

## One Piece 421

Chapter 421 - 421: Volume 3 – Chapter 64: Unrest! Shiki's Ambition

Seeing Daren lost in thought, Tokikake chuckled and patted him on the shoulder, trying to console him.

"You've got no shot with Stussy, the Queen of the Pleasure District... After all, you've already got that breathtaking beauty Amatsuki Toki back in Marineford. Hehehe."

"But it's fine. I'll be the one to win over Stussy."

He flipped his hair with exaggerated flair.

"Relying on the charm of me—Tokikake, the genius of Headquarters!"

Daren let out a lazy puff of smoke and smiled.

"Confident words... especially coming from someone who can't even last five minutes."

Tokikake's face darkened. He stiffened his neck and retorted,

"You don't get it. It's not about how long—it's about how amazing it is!"

Just then, a man in a black suit suddenly appeared before them. With a respectful posture, he took out a gold-embossed card and bowed.

"Daren-sama, this is a gift from Stussy-sama. With this VIP card, you have unlimited access to all services and establishments in the Pleasure District."

"What!?"

Before Daren could respond, Tokikake jumped up in shock, eyes glued to the shimmering card.

"Send her my thanks. Let her know I'm very pleased with the gift."

Daren didn't hesitate and accepted the card with ease.

"Yes, Daren-sama."

The man bowed again, then disappeared without a trace.

Bang!

Tokikake suddenly slammed the table, glaring at Daren.

"You already hooked up with the Queen of the Pleasure District!?"

"Damn it! When did this happen!?"

Daren thought for a moment and grinned.

"Probably yesterday. We had a pleasant evening."

Tokikake froze.

Then he grabbed his head and let out a miserable wail like his world had just ended.

"No way! No waaay!"

"You bastard! You already have Amatsuki Toki, a total goddess, and you still couldn't leave Stussy alone?!"

He howled in despair, then leaned in close, glaring at Daren furiously.

"I'm telling Amatsuki Toki!"

Daren glanced over at him, then casually pulled the card from his pocket and said flatly,

"You can use it for a few days."

Tokikake froze.

A second later, his expression flipped completely. A warm, eager smile spread across his face, and he snatched the card in a blur.

"Oh, you're too generous..."

"You really are my best colleague, my brother, my comrade-in-arms!"

He pounded his chest with pride.

"Don't worry, Daren. I won't breathe a word!"

Daren: ...

...

A few days passed in a flash.

Taking full advantage of his rare paid vacation, Daren toured every corner of the Pleasure District—known as one of the finest entertainment cities in the world.

At this point in time, the future "Golden Emperor" Tesoro was still just some kid singing on the streets, with his famed entertainment empire, Gran Tesoro, yet to exist.

As one of the world's top dens of extravagance, the Pleasure District wasn't just known for its adult services—gambling, arenas, music, dance shows... every kind of indulgence was thriving here. After making his rounds, even Daren, the "King of North Blue," had to admit it was an eye-opener.

"Tokikake, you really need to slow down. If you keep this up, I'm honestly worried you're gonna drop dead here."

Back at their usual tavern, Daren lowered the newspaper in his hand and gave Tokikake a displeased look. The man now had dark circles under his eyes and looked like he'd physically shrunk.

Ever since Daren handed him that no-limit card, Tokikake had gone wild—hitting every single brothel in the Pleasure District without a break.

"I—I'm fine..."

Tokikake puffed on a cigar weakly, looking like a ghost of himself.

"I can't stop now... still... twenty-eight left..."

Daren: 6

"There'll be more chances in the future. No need to kill yourself over it."

Daren's mouth twitched as he sighed.

Slumped over the table, Tokikake suddenly lifted his head, eyes sparkling.

"So you're saying... I can still use your card in the future?"

"I'm warning you, Daren... don't joke with me about something this serious. If you're lying, I'll never forgive you for the rest of my life!"

He gritted his teeth.

Daren had never seen him so dead serious.

Rubbing his temples, Daren replied helplessly,

"Yeah, sure. I don't need it anyway."

Honestly, I'm scared you're going to die like this...

It had only been three or four days, but the guy already looked like he'd lost 20 pounds.

If he kept this up, people would be preparing a funeral.

"Hahahaha! Awesome!!"

Tokikake jumped up, waving his arms in celebration.

"Daren!! You've earned my respect!!"

He pointed at Daren, looking deadly serious.

"From now on, if any bastard lays a hand on you, I'll make sure they regret it!!"

"You sure about that?" Daren gave him a half-smile.

"Absolutely!" Tokikake declared with full conviction.

Daren replied dryly,

"Kaidou's in Wano, Big Mom's in Totto Land, Roger's already entered the Grand Line—he'll be in the New World soon. Shiki's hard to track, but Whitebeard's got a fixed base... Go ahead. I'm counting on you, Tokikake."

Tokikake's expression froze.

"Uh, well..."

Daren chuckled and shook his head.

He folded the newspaper, laid it flat on the table, picked up his whiskey glass, and downed it in one gulp.

"Let's go. Time to head back."

Daren rose from his seat, tossed a few bills on the table, and made his way toward the tavern door.

"Huh? We're leaving? Isn't your vacation still going?"

Tokikake looked after him, confused.

"It's over. And I'm guessing Admiral Sengoku's about to reach out."

Daren didn't slow down. A sharp smile tugged at the corner of his lips.

With each step, the Vice Admiral's presence surged, drawing the attention of nearby patrons.

"Admiral Sengoku?"

Tokikake was still puzzled—until his Den Den Mushi began ringing urgently in his coat.

"Hello, this is Commodore Tokikake!"

He picked it up and answered.

Whatever he heard made his face go pale.

"Admiral Sengoku!? What!?"

Tokikake shot to his feet, eyes wide and pupils contracting.

"Understood! Daren and I will return to headquarters immediately!"

He ended the call and hurried after Daren, now clearly anxious.

Back on the table in the tavern, the neatly folded newspaper remained.

Its front page featured a bold headline:

"Flying Pirate Shiki the Golden Lion Stirs—Flying Pirates Begin Recruitment!"

The article was written by none other than Morgans, President of the World Economic News Agency.

#### Chapter 422 - 422: Volume 3 – Chapter 65: Reunion with an Old Acquaintance

After leaving the tavern, Daren didn't head straight back to base.

He hadn't brought a warship or subordinates with him on this mission. The journey from the New World back to Marineford was long, and with his injuries still not fully healed, the safest option was to hitch a ride aboard Tokikake's warship.

The ship needed an hour or two to resupply—just enough time for Daren to take care of a few things.

Back in the familiar top-floor suite of his luxury hotel, he had barely opened the door when he saw a graceful figure already waiting, seated on the leather sofa in front of the floor-to-ceiling window.

Today, the Queen of the Pleasure District wore a sheer black dress with red-soled high heels. She sat with her legs crossed, one pale foot gently toying with her dangling heel, radiating both mystery and seduction.

Her allure filled the room—mature, elegant, and dangerously enticing.

"Heading out?"

Stussy held her wine glass with practiced poise, the crimson liquid catching the light and highlighting the curve of her lips.

"You got the message, didn't you? That bastard Shiki is stirring again."

Daren smiled as he shut the door behind him, walking over to the bar to pour himself a whiskey.

As a senior agent of the World Government's top intelligence agency, she naturally had access to Marine movements and classified orders.



"Shiki's ambition runs deep. With his strength and his powers, even the government keeps a wary eye on him."

"Now that he's on the move again, he's definitely planning something."

Stussy narrowed her eyes slightly, her voice calm and cool.

Daren raised an eyebrow and turned with a smirk.

"So this is your way of telling me to be careful? Honestly, I figured you'd prefer I died at Shiki's hands. That way, your little secret would go to the grave with me."

Stussy let out a soft laugh.

"When I first heard the news, I really did hope you'd die."

"But then I thought... for a man as entertaining as you, wouldn't it be such a waste to let you go so soon?"

"Ah, I see now... makes perfect sense." Daren nodded as if he had an epiphany.

See what?

Stussy blinked, caught off guard.

Before she could respond, the Marine Vice Admiral in front of her had already started unbuttoning his shirt, walking toward her one step at a time.

"Wait—what are you doing?!"

Her calm cracked, a flicker of panic flashed in her eyes.

Daren answered as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

"You said you'd hate to see me die... so clearly, you just want my body."

This damn bastard!

What the hell is going on in that head of his?!

Stussy's tone turned sharp.

"Didn't you say last time was the last time!?"

Those shameful positions from before flashed through her mind, and a faint blush crept over her elegant face as she struggled to stay composed.

Daren chuckled.

"We're both adults. No need to dance around it, right?"

"This bastard..." Stussy bit her lip, then, not bothering with anything else, brushed past him and stormed out of the suite.

Watching the flustered Queen of the Pleasure District make her exit, Daren couldn't help but smile.

Once the door clicked shut again, he picked up his glass, took a sip, and sank into the sofa.

Then, casually, he said,

"You can come out. She's gone."

The words had barely left his lips when a breeze stirred silently through the room.

A murderous aura spiked.

Before him, pale green wind compressed into a tight miniature cyclone—and from the heart of that storm, a tall figure burst forward.

Daren's eyes sharpened as he sprang up from the sofa like a predator.

The two clashed in perfect sync, striking at the exact same moment!

Five fingers splayed and curled into a three-fingered dragon claw... the exact same opening move!

"Ryusoken!"

"Ryusoken!"

Two clawed hands, shrouded in flickering black light, tore through the air—three fingers curled into dragon claws, tracing a trail of dark, phantom brilliance. With the force and will to crush all domination, they clashed violently in midair.

Boom!

A deep, thunderous shockwave exploded between them.

The air tightened for an instant. A burst of wind erupted, surging through every corner of the room.

Yet, despite the force of the impact, both combatants had flawless control over their power. The shockwave didn't crack the walls or shatter the glass.

It was a draw.

But neither paused. The moment the clash ended, they shifted tactics without hesitation.

Drop the knees.

Swing the elbows.

Like arrows fired from fully drawn bows!

Bang!

Bang!

Their knees collided. Elbows slammed against each other.

Another sharp crack filled the air.

Both figures staggered back a step.

Then, channeling strength from waist and legs, they hurled their fists with brutal force!

The air itself seemed to ripple around their fists, pulsing outward in concentric waves.

"Genkotsu!"

"Genkotsu!"

Another thunderous collision—brief, brutal. They broke apart again, each retreating several steps.

"Hahahaha! So you really did learn the old man's style!"

The figure, blurred by the lingering storm winds, finally took shape.

He stood tall, a cold, commanding presence, cloaked in a dark green hooded coat that obscured most of his face. Even standing still, his aura cut like a blade.

Daren looked up at the man and grinned.

"It's been a while, Dragon."

The man was, unmistakably, Dragon.

Dragon pulled back his hood, revealing a sharp, brow-less face full of intensity. His messy black hair fell loose behind him, and he laughed heartily.

"You've gotten a hell of a lot stronger, Daren."

The look in his eyes was a mix of surprise, awe, and complexity.

How long had it been since they'd last met?

Barely half a year.

And yet in that time, Daren had broken through his limits—he'd fully stepped into Admiral-level combat strength, now standing as Dragon's equal.

What shocked Dragon most was the brief exchange just now. Daren's physical resilience... far beyond anything he expected.

Paired with overwhelming power output—if not for Dragon's superior Haki and close-quarters technique, he might've lost.

And most of all... Daren had actually mastered the Ryusoken and even his old man's Genkotsu technique!

What kind of monster was this guy?

No—he was the real "monster," wasn't he?

Daren, still smiling, flicked a cigar over to Dragon and sat back down.

"Yeah. I found myself a pretty great teacher."

"Zephyr-sensei?" Dragon raised a brow. He brought the cigar to his nose, inhaling deeply. A flicker of bliss crossed his face—he looked like he might cry.

It had been ages since he'd had a cigar this good.

"Nope," Daren said, shaking his head.

"Wait... it wasn't my old man, was it?" Dragon asked again.

Another headshake from Daren.

"Then who? Don't tell me Kong himself started training you?"

Dragon couldn't resist lighting the cigar now, curiosity burning in his eyes.

Daren grinned.

"Kaidou of the Beasts."

Dragon: ???

Chapter 423 - 423: Volume 3 – Chapter 66: If You've Got Time, Try Visiting Kaidou

"Kaidou of the Beasts!?"

Dragon blinked, utterly dumbfounded.

Kaidou of the Beasts... was a pirate!

Sure, Kaidou's overall strength was undeniably top-tier. Whether it was his mastery of his Devil Fruit, raw physical combat, or control over Haki, he was without question one of the strongest figures in the sea.

Even Dragon, with power on par with an Admiral, would take a hit if he faced Kaidou head-on. Mythical Zoan-type Devil Fruits give a close-combat boost that most Logia users just can't match.

But setting politics aside, Kaidou as a teacher?

What kind of joke was that?

The Marines were filled with accomplished mentors and prodigies. What qualifications did Kaidou have to be compared to the instructors of the Marines?

There was Zephyr-sensei, Chief Instructor of the Marine Officer Training Camp, who had raised countless Marine "monsters"—the now-celebrated "Golden Generation" was entirely his legacy.

Then there was his own father, Garp. Sure, Garp's teaching style could be described as... "improvised," but as long as you had the grit and focus, you could still learn deeply powerful techniques from him.

Admiral Sengoku was a paragon of balance—with no real weaknesses except maybe a lack of flight—and his vision and strategy were unmatched. Under his tutelage, any Marine would thrive.

And let's not forget the current Fleet Admiral of the Marines, Kong.

In his eighties now, he had personally trained the three pillars of the Marines—Garp, Zephyr, and Sengoku. A living legend!

How could Kaidou even compare to these giants?

Why on earth would Daren go out of his way to learn from him?

"You're not seriously saying that, are you, Daren?" Dragon said incredulously. "Kaidou's a pirate, and you expect me to believe he's capable of teaching anything worthwhile?"

Daren only smiled, calm and cryptic.

"You don't have to believe me, Dragon. But I'll be honest with you—my recent power spike? It's thanks to Kaidou's... 'teaching.'"

"If you get the chance, go to Wano Country. See for yourself."



"In my opinion, Kaidou might actually be a better 'teacher' than even Zephyr-sensei or Vice Admiral Garp. A true 'great instructor.'"

"That so..." Dragon eyed him suspiciously.

Could Kaidou really help improve one's strength?

It sounded absurd, but Daren didn't look like he was joking. So Dragon silently made a mental note.

If he ever faced Kaidou in a proper match, he might take some damage—after all, hand-to-hand was Kaidou's specialty.

But with his own power, he was confident he could survive, even in defeat.

"If I get the chance, I'll head to Wano and see if Kaidou really is the 'great teacher' Daren says he is..."

Dragon kept the thought to himself.

Far away in Wano Country, Kaidou remained blissfully unaware that, because of one offhand comment from Daren, an onslaught of headaches was heading his way.

"Wait... you said Kaidou's in Wano Country?"

Dragon paused, just now processing the implication. A flicker of surprise crossed his face.

"Yeah," Daren nodded. "The Beasts Pirates have already taken over Wano. They've set up large-scale weapons production lines. That formerly isolated country... it's Kaidou's turf now."

With that confirmation, Dragon couldn't hide the shock in his eyes.

"This is going to complicate things..."

As a former top Marine, Dragon was well aware of Wano's complex political situation.

If a power-hungry figure like Kaidou had really seized control of the country, any Marine operation there would require far more caution and planning.

Dragon took a long drag from his cigar and shook his head, forcing the turbulent thoughts down.

He looked up at the Vice Admiral across from him, a wave of emotion flickering in his chest.

The young man who had once walked out of North Blue was now a leader who could stand on his own.

And him?

The grand ambitions he had once dreamed of... now felt so distant.

"So, about that Queen of the Pleasure District—Stussy..."

Dragon asked, sounding him out.

Daren chuckled. "If I said we were just good friends, would you believe me?"

Dragon rolled his eyes hard.

Yeah, right.

You're already at the "taking your clothes off" stage!

One's a Marine infamously labeled a disgrace, the other is the sultry Queen of the Pleasure District...

If you told me nothing happened between you two, I'd rather believe Kaidou really is a great teacher.

Daren just smiled without saying a word.

Stussy hadn't noticed Dragon sneaking into the Pleasure District.

Even with Observation Haki, perception isn't infallible. After all, both Sabo and that creep Wapol had managed to infiltrate the Room of Flowers deep within Pangaea Castle, right under the noses of the Five Elders and Imu.

Dragon's strength aside, he hadn't released a trace of killing intent. If not for Daren's own Observation Haki, which had been significantly refined under Katakuri's "training," and enhanced further by his biological magnetic field sensing ability, he might not have picked up on Dragon at all.

"But Dragon, you didn't just come here to spy on my personal life, did you?"

Daren flicked the ash from his cigar and raised an eyebrow.

A smile tugged at the corners of Dragon's mouth.

"No, I came for something important."

"But before that, I want to introduce you to someone."

"A partner. A comrade who shares my ideals."

As his words fell, a towering figure appeared in the room without a sound.

Daren's pupils contracted slightly.

So fast—it felt like teleportation.

There wasn't the slightest disturbance. It was as if he had materialized out of thin air.

Noticing Daren's subtle reaction, Dragon smiled, clearly proud.

"This is—"

"Bartholomew Kuma," Daren cut in, his eyes fixed on the towering figure in glasses.

The man before him had an enormous build. Daren and Dragon were both around three meters tall—standard for top-tier Marines—but even standing next to this guy, Dragon looked small.

The man stood there like a great bear, his massive frame casting a shadow that filled the room with pressure.

But the most striking thing wasn't his size—it was the aura he gave off.

Gentle. Quiet. Calm. Polite.

A future member of the Shichibukai.

The prototype for the Pacifistas.

The Nikyu Nikyu no Mi user.

The future "Tyrant," Bartholomew Kuma.

But at this point in time, Kuma hadn't yet earned that fearsome title. He was still an unknown.

"You... know who I am?"

Kuma smiled warmly, scratched his head, and extended a hand to Daren.

"Nice to meet you, Daren-san."

Daren glanced down at the enormous, calloused hand. He could faintly see the soft pink paw pads in the center of the palm.

This guy isn't going to slap me halfway across the world to some random hellhole, is he?

He hesitated, then smiled and took Kuma's hand.

And in the very next second—

Something strange happened.

Chapter 424 - 424: Volume 3 – Chapter 67: Who the Hell Uses Haki to Shake Hands?

Something strange happened.

Daren smiled as he took Kuma's massive paw in a handshake—and then... nothing.

Dragon's smile froze for a beat.

Kuma's expression blanked as well, giving off a dopey look.

"Nice to meet you, Kuma," Daren said with a grin.

Both Dragon and Kuma stared at Daren's hand in confusion. It looked as if it had been dipped in black metal—coated in a cold, hardened sheen.

"Daren, why the hell are you using Armament Haki just to shake hands?!"

Dragon grabbed at his messy hair in frustration, nearly tearing it out.

Daren shrugged, looking a bit sheepish.

"Well, I just got back from the bathroom and didn't wash my hands. I figured this was more hygienic, you know... sanitation and all."

Kuma: ...

Dragon went from irritated to exasperated, gritting his teeth.

"You didn't wash your hands!?"

Daren gave him a glance. "Do you?"

"...No," Dragon muttered under his breath.

Kuma turned suddenly to Dragon, eyes wide in disbelief.

"Ahem..."

Avoiding Kuma's gaze, Dragon quickly turned back to Daren.

"Just drop the Armament Haki already!"

Armament Haki could defend against and resist the effects of Devil Fruit powers. Theoretically, as long as your Haki was strong enough, it could counter any ability.

Daren sighed.

"I was just a little worried Kuma might accidentally slap me into some remote, godforsaken place. That'd kinda suck."

"Why the hell would he do that?!"

Dragon was seething.

"Your injuries haven't even healed yet! He just wanted to help relieve your pain and fatigue! You bastard—don't you trust me even a little!?"

Clearly, he was fuming.

He'd originally planned to have Kuma treat Daren's injuries first—build up a bit of goodwill—then bring up the favor he needed. That way, Daren would owe him, and he could up the amount he asked for.

But this damn guy... was so ridiculously paranoid he'd even defend against his own allies!

Seriously, who uses Armament Haki just to shake hands!?

"Oh, I see now."

Daren finally caught on and laughed.

It wasn't that he didn't trust Dragon—it was just habit.

After all, this sea was crawling with strange Devil Fruits. The Hobi Hobi no Mi could turn people into toys. The Noro Noro no Mi could slow their movements. There were even fruits like the Raki Raki no Mi, capable of tampering with someone's luck...

And when it came to countering Devil Fruits, the only real option was Haki.

Better safe than sorry.

"Sorry, sorry. Let's try that again."

Daren grinned as he reached his hand out once more.

Dragon shot him a glare, clearly annoyed.

Kuma nodded, then gently patted Daren's hand.

Smack!

In that instant, Daren's pupils contracted sharply.

A strange, indescribable sensation surged through his entire body the moment Kuma's hand touched his.

He could feel it—every bit of fatigue and pain that had built up since his battle with Kaidou in Wano was suddenly flushed out of him.

No—not just Wano.



Even the exhaustion buried deep in his muscles from countless life-and-death fights, the hellish training routines he'd pushed himself through—all of it was being drawn out by Kuma's Nikyu Nikyu no Mi.

Injuries could heal, but fatigue and pain? Those sank in. They lingered.

Especially for someone like Daren, who trained and fought like a lunatic. His body carried way more internal wear and tear than most.

Anyone who's ever been seriously hurt would understand. Like when you recover from severe pneumonia—your tests are normal, doctors say you're fine, but every step feels off, and stairs make you wheeze like an old man. Or when you've broken bones or gotten deep bruises—sure, the scars heal, but movement feels stiffer, weaker than before. And when the weather turns, the pain returns too, like a ghost.

Those were hidden injuries—buried fatigue that medicine couldn't touch.

But now...

It was all gone.

A sensation of unmatched lightness and vitality roared through Daren's body like a tidal surge. He felt more in tune with himself than ever before, like his control had reached an entirely new level.

Instinctively, he triggered his perception ability to scan his physical status and data:

Physique: 91.031 (Indestructible Body)

Strength: 81.891 (Giant's Power)

Speed: 81.222 (Soru's Godspeed)

Devil Fruit Mastery: 85.445 (Island-Wide Coverage)

Armament Haki: 66.315

Observation Haki: 73.887 (Magnetic Field Sensory)

Conqueror's Haki: 64.091

His eyes widened in disbelief.

Compared to right after Kaidou's "lesson" in Wano, every one of his stats—except for Devil Fruit mastery—had increased by nearly a full point.

That was insane.

With numbers already this high, especially for core attributes like physique, strength, and speed, even a tiny increase was ridiculously difficult. Normally, even Kaidou-sensei would have to beat the hell out of him a dozen times to reach that gain.

But Kuma? Just one gentle tap...

And it gave him a full 6-point boost across the board.

The Nikyu Nikyu no Mi... was totally busted.

Meanwhile, a crimson ball of light shaped like a bear's paw floated slowly from Daren's body and hovered in the air.

"So... this is all the hidden pain and fatigue in my body?"

Daren narrowed his eyes as he studied it, clearly intrigued.

The Devil Fruits really were incredible. They could do this?

"How do you feel now, Daren?"

Dragon looked smug, chest puffed with pride as he watched Daren's stunned expression.

Daren nodded.

"Amazing. I've never felt this light before."

Casually, he clenched his fist.

The moment his fingers curled inward, the pressure generated triggered a deep, low boom—a muffled sonic crack rippling through the air.

Dragon and Kuma both flinched.

His raw physical power had gone up again—even stronger than before.

They stared at him like he was possessed, unconsciously taking half a step back.

"But..."

Daren pointed to the floating dark red light.

"What are we supposed to do with that thing?"

Chapter 425 - 425: Volume 3 – Chapter 68 He Smiled, He Knelt

Daren rubbed the stubble on his chin, eyeing the bear paw-shaped red light with interest.

He had to admit—it actually looked kind of cute.

But looks could be deceiving. Daren knew this wasn't some harmless cushion of light.

The years of accumulated pain and exhaustion he carried weren't a joke. Even if he set aside the countless brutal battles, the sheer fatigue from relentless, hellish training alone would be unbearable for most people.

Touch it just a little, and you'd probably drop to your knees on the spot.

What's more, this wasn't just compressed air from a standard "Ursus Shock"—it was concentrated conceptual energy.

If it were the former, he could just release it somewhere remote, like an uninhabited island or sea.

Kuma paused in thought, then rumbled in his low voice:

"My ability can't make this vanish into thin air. Someone else has to take it on."

Daren frowned.

"And if no one does?"

Kuma scratched his head, smiling gently.

"Then I'll take it myself."

"If no one bears the fatigue and pain soon enough, it'll just end up returning to my body."

That had always been his way.

He couldn't stand to see poor civilians suffering from illness and pain, so he would volunteer to take it on himself.

Sure, they could've used "scapegoats"—like capturing some truly vile pirates and making them bear the pain and fatigue as punishment.

But back then, he and Dragon were mostly helping people in impoverished countries or slums, where pirates weren't always available for the task.

So in the end, to prevent this expelled pain and fatigue from hurting innocent people, Kuma always quietly took it on himself.

While they were speaking, the dark red orb of light had already started drifting—slowly, but unmistakably—toward Kuma.

"Hahaha, it's fine! Let me take it for you, Daren!"

Dragon broke in with a hearty laugh.

He radiated a boisterous sense of camaraderie, his smile strangely infectious.

Daren raised an eyebrow, intrigued.

"You sure about that? I get the feeling this isn't something most people could handle, Dragon."

Dragon laughed it off.

"Are you underestimating me? Don't forget, I earned the title of 'monster' before you did!"

A glint flickered in his eyes.

If he helped Daren absorb all this pain and fatigue, he'd be owed a favor. And when the time came to ask for some Belly, Daren couldn't exactly turn him down, right?

Dragon had it all figured out.

Once, he had scoffed at money.

Wealth was a corrupting force, and as the future Fleet Admiral, Monkey D. Dragon had no need for it!

But after half a year of scraping by in poverty, not knowing where his next meal would come from... he couldn't take it anymore.

The thought made his grin stretch even wider. With righteous bravado, he stepped forward.

"A little internal damage and pain? With the bond we share, how could I not take this for you?!"

Raising both arms in a heroic pose...

He thrust them straight into the dark red, nearly black bear paw-shaped orb.

One second.

Two seconds.

Three seconds.

Dragon's smile froze.

His whole body twitched violently, face twisting in agony, trembling as if hit by a devastating shock.

Then—

With a loud thud.

He dropped to his knees.

Kuma: ...

Daren: ...

Dragon: ...

The air suddenly turned deathly still.

"Ahem... I'm just... not used to it."

Dragon's face flushed red as he pushed himself up with shaky hands on his knees. His legs were trembling like crazy.

But even as he spoke, his gaze locked on the glowing orb with disbelief.

He could swear—for a moment there, he actually saw his late grandmother!

Daren—no, what had been expelled from him, the "pain" and "fatigue"—was downright terrifying!

Dragon had taken on the pain Kuma extracted from sick civilians before, but this was nothing like that. Not even close.

It was a whole different magnitude.

If he had to put a number on it, the agony and exhaustion drawn out of Daren were a hundred, maybe even a thousand times worse than what you'd get from a terminally ill patient!

Without experiencing it firsthand, Dragon wouldn't have believed the human body could even handle such torment.

With that thought, both he and Kuma found themselves staring at the Vice Admiral in front of them in stunned silence.

What the hell was this guy's body made of?

And then came an even more disturbing question that sent a chill down their spines—

Just how many times had Daren been through life-or-death battles, skirting the edge of collapse, surviving against all odds?

A monster... this was a real monster.

Their eyes suddenly filled with genuine awe and admiration as they looked at him.

Compared to Dragon himself, Sakazuki, Borsalino, and Kuzan—all natural-born powerhouses—Daren, who clawed his way up through brutal training and relentless battles, enduring unthinkable pain and hardship, was the real deal.



Right then, Dragon finally understood why Daren's strength had grown at such an insane rate.

The guy was basically gambling with his life every time he trained or fought!

This lunatic...

Kuma and Dragon both gulped hard.

Their gazes drifted back to the dark red, nearly black orb of light, bitter expressions on their faces as they instinctively took a step back.

Even after Dragon's full-on "kneeling" attempt to absorb it, the thing had only shrunk by about one-fifth.

The remaining four-fifths... if they had to take that on, they'd either die or be stuck in bed for half a month.

"Uh... Daren..."

Dragon hesitated, stammering.

"Alright, alright, I'll handle it."

Daren shot him an annoyed look, then pulled out a freshly issued Den Den Mushi and dialed Stussy's number.

"This is Daren. I need ten... huh?"

Dragon frantically waved his hands and blinked at him.

Daren raised an eyebrow and went on,

"...make that thirty—no, a hundred criminals or pirates who've got it coming."

"Yeah, hurry. Three minutes."

He hung up right after.

The Pleasure District was Stussy's turf. With her pull, rounding up a hundred poor suckers on this island in under three minutes shouldn't be an issue.

Chapter 426 - 426: Volume 3 – Chapter 69: Seeing Off the Guests

"What are you doing!?"

"I'm the First Mate of the Black Snake Pirates! A big-name pirate with a 47 million Belly bounty!"

"If you lay a hand on me, our captain won't let you walk away alive!"

"D-Don't come any closer... Stay away..."

"AAHHHHH!!!"

Screams of agony burst from the top-floor suite of the hotel, sharp and unbearable, sending chills down the spines of the two black-suited security guards stationed outside. They didn't dare breathe too loudly.

This was the most luxurious hotel in the entire Pleasure District, owned personally by the Queen herself. It only served the most prominent figures from the New World.

Even the most basic room cost over a million Belly per night.

And this top-floor suite? It came with a private chef, massages, loans, and all kinds of high-end services. Security was available 24/7, and the nightly rate reached an outrageous five million Belly.

More importantly, the suite boasted top-tier soundproofing and security to ensure the utmost privacy for its distinguished guests.

The last person to stay here had been a Celestial Dragon who truly knew how to indulge. That night, at least ten boys and girls were brought into the suite—and not a single one came out again.

Even then, the guards hadn't heard a sound from inside.

But now...

That gut-wrenching wail, like something dragged out of the depths of hell, faintly leaked from the room. The two guards exchanged uneasy glances, fear flashing in their eyes.

Just who was in that room?

What was going on in there?

No matter how far their imaginations stretched, they couldn't picture it.

A few seconds later...

With a soft click, the door opened. Two staffers emerged, carrying a stretcher.

The man on it was unrecognizable—his body a bloody mess, large portions of skin shredded, pupils dilated. His lifeless face was frozen in a look of indescribable horror and pain.

Blood dripped steadily to the floor as cleaning staff rushed to wipe it up.

A pirate with a bounty nearing 50 million Belly—dead, just like that.

Gulp...

The two security guards swallowed hard, staring at the slowly closing door as though they were gazing into the depths of hell.

...

Inside the penthouse suite.

"Take him out. Next."

Daren waved his hand flatly, face emotionless.

Beside him, Dragon and Kuma looked numb, lips twitching with barely contained discomfort.

Soon after, another pirate—this one a burly man with a thick beard and bound in Seastone shackles—was dragged in like livestock headed for slaughter.

"Bastards! What the hell do you want!?"

He thrashed and roared in rage, but with those shackles on, he was completely helpless.

"I'm the captain of the Black Snake Pirates! A Great Pirate with a 60 million Belly bounty!"

Black Snake glared at the trio before him, bloodshot eyes full of killing intent.

"How convenient."

Daren chuckled, waving a hand.

"A family should stick together."

Metal whipped out like a venomous serpent, latching onto Black Snake and dragging him toward the slightly smaller bear paw-shaped orb of light.

The moment he touched it, his entire body jolted, and a scream ripped from his throat, sharp and inhuman.

It was like he'd been struck by lightning—his body convulsing violently as his skin burst open, misting the air with blood.

Five seconds later, Black Snake's legs kicked once—and then he collapsed, lifeless, joining his crewmate in the afterlife.

"Take him away."

Daren let out a sigh, visibly disappointed.

"This guy's supposed to be a 60 million Belly pirate? The bounties coming out of headquarters are getting more and more ridiculous. Couldn't even last ten seconds. What a disgrace..."

Dragon: ...

Kuma: ...

There was nothing wrong with that guy's bounty—his aura clearly wasn't weak!

It's just that what you expelled is way too terrifying!

"How many is that now..." Kuma murmured, shrinking back a bit.

"I've lost count," Dragon said, his eyelid twitching.

"Thirty-seven, I think. We're probably close—should hit a hundred soon," Daren replied calmly, puffing a cigar and sipping whiskey with a smile.

Hearing that, Dragon and Kuma once again turned their eyes to the red-black orb of light still floating in the air.

After absorbing over thirty unlucky victims, the mass of condensed pain and exhaustion had shrunk to about half its original size.

Dragon pressed his lips together.

Thinking back to how cocky he was at the start... he felt a cold sweat creeping in.

"If we'd had a large Sea King, we probably wouldn't have had to go through all this trouble..." Daren said. "But we didn't have the time. This was the only way."

He glanced at the orb, now hovering less than a meter from Kuma, thought for a moment, then gave an order to the staff nearby.

"Bring in the rest."

The staff member raised an eyebrow, bowed respectfully, and turned to carry out the order.

A few seconds later...

It looked like a scene from a slave auction. Black-suited security led dozens of cursing pirates inside, one after another, all in chains.

Dragon and Kuma instinctively turned away.

The sight was just too brutal.

Even though these guys were the worst of the worst—pirates and scum who deserved to be executed a hundred times over—it was hard not to feel a little sorry for them.

Soon, the top-floor suite was once again filled with gut-wrenching screams, echoing one after another.

...

The terrifying orb was finally, completely absorbed and dissipated.

The cleaning crew came in, equipped with professional tools, working swiftly and efficiently to tidy up the aftermath.

They mopped the floor, aired the room, and sprayed fragrance.

Moments later, the suite was spotless once again—like nothing had ever happened.

"So," Daren said with a warm smile, handing Dragon a gold-embossed cigar, "what was it you wanted to talk to me about this time?"

"You've done me a big favor here. As long as it's nothing that goes against my principles, I'll do my best to help."

As he spoke, he cast a sidelong glance at Dragon's tattered cloak and dirt-caked military boots, a half-smile tugging at his lips.

"Ahem..."

Dragon flushed, his face turning red. He instinctively glanced toward Kuma.

The latter had already closed his eyes at some point, standing there like a boulder—completely still, like he'd gone into hibernation.

Dragon: ...

Clenching his jaw, he took a deep breath and spoke earnestly.

"Daren, I really did come here today because I need your help with something."

Daren smiled.

"Go ahead."

Dragon straightened up, expression turning serious. He sat upright, posture firm.

"I want to borrow some funds from you. Enough to start forming a volunteer army."

As he finished, he locked eyes with Daren, gaze full of hope.

"I see..."



Daren nodded, exhaling a puff of smoke.

"Someone, come in."

He picked up a Den Den Mushi and made the call.

Dragon's eyes lit up. A smile spread across his face.

As expected of my best friend!

So direct, so decisive!

Didn't even ask for details—just called someone to bring the money!

He shot a smug glance at Kuma, wearing a proud, victorious grin like he was saying, "See? That's my buddy. Look how far my name carries."

Kuma opened his eyes too, unable to hide his excitement. He clenched his fists.

With proper funding, they could finally help more struggling civilians!

"Daren-sama, what are your orders?"

A man in a tailcoat entered, bowing gracefully.

Daren recognized him. He was the one who'd delivered the unlimited VIP card on Stussy's behalf. A trusted aide, no doubt.

Daren nodded, then smiled.

"Show him out."

Dragon: ???

Kuma: ???

Chapter 427 - 427: Volume 3 – Chapter 70: My Principle

Dragon stared blankly at Daren, looking like he couldn't believe what he'd just heard.

It was as if lightning had struck him—he stood there in a daze, his mind completely blank.

Send us away?

What's that supposed to mean!?

Weren't we just chatting and laughing a moment ago?

You even said, "You've done me such a huge favor. As long as it's not a matter of principle, I'll do everything I can to help you."

So why are you suddenly kicking us out?

I just cleared out the hidden injuries and pain from your body, nearly collapsed doing it... and this is how you repay me?

Ungrateful bastard!

The more Dragon thought about it, the more wronged he felt.

Kuma, standing nearby, also looked visibly stunned.

He couldn't help but glance at Dragon with a questioning look—

Like he was saying, "This is your 'influence'?"

Dragon: ...

"Gentlemen, this way please."

The man in the black tailcoat gave a slight bow to Dragon and Kuma, his gesture inviting them forward. His professional smile was flawless.

"No, Daren, you bastard... what the hell is this supposed to mean!?"

Dragon finally snapped out of it and growled, teeth clenched.

"Didn't you say you'd help with anything that wasn't a matter of principle?"

The man in the tailcoat shot an awkward glance at Daren.

Daren picked up his wine glass, took a sip, and waved for him to step out.

Once the man had exited, Daren let out a sigh and turned to Dragon.

"Dragon, tell me—what kind of person do you think I am?"

Dragon froze, then glanced toward Kuma in confusion.

Kuma looked up at the ceiling, pretending he hadn't noticed anything.

Dragon's mouth twitched slightly.

What the hell is that supposed to mean?

He ran through the possibilities in his head, then made up his mind and answered in a low voice,

"You're my closest friend."

To his surprise, Daren didn't deny it. He simply nodded.

"That's right. I've always seen you as a friend. Otherwise, back in the North Blue, I wouldn't have let you escape."

Dragon: ...

Let me escape?

You couldn't even beat me back then!

Dragon was fuming, but in someone else's house, he had to swallow his pride. In the end, he said nothing.

"Since we're friends... can't you help me with something this simple? I wouldn't have come to you if I had another way."

Daren sighed again and shook his head.

"It's exactly because we're friends that I can't help you with this."

Dragon was caught off guard.

Daren continued.

"I know you're strapped for cash. The moment you showed up, I figured you were here to borrow money."

"Why?" Dragon blurted out.

He thought he'd done a great job hiding it, even using the whole injury removal thing as a pretext.

"The reason..."

Daren took a drag from his cigarette, tapped his temple, and sighed.

"When a friend you haven't heard from in forever suddenly shows up all friendly and enthusiastic... what else could it be but to borrow money?"

Dragon: ...

Kuma nodded in agreement.

"Yeah, makes sense."

Dragon: ...

He opened his mouth, but for a moment, couldn't find a single counterargument.

It really did make sense...

Seeing Dragon stay silent, Daren went on.

"You should know what kind of person I am."

"You're a Marine," Dragon replied immediately.

Daren nodded, then shook his head. "Yes, but not exactly."

Dragon paused, thinking of all the titles that had been circulating about Daren, and cautiously ventured,

"You're... the handsome, powerful, and widely respected monster of Marine Headquarters, the legend killer, the successor of the Three Pillars, the uncrowned king of the North Blue, and the future Flying Admiral?"

Daren nodded. "Correct."

Dragon: ...

"But that's not what I meant," Daren added with another shake of his head.

"Then what do you mean!?"

Dragon was so furious his lips trembled.

If Daren hadn't kept a straight face, he would've thought the guy was messing with him.

Daren tapped his temple again. "What's my most well-known nickname?"

"The Marine... biggest scumbag?" Dragon answered hesitantly.

"That's it!"

Daren's eyes lit up as he finally cracked a smile.

"Scumbag! Being a Marine is just my title. But being a scumbag... that's who I truly am."

Hey hey hey, why do you sound proud of that...

Dragon was overwhelmed with disbelief.

"So what you're saying is..."

"As long as it's not a matter of principle, I can agree to it. However..." Daren's expression turned serious.  
"Not lending money is one of my principles!"

Dragon: ...

He couldn't help but ask,

"Then what other principles do you have?"

Daren took a deep breath, his eyes glowing with determination.

"I'm greedy, but I never take bribes!"

"I'm lustful, but I never deceive for it!"

"I smoke, but I'll never touch drugs!"

"I love drinking, but I never get drunk!"

"I flirt, but I never let down the girls who like me!"

"I crave power, but I'll never betray my friends for it!"

Every word hit like a hammer, loud and clear.

His solemn expression matched the gravity of his words. When he finished, Kuma could almost swear he saw a divine golden light radiating from him.

He looked ten feet tall!

Kuma was stunned.

"But what does any of that have to do with not lending me money!?"

Dragon's voice trembled with rage.

"I'm saying, I'm a scumbag with principles."

That relaxed smile returned to Daren's face.

"Borrowing money only ruins the purity of a friendship."



"Actually... our friendship isn't that pure," Dragon muttered.

"No, Dragon. Like you said, you see me as a close friend... and that will never change."

Daren shook his head firmly.

Dragon: ...

This bastard!!

He's absolutely messing with me!!

Dragon screamed internally, his face flushed, veins bulging at his temples, fists clenching and unclenching.

If he didn't need a favor, he might've already thrown a punch!

Not that he was sure he'd win...

"So, Dragon, I'm sorry. But based on my principles, I have to turn you down."

Daren shook his head with a look of genuine regret.

Dragon's expression fell. He opened his mouth but couldn't find anything to say.

Truth was, Daren had no obligation to help him.

Back then, he'd helped him escape purely out of personal ties—that alone fulfilled the duties of a friend.

And Daren had paid for it too. He was accused of negligence, and his promotion got shelved because of it.

Now, Dragon was a fugitive wanted by the World Government and the Marines.

The fact that Daren was willing to risk his career just to meet with him—he'd already shown more than enough goodwill.

But to go further, to provide financial support or help topple the World Government—that was too big a risk. If caught, Daren wouldn't just lose his career. He could end up on the run just like Dragon.

"I'm sorry. I got carried away, Daren," Dragon said, forcing a smile.

"I shouldn't have dragged you into this."

Daren gave a light laugh.

"It's alright."

"It's because I see you as a friend that I need to be clear about my principles... I never borrow money from friends."

He paused.

"Because if a friend needs it, I just give it to them."

"It's fine, I understand, Daren. I'll find another way—wait, what did you just say!?"

Dragon suddenly looked up, eyes wide, his expression lit up in shock and joy.

Give it directly!?

There's a deal this sweet!?

"You're serious!?" he practically shouted.

Daren nodded with a grin.

"I'm serious—but I need you to do me a favor."

"Say no more!"

Dragon bowed deeply, his face full of resolve.

He even raised a gust of wind with a wave of his hand, pushing Kuma's head down too so they both bowed.

"Well..." Daren stroked his chin, thinking it over.

"This thing I need... it's risky. You should consider it carefully—"

"No need to consider!"

Dragon cut him off, righteously declaring,

"No matter what it is, as long as I can get your money—uh, I mean, your friendship—I, Monkey D. Dragon, will go through fire and water for it!"

He stepped in close, leaned toward Daren's ear, and growled under his breath with gritted teeth.

"It's settled, Daren. Don't make me... beg you on my knees."

After all the "torment" Daren had put him through, Dragon had completely let go of his pride.

He was sick of being broke.

If this kept up, his dream of overthrowing the World Government and building a peaceful world would drift further and further away.

Daren replied coolly,

"You already knelt down earlier."

Dragon: ...

Chapter 428 - 428: Volume 3 – Chapter 71: Am I Missing Something?

"I... I just had a bit of a wobble in my legs earlier," Dragon muttered awkwardly.

Daren chuckled but didn't bother responding to the prideful act.

"So, what is it you need me to do?" Dragon asked eagerly.

A faint gleam flashed in Daren's eyes, as if he were already formulating a plan, but it quickly faded. He smiled and said calmly,

"No need to rush. I just need to know that you're capable of handling it."

He glanced at the straightforward Kuma beside him.

"At first, I thought you might not make the cut, but now... it looks like you'll manage."

Dragon was still confused, but he'd already made up his mind. As long as he could get enough financial backing from Daren, he'd do whatever it took.

"So... how much funding will you give me?"

His eyes lit up with anticipation. Rubbing his hands together, he stared at Daren with burning hope.

"No, the question is—how much do you need?"

Daren leisurely puffed on his cigar, crossed his legs, and gave a composed smile.

How much do I need?

Dragon froze for a moment. He honestly didn't have a clear answer to that yet.

Despite being a Marine by blood and upbringing, he'd never been too involved in the military's internal operations.

The Marine system was well-established. Besides the combat units, there were whole divisions of staff officers and administrators to handle communications, budgeting, and day-to-day operations.

But Dragon, having inherited Garp's more free-spirited personality, had never cared much for that sort of logistical grind.

Now that he was starting from scratch, though, he realized just how in the dark he was.

Rescuing civilians, sourcing weapons, recruiting manpower... Dragon began counting on his fingers, his face full of worry.

Daren didn't rush him and let him think.

Truthfully, Dragon's request hadn't caught him off guard at all.

Starting a military force from the ground up wasn't something anyone could do on a whim.

Daren had only managed to build up the North Blue Fleet because there was already an existing Marine presence in the region.

All he really did was "pull" that fleet out from under Marine command.

Of course, after years of effort—managing, reinforcing, and expanding his forces—the North Blue Fleet was now completely independent from Marine Headquarters. It had nothing to do with the frail unit it once was.

That alone showed how difficult building a proper military could be.

Daren had practically stripped the North Blue clean, squeezing every possible profit out of those waters just to sustain his fleet.

If it weren't for draining the gold reserves from Sky Island's City of Gold, he'd probably still be losing sleep trying to fund its future growth.

As for Dragon's request? Lending money wasn't something Daren liked doing.

Sure, with Sky Island's treasure now in his hands, he had more wealth than he could ever need. But loans always came with strings—and problems.

Especially with someone like Dragon, constantly on the run. Odds were, he'd never pay it back.

And if he didn't, Daren would be left stewing in frustration. It'd strain their relationship.

Better to just give it outright.

At least that way, he'd get something meaningful in return—like Dragon's promise.

A favor from someone with Admiral-level power, or even someone who might one day become a legendary force? That was a trade Daren would make any day.

But more than that... he genuinely had too much money to spend.

Sky Island's gold was overwhelming.

It just sat there, piling up day after day, and he had no idea what to do with it.

When you have that much, money becomes just a number.

And if you can't spend it, it might as well not exist.

So, why not use it to earn a favor from Dragon?

"I've got the number!"

Dragon suddenly raised his head, clenching his fists with determination.

Daren smiled. "Alright then—how much?"

Dragon glanced at Daren's face, gauging his reaction, and cautiously offered,

"One billion Belly?"

His voice wavered a bit.

After all, a billion Belly was a massive sum no matter how you looked at it. In Marine terms, that kind of money could build fifteen standard warships, or five Buster Call-class battleships. It could also fund a 2,000-man elite unit for an entire year.

For someone like Dragon—who currently had nothing but himself and Kuma—that amount was astronomical. It would cover all operating costs for the coming year and allow him to form a small, functional force.

He knew Daren had money. But how much? That, he wasn't sure. And for pride's sake, he didn't dare ask for too much.

"Uh, Daren... if you think a billion is a bit steep..."

"No problem."

Daren casually waved his hand and cut him off without hesitation.

Dragon froze.

That was way too easy.

Regret instantly surged in his chest. Had he asked for too little?

Even Kuma blinked in confusion. He'd never seen someone so casually generous. Right now, Vice Admiral Daren looked ten feet tall.



"No—I spoke too soon. I meant 1.5 billion!" Dragon blurted, blushing with embarrassment.

"Sure."

Dragon: ???

"Wait, no, 2 billion!"

"Deal."

Dragon: ???

He stared at Daren, who was still calmly puffing his cigar, like he'd just seen a ghost.

"H-how rich are you?"

Even his voice was shaking now.

Daren shrugged.

"I have no idea."

Damn it!!

"Then I want 2.5 billion!!" Dragon shouted like a gambler going all in, his eyes bloodshot.

Daren gave him a glance.

"Alright."

Dragon: ...

"Aaaaaahhhhhh!!!"

Losing his mind, Dragon spun around and screamed at the stunned Kuma.

"So how much should I have asked for!?"

Kuma shook his head slowly and swallowed hard.

Dragon looked back at Daren—who had just promised 2.5 billion Belly and was still lounging there, smoking without blinking an eye.

His frustration hit the ceiling.

Damn it!!

You rich bastards are the worst!!

I, Monkey D. Dragon, swear I'll overthrow the World Government... and wipe out all of you filthy rich elites!!

I'll build a better world!

"Forget it, I'll just give you 3 billion," Daren said impatiently, finally cutting the drama short.

Three... three billion...

Dragon was stunned, his face twitching.

After a brief pause, he finally snapped out of it.

He shoved down Kuma's head again, and the two bowed in perfect sync.

"Thank you!!"

Dragon's voice was full of emotion as he declared,

"Daren, you really are my best friend!"

He turned to Kuma, stretched out his hand, and laughed.

"Kuma! Today marks the official start of our journey!"

Kuma smiled and was about to return the handshake but paused.

He glanced around, walked over to the coat rack, picked up a pair of black gloves, put them on, then came back and finally shook Dragon's hand.

Dragon: ...

...

Daren gave Dragon instructions to return to the North Blue to pick up the money, then waved him off.

"That's all for now, Dragon."

"I've got to head back to HQ."

Dragon nodded but suddenly stepped forward and lowered his voice.

"Hey, Daren—those pirate bodies you just had carried out... mind handing them over to me?"

Daren gave him a skeptical look.

Dragon chuckled.

"They're mostly small fry, sure. But all together, I could probably cash in two or three hundred million in bounties."

Daren: ...

"Fine, take whatever you want," he said gruffly, waving him off like swatting a fly.

Chapter 429 - 429: Volume 3 – Chapter 72: It's That Guy

After getting Daren's approval, Dragon left in high spirits.

Not even three minutes later, Stussy strolled in, graceful as ever, her black lace gown trailing behind her and a fragrant breeze accompanying her steps.

"Well, well... I didn't expect you to still be secretly keeping in touch with a Marine defector."

She smiled seductively at Daren, as if she'd stumbled upon some juicy gossip.

"If word got out, even someone like you—riding high as you are—might find yourself in a bit of trouble, wouldn't you?"

Daren shrugged, completely unfazed.

He hadn't planned on hiding Dragon's visit from Stussy in the first place.

If he had, he wouldn't have arranged the meeting in a hotel owned by her.

In truth, he had intentionally let her find out.

"If you're curious, feel free to report me."

He gave her a half-smile.

The flirtatious grin on Stussy's face froze for a second.

This guy—so cocky... She bit her lip, irritated.

Meeting with Dragon in private might cause some political ripples for Daren, but it wasn't enough to sink his career.

If she dared report him, Daren would absolutely leak her secret.

And if that happened, Dr. Vegapunk could be in serious danger.

"I'm heading back to HQ. If it's convenient, have your forces in the New World keep an eye on Shiki."

Daren snuffed out his cigar, rose from the sofa, and grabbed the large cloak hanging nearby, tossing it over his shoulders.

"And why should I take your orders!?" Stussy snapped.

Daren pushed open the door, paused, then turned back with a grin.

"You wouldn't want your little secret getting out, would you?"

Stussy: ...

Her fair face flushed with anger, her expression shifting as rage simmered beneath her calm.

Daren, satisfied, stepped out of the suite.

The door shut behind him.

From inside, the sound of the Queen of the Pleasure District furiously smashing furniture rang out.

...

By the time Daren arrived at the harbor of the Pleasure District, Tokikake's warship was already prepped and quietly docked by the pier.

"Vice Admiral Daren!!"

The Marines on board, spotting him, snapped to attention and saluted with excitement.

"Vice Admiral Daren is sailing with us this time?!"

"It's an honor!"

"He really is as handsome as they say!"

"His presence is incredible!"

"..."

They murmured among themselves, awestruck.

After all, standing before them was the man who had stopped Shiki, and who had stormed Totto Land single-handedly—the Navy's monster.

By now, Daren's formidable presence and dazzling combat record had earned him a massive following within Marine ranks.

"Hmm? Where's Commodore Tokikake? Hasn't he shown up yet?"

Daren smiled, nodding in greeting, then looked around but didn't spot him.

The soldiers responded with discipline.

"Commodore Tokikake said the main goal of this visit to the Pleasure District was intelligence gathering. To ensure our safety, he went deep undercover alone."

"Other than a small group ashore for supplies, the rest remained on the ship."

Daren: ...

So he went 'deep undercover,' huh?

He shook his head.

"Commodore Tokikake is back!"

"Something's wrong with his face!"

"Did he get hurt?!"

"..."

Suddenly, anxious shouts broke out.

Daren turned, confused—only to see several Marines in loose hooded cloaks rushing up the gangway with a stretcher.

On it lay a figure completely drained of energy, pale and gaunt...

It was Tokikake.

Daren's eye twitched.

Yeah... he could already guess what happened.

"Tokikake, you bastard..."

Tokikake was carried over to Daren, weakly smiling through his heavy dark circles.

"The other 28... I handled them all!"

His voice was full of pride.



Daren: ...

"...Very impressive."

He sighed, then gave Tokikake a thumbs-up with a serious expression.

The nearby Marines, unaware of the real story, were so touched by the sight that they were practically in tears.

"Commodore Tokikake truly deserves to be called one of the Navy's 'Golden Generation'!"

"He went deep undercover to gather intelligence... working himself to the bone day and night..."

"He's amazing..."

"Yeah, absolutely..."

Daren shook his head speechlessly, then said in a low voice,

"Set sail. We're heading back to headquarters."

"Yes, Vice Admiral Daren!"

The Marines moved into action at once.

Sails were hoisted, anchors raised—the warship began its journey back.

"I'm going to rest. Unless it's urgent, don't bother me."

Leaving that instruction behind, Daren entered the cabin.

Now that all the hidden injuries and fatigue in his body had been purged by Kuma, he needed time to get used to the new state of his body.

The ship gradually pulled out from the Pleasure District's harbor and drifted off into the distance.

Tokikake, now recovered enough to stand with the help of his fellow Marines, slowly got to his feet.

Standing at the stern, he looked back at the vibrant island, his expression full of emotion and his face streaked with tears.

"I'll be back."

"Miss Asuka, Miss Ozawa, Miss Matsushima, Miss Hata, Miss Matsushita, Miss Inoue, Miss Mikami..."

He clenched his fists tightly, as if vowing something of the utmost importance.

Then—

Thud.

He fell straight backward and passed out cold.

...

One day later.

Daren emerged from his cabin, refreshed and energized, only to spot Tokikake training furiously on deck.

He'd shed his uniform, revealing a scrawny, sweat-drenched upper body, and was doing one-handed push-ups while balancing an enormous barbell on his back.

"Looking lively today..."

Daren greeted him with a smile.

Tokikake grinned, flipped upright in a smooth motion, and the massive barbell slammed onto the deck with a loud bang. The weight was so absurd that the whole ship dipped slightly, drawing startled cries from the crew.

"Of course! I'm Tokikake—the genius of Marine Headquarters!"

He strode over, radiating pride.

"Brrrr..."

Suddenly, the ship's Den Den Mushi rang out.

A nearby Marine picked up the line. His face changed slightly, and he rushed over in haste.

"Vice Admiral Daren, Commodore Tokikake—distress call from a nearby island!"

He held up the Den Den Mushi. A panicked voice crackled through:

"Requesting backup!!"

"This is Team 357 from Marine G11 Base—we've run into a pirate!!"

"He's... way too strong..."

"Sand... it's sand...!"

"Everyone's being pulled into quicksand... Please... send help... Our coordinates are—"

The voice trailed off, fading into static, like it had been swallowed whole.

The Marines grew tense, expressions turning grim.

Daren, however, raised an eyebrow, and a faintly amused smile tugged at his lips.

Sand powers...

It's that guy.

Chapter 430 - 430: Volume 3 – Chapter 73: Isn't It Good to Stay Alive, Crocodile?

"Sand... So he's a Devil Fruit user?"

Tokikake frowned.

Daren let out a faint laugh.

"Does it matter?"

The smile on his lips carried a biting chill.

"Whoever he is, this isn't just a challenge to the Marines... it's a challenge to me."

Tokikake blinked in disbelief.

"Wait, you're saying he's targeting you?"

He quickly waved to the nearby Marines, issuing orders while still looking doubtful.

"That seems unlikely..."

The warship promptly adjusted course.

Daren just shrugged, then lifted his hand and curled a finger.

Clang!

Two glints—one black, one white—flashed out from the ship's cabin. Without a sound, they sliced through the air and arrived before Daren, floating in place.

"It's only been a few days since I hit Totto Land. With the whole pirate world lying low, this guy's the only one bold enough to strike at the Marines. Who else could he be after, if not me?"

Daren sneered as he stepped onto Enma's blade.

"Wait! I'm coming too!"

Seeing Daren preparing to head out, Tokikake called out urgently.

Daren looked back, puzzled.

Tokikake grinned with excitement, cracking his knuckles.

"Leave this one to me."

Daren eyed him skeptically.

What's this guy up to now?

Tokikake puffed out his chest and said righteously,

"I'm just keeping my word. Didn't I tell you? I approve of you now, Daren!"

"If anyone dares to mess with you, I won't let them off easy!"

Daren couldn't help but laugh.

"Alright, hop on. Just hold tight."

With Daren's permission, Tokikake eagerly stepped forward, ready to stand on Enma's blade as well.

He'd been fascinated by Daren's flashy travel style for a while now.

Riding a sword through the air—

Power aside, it was just plain cool!

But as soon as he got close, a suffocating, deadly aura exploded from the blade of the cursed sword, stopping him in his tracks and raising every hair on his body.

He instantly stepped back, staring at the long sword wrapped in black and purple flame-like patterns with visible unease.

Was it just his imagination, or did that sword actually feel... deadly?

Thinking back to the day it pierced straight through an entire island, Tokikake swallowed hard.

"Not that one."

"Oh, oh, got it."

He turned toward the other sword—Kariumi.

"Not that one either."

"Damn it! Where am I supposed to stand then!?"

"Don't you have your own military sword?"

"..."

...

New World.

An island.

Yellow sand danced in the wind.

The town looked as if it had been corroded by time. The buildings' surfaces had crumbled into dry quicksand, and all around were broken walls and ruins.

Marines lay scattered across the ground, some looking like shriveled husks—bodies completely drained of moisture, barely clinging to life like mummies.

A young figure radiating a powerful aura sat among the debris of a collapsed house, one foot resting atop a critically wounded Marine.

The youth had slicked-back hair and a shadowed gaze. He wore an orange plaid shirt, black pants, and a black fur coat draped over his shoulders.

Though only seventeen or eighteen by appearance, his sharp arrogance and mafia-like demeanor gave him an air of maturity well beyond his years.

"Damn pirate..."

"Why didn't you just kill us..."

The dying Marines cursed weakly, their eyes filled with bitter resentment as they stared at the man.

He was too strong.

Their attacks had done nothing. In less than three minutes, their entire 200-man patrol unit had been decimated like dry leaves in a storm.

But what enraged them most was that, despite being able to kill them all in an instant, he had deliberately held back—and even allowed them to call for reinforcements from nearby Marine branches.

"Killing small fry like you is a waste of my energy."



The man sneered coldly, his gemstone-ringed hands scattering into yellow sand, spinning into a miniature storm.

The Marines stiffened, faces red with helpless anger.

"How arrogant..."

At that moment, a calm voice echoed faintly from high in the sky.

Almost the instant it was heard, a flash of snow-white light tore through the air, moving faster than the eye could follow and streaking across the island.

Crack!

The man's entire face suddenly burst into particles of sand.

In the next instant...

A tall, imposing figure streaked downward from the clouds on a trail of black light, landing hard on the ground. A long, snow-white cloak billowed violently behind him.

"Vice Admiral Daren!!"

"Vice Admiral Daren came for the rescue!!"

"This is amazing! We're saved!!"

"..."

The battered Marines' faces lit up with surprise and joy. Even as they lay half-dead, they stared up in awe at the Marine Vice Admiral who had descended from the heavens.

The airborne sand twisted, swirled... and reformed into the man's head.

The moment his gaze fell on the Vice Admiral, a flicker of surprise passed through his eyes—but it quickly turned into an uncontrollable excitement and thirst for battle.

"At first, I thought they'd send some branch vice admiral... Kuhahaha. Didn't expect it'd be you..."

The young man rose slowly from the rubble, his eyes locked onto Daren, burning with unhidden ambition.

"But this is even better... Rogers Daren. The 'monster' of Marine Headquarters! The 'Legend Slayer'! The 'Uncrowned King of the North Blue'... Kuhahahaha! Before I take down Whitebeard, I'll sharpen my blade on you first!!"

Daren tilted his head, eyeing the vaguely familiar young man.

Then, a wide grin spread across his face.

"Isn't it good to be alive, Crocodile?"

This man was none other than a young Crocodile.

After tearing through the Grand Line, his sights were now set on challenging Edward Newgate—the "strongest man in the world."

"You know me?"

Crocodile's eyes lit up. He let out a loud laugh.

"Kuhahaha! Even better. Saves me the trouble of an introduction."

His right palm suddenly gathered a tightly condensed sandstorm, growing rapidly into a whirling tornado over ten meters tall.

In an instant, a fierce wind swept across the area, yellow sand pelting the ground and nearby walls like a hail of bullets, riddling everything with holes.

"Then let's get started!"

Crocodile took a long drag from his cigar.

But just as he was about to launch his attack—

"Aaaahhhhhh!!"

A pig-like shriek of misery suddenly rang out from above, rapidly getting closer...

...