Gion froze, quickly wiping at the corner of her eye. She turned around and found the smirking face of a certain Marine Commodore, mischief twinkling in his eyes.

She glared.

"What are you doing here?"

"Shouldn't you be home with your loving wife?"

Seeing her reddened eyes and that sharp, jealous tone, Daren couldn't help but chuckle. Feeling wicked, he leaned into the teasing and winked.

"Well, there's still plenty of night left. I've got time to spend with Toki... no need to rush."

"And besides, as the host, isn't it only right I come see the guest off?"

Time left to spend with her...

The words hit like a knife. Gion bit her lip, eyes reddening even more. She spat bitterly,

"I don't need you to see me off! I can go back on my own! Go be with your perfect, gentle wife... I'm just a guest to you, right?"

"No, no. You're not just a guest."

Daren shook his head.

"Then what am I to you?"

Gion's head snapped up, her eyes flickering with a faint, almost imperceptible hope. Her voice carried softly through the cold night air, tinged with urgency.

"Well..."

Daren scratched his head, acting like he was struggling for words.

"A subordinate who always argues with me."

"A colleague who calls me trash and scum every day."

"A comrade with a cute personality—tough on the outside, soft on the inside."

He started counting on his fingers, listing each one with a maddening seriousness.

"...Yeah, pretty much that."

The more she listened, the darker Gion's face grew. By the end, she looked ready to freeze the whole street with her glare.

"You bastard—mph!!"

She didn't get to finish.

Her lips were suddenly sealed.

She instinctively tried to pull away, but a strong, calloused hand wrapped around her slender waist, yanking her close.

The scent of tobacco hit her first, then the warmth of his breath, and her eyes widened in shock. But slowly... her stiff body began to relax.

All that pent-up frustration, the complicated emotions that had built over weeks—love, hate, longing—they exploded, flooding her mind and short-circuiting her will.

She closed her eyes without realizing it, and before long, her arms found their way around Daren's neck.

And she kissed him back.

Ten seconds passed.

Their lips finally parted.

A thin strand of saliva still connected them briefly as they pulled away.

Gion stood there breathless, face burning crimson.

I just... kissed him. In the middle of the street...

Panic hit her as she suddenly looked around, scanning for witnesses. Seeing the street empty, she let out a small sigh of relief.

Then, she remembered she was supposed to be mad.

"You bastard! What do you think you're doing!?"

"What do you take me for!?"

Gion glared at him, biting her lower lip.

Daren, still savoring the kiss, looked at the flustered, red-faced woman in uniform and felt an overwhelming sense of pride.

"Didn't I just answer that?"

Before she could erupt again, he smiled gently and said,

"You're the person I like."

All of Gion's anger and resentment melted away in an instant.

She stared at him in disbelief, stunned.

"You... what did you just say?"

Daren grinned.

"Come on, I want to show you something."

He didn't wait for her reply—just pulled her into his arms again, one hand wrapping firmly around her slim waist, the other raising into the air.

With a sharp swish, a pitch-black blade flew in from the distance, hovering steadily in front of him.

"That sword?!"

Gion forgot to struggle. The moment she saw it, she instantly sensed its power and stared, wide-eyed.

"A famed sword from Wano Country. One of the few cursed blades in the world. They say it can 'cut through hell'... Enma."

Daren spoke casually, then added with a smirk,

"Don't even think about claiming it. It took me ages to tame this thing."

Chapter 274 - 274: Volume 2 – Chapter 176: Be My Woman

"I don't like cursed swords like that!"

Gion's cheeks flushed slightly, as if Daren had just exposed her thoughts.

She lifted her chin with pride, one hand resting confidently on the golden Meito at her waist.

"My Konpira is a Great Grade sword, one of the 21 Ōwazamono!"

Daren chuckled.

"Alright, alright. I know you're impressive."

If he remembered right, that Konpira had been a birthday gift from Vice Admiral Tsuru on Gion's fifteenth birthday.

Owning a Great Grade sword at fifteen... that was like being handed the keys to a limited-edition Lamborghini at that age—one of only 21 in the world.

People like that were just built different.

What did he have when he was fifteen?

Right... probably a toilet brush for cleaning latrines.

Still, Daren had his reasons for keeping her away from Enma.

With her current strength, she wasn't nearly ready to tame a blade like that. Enma's bizarre, overbearing ability could easily drain her Haki in an instant—and if she wasn't careful, it might cost her her life.

Gion huffed, then turned her gaze to Enma, still hovering silently in front of them, curiosity gleaming in her eyes.

"How did you call it to you like that?"

Daren smiled.

"Already forgot my Devil Fruit power?"

He winked at her.

"I guess you could say I'm half a swordsman now."

"You? A swordsman?"

Gion looked at him like he'd just cracked a joke.

"Sure, you're strong—but you know nothing about swordsmanship."

Daren shrugged.

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

He stepped closer, and before she could react, slipped an arm around her waist.

"You—wait, don't tell me you're—"

Gion's eyes widened as a ridiculous thought popped into her head.

"You're gonna waste a legendary sword like—"

"Hold on tight!"

Boom!

With the pull of his magnetic field, the two of them shot into the sky atop the cursed blade, Enma.

...

One minute later, they landed in a secluded corner of an abandoned port in Marineford.

"You absolute bastard! You've got no respect for swords!"

Gion growled, watching as Daren casually dismissed Enma with a wave of his hand.

"You just don't know how much I've sacrificed to keep it fed."

Daren rolled his eyes.

Knowing there was no reasoning with him, Gion puffed her cheeks and turned away, scanning the surroundings.

The sea stretched endlessly before them, shimmering beneath the night sky.

In the distance, the glow of the observation decks and the lights from the civilian district danced across the waves.

"Why did you bring me here?"

