

One Piece 371

Chapter 371 - 371: Volume 3 – Chapter 14: Two Devil Fruits

So that's how it is...

Tsuru looked at Gion and Tokikake, their eyes blazing with determination, and a smile of satisfaction slowly spread across her face.

Was it because Daren was improving too quickly... and they were worried about falling behind?

Suddenly, she understood why Zephyr insisted on the "seat ranking" system in the training camp. Even among the elite of the golden generation, filled with talented and ambitious youths, they needed someone to chase after—someone worth following, someone to inspire them to push themselves.

That was the meaning of being number one.

"I understand."

Tsuru took a key from a nearby drawer, walked over to a safe in the corner of the office, and unlocked its outer casing. She entered a password, and soon retrieved two finely crafted small wooden boxes. Carefully, she placed them on the coffee table.

Under Gion and Tokikake's eager gazes, Tsuru slowly opened the two boxes.

Inside each lay a Devil Fruit, both radiating a vibrant, mysterious energy.

The one on the left was snow-white, shaped like a peach, its surface glistening with a crystal-clear sheen.

The one on the right looked like a banana, covered in dark brown scale-like patterns.

Even sitting there silently, the two Devil Fruits gave off an overwhelming aura of power.

Gion and Tokikake's eyes were instantly locked onto them, unable to look away.

"I'm sure you already know the pros and cons of Devil Fruits, so there's no need for me to explain."

Tsuru smiled as she spoke.

Both of them nodded in unison.

A single person cannot eat two Devil Fruits.

Once someone eats one, they lose the ability to swim—cursed by the sea.

Tsuru had actually prepared these two Devil Fruits for them two years ago.

Back then, though, both had agreed that their foundations weren't solid enough, so they chose not to eat them and become ability users.

But now, things were different.

After two years of training, trials, and battle experience, and everything they'd learned at the camp, they had undergone a complete transformation. They were no longer the naïve rookies they once were.

Now, they had mastered both the Rokushiki and Haki, reaching a point where they could fully utilize the power of a Devil Fruit to boost their strength.

What's more, the sudden eruption of the Battle of Marineford had left both Gion and Tokikake with a deep sense of pressure and insecurity. It had made them realize just how far they still were from the top-tier powerhouses of the sea.

They knew—if they didn't push themselves now, they might never catch up to that guy again.

Having made up their minds, they didn't hesitate any longer.

Gion stepped forward first, gently picked up the snow-white Devil Fruit, peeled a small piece of its skin, and put it in her mouth.

Her eyebrows instantly furrowed, and her face froze.

Seeing her reaction, Tokikake, who had been itching to go next, burst into laughter.

With swagger, he marched forward, rolled up his sleeves, snorted hot air from his nostrils, and stared down the scale-covered Devil Fruit. Hands on his hips, he grinned cockily.

"Little baby, been waiting for me long enough, huh..."

"Once I eat you, Daren won't be able to keep acting so high and mighty!"

"Keh keh keh keh... from this moment on..."

He grabbed the Devil Fruit, opened his mouth wide, and shoved the whole thing in.

"I, Tokikake, the genius of Marine Headquarters, will no longer—"

His voice cut off.

Tokikake froze on the spot.

His face turned from red with excitement to a ghostly white. Then a purplish hue, like he'd been poisoned, crept up his neck and spread across his face.

Gulp.

His throat moved.

He swallowed.

"Cough! Cough! Cough!!"

Doubling over, Tokikake broke into a violent coughing fit, tears and snot streaming down his face as he howled like a dying beast.

"This tastes like shit!!"

Then he noticed Gion and Tsuru looking at him—expressions slowly turning strange.

...

A few days later...

Marine Headquarters, abandoned port.

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

Heavy thuds echoed as fists slammed into the sides of massive warships, sending shockwaves rippling through the air.

Two tall figures stood in front of separate derelict warships, hammering away with nothing but their raw strength. Their punches struck like cannon fire, carving dents into the hulking steel hulls.

Sweat dripped from their foreheads, their breathing ragged, yet their eyes remained laser-focused.

"Dahahaha! Daren! I'm almost catching up to you!"

With a loud crack, Kuzan smashed a hole into the side of a warship, splinters flying everywhere as a grin of exhilaration spread across his face.

But Daren didn't respond. His concentration was absolute. The world around him had faded—only the warship before him remained, a target to be destroyed.

Not far off, under a large sun umbrella...

Garp lay sprawled out on a beach chair in a loose floral shirt and oversized shorts, munching loudly on a pack of opened senbei.

"You're unbelievable, Garp. Just gonna sit there and watch?"

A resigned voice sounded behind him.

Zephyr walked over, arms crossed, clearly irritated.

Garp let out a carefree laugh.

"You don't get it. This is my secret training method."

"Secret training method?"

Zephyr raised an eyebrow, giving Garp a skeptical glance.

Then he recalled the battle on Coin Island. According to Sengoku, Daren had taken a direct hit from Shiki in that fight.

During that clash, Daren had unleashed a punch remarkably similar to Garp's. Though he was eventually slashed and badly injured by Shiki, the fact that he could replicate part of Garp's style under pressure proved that he had grasped its essence.

Could it be... Garp actually had some kind of special teaching method?

"Wahaha, exactly," Garp said smugly.

"Go on, let's hear it."

Zephyr's curiosity was piqued. Since retiring, he no longer had much interest in military matters—his passion now was raising the next generation of Marine elites.

If Garp really had a unique method, of course he wanted to learn it.

Garp gave him a side glance, then leaned in and said mysteriously,

"It's simple... just let them experience it firsthand."

"Experience it firsthand?"

Zephyr frowned, thinking it over.

Then it hit him.

Wasn't that just another way of saying "beat the crap out of them and let them figure it out themselves"!?

A few dark lines popped up on Zephyr's forehead.

He should've known better than to trust this guy!

He shot Garp a death glare.

Just then, Daren and Kuzan finished their training and walked over, wiping the sweat from their brows.

"Hahaha, Zephyr-sensei, you're here!"

Kuzan looked a bit bashful.

Daren gave Zephyr a nod.

"Zephyr-sensei."

Zephyr smiled.

"Looks like you two have been making good progress."

He gave Kuzan a pat on the shoulder, then turned to Daren.

"Daren, I came to ask—are you ready for tomorrow's training camp graduation ceremony?"

The graduation speech, huh?

A faint, unreadable smirk played at the corner of Daren's lips.

"I've been ready for a while, Zephyr-sensei."

Zephyr paused.

He didn't know if it was just his imagination, but something about that smile made him uneasy.

He had a bad feeling about this...

Chapter 372 - 372: Volume 3 – Chapter 15: Rest and Recuperation, Steady Progress

The next day.

Early morning.