She frowned.

"It's New Year's Eve," Daren replied with a grin. "You've gotta watch the fireworks."

"But all the fireworks are going off in the civilian district. There's nothing on this si—"

Before she could finish, a brilliant orange-red light exploded across the sky.

Bang!

Bang!

Bang!

Fireworks bloomed in the night, cascading down like fiery ribbons over the ocean, coloring the darkness with dazzling streaks of light.

"What the..."

Gion's eyes widened in disbelief.

She squinted into the night and quickly noticed the shells perched atop the rusted, abandoned cannons—one by one, they were launching into the air, then bursting in radiant explosions overhead.

Realization dawned.

She turned to look at Daren.

Tiny arcs of electricity crackled between his fingers.

The stunning fireworks lighting up the sky... he was the one detonating the shells, crafting this entire spectacle just for her.

Gion stared, dazed, then slowly turned back.

Daren was smiling at her.

And in that moment, the light in his eyes outshone the fireworks.

"Happy New Year."

Daren grinned.

"Don't blame me for wasting military supplies. This port's abandoned, and those shells were collecting dust anyway... figured I'd put them to good use."

As he spoke, soft lips suddenly pressed against his.

Hot. Intense. Unmistakably hers.

"I want you."

Gion's breathless whisper barely escaped her lips.

Daren's brain went blank in an instant.

"I-I still have to go back—"

Gion twisted his waist sharply and growled,

"Are you even a man!?"

Daren blinked.

Then gritted his teeth.

And lowered his head.

...

Explosions thundered above like roaring cannons, streaks of light scattering like shooting stars.

The sea stretched into the darkness, calm and deep, as two white fish leapt from the surface, their tails shimmering in the moonlight, disturbing the still waters in lazy ripples.

...

Who knew how long had passed.

At the edge of the abandoned port, the fireworks had faded, and the night had settled into silence, broken only by the distant rhythm of the waves.

A man and a woman sat on the shore, surrounded by a careless scatter of clothing.

Daren was bare-chested, his skin crisscrossed with brutal scars, a cigarette resting between his lips.

Gion sat beside him in silence, wrapped in an oversized cloak, her eyes gazing far into the sea.

The salty breeze stirred her hair. Her long, slender legs hung loosely, her white high-heeled sandals slipping halfway off, pink toes peeking through.

"So... what are we now?"

Her voice was quiet, calm—only a faint blush lingering on her cheeks.

Daren exhaled a slow stream of smoke.

This wasn't the time for hesitation.

He met her eyes, voice steady and sure.

"Be my woman."

He crushed the cigarette under his thumb, then gently cupped her face in his hands.

"I like you."

Gion's cheeks turned red again. Her heart pounded violently at his direct confession, but she bit her lip and asked,

"You sure?"

"I'm sure."

No pause. No doubt.

"Hmph. I've got a sharp tongue and a bad temper, you know."

She turned her face away with a snort.

Daren: ...

Yep. Women don't forget.

"To me, those are the things that make you cute."

The words came out automatically.

Gion scoffed and rolled her eyes.

"Tch. I don't believe a word out of your mouth, you bastard."

But her voice was soft now.

Daren smiled and reached for her hand.

"Let me walk you home."

Gion raised an eyebrow, eyes narrowing.

"Oh? So you can go back and snuggle up with your perfect little wife?"

"Uh..."

Daren's smile twitched.

But before he could answer, Gion lunged again.

Her toned legs clamped tightly around his waist.

Leaning over him with a predatory smirk, eyes sparkling with challenge, she whispered,

"I'm not letting you go that easily."

"Wait—!"

Panic shot across Daren's face.

...

One hour later.

Daren hobbled back to the officer housing compound, hand pressed to his aching waist.

The moment he leaned on the doorframe and pushed it open, his face froze.

Amatsuki Toki stood gracefully in front of a folding screen, a soft pink kimono with cherry blossom patterns hugging her figure.

Her gentle smile glowed like spring.

"Husband, let me take care of you."

Daren's expression stiffened.

Then, forcing a grin uglier than crying, he answered weakly,

"...Okay."

Chapter 275 - 275: Volume 2 – Chapter 177: How About Coating It with Haki?

Meanwhile, somewhere in the New World.

In the lawless zone of a neutral island.

Inside a tavern.

"Hahaha! It's not every day Oyaji treats us—let's drink 'til we drop!"

Marco, sporting his signature pineapple hair, stood atop a table, face flushed as he raised his beer mug high.

"Roar!!"

The rest of the Whitebeard Pirates erupted in cheers, clinking their mugs together in raucous celebration.

"Hey, hey, hey! You guys..."

Whitebeard called out, exasperated, but before he could finish, his crew had already surrounded him, pouring drinks and dragging him into the revelry.

The tavern buzzed with life—songs, laughter, and the clatter of mugs filled the air.

Some grabbed beer bottles like microphones, belting out tunes.

Others laughed so hard they nearly toppled over.

A few drank themselves into a stupor, tears streaming down their faces.

And some simply sat back, smiling as they watched their crewmates let loose.

"Hey, Oden! Don't just sit there zoning out—everyone's having a blast! Come drink with us!"

Marco suddenly noticed something, his eyes lighting up as he dashed to a corner of the tavern.

He threw an arm around Kozuki Oden, who was clad in his samurai garb, and, reeking of alcohol, asked,

"What's on your mind?"

Kozuki Oden snapped out of his daze, looked at the tipsy Marco, and smiled.

"It's nothing."

Marco narrowed his eyes, then asked,

"Are you homesick?"

Kozuki Oden burst into laughter, as if he'd just heard a joke.

"How could I be? I've dreamed of sailing the seas since I was a kid!"

To become a free-spirited pirate, explore the world, and witness all the wonders this ocean has to offer—that's the life I, Kozuki Oden, was meant for!

Compared to this vast, endless sea, Wano Country feels far too confined."

Marco frowned, curiosity piqued.

"Then why do you seem so distracted lately? Always sitting alone at the bow, lost in thought."

Kozuki Oden waved it off, trying to appear nonchalant.

"It's nothing, really. Just spacing out."

Marco eyed him skeptically, muttering,

"Is it because you lost to that Marine, Daren?"

"That guy's no pushover. He even took down Kaidou's base and defeated Byrnni World, the 'World Destroyer.' Losing to him isn't exactly shameful... You'll get another shot someday."

Kozuki Oden laughed heartily.

"Exactly! His appearance only confirmed that my decision to set sail was the right one.

If I'd stayed in Wano, I'd never have encountered such formidable opponents!"

He instinctively rested his hand on the hilt of Ame no Habakiri at his waist, eyes gleaming with fierce determination.

"Next time we meet, I'll win—and I'll reclaim Enma from him!"

At his side, besides Ame no Habakiri, hung a black-sheathed sword.

Marco observed Oden's carefree demeanor, but his curiosity only deepened.

If it wasn't the loss to that Marine bothering him, then what was it?

As the Whitebeard Pirates' "Doctor," Marco was far more attentive to his crewmates' well-being than the gruff Whitebeard himself.

Watching the samurai take a gloomy swig of beer, Marco suddenly seemed to remember something. He asked tentatively,

"You... you're not thinking about women, are you?"

Pfft!!

Kozuki Oden spat beer all over Marco's face. His face flushed red as he shook his head furiously and coughed hard.

"I—I'm not!!"

Marco wiped the beer off his face, completely speechless, the corners of his mouth twitching.

Come on, could you be any more obvious?

"Is it that pretty girl? I think her name was... Amatsuki Toki?"

Marco asked in a low voice.

Realizing he couldn't hide it, Kozuki Oden fell silent for a moment, then let out a long sigh.

"I don't even know why..."

He scratched his head.

"We barely knew each other, but watching her get taken away by that Marine named Daren... it felt like I'd lost something really important."

...

The bedroom was a mess.

White socks, a loose kimono, and a purple sash were scattered across the floor. Even the air was heavy with warmth and lingering heat.

Daren dragged himself up weakly, one hand on his lower back, the other carefully pulling the blanket over Toki, who had already drifted off to sleep.

He glanced at Amatsuki Toki's peaceful face, the corners of her lips curled in a satisfied smile. Exhaling softly, he tiptoed out of the room.

"What a damn ordeal..."

Wearing nothing but shorts, Daren slumped unceremoniously on the front step, lit a cigarette, rested his chin in his hand, and muttered,

"Don't tell me I actually have to go find Yamakaji..."

But he rejected the thought almost as soon as it came.

No way.

He shook his head and shivered.

Yamakaji might not be the gossipy type, but he was way too soft-hearted. He didn't look like someone who could keep a secret.

If word got out... would he even have any reputation left?

Wait, who was he kidding?

His reputation at headquarters was already "not great."

Still, that didn't mean he should just give up.

This was a man's pride—no way he was going to admit he wasn't up to the task.

"I've got to come up with something else... Seimei Kikan? Nah, that drains my energy. This isn't some life-threatening injury. Seimei Kikan won't cut it..."

With a cigarette in one hand, Daren scratched the stubble on his chin, deep in thought.

"What if... I used Armament Haki to cover it?"

The moment the idea hit, his eyes lit up.

That just might work...

Though... what if it turned out to be too effective?

Yeah, if the original creator of Armament Haki found out someone was using it for that, he'd probably blow the lid off his coffin.

Daren's thoughts began to drift, wandering aimlessly.

He sat there smoking, staring up at the quiet, starry sky.

Behind him, the steady sound of Toki's breathing carried from the bedroom, soothing his mood.

Bathed in the soft light, he couldn't help but smile.

How long had it been since he'd felt this kind of peace and happiness?

He honestly couldn't remember.

Fighting, killing, desire, money, scheming... The life he'd lived before flashed vividly through his mind. It might have been comfortable in some ways, but those memories were long since faded.

He finished the cigarette quickly.

After rinsing his mouth, Daren slipped back into the room, climbed into bed, and pulled Toki into his arms.

Looking at her face, glowing with a serene smile, he gently kissed her forehead and whispered,

"Happy New Year."

Chapter 276 - 276: Volume 2 – Chapter 178: Want to Learn?

On the first day of the Sea Circle Calendar in 1493, Sengoku was absolutely furious.

"What the hell is going on!?"

"All of the ammunition stockpiled in the abandoned port on D1 has been taken!?"

In the Admiral's office, Sengoku exploded in rage, shouting so fiercely that he sprayed the messenger who had come to report with saliva.

He was beyond livid.

Ever since the "defection" of Dragon, the Marine Headquarters had suffered a major budget cut from the World Government.

On top of that, having to erase all traces of Dragon's identity as a Marine—and dealing with the political fallout the incident caused—had left Sengoku, an Admiral, buried in headaches.

The promotion to Fleet Admiral, which had practically been set in stone, was now gone. And instead of getting any sympathy, Sengoku had to grit his teeth and comfort that bastard Garp.

But who was going to comfort him—the Admiral who had endured so much humiliation and frustration?

D1 Port may have long been abandoned, and sure, its stockpile wasn't that large anymore... but given the current circumstances, even the smallest resource was precious.

So the moment this happened, Sengoku snapped.

"Admiral Sengoku... after our investigation, we discovered the ammunition wasn't moved—it was detonated."

The messenger, watching Sengoku's expression carefully, lowered his voice.

"Detonated?"

Sengoku raised an eyebrow.

The young messenger could hear the fire barely suppressed in Sengoku's tone and stammered,

"Someone spotted it from a distance last night... there was a massive fireworks display in the direction of Port D1."

"Quite a few civilians thought it was part of a New Year's celebration organized by headquarters..."

Sengoku clenched his teeth.

The veins on his forehead were bulging so intensely that the messenger felt like they might burst at any moment.

Not daring to delay another second, he quickly added,

"This morning, a soldier came to report that Commodore Rogers Daren admitted to using the ammunition from Port D1."

"Daren?"

Sengoku froze—then exploded again.

"Has that damn brat lost his mind!?"

"He used perfectly good ammunition... for fireworks!?"

"Does he think this is the North Blue!?"

"Hey... what's that in your hand?"

Sengoku suddenly paused, narrowing his eyes at the trembling messenger, who shakily held out an envelope.

The envelope was already opened.

Inside was a check.

There were a number of banks operating across the sea, but this particular check was a promissory note from a bank under the World Government.

"Commodore Daren said he used the ammunition to please his lover. He's willing to cover all the costs and deeply apologizes for the inconvenience caused."

The messenger presented the envelope with both hands and bowed deeply.

Staring at the long string of zeros on the check, Sengoku opened his mouth... but said nothing. He silently accepted it.

Somehow, he didn't feel quite as angry anymore.

After a few moments of silence,

He coughed lightly and spoke in a calm, composed tone,

"Well, I'll let it slide this time. A lover is important, after all."

"Go tell that brat not to stir up such a commotion next time."

"Yes, Admiral Sengoku."

The messenger didn't dare look up, afraid he'd catch a glimpse of something he shouldn't.

"Oh, right. That kid Daren—he's supposed to be back at the training camp today, isn't he?"

Sengoku tucked the check away and casually asked.

The messenger answered respectfully,

"Not yet, sir. I heard that Vice Admiral Garp sent someone to summon Commodore Daren early this morning."

Garp...

Sengoku thought for a moment, then waved his hand.

"Alright, you can go now."

The messenger bowed again, gave the wad of cash in his pocket a subtle pat, and hurried out of the office like he was fleeing for his life.

As the office door shut behind him, Sengoku stood there in silence for a moment, then pulled the check out once more.

He suddenly cursed out loud,

"That damn brat really went all out... two hundred million Belly just for a damn fireworks show!"

...

Daren was panicking.

Standing in the abandoned port where last night's "fireworks" had gone off, he faced Garp—who wore a stormy expression, exuding a murderous aura—and felt a tidal wave of pressure crash over him...

Inside, he was a complete mess.

His mind spun rapidly.

Was it because he went too far with his performance and now this old man was mad about him roughing up Dragon?

Or had his relationship with Gion finally been exposed, and Garp, feeling like his precious cabbage had been eaten by pigs, come to take it out on him?

While Daren's thoughts were spiraling, Garp, still wearing that signature dog-head cap, suddenly began walking toward him in silence.

Heavy footsteps.

Clenched fists.

That rising, crushing aura...

Daren's throat bobbed involuntarily.

"Um... Vice Admiral Garp, why did you call me here?"

"I didn't do anything... Every move I made was on Admiral Sengoku's orders. You can't blame me for this..."

His mouth twitched nervously, and his body instinctively backed away.

If it were anyone else, he wouldn't have flinched.

But this was Garp.

The man standing at the pinnacle of strength in this entire sea!

On top of that, his son had just defected from the Marines. The guy had to be burning with frustration and itching to blow off steam.

Most importantly, Garp was the only Marine known for being completely unreasonable.

And Daren? He was still sore all over and running on fumes. If he got clobbered here, he'd be laid up for days.

But just as he stepped back, he felt something hard behind him.

He turned to look.

It was a towering, twenty-meter-high abandoned warship.

Yet before he could process that, an overwhelming force—like a collapsing mountain—suddenly surged toward him.

His heart pounded uncontrollably.

It felt like every drop of blood in his body was boiling under the sheer pressure of impending doom.

His body tensed to the limit, instinctively switching into combat mode.

But in the next moment, as he looked ahead—

A fist, just a plain, ordinary fist, began to grow larger and larger in his vision.

Daren's pupils shrank to pinpoints.

That punch...

He couldn't describe it.

There was no Haki, no aura, no shockwave, no flames... not even speed—it moved slow enough to be seen clearly.

Yet at that exact moment,

A wave of near-hopeless despair rose in his chest.

He couldn't take this punch!

So all he could do was stand there and watch, eyes wide, as Garp's fist—moving at a casual pace—drew closer to his face.

It brushed past his hair—

And struck the warship behind him.

Bang!

A soft, muffled thud.

So ordinary.

Like a child nervously tapping a stick against a wall.

But the next instant—

BOOM!!

The entire massive abandoned warship exploded into a blizzard of debris!!

A wild shockwave tore across the ground, ripping apart everything behind Daren—including the warship and several heavy artillery platforms.

Gulp...

Daren swallowed hard.

"Vice... Vice Admiral Garp..."

Before he could finish, Garp—who had kept his head low the whole time—suddenly looked up and grinned.

"Want to learn? I'll teach you."

Chapter 277 - 277: Volume 2 – Chapter 179: Pure Strength

You scared the hell out of me!

Looking at Garp in front of him, wearing his signature dog-head cap and grinning menacingly, Daren's mouth twitched as he grumbled inwardly.

If you wanted to teach me martial arts, just say it. If you were planning to show off the power of your "Iron Fist," at least give me a heads-up. You nearly gave me a heart attack...

Still, that punch was terrifying.

It had no Haki coating, no visible buildup, no explosive force, and definitely no Conqueror's Haki swirling around it. It looked simple—plain, even—but the destruction it caused was off the charts.

That crushing sensation, like a thousand-meter-high mountain collapsing right in front of him, gave off a sense of utter helplessness.

When the punch locked on to him earlier, Daren had genuinely felt like there was no way to dodge.

It was a perfect fusion of pressure and masterful technique.

Probably similar in essence to Roger's "Kamusari."

No wonder Garp stood at the very peak of this sea's power.

"Vice Admiral Garp, what exactly do you mean?"

Daren quickly gathered his thoughts and asked.

Garp slowly withdrew his fist, then patted Daren on the shoulder with a grin.

"You should know I've always liked you, kid..."

He let out a long sigh, a trace of emotion flashing through his eyes.

"I've read the battle report. You did well. That stinky brat of mine gave you a lot of trouble."

So this was about returning a favor?

The thought crossed Daren's mind. He smiled and shook his head.

"You're too kind, Vice Admiral Garp. Dragon and I are friends. I was just following Admiral Sengoku's orders—nothing more."

Garp burst out laughing.

"You've got a lot going for you, kid, but you're too cautious and calculating."

"If I didn't know you had that obsession with battle and killing deep in your bones, I'd say my martial arts weren't right for you."

He paused, then continued with a smile,

"But don't turn me down, Daren. Your strength is already at a critical juncture."

"There are countless powerhouses out there who've been stuck at this bottleneck their whole lives."

"Even if I don't know how much you'll actually take away from me, at the very least..."

Garp puffed out his chest and placed his hands on his hips proudly.

"I'm definitely a better teacher than that Zephyr guy!"

Daren: ...

Why does it feel like that's your real reason for offering to teach me?

Still, to be fair, while Garp's teaching style might not be as methodical and professional as Zephyr's—more like letting his students run wild—there was no denying that his trainees turned out strong.

Kuzan was the perfect example.

In the original timeline, Kuzan had finished all the training camp content early, then proactively sought Garp out to become stronger.

Under Garp's guidance, he gained all-around enhancements and eventually rose to top-tier combat strength.

Later, in the Hachinosu arc, he even clashed with Garp in an intense battle between master and student.

Another one of Garp's students was Koby.

After two years of Garp's hands-on training, Koby went from the teary rookie who could only scream "ceasefire" at Marineford, to an elite of Marine HQ's covert unit "SWORD."

He stood out in the battle against the Blackbeard Pirates at Hachinosu and received a massive power boost.

Sure, part of that was Oda's signature power-up writing—but even so, it proved that Garp's teaching was no joke.

Most importantly, Daren had always coveted Garp's martial prowess.

Sure, he already had powerful abilities like "Magnetic Sword Control" and "Railgun," but in high-level combat between true powerhouses, victory was still decided by martial skill.

"Thank you, Vice Admiral Garp."

Daren stopped pretending to decline.

"Bwahahaha! That's more like it!"

Garp laughed heartily.

"Come with me."

He led Daren to another open area of the port, where several massive medium-sized warships lay beached.

These ships had long been abandoned. Their heavy cannons had been removed, salvageable materials dismantled, leaving only the main hulls behind. Time had not been kind—cobwebs covered their surfaces, the large anchors were rusted through, and the hulls were marred with deep battle scars, stacked there at an angle.

Scenes like this weren't uncommon at Marine Headquarters.

In naval warfare, targeting the enemy's ship directly is the most straightforward and effective tactic—not just for the Marines, but for pirates too. Given the sheer number of warships stationed at headquarters, the number decommissioned each year was far from small.

Repairs, building new ships, outfitting them with weapons, day-to-day maintenance...

As the man behind the North Blue fleet, Daren knew better than anyone how much it cost to maintain a powerful navy. No wonder Sengoku was constantly buried in budget headaches.

"Daren, what do you think is the strongest power in these seas?"

Garp suddenly asked as he looked up at the two abandoned warships in front of them, cutting through Daren's thoughts.

Daren was momentarily stunned, but before he could answer, Garp continued.

"Is it the unbelievable powers of the Devil Fruits?"

"Is it Haki, which lets you strike the true form of a Devil Fruit user?"

"Or maybe Conqueror's Haki, that force said to overwhelm others and embody one's will?"

"No. None of those!"

Garp shook his head firmly.

"Those might make you strong, but they'll never make you the strongest out here."

Daren said thoughtfully,

"Then what do you believe it is, Vice Admiral Garp?"

Garp smiled, raised his right hand, and clenched it into a fist.

In that moment, Daren caught a glimpse of black and red lightning flickering in Garp's palm before it quickly vanished.

With a fiery, confident look in his eyes, Garp said in a low voice,

"It's strength—tempered, forged through countless battles. Pure power!"

"The abilities I just mentioned? On their own, they don't mean much in the eyes of the truly powerful. But if you've gone through rigorous training and can perfectly blend and channel all of those powers together—that's what true strength is."

"Unmatched, pure strength!"

He turned to Daren, smiling.

"You've got excellent physical potential—enough to rival those freaks born with unnatural talent. But your power isn't refined."

"When you attack, the strength you've built up doesn't come together. That's why your strikes feel weak and unfocused."

"That's what I'm going to teach you."

Chapter 278 - 278: Volume 2 – Chapter 180: Do You Understand?

Pure strength forged through relentless trials...

Are you sure this isn't just a "serious punch"?

Daren couldn't help but mock the idea in his mind.

Still, hearing Garp's serious and forceful words, he took a breath, calmed himself, and began to carefully digest the meaning behind them. Before long, he found himself deep in thought.

It was true—just like Garp said, most of his combat ability had been "stacked" together.

With his powerful physique as the base, he had piled on Armament Haki, a variety of combat techniques, and even Devil Fruit abilities—like stacking bricks onto a foundation.

What came out of it was a rough, brute-force "fighting machine" that relied purely on physical power to overwhelm opponents.

But in actual battle, was he truly making full use of his physical advantages?

Was there a smooth, seamless synergy between his body, strength, and speed, and his Haki and Devil Fruit powers?

Had he really pushed his combat potential to its peak?

Before this conversation with Garp, Daren had never seriously considered these questions.

Because of his innate sensory abilities, his past training had always focused on boosting specific "stats" from his personal panel.

He'd strengthened his body through endurance and lightning-tempering.

He'd trained his strength by dragging warships under heavy load.

He'd sharpened his speed through bullet-dodging drills and short-distance bursts.

Almost every training session had been highly specialized.

That approach wasn't bad—on the contrary, it had a major advantage: with his data panel, Daren could clearly identify his weaknesses and keep pushing past his limits by discovering new, targeted ways to train.

There was no doubt that, especially early on, this was the fastest and most effective way to build power.

But...

Could a method like that really create a top-tier powerhouse?

Probably not.

Daren's mind instinctively recalled a certain character from the original Dressrosa arc.

Elizabeth II, King of the Providence Kingdom.

The guy was no pushover—he was even nicknamed the "The Fighting King."

It was said that he could unleash the "King Punch" thanks to his naturally powerful physique.

With a single blow, he could demolish an enemy fortress. Some claimed that even a Yonkō would be injured outright if they were hit.

So was he strong?

With the sheer destructive power of that "King Punch," Daren figured he might actually be able to injure a Yonkō.

But the problem was, to throw that punch, Elizabello II needed to "warm up" for at least an hour before his body could generate that level of force.

In a real fight, that was basically useless.

By the time he finished warming up, who knows how many times he'd have already died.

In that sense, Elizabello II's situation wasn't that different from Daren's. He too possessed immense power—but couldn't fully unleash it.

Like a heavily armed fortress that still felt clunky and inefficient.

It was like owning a high-performance sports car with a top-tier engine, an elite chassis, and the best transmission... but lacking a skilled technician to properly tune it.

The only difference was that Daren's shortcomings weren't as obvious.

And now, what Garp was talking about was helping Daren bring all his power and abilities together into one cohesive force.

...To integrate every piece of his strength—and unlock the full potential of this supercar that is Rogers Daren!

"I see..."

Daren muttered softly, his eyes gradually lighting up.

"So what should I do?"

He looked at Garp with excitement.

"Watch carefully."

Garp let out a hearty laugh, took a step forward, blew on his fist, focused his gaze, and then punched the warship in front of him.

Bang!!

The entire warship shuddered violently, and the spot where his fist landed exploded with fragments.

"Got it?"

Garp turned back with a smile.

Daren: ...

What the hell am I supposed to get from that!?

Isn't this just the difference between a regular punch and a serious one?

Frustration welled up inside him. He really wanted to say something, but when he saw the proud look on Garp's face—as if he genuinely believed he'd just delivered a masterclass—Daren opened his mouth... and said nothing.

This was totally just a showy load of nonsense!

Just like Kaidou... flashy names for attacks that all boil down to the same thing: horizontal swing, vertical swing, strong swing, stronger swing!

"Hmph, I knew I wasn't wrong about you! You really are the right one to carry on my legacy! Bwahahaha!!"

Seeing Daren stay silent, Garp assumed he had truly understood and couldn't help but thump him on the shoulder with pride, roaring with laughter.

"Uh... Vice Admiral Garp, have you ever tried teaching this to anyone else?"

Daren's eye twitched as he asked.

Garp scratched his head and chuckled.

"I guess you could say I have. I told that brat of mine once, but he didn't seem to get it. Ran off to work on some 'claw' technique instead."

"And Sakazuki... hmm, I don't like that guy's methods, but he is an important talent in the Navy. Still, right after I explained it to him, that damn kid just turned around and bolted without a word."

He suddenly started grumbling.

"Really pisses me off! I laid out the strongest technique right in front of them, explained it so clearly, and they still couldn't get it!"

Daren: ...

Honestly... not getting it sounds about right.

"Alright, since you understand it now, let's get started!"

Garp shook his head and looked at Daren with anticipation written all over his face.

He pointed at the warship in front of them.

"A hero's strength doesn't just appear out of nowhere. Only through relentless training can you become the strongest!"

"No Devil Fruit powers. No Haki either... Control your strength, pour all your focus and spirit into each punch..."

"This warship is your punching bag!"

...

At the same time, at the training grounds.

Zephyr frowned as he looked over the students lined up in formation.

"Where's that brat Daren? Didn't he already return to headquarters? Where'd he run off to?"

Everyone froze for a moment, exchanging looks, then shook their heads—no one knew.

"Maybe he's off flirting with some girl..."

Tokikake, standing at the front, curled his lip and muttered.

He turned to Gion beside him and grinned.

"With a shameless guy like him, what more can you expect, right Gion?"

Gion glanced at him without expression, paused, then said calmly,

"Daren might be a flirt, but he's not a bad person."

Tokikake's eyes widened in shock, stunned.

Gion... was defending Daren!?

He looked like he couldn't believe it, as if he were dreaming.

But before he could react, Zephyr suddenly erupted with a shout full of shock and fury.

"What!?"

"That brat got dragged off by Garp!?"

Chapter 279 - 279: Volume 2 – Chapter 181: A Serious Punch

"Focus!! Every punch you throw must carry the will to win and the spirit of justice!"

"Only with absolute confidence in victory can you bring all that scattered power of yours together!!"

Under the blazing sun...

In a derelict port piled high with military scrap, a shadowy figure stood beneath the scorching heat, panting heavily like a wild beast as he unleashed a flurry of blows at a towering warship over twenty meters tall.

Shirtless, his upper body was covered in scars. His face was rugged, sharp as a cliff, sweat dripping from his dark hair and jaw in thick drops.

His sharply defined muscles were tanned a deep bronze, radiating a wild and untamed energy.

With each strike, the coiled force in his body snapped like twisted rope, sending out shockwaves that made the hulking ship in front of him tremble violently.

Not far away, Garp sat comfortably under a makeshift parasol, wearing a floral shirt, shorts, and flip-flops. Reclined on a beach chair with a glass of juice in hand and a donut in the other, he occasionally barked out instructions.

"I said no Haki!"

"I'm not using Haki!!"

Daren snapped, clearly annoyed.

This old geezer was unbelievable. At first, he'd acted like they were going to train together. But just a few days in, he'd shown his true colors.

Out of nowhere, he dragged over a parasol and a beach chair, parked himself in it, and hadn't moved since.

"Bwahaha! I know you're not using Haki—I was just reminding you."

Garp laughed shamelessly, thick-skinned as ever.

Daren: ...

He clenched his teeth. Watching Garp lounging around so comfortably made him want to scream. His fists pounded faster, harder, with a sudden burst of fury.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

He threw all his pent-up frustration into the already battered warship.

Chunks of wood and shards of metal flew in all directions. The force of his punches was so intense, it caused visible tremors in the ground beneath his feet.

This kid's a real monster...

Garp took a satisfied sip of his chilled juice, eyes half-closed as he watched Daren's lithe, explosive movements—his physique like that of a jungle predator—and couldn't help but feel impressed.

He'd already seen Daren's strength firsthand, and heard the rumors about his inhuman body. He thought he was prepared.

But after a few days of direct training, even Garp was stunned by just how freakish this kid's body was.

Swords, bullets, flames, electricity—none of it worked. His resilience rivaled, maybe even surpassed, solid steel. Not even cannon fire could hurt him.

Garp had even run a test just to be sure.

Officially, it was to test Daren's physical limits. In truth, Garp was just curious. So he tossed cannonballs at him. By hand.

The result?

Daren's uniform got shredded. Smoke rose from his body. The ground within ten meters sank a full meter from the impact.

But he stood there, completely unfazed—like it was nothing.

What did that mean?

As Garp watched Daren hammer away at the warship with wild intensity, two monstrous figures surfaced in his mind.

Kaidou and Big Mom.

"I didn't expect the Marines to produce a freak like this... Could this kid not be human at all, but some weird species?"

Garp rubbed his stubbled chin, eyeing Daren's back with curiosity as he muttered to himself.

"Should I have that bastard Borsalino check him out?"

The thought crossed his mind, but he quickly shook his head.

"Forget it, not important."

He took a bite of his doughnut and continued observing Daren's movements.

Yeah... he was starting to get the hang of it. His power was much more focused than before.

Gotta admit, the brat was putting in the work.

A satisfied grin tugged at Garp's lips.

What truly impressed him about Daren wasn't his over-the-top physical capabilities—but his willpower. Tougher than "Iron" itself.

Garp knew exactly how brutal the training regime he'd laid out was. No normal person could endure it.

But Daren's performance had gone well beyond expectations.

No matter how much sweat poured off him, no matter how exhausted he looked, he never once muttered a single word of complaint.

This young man was filled with a hunger to grow stronger—a drive that ordinary people couldn't begin to understand. Relentless. Resolute. Borderline obsessive.

"Maybe he really will pull it off..."

Garp's eyes glinted with amusement as he murmured with a smile.

Just then, a young Marine came running over, panting hard as he saluted sharply.

"Reporting, Vice Admiral Garp! Zephyr-san says it's time."

Garp rolled his eyes.

"Yeah, yeah, I hear you."

He set down his doughnut and juice and called out toward Daren.

"Hey! Daren, time's up. Head over to Zephyr."

Daren said nothing. Instead, his fists suddenly picked up speed again.

A storm of punches rained down, pounding the wrecked warship before him.

"Huh?"

Garp raised a brow, a flash of anticipation sparking in his eyes.

The next second—

Daren let out a powerful shout. His gaze sharpened, force rose from the soles of his feet, and every muscle in his body moved in sync.

His body operated like a precision machine, transmitting power through his spine straight to his arm.

Then—he struck.

Bang!!

A deep, muffled boom echoed out.

But unlike before, the warship didn't budge. Not even a tremble.

It remained motionless.

One second...

Two seconds...

Three seconds...

Amid Daren's ragged breathing, amid Garp's rising cheer, amid the stunned expression of the Marine soldier delivering the message...

The already shattered wreck of the warship suddenly erupted—blasting into fragments that scattered like a storm!

"Bwahahahaha!! That's what I'm talking about!"

Garp jumped to his feet, hands on his hips, beaming with pride as he roared with laughter.

"My teaching really is flawless! That punch's still got a long way to go, but the essence is finally showing!"

Daren glanced at Garp's smug grin and couldn't even bother to throw out a retort.

He walked over, tiredly throwing on his oversized Marine cloak. Then he turned to the wide-eyed Marine soldier still frozen in place.

"Let's go."

The soldier swallowed hard, finally tearing his eyes away from the debris-strewn ground and quickly followed.

They walked in silence for a bit before curiosity got the better of him. He leaned in slightly and asked in a low voice.

"Commodore Daren... what was that move called just now?"

Daren paused mid-step.

He looked up, took out a pack of cigarettes, pulled one out, lit it, and let it dangle from his lips.

A cool breeze swept by. Smoke curled gently around his face, giving him a mysterious air.

The Marine held his breath, silently waiting.

Looking at Daren standing there, all silent and stoic, he just knew the name of that move had to be something epic.

"This move..."

Daren exhaled a long puff of smoke and replied flatly,

"—It's called 'Serious Punch.'"

The Marine looked like he'd just been struck by lightning.

...???

Chapter 280 - 280: Volume 2 – Chapter 182: I Want to Learn Observation Haki

Daren wasn't entirely sure if that punch had really been a "serious punch."

Garp's training style had no logic to it—bizarre and unorthodox, far beyond anything Daren could wrap his head around.

But out of pure trust in the "strongest Marine," he followed Garp's methods step by step, no questions asked.

Training was training, after all. And at his current level, those old methods that once pushed him to his physical limits weren't doing much to boost his "stats" anymore.

Still, in that final punch he threw earlier, he felt like he'd caught a glimpse of something.

It was fleeting—like a spark of inspiration or a physical sensation that couldn't be forced, only stumbled upon by chance.

For a split second, it felt like everything around him disappeared.

It was like peering through a high-powered scope—his vision zoomed in and everything narrowed, becoming intensely focused.

The world around him faded to nothing. His mind went still.

Even though his body was utterly exhausted, power surged through him naturally, as if springing forth from a deep well.

In that moment, all distractions vanished.

There was only the punch.

A blow meant to win—no matter what.

By the time he came back to his senses, the warship before him was in pieces, reduced to nothing but rubble.

What kind of power was that?

As he walked toward the training camp, thoughts spun endlessly in his mind.

If he had to describe it, Daren figured it wasn't some specific technique, or a combination of abilities, and definitely not just brute-force strength. It felt like something more subtle, more profound—something hard to explain.

A perfect unison of mind, body, and technique.

...Could that be the secret to mastering Conqueror's Haki infusion?

The idea popped into his head.

He'd awakened Conqueror's Haki a while ago. He could release it at will and use it to intimidate opponents, but when it came to actually coating his attacks with it—he was still clueless.

Daren tried to recall that brief moment of clarity from earlier. The state of mind he'd entered. He searched for that elusive sensation again.

He knew it had been a fluke.

He was still a long way from fully mastering this kind of complete body control.

But he wasn't discouraged.

Daren had always been patient. Some things couldn't be rushed—they needed time to build up naturally.

With that mindset, he stepped through the gates of the training camp and onto the field.

Zephyr, already waiting, stood with his Marine cloak draped over his shoulders.

"Garp's training is done?"

Zephyr asked, clearly annoyed, a cigar between his teeth as he watched Daren enter the grounds.

Daren smiled and nodded.

"Yes, Zephyr-sensei."

"Hmph! That bastard Garp, just snatching you away without a word!"

Zephyr growled, clearly ticked off.

"And what could he possibly teach you with those crude training methods of his?"

"Even his own son didn't want to train under him!"

Zephyr clearly had strong opinions when it came to Garp's way of teaching.

Daren just smiled without commenting.

He still remembered the first day he started training with Garp—Zephyr had stormed over, furious, and the two of them immediately launched into a shouting match.

It turned into an all-out insult war.

"What do you know about teaching!?"

"I know everything!!"

"Your own son doesn't even want to learn from you!"

"Bullshit!!"

"I'm the head instructor!"

"I can fight better than you!"

"Bullshit!"

"Wanna go?"

"You bastard!!"

And just like that, the two of them went at it shirtless, practically tearing the whole port apart.

The commotion eventually got so loud that Admiral Sengoku and Staff Officer Tsuru had to step in and pull the two bruised-up men apart.

In the end, it was decided that Daren would train under both Zephyr and Garp.

He'd train with Garp in the mornings and follow Zephyr's methods in the afternoons.

Of course, the two of them argued for quite a while over which time slot was better.

After all, training in the morning meant better energy and sharper focus, so the results would naturally be more effective.

Zephyr grumbled a few words before turning his gaze to Daren.

"Daren, be honest with me. With how intense and frequent your training's been lately, can your body really handle it?"

Daren paused for a moment and then said slowly,

"I don't feel like there's any real problem."

Zephyr activated his Observation Haki, sensing Daren's aura. Once he confirmed there was nothing off, he nodded.

"Good. But if anything starts to feel off, speak up. Don't push your body to the point of causing lasting damage."

Then, after a brief pause, Zephyr added out of nowhere,

"And also... watch yourself with that other thing. Don't overdo it."

That thing?

Daren blinked, then quickly realized what Zephyr meant. His mouth twitched.

"Ahem... today's training is going to be light. Consider it a half-day break."

Zephyr switched gears and got to the point.

"You've been progressing way faster than the others in the training camp. With your current strength and experience, sticking to the camp's standard routines... isn't all that meaningful anymore."

"Instead of blindly piling on training, it's better to work on your weak points and patch up the gaps."

"So tell me, Daren, what issues have you been running into in your training? Or is there something specific you want to learn?"

Daren thought for a moment, then looked up seriously.

"Zephyr-sensei, I want to learn Observation Haki!"

"Hmm, Observation Haki is definitely useful... wait, you haven't awakened it yet!?"

Zephyr blurted out before catching himself, then stared at Daren in disbelief.

"No..."

Daren gave a bitter smile.

He recalled the embarrassing moment from earlier when his lack of Observation Haki nearly got him in trouble, and the corner of his eye twitched.

"But that doesn't make sense. If you haven't awakened Observation Haki, there's no way you could've fought guys like Byrnni World or Kaidou... You shouldn't even be able to see their movements."

Zephyr frowned, muttering to himself.

"It's because of this..."

Daren raised his hand, letting arcs of electricity dance across his fingertips.

"Zephyr-sensei, I have the Jiki Jiki no Mi. I can generate magnetic fields and sense the magnetic signatures of living beings within range. The effect is similar to Observation Haki, though not as precise in real combat."

He paused, then added,

"And even if I can't dodge, taking a few hits head-on isn't going to kill me."

Zephyr: ...

Well, fair enough.