Warm sunlight poured through the towering floor-to-ceiling windows of the Fleet Admiral's office, overlooking the oval-shaped naval port. But despite the brightness outside, the atmosphere inside the spacious office was heavy with tension.

Fleet Admiral Kong looked worn from his journey. His usually resolute face showed clear signs of exhaustion.

Sengoku and Tsuru stood before him, eyes full of anticipation. Their hands fidgeted slightly as they waited in silence, hoping the elder—just returned from Mary Geoise—would give them the answer they had long awaited.

"So... Fleet Admiral Kong?"

Kong pulled out a handkerchief to wipe the sweat from his face, lit a cigar, and took a deep draw. Only then did he finally look up at the two of them.

A weary but genuine smile slowly appeared on his face.

"The process wasn't easy, but the government finally approved it."

"That's great!"

Sengoku clenched his fists and gave a heavy pump of excitement, unable to hold back his voice.

Only in private with Kong would this usually stern, composed Marine Admiral reveal such a youthful reaction.

Tsuru couldn't help but laugh too, letting out a long sigh of relief.

They both knew exactly how important Kong's trip to Mary Geoise had been. Besides delivering his official report, he had a crucial mission—to request financial support from the World Government for the reconstruction of Marineford, as well as for medical treatment for the wounded and compensation for the fallen after the war.

Shiki's reckless assault on Marine Headquarters had done far more than just destroy buildings and infrastructure.

Countless civilians lost their homes and were forced to flee. Many more lost their lives in the chaos.

Against the highest levels of combat power in the world—forces capable of shaking the very balance of the sea—the lives of ordinary people were as fragile as ants, helpless in the face of overwhelming might.

And the Marines had suffered heavily as well. The soul monster army summoned by Big Mom, Charlotte Linlin, inflicted massive casualties on the Marine forces.

According to incomplete statistics, at least 50,000 civilians were killed in the Battle of Marineford, more than 15,000 Marines died in the line of duty, and the number of wounded was beyond counting.

Over the past few days, Sengoku and Tsuru had been overwhelmed by the work of postwar relief and reconstruction. They'd barely had time to sleep.

But even the most capable leaders can't build without resources. The Marine budget had already been tight before the war, and this unexpected disaster had only made things worse.

With both funding and manpower running low, even the brilliant minds of Sengoku and Tsuru were stuck.

Now, with Kong successfully securing additional military funds from the World Government, they could finally relax a little.

It was incredible news.

The dead could not be brought back, and the pain of those left behind would not vanish—but with enough support, at least some hope could be restored.

Kong let out a puff of smoke shaped like a dragon and smiled.

"How've things been at headquarters while I was away?"

Sengoku immediately straightened up and replied with a serious expression.

"Reporting, Fleet Admiral Kong—everything in Marineford is proceeding normally!"

"Reconstruction is moving ahead step by step. Now that funding is secured, compensation and medical aid for the wounded can also proceed without delay."

Kong nodded in satisfaction.

Sengoku's abilities were unquestionable. Aside from raw combat strength, his all-around leadership made him the strongest candidate to succeed Kong as Fleet Admiral.

"Right, how did the hearing for Sakazuki and the other two go?"

As if suddenly recalling something, Kong's expression turned a little strange.

"When I was in Mary Geoise, I bumped into the folks from the Inspection Department. Their attitude was... oddly enthusiastic. They just kept going on and on about how outstanding that kid Daren was..."

At those words, both Sengoku and Tsuru's expressions shifted subtly.

"Fleet Admiral Kong, the hearing... went relatively smoothly."

"It's just—strangely enough, the officials who had been pressing Daren hard suddenly changed their tune completely after receiving a Den Den Mushi call midway through."

"Is that so..."

Kong mused for a moment, then shook his head.

"Never mind. It's not that important."

"That kid Daren has always been thorough in his work. If he managed to shut down those arrogant bureaucrats, it's just a sign of his capability."

"There's one more matter."

Sengoku straightened up and spoke solemnly.

"Go ahead," said Kong.

Taking a puff from his cigar, Kong narrowed his eyes.

"The graduation ceremony for the training camp is all set for today, isn't it?"

"Yes, Fleet Admiral. Reporters from the major newspapers have already arrived at headquarters. Sakazuki and the other two will be decorated at the same time as part of the ceremony," Sengoku confirmed.

"Good,"

Kong nodded, then continued, "What about Zephyr's side? Everything under control?"

"Let's not have another incident like the last two times."

He gave a helpless, pained expression, as though recalling something best forgotten.

Sengoku's mouth twitched slightly before replying with emphasis,

"Don't worry, Fleet Admiral."

"Zephyr's already spoken with Daren. There shouldn't be any problems this time."

At that, Kong gave a slow nod.

"That's good. Even though the war ended with us managing to hold Marineford, it was, in truth, a devastating defeat."

"Casualties were severe. The losses immeasurable. The overall mood at headquarters is bleak and lifeless, and morale throughout the ranks is dangerously low."

"In times like this, holding a graduation ceremony—and letting Daren, the hero who protected Marineford, speak to rally the troops—can go a long way in lifting spirits."

"Of course, the propaganda effort shouldn't be overdone."

"For now, our guiding policy must remain 'seeking steady progress.' The focus should be on swiftly rebuilding headquarters and regaining our strength."

"At least in the short term, we're in no position to launch another large-scale war."

As he finished speaking, a cautious glint flashed in Kong's weathered eyes.

Though he had managed to wring additional funding from the World Government, it wasn't much—nowhere near enough to support another full-scale campaign.

At least, not for the foreseeable future.

Still, there was some good news: with the war's end, the situation in the New World had begun to stabilize.

Shiki had gone into hiding once more, vanishing without a trace.

Big Mom and Kaidou had both quieted down as well.

This rare moment of peace gave the Marines a chance to rest, regroup, and rebuild their fighting strength.

And the younger generation—Sakazuki, Borsalino, Daren—were steadily coming into their own.

As time went on, the Marines' advantage over the pirates would only grow stronger.

Chapter 373 - 373: Volume 3 – Chapter 16: They Can Wait

Daren stepped out of the steam-filled shower, gave himself a quick towel down, then wrapped it around his waist and slowly walked over to the mirror.

With a swipe of his hand, he cleared the condensation from the glass, revealing a strikingly handsome, unruly face.

Sharp eyes, blade-like brows, and a prominent nose lent his features a chiseled, commanding look. His damp, tousled black hair stood casually upright, giving off a wild, defiant air.

His bare upper body was lean and powerful, muscles taut and defined. Broad pecs, sculpted abs, wide shoulders, and countless scars crisscrossing his torso made him look like a predator in wait—a coiled leopard brimming with lethal force.

"Finally... it's here."

Daren smirked at his reflection, lit a cigarette, and murmured softly.

Today marked the graduation ceremony of the Marine Headquarters Officer Training Camp.

And today, he would officially rise to the rank of Vice Admiral of Marine Headquarters.

In the original plot of this pirate-infested world, a Vice Admiral might've seemed like little more than set dressing—just another rank, a convenient yardstick for protagonists to showcase their strength. Ordinary, forgettable.

But after living in this world himself, Daren knew better. Becoming a Vice Admiral was the pinnacle many spent their entire lives chasing across these vast seas.

In terms of strength, a Marine Vice Admiral was expected to have mastered both forms of Haki, and to skillfully wield several superhuman combat techniques. Some elite Vice Admirals could even stand toe-to-toe with the Shichibukai.

In terms of authority, they commanded their own warships and had direct control over thousands of elite Marines. When stationed abroad, they could oversee entire sea regions, with full jurisdiction over major Marine branches along the Grand Line.

Whether it was power, status, influence, or reputation—Vice Admirals were some of the most formidable forces on the sea, the backbone of justice in this world.

And now, this day had finally come for Daren.

From a lowly Navy janitor scrubbing toilets to standing on the edge of real power, his climb had been one of brutal perseverance. More than anyone, he knew what the title of Vice Admiral truly meant—and just how hard it was to earn.

Endless days of training. Countless battles where he danced on the edge of death. Sleepless nights plotting his next move. Bloodshed. Betrayal. Sacrifice...

And now, he was here.

"Husband."

A soft voice drifted in from behind.

Amatsuki Toki stepped into the bathroom, dressed in a loose, flowing kimono. She held a freshly pressed Marine uniform in her hands.

Her eyes sparkled with admiration and affection as she spoke gently.

"Your uniform is ready."

Daren smiled and nodded.

"Thanks, Toki."

She shook her head with a soft smile.

"Today is a big day for you. I'm so happy."

She looked him over and hesitated for a moment before asking,

"Husband... are you nervous?"

Daren paused, then suddenly chuckled.

"Nervousness is for the weak—people who feel they don't deserve the position they're in."

"But me..."

He crushed the cigarette in an ashtray, turned around, and pulled her close with an arm around her slender waist.

With a flick of his fingers, her pink sash came undone.

Her light kimono slid from her smooth, pale body like a whisper.

"I'm right where I belong."

As Toki let out a soft gasp, Daren held her tightly against him.

"H-Husband..."

She instinctively tried to resist, but quickly melted under his touch, gasping softly.

"You... the graduation ceremony... it's about to start... there's not enough time..."

She was breathless, cheeks flushed, eyes shimmering.

Seeing her like that, Daren couldn't hold back any longer. With a low growl, he pressed her down, all restraint gone.

"They can wait... I can't."

...

At the Same Time.

Marineford, Marine Headquarters—just outside the gates of the Officer Training Camp.

The square was packed with people.

A grand platform had been set up long in advance, with a long red carpet stretching from the center of the stage all the way to the far end of the plaza.

Elite Marines, dressed in full uniform, stood as a solemn honor guard, maintaining order with sharp vigilance.

Closest to the platform were rows of reserved seats, all occupied by the most powerful figures in the Marine Headquarters.

Fleet Admiral Kong, code name "Steel Bone."

Admiral Sengoku, one of the World Government's top combat powers, code name "The Buddha."

Former Admiral Zephyr, Chief Instructor of the Officer Training Camp, code name "Black Arm."

Vice Admiral Tsuru, the Marine Headquarters' Chief of Staff.

Vice Admiral Garp, code name "Iron Fist."

Just behind them, every other seat was also filled.

These were the backbone of the Marines—the base commanders of headquarters and distant outposts alike. Commodores, Rear Admirals, and officers of every rank...

They fanned out from the central platform like crashing waves. The closer to the stage, the closer one stood to the very heart of Marine power.

Besides them, many officials from the World Government were in attendance, along with royal and noble representatives from allied nations.

Reporters from news agencies around the globe had gathered as well, their cameras—both large and small—waving eagerly in the hands of excited journalists.

Everyone was jostling for position, desperate to capture the perfect shot.

After all, the Marine Headquarters Officer Training Camp graduation ceremony was a global event that could shake the world.

Since Zephyr took charge as the camp's chief instructor, it had produced countless talented and elite Marines.

There had been the likes of Sakazuki and Borsalino, "monsters" who'd already carved out fearsome reputations across the seas.

And now, newcomers like Daren and Kuzan had risen—bearing the same "monster" label and making a brilliant name for themselves in the recent Battle of Marineford.

The media had not been shy with their praise, hailing Zephyr and the training camp as the "Cradle of Stars."

And based on numerous reports and sources, this year's class was said to be the strongest in the camp's history.

Led by Rogers Daren, the "Golden Generation" was on the verge of graduation.

What ranks would they receive? Where would they be stationed? Every detail was prime material for headlines.

Not to mention, this very ceremony would also include the awarding of honors to those who distinguished themselves during Shiki's assault.

Sensing blood in the water, the press had dropped everything and swarmed the scene like sharks, desperate for coverage—even if it meant being crushed in the crowd.

At the outer edge of the square, thousands of rank-and-file Marines and countless excited civilians gathered, packing the area shoulder to shoulder.

The massive plaza was filled to bursting. Shouts, chatter, footsteps—it was a roaring sea of sound.

Yet amid all the noise, in the front row...

Fleet Admiral Kong sat with his brow deeply furrowed. He turned toward Sengoku and Zephyr, clearly irritated.

"What time do you call this? Why isn't that kid Daren here yet?"

"You told him, didn't you? What the hell is he doing!?"

Chapter 374 - 374: Volume 3 – Chapter 17: Graduation Ceremony

"What the hell is he doing!?"

Kong glanced at his watch, his brow tightening further, a trace of real irritation creeping into his voice.

The graduation ceremony was set to begin in just two or three minutes. Everyone was already in place, and the entire crew was ready.

Yet at a time like this, that damn brat Daren was still nowhere to be seen!

If it had been anyone else, it wouldn't have mattered—as long as the ceremony went on smoothly, medals could always be awarded afterward.

But Daren? Absolutely not.

He was the centerpiece of this entire graduation ceremony!

The man who single-handedly annihilated Shiki's pirate aerial fleet.

The undisputed top graduate of the training camp.

The "monster" of the Marine's new generation. A genius on the verge of entering the Navy's core leadership.

The key figure who had played the most pivotal role in defending Marineford.

With so many accolades and honors under his belt, it wasn't an exaggeration to say this whole ceremony was built around Daren.

Most of the media outlets and reporters gathered from around the world had come specifically to cover him.

Without him, the entire ceremony would lose its spark.

The Marine Headquarters had poured tremendous effort into preparing for this event—inviting news agencies from all over with the hope that the ceremony, especially Daren's speech, would inject a much-needed boost of morale into a force that had been reeling.

Watching the seconds tick away, Sengoku began to sweat nervously.

"Fleet Admiral Kong, I've already sent someone to urge him along. Daren's always been reliable. I doubt anything's gone wrong."

Kong took a long breath, forcing down his frustration.

The trip to Mary Geoise had been grueling. The physical fatigue was one thing—what drained him most was having to humble himself to beg the World Government for funds.

Especially when the Five Elders took turns mocking and sneering at him. Kong felt his dignity as Fleet Admiral being stomped into the ground.

It was a bitter pill to swallow. But this was his duty.

"...We'll give him a bit more time."

Kong's voice was low and firm.

One minute passed.

Three minutes.

Five.

Ten...

Fifteen minutes went by.

Watching Kong's expression grow darker by the second, Sengoku's back was soaked with cold sweat.

"Fleet Admiral Kong... maybe we should begin the ceremony?" he offered cautiously, gritting his teeth.

"Daren's appearance was scheduled for the end anyway."

A vein bulged on Kong's forehead.

"...Fine."

His response was ice-cold.

Sengoku, as if relieved of a great burden, immediately raised his hand and signaled the herald.

Moments later, the solemn sound of a military bugle echoed across the grounds.

The stately, distant melody washed over the square, instantly blanketing the atmosphere in a heavy sense of gravity.

The roar of the crowd, once overwhelming, faded with the first notes of the bugle. But their anticipation remained palpable—eyes burning with excitement, voices restrained but restless, heads packed tight like waves crashing toward the stage.

A tall, imposing figure slowly rose from the front row.

His short, vivid purple hair and signature sunglasses caught the light, while the long cape of the Marines flowed behind him with each step, lending him a powerful, dignified presence.

The crowd held its breath. Reporters frantically raised their cameras, shutters clicking without pause.

Under the spotlight of countless stares and relentless flashes, Zephyr climbed the steps steadily, then took his place at the center of the platform.

He turned to face the seemingly endless rows of seats stretching into the distance, packed with Marines and civilians alike.

And on his stern face... a faint smile began to bloom.

He saluted solemnly and called out in a clear, commanding voice:

"I am Zephyr, Chief Instructor of the Marine Headquarters Officer Training Camp.

I now officially declare—the graduation ceremony of the third Elite Officer Training Camp... begins!"

As his words fell, an earth-shaking roar of cheers erupted like crashing waves.

Every Marine in the seating area stood in unison and snapped to attention with a salute.

Around the square, and in countless locations where people watched via Den Den Mushi live broadcasts, the crowd surged forward, their faces lit with excitement—cheering, shouting, waving with all their might.

This was a festival of justice.

Zephyr spread his arms wide in a welcoming gesture and laughed heartily.

"Let's now welcome the outstanding cadets of this year's training camp!"

All eyes turned as one toward the far end of the long red carpet.

At the grand entrance, one after another, young figures stepped into view, expressions stern and focused.

Dressed in crisp, spotless uniforms, they walked with firm steps, white capes fluttering behind them in the wind.

Sunlight poured down, illuminating their spirited, determined faces—radiating a sense of purpose and promise that moved the crowd.

In an instant, waves of cheers engulfed the plaza.

"They're here!!"

"That's Commander Gion! Our headquarters' very own 'flower of the Marines'! She's absolutely stunning!"

"And look! That's Captain Kuzan! The young man who earned the title of 'monster'! During the defense of Marineford, he used his powerful Devil Fruit abilities to hold off Shiki!"

"Captain Yamakaji! Just like the rumors say—he looks so gentle and kind!"

"That's Captain Doberman... a master swordsman with incredible strength! That aura is overwhelming!"

"Wait, who's that in shorts?"

"You don't know? That sketchy-looking guy is Commander Tokikake—one of our headquarters' top geniuses. Word is, he's almost at monster level... though, well, that's just the rumor."

...

As each young face appeared, the crowd broke into excited murmurs.

Gion, tall and poised, her hair tied in a high ponytail.

Kuzan, yawning with sleepy eyes.

Tokikake, in flip-flops and shorts, a toothpick in his mouth, grinning and waving wildly to the crowd.

Yamakaji, simple and a little shy.

Doberman, looking composed on the outside but sweating nervously beneath the surface.

Dalmatian, wearing his signature spotted dog hat.

Onigumo, with a cold, stern expression and lifeless gaze.

These were the names destined to shake the seas in years to come—together forming the flourishing "Golden Generation" of the Marines.

The crowd erupted with cheers. Marines watched with admiration and awe. Reporters frantically snapped photos, capturing every moment.

"Youth really is something special..."

Sengoku clapped softly, eyes fixed on the slow procession of young Marines. His expression was full of emotion.

Once, he'd been just like them—young, driven, burning with ambition and energy, charging into the path of justice.

In the blink of an eye, so many years had passed. Everything had changed.

Most of the comrades he once fought beside now slept beneath the sea, their lifeless bodies wrapped beneath the bloodstained seagull flag.

He had endured countless trials, celebrated glorious victories. Their enemies had changed—from Rocks, to Whitebeard, Kaidou, Shiki, Big Mom...

Sengoku felt a wave of nostalgia and sorrow rise in his heart.

Just then—

Crunch, crunch...

A sharp, crisp sound rang out beside him.

Snapped out of his thoughts, Sengoku's mouth twitched. He turned abruptly and barked at Garp, who was casually munching on senbei.

"Garp, you bastard! Can't you stop eating for one damn moment!?"

Garp let out a carefree chuckle.

Sengoku: ...

Well. Some things never change.

Chapter 375 - 375: Volume 3 – Chapter 18: Outstanding Students

The crowd surged with excitement.

As the young figures stepped forward one by one, Zephyr's eyes reddened beneath his sunglasses, though his smile remained gentle.

His chest instinctively lifted, back held straight and proud.

To him, no amount of glory or power could compare to this moment.

Watching the students he had trained with his own hands march forward under the eyes of the world—walking toward a bright future to pursue the justice they believed in—this was his greatest reward as an instructor.

The trainees lined up neatly below the stage, taking their places according to their assigned order. One by one, they stepped onto the platform under the gaze of the crowd.

Kuzan went first.

He walked up casually, yawning as he raised his hand in salute to the former Admiral standing before him.

"Zephyr-sensei."

Zephyr shot him a glare and muttered under his breath,

"Kuzan, wake up! This is a live broadcast to the entire world. Look around you—there are cameras everywhere!"

Kuzan scratched his head and replied lazily,

"But Zephyr-sensei... Daren's not here. I just can't get fired up without him."

Several veins popped on Zephyr's forehead, and his smile stiffened.

Suppressing the urge to lose his temper, he took a brand-new Marine cloak from a nearby guard and, maintaining a serious tone, called out loudly:

"Captain Kuzan of Marine Headquarters, in recognition of your exceptional performance and combat strength during the Battle of Marineford..."

"On behalf of Marine Headquarters, I hereby promote you to the rank of Rear Admiral."

He draped the Rear Admiral's cloak over Kuzan's shoulders and stared at the young man's half-awake face with blazing eyes.

"Congratulations, Rear Admiral Kuzan."

"Now, please say a few words to your fellow comrades."

Kuzan rubbed his eyes and turned toward the microphone.

His half-lidded eyes and laid-back demeanor stood in stark contrast to the formality of the event.

With dozens of eyes filled with anticipation staring up at him, he scratched his head again, looking thoroughly disinterested.

At that moment, Zephyr stepped up beside him and whispered,

"Daren's arriving soon. Think it over—don't let him outshine you."

A spark flashed in Kuzan's eyes.

His entire aura shifted, and a fire ignited in his gaze.

Then—

He suddenly thrust his hand up, flashing a "peace" sign to the audience and shouted with a grin:

"That's right! I'm Daren's lifelong rival... Kuzan!!"

"Keep your eyes open! There's no way I'm letting him outdo me!"

He then turned abruptly to look at Garp in the audience.

"Garp-san! I heard you took down 'Red the Aloof' Patrick Redfield and refused a promotion! That's so badass!"

"Dahaha—mmph!"

A large hand suddenly clamped over Kuzan's mouth.

Zephyr, face dark with rage, grabbed him by the head and yanked him offstage as his legs flailed wildly.

Kong: "..."

Sengoku: "..."

Tsuru: "..."

Garp waved cheerfully, laughing, "Bwahahaha! Kuzan, you're pretty cool yourself—mmph! Sengoku, what are you doing!?"

The crowd was left utterly bewildered.

Moments later...

Zephyr, expression frozen, walked stiffly back onto the platform.

Facing a sea of confused stares, he cleared his throat twice.

"Ahem... next."

Gion, who had been waiting patiently, stepped up the stairs in her heels.

With a golden Meito at her waist, she strode forward with poise and saluted sharply.

"Zephyr-sensei!"

Zephyr smiled in approval.

Now this was the kind of student he could be proud of.

"Commander Gion of Marine Headquarters, for your excellent conduct during the defense of Marineford and your outstanding performance and discipline in training... On behalf of Marine Headquarters, I hereby promote you to the rank of Commodore."

He placed the Commodore's cloak over her shoulders.

Gion saluted once more, then stepped to the microphone and spoke simply,

"All glory belongs to justice."

Clap, clap, clap...

The scene returned to normal as thunderous applause broke out.

The energy of the ceremony reignited as if that earlier absurd moment had never happened.

Seeing this, Zephyr, Sengoku, and the other high-ranking officers all exhaled in unison.

"Yes, that's Gion for you."

"Such remarkable talent, strength, and charm."

"Tsuru, your sister really is outstanding."

They smiled and nodded, clearly pleased.

But they were far too happy, far too early.

Because before Gion could even finish speaking, a figure from the crowd had already burst onto the stage, completely uninvited.

Wearing flip-flops that left his toes exposed, baggy shorts, a brown hat, and a toothpick in the corner of his mouth, Tokikake swaggered up with an arrogant stride, standing proudly before Zephyr like he owned the place.

Zephyr's eye twitched.

Something about this eager grin and bouncing energy sent a chill of bad premonition down his spine.

Down below, Kong, Sengoku, and Tsuru watched with wide eyes and clenched jaws.

"Zephyr-sensei!"

Tokikake gave a crooked salute, his voice deliberately loud enough to grab the attention of every single person present.

Zephyr: ...

Taking a deep breath, Zephyr barely forced a smile onto his face.

"Hmm. Very... spirited."

He quickly turned to address the audience, raising his voice:

"Commander Tokikake of Marine Headquarters. In recognition of your outstanding performance in the Battle of Marineford, you are hereby promoted to Commodore."

He draped the Commodore's cloak over Tokikake's shoulders with practiced speed, and leaned in, lowering his voice:

"Time's short. Tokikake, skip the speech this time—"

But before he could even finish the sentence, Tokikake vanished with a whoosh, reappearing in front of the mic in a flash of high-speed movement—Soru, nearly at secret technique level.

Zephyr: ...

Under the watchful eyes of countless people, flashes from cameras, and recording Den Den Mushi, Tokikake's face flushed red with excitement. His body visibly trembled.

Stay calm. Be cool. This is your moment... The entire world is watching you, Tokikake!

This is your best chance to outshine Daren!

Screaming internally, he shoved his hands into his pockets with forced nonchalance, plastered on a smug smile he thought was charming, and leaned into the mic in a deliberately deep voice.

"Hello everyone. That's right, I'm the genius of Marine Headquarters—Tokikake!"

"Yes, I know many of you have already heard my name... I'm the one who can rival the 'monsters' of the Marines! The future Admiral! The embodiment of justice itself!"

"Hahahahaha!"

He threw his hands onto his hips and laughed loudly, then spotted a cluster of women in the crowd. His eyes gleamed, and he flicked his hair dramatically before adding,

"Oh, and one more thing—good news, ladies. I'm still a bachelor."

"So, single ladies... and lonely wives—if you're curious about this perfect, strong body of mine, feel free to reach out."

"I specialize in serving the people."

"My Den Den Mushi number is—"

BOOM!

A massive black fist slammed straight into his face, launching Tokikake like a cannonball across the entire plaza.

Under the brilliant sunlight, amidst his howls of agony, a blood-smeared broken tooth clattered to the ground with a ding ding.

"Zephyr-sensei, don't be rash!"

"Zephyr-sensei, calm down!"

"Zephyr-sensei—!!"

...

Several Marines rushed forward to restrain the raging Zephyr, who was struggling like a wild beast.

"LET ME GO! I SWEAR I'LL KILL THAT LITTLE BASTARD TODAY!!!"

Chapter 376 - 376: Volume 3 – Chapter 19: The Monster's Award

Order was soon restored at the venue.

But the Marines seated below the stage all looked unusually stiff, twitching at the corners of their eyes, shoulders trembling as they tried to hold in their reactions.

Zephyr stood on the stage, breathing heavily. His expression flickered between dark and darker, veins bulging on his forehead as he gritted his teeth in fury.

Kong rubbed his temples in pain, then turned to Sengoku—whose own face was twitching slightly—and said through clenched teeth,

"Get in touch with the major news outlets right after the ceremony. Make sure they cut that part out."

Sengoku nodded seriously.

"Understood, Fleet Admiral Kong. I've already sent someone to handle it."

Only then did Kong let out a long breath and relax a little.

"Next!" Zephyr barked with barely restrained anger.

Down below, Yamakaji nervously rubbed his crew cut and cautiously stepped up onto the stage.

"Z-Zephyr-sensei!"

Under Zephyr's deathly black expression, Yamakaji shivered and snapped to a salute.

Zephyr looked at the simple, earnest young man in front of him. After taking a deep breath, a forced smile crept onto his face.

"Hmm. You're at least pleasant to look at."

As he spoke, he cast a murderous glare at Kuzan, who was squatting in the corner yawning, and Tokikake, whose swollen face was contorted in pain nearby. A sharp, inexplicable pain flared in his chest.

Shaking his head, Zephyr took the Marine cloak handed over by the guard and solemnly draped it over Yamakaji's broad shoulders.

"Captain Yamakaji of Marine Headquarters, for your outstanding performance in the defense of Marineford—protecting civilians and rescuing injured comrades—you have shown the character of an exceptional Marine."

"In the name of Marine Headquarters, I hereby promote you to Commodore."

Zephyr looked at Yamakaji with a much more genuine smile and said encouragingly,

"Keep it up. Pursue the justice you believe in—steadily and firmly."

"Yes, Zephyr-sensei!"

Yamakaji snapped another salute, standing tall and proud.

Zephyr nodded and waved him off.

"Go on."

After what happened with Kuzan and Tokikake, there was no way he'd let any of the others speak in front of a crowd this size again.

Losing face was one thing. He genuinely felt like his heart couldn't take another shock like that.

Even though the rest of the trainees seemed relatively normal, who knew what kind of "unexpected brilliance" they might display?

Better safe than sorry.

From then on, the rest of the award ceremony proceeded smoothly and returned to its proper form.

Under the solemn atmosphere and the admiring gazes of the Marines and the public, one after another, the determined and energetic young Marines took to the stage to receive their honors.

Onigumo, Doberman, Dalmatian, Strawberry...

One after another, they stepped up.

The smiles on the faces of Zephyr, Sengoku, and the other Marine brass gradually returned.

In less than half an hour, every cadet from the training camp—except for the still-absent Daren—had received their commendations.

They now stood in a straight line behind Zephyr, each draped in a Marine cloak from Captain to Rear Admiral, standing proud and tall.

With the brisk sea breeze blowing across the plaza, their pristine white capes of justice fluttered beside the soaring seagull flags above, flapping loudly in unison, radiating a majestic and inspiring force.

Down in the front row of the audience—

Seeing that all cadets had been awarded, Kong's face darkened once again.

He turned to Sengoku with a frown.

"Has that kid Daren arrived yet? What the hell is he doing!?"

Sengoku wiped the cold sweat from his forehead and whispered,

"He should be here any minute now, Fleet Admiral Kong. How about we start by awarding Sakazuki and Borsalino their medals first?"

Kong gritted his teeth.

"We don't really have a choice."

With that, Kong and Sengoku stood abruptly from their seats. The sudden movement immediately drew the attention of the crowd and media. Everyone craned their necks, trying to get a better look.

Kong slowly made his way to the platform, then turned to face the sea of people below with a solemn expression.

"As you all know, during the battle to defend Marineford, Marine Headquarters displayed an unbreakable will and spirit. Among those who stood out most... were a few of our young talents."

He paused, then suddenly called out in a deep voice,

"Sakazuki, step forward!"

As the words left his mouth, a tall figure appeared at the edge of the square.

Dressed in a sharp, crimson suit and polished black military boots, he walked with rigid, steady steps. A military cap cast a shadow over most of his face. Pinned to his chest was a red rose—vibrant and blood-red.

Rear Admiral Sakazuki, the Marine Headquarters' infamous "monster."

As Sakazuki entered the square, a cold and oppressive air swept through the crowd. Under the sheer pressure, many felt a chill crawl up their spines.

Step by step, he ascended the platform. Had someone measured his pace, they would have been stunned—each step precisely the same, like the swing of an ancient pendulum.

"Zephyr-sensei."

Sakazuki raised his hand in a crisp salute.

Zephyr looked at the fierce student before him and smiled.

"It's finally here. Congratulations, Sakazuki."

Sakazuki paused a moment before replying quietly,

"Thank you for all your guidance."

Zephyr chuckled and shook his head, then turned to Kong.

The promotion to Vice Admiral had to be conferred personally by the Fleet Admiral.

Kong smiled.

"I look forward to the day I get to drape the Admiral's cloak over your shoulders."

He took the cloak from a nearby guard and placed it on Sakazuki.

"In the name of the Fleet Admiral of Marine Headquarters, I hereby promote Sakazuki to the rank of Vice Admiral!"

The ceremony concluded.

As Sakazuki stepped aside, Kong shouted once more,

"Borsalino, step forward!"

No response.

Everyone turned to the square's entrance—but no one was there.

Kong frowned and called again,

"Borsalino, step forward!"

The next second—

"Coming, coming..."

Countless golden photons gathered into a tall silhouette. Borsalino materialized with his hands raised in a mock surrender, wearing a look of exaggerated innocence.

"Sorry, sorry, almost showed up late."

The crowd: ...

Kong took a deep breath, clenching and unclenching his fists.

Now he understood why Zephyr had wanted to punch him earlier.

Looking at Borsalino's shameless grin, he felt the same urge.

Suppressing his impulse, Kong moved quickly through the process.

"In the name of the Fleet Admiral of Marine Headquarters, I hereby promote Borsalino to the rank of Vice Admiral!"

He shoved the Vice Admiral's cloak into Borsalino's hands, then looked toward Zephyr.

As if sensing something, the entire venue gradually fell silent.

Everyone held their breath and turned toward the square's entrance, waiting quietly.

Waiting for their main character... to finally make his entrance.

A few seconds later—

A figure appeared before them.

With slightly messy black hair, a lit cigar between his lips, a tall and imposing build, a silver-white longsword hanging from his waist, and a loosened black tie under his suit, he stood there in the sunlight. The disheveled look didn't make him seem sloppy—it gave him a rugged, untamed charm.

His striking face, a blend of handsomeness and wild energy, instantly captivated everyone.

In that moment—

A tidal wave of cheers erupted across the square. Civilians and soldiers shouted and hollered, reporters snapped photos like mad, flashes going off nonstop, and among it all were frenzied screams from excited women.

Commodore Rogers Daren of Marine Headquarters!

The man who stole the "monster" title—"King of the North Blue"!

Chapter 377 - 377: Volume 3 – Chapter 20: Victory or Defeat

The moment that figure appeared, the entire square erupted.

Reporters from every news agency surged forward like wolves, desperately jostling for the best angle.

"Hahaha, it's Daren! Daren's finally here!"

Kuzan, who had been lounging about in boredom, suddenly leapt to his feet, eyes blazing with excitement as he waved enthusiastically.

Beside him, Tokikake glanced at the cheering crowd—especially the screaming women—and couldn't help but scoff and mutter,

"Tch, stealing my spotlight again."

He didn't notice that Gion, who had been cold and indifferent all along, suddenly brightened the moment she saw Daren.

Sengoku let out a long breath, the weight in his chest finally easing.

If that brat Daren still hadn't shown up, Fleet Admiral Kong might have actually exploded.

The crowd's cheers surged like a tidal wave.

"That's Commodore Daren!"

"I heard he took down the entire Beasts Pirates headquarters on his own!"

"That's old news! He wiped out the Great Pirate Shiki's flying fleet solo!"

"Is that sword at his waist the Enma? The one that pierced an island in one strike?"

"No, Enma's said to be a black cursed sword. That one's silver."

"The Marine Headquarters' monster... Not just powerful, but ridiculously good-looking too..."

"Seriously, he's less like a monster and more like the perfect knight!"

"He's so handsome! Daren-sama, marry me!!"

"I love you, Daren-sama!!"

...

The entire venue buzzed with excitement and admiration.

Power, wealth, rank, fame, looks, charm... To put it bluntly, Rogers Daren was the very definition of perfection.

Men wanted to be him. Women wanted to be with him.

Soaking in the admiration, Daren walked down the red carpet with a calm smile.

There wasn't a trace of nervousness or hesitation.

He felt like he was born for moments like this.

He deserved it all.

Step by step, the Commodore made his way toward the platform. Under the watchful eyes of the crowd, he climbed up and gave a crisp salute.

"Fleet Admiral Kong! Admiral Sengoku! Zephyr-sensei!"

The three men broke into simultaneous smiles, full of pride and approval.

Putting aside strength, talent, and potential—Daren's looks alone were disarming.

Sakazuki's brooding glare, Borsalino's sleazy grin, Kuzan's lazy fire... Compared to them, Daren was practically the Marines' golden boy—their perfect poster face.

Just standing there, he exuded likability.

Even Kong and the others, who never considered themselves shallow, had to admit—when it came to representing the Marines' image, Daren was a flawless choice.

"You brat, what took you so long?"

Sengoku shot Daren a glare.

Zephyr chuckled and waved it off.

"Let it go. It's not like we're behind schedule."

After dealing with Kuzan and Tokikake's antics earlier, Zephyr found Daren all the more pleasing to the eye.

Kong grinned.

"Daren, you've been waiting for this day a long time, haven't you?"

Daren smiled calmly.

"Yes, Fleet Admiral."

Kong's grin widened, clearly satisfied.

He raised his head, and his deep, commanding voice echoed through the massive square via the microphone.

"Commodore Rogers Daren of Marine Headquarters has achieved remarkable military feats, distinguished himself in the defense of Marineford, and graduated top of his class from the Marine Headquarters Officer Training Camp..."

Kong stood tall, chest out, and took a brand new Marine cape from the hands of a guard.

"After careful deliberation by the Marine Headquarters, I, as Fleet Admiral of Marine Headquarters, hereby grant Rogers Daren a special promotion to the rank of Vice Admiral!"

As his voice rang out, thunderous cheers and applause swept through the venue like a tidal wave. Kong unfurled a fresh cloak of justice and draped it over Daren's shoulders with a warm, satisfied smile.

"Daren, I hope you live up to all of our expectations—and more importantly, the honor and justice this rank represents."

Daren straightened and saluted solemnly.

"All glory belongs to justice!"

Clap! Clap! Clap!

A roar of applause erupted again. Kuzan was so fired up he nearly clapped his hands raw, murmuring to himself, "As expected of my lifelong rival..."

"You brat, now tell everyone how you feel," Zephyr said, giving Daren a subtle wink.

Daren glanced at Kong and Sengoku, both of whom gave him encouraging nods.

The newly promoted Vice Admiral smiled, gave a slight nod, and stepped up to the microphone.

The moment he moved, the thunderous crowd quieted instantly. The venue fell into an eerie silence.

Reporters scrambled to pull out their recorders and notepads, faces filled with anticipation.

Countless eyes locked on Daren, their silent pressure weighing down on his shoulders.

It was time.

Looking out over the crowd, the faces of the Marine officers below, and the hundreds of cameras trained on him, Daren felt an unfamiliar ambition rapidly swelling in his chest—burning like fire behind his eyes.

Zephyr-sensei had told him to deliver a rousing speech, something to lift the spirits of the Marines.

Daren's eyes narrowed slightly. A slow smile tugged at the corner of his lips.

Oh, he would stir their spirits, alright.

Just maybe... not in the way they expected.

This speech—could very well be his chance.

Daren took a deep breath, then began, his voice steady and full of confidence.

"Today is a day worth celebrating."

"As everyone knows, today's promotion ceremony is largely a result of the recent battle in defense of Marineford."

"In that grand and turbulent war, our righteous forces crushed the wild ambitions of the legendary pirate, Shiki the Golden Lion."

"He dreamed of storming Marineford, of sinking the world's strongest fortress into the sea. He even went as far as dropping an entire island to make it happen!"

Daren raised his hand and clenched it into a fist.

"But he failed!"

"Yes, he was destined to fail!"

"We proved one thing—without a doubt—the Marines are the strongest military force on the seas! Not even the combined might of Shiki, Big Mom, and Kaidou could break through the Holy Land of Justice!"

At his words, the Marines below unconsciously straightened their backs, their faces lit with pride.

Some of the younger ones couldn't help but shout out, their voices rising above the crowd:

"Justice will prevail!"

"The Marines are the strongest!"

"We really are amazing!"

"That's right!"

Even the civilians started chiming in with cheers.

Seeing this, the three standing behind Daren—Kong, Sengoku, and Zephyr—exchanged glances and smiled.

This kid... he's not bad at all.

Daren nodded and smiled as he waited for the wave of cheers to fade.

"Yes, justice will prevail. Of that, I have no doubt."

"But—"

Suddenly, the Vice Admiral slammed his palm down on the podium, shattering it into splinters. His face twisted with fury.

"All of that... is nothing but delusional bullshit!"

The sharp, cold scream pierced through the air like a shockwave. Everyone in the square froze as if struck by lightning, gasping in disbelief.

"This wasn't some glorious victory!"

Daren's eyes flared with murderous intent as he swept his arm out fiercely. Behind him, Kong, Sengoku, and Zephyr's faces changed drastically.

"The Battle of Marineford... was a complete and utter failure!"

Chapter 378 - 378: Volume 3 – Chapter 21: Answer Me

"The defense of Marineford... was a complete and utter failure!!"

The furious roar of the newly promoted Vice Admiral echoed through the entire venue, blasting from every loudspeaker and transmitted in real time to every Marine branch across the seas via Den Den Mushi.

In that instant, Marines around the world stared blankly at their screens, faces going pale as they watched the sharp-eyed, grim-faced Vice Admiral on the other end. It was as if they'd been struck by lightning.

The venue itself was plunged into deathly silence.

Marines and civilians alike were frozen in place, unable to believe what they had just heard.

"The Battle of Marineford... was a failure?"

"But didn't we successfully repel the invasion of the three great pirates? Wasn't that Shiki the Golden Lion?!"

"He even dropped a floating island on us!"

"We protected our home. That should've been a victory..."

"Didn't Fleet Admiral Kong and Admiral Sengoku say the same thing?"

...

Whispers rippled through the crowd. All eyes turned toward the platform, staring at the Vice Admiral in disbelief.

Behind Daren, Kong, Sengoku, and Zephyr were just as stunned, their expressions frozen.

This... wasn't what they had agreed on!

Wasn't Daren supposed to deliver an uplifting speech? Something to rally the Marines?

Why was he outright denying the meaning of the war?

How could he brand the great Battle of Marineford... as a "complete failure"!?

Or... was this some new speech technique they'd never heard of?

For a moment, the three of them stood there, unsure whether to stop him or not. The sudden shift in tone had caught them completely off guard.

Elsewhere, Gion and the others were visibly confused, trying to grasp what Daren was getting at.

Borsalino glanced at Daren's back and let out a small, intrigued smirk.

Sakazuki slowly opened his eyes, a subtle glint flickering in their depths.

Then—

"Vice Admiral Daren! I disagree! The Battle of Marineford was our victory!"

A young Marine soldier suddenly raised his hand, gritting his teeth and shouting out with courage.

"Yes! We defended our home!"

Another Commander stood abruptly, his voice firm in protest.

"This was a disaster, and you saved this island. We all respect you... but you can't erase the efforts and sacrifices everyone made!"

A Commodore spoke up, visibly outraged.

From another part of the crowd, a little girl burst out in tears.

"That's right! My brother... Captain Sbit, he gave his life to protect Marineford! He died a hero! How could this be called a failure!?"

...

One by one, Marines and civilians stood up, speaking out in waves.

None of them questioned Daren's achievements—they admired and respected him deeply.

But they couldn't accept him labeling the Battle of Marineford as a "failure."

They had lost too many—family, friends, comrades, partners. The cost had been enormous.

To them, the joy of victory was the last comfort for their grieving hearts.

They refused to believe that what they had fought and bled for... was meaningless.

They would not allow anyone to take away their "victory."

As the crowd's emotions surged, Sengoku furrowed his brow and instinctively stepped forward, ready to cut the ceremony short and regain control of the situation.

But a firm hand landed on his shoulder, stopping him.

He turned in confusion and saw Kong shake his head.

"It's too late."

Kong's expression was complicated, his voice heavy with meaning as he sighed.

Sengoku froze.

He looked back at the crowd.

Countless faces filled with confusion, frustration, even suspicion—every gaze locked on the Marine Vice Admiral, anxiously awaiting his next words.

Yes... it couldn't be stopped now.

Daren had ignited something, and unless he could offer a compelling, satisfying explanation—not just to those here, but to Marines watching from across the world via Den Den Mushi—this wouldn't end well.

With that thought, Sengoku found his eyes drawn once more to Daren's back, whispering in his heart:

"Daren... just what are you trying to do by saying all this..."

...

The venue was dead silent.

Even the sound of breathing was crystal clear.

Countless eyes locked onto Daren, crashing over him like an invisible tidal wave. The pressure was suffocating—enough to break a lesser man.

But Daren just smiled.

"So, you all want this to be a glorious, worthy-of-celebration victory, don't you?"

He asked calmly.

No one spoke, but every head in the audience nodded in unison.

The curve of Daren's lips deepened—twisting into a cold, mocking smile.

"I see."

"Yes, you all want to believe this was a victory."

"And in some ways, sure... you could call it a 'great' one."

Before anyone could react with relief—

His voice suddenly exploded like a beast's roar.

His arms lashed out in fury.

"We 'won' by letting filthy, wicked, vile pirates storm our headquarters!"

The words thundered across the crowd.

Faces went pale with shock.

"We 'won' by turning the Holy Land of Justice into the ruined wasteland you see before you!"

His voice grew sharper, each word cutting deeper.

Gasps echoed louder now, sharp and piercing.

"The Marines—supposed to be the world's supreme power—have been reduced to toys! Weak, exposed, left to be challenged and humiliated at will!"

His rage surged to its peak.

A storm of pressure ripped through every corner of the square. Color drained from every face.

Daren raised both arms high, his gaze sweeping coldly over the crowd below the platform.

Those eyes—steely, furious, unrelenting—were too sharp for anyone to meet.

"So tell me... all of you..."

"When pirates can brazenly invade the very heart of global justice..."

"When the Marines can do nothing but defend themselves—forced to watch helplessly as the enemy shrugs and says, 'I'm done playing,' before walking away..."

"When the entire world sees how weak we truly are, sees how this so-called sacred Marineford is nothing special after all..."

"This war..."

Daren lifted his head, eyes blazing with a cold fire that could burn through steel.

His words dropped like anchors—slow, heavy, and inescapable—sinking deep into every heart in the crowd.

"Can you still call it a victory!?"

Everyone froze in place.

Daren roared, veins bulging with fury.

An overwhelming surge of force burst from him, crashing outward like a tidal wave, shaking the heavens and earth.

Wind howled. Lightning split the sky. The entire world seemed to tremble.

"Answer me!"

Chapter 379 - 379: Volume 3 – Chapter 22: No Compromise

"Answer me!"

The Vice Admiral's furious roar cracked through the square like a thunderclap on dry earth—and echoed through every Marine base across the entire world.

It was deafening.

The shockwave from his Conqueror's Haki whipped through the air, flinging garments and rattling the very souls of everyone present.

But even that overwhelming force couldn't compare to the weight of Daren's words.

His voice, sharp as a blade, pierced straight into the hearts of every Marine, leaving their minds blank with stunned silence.

No one spoke.

No one dared to.

Because deep down, they all knew—

Was the great battle to defend Marineford really a victory?

This was supposed to be the stronghold of the Marines. The Holy Land of Justice.

And yet... it had been breached—by pirates.

After killing tens of thousands and reducing most of Marineford to rubble, they had turned and left with arrogant ease.

And the so-called rulers of the sea—the Marines—had done nothing but watch.

How could that possibly be a victory?

"This was a defeat!"

"This was a disgrace to the Marines!!"

Daren shouted, his rage boiling over, eyes bloodshot with fury.

The crowd stirred, visibly shaken.

Their faces contorted with conflict, their hearts churning with grief, confusion, denial.

Zephyr, Sengoku, and Kong exchanged glances, mouths parting—but not a single word came. In the end, they too fell silent.

Because even they couldn't argue against it.

Daren was right.

A smirk crept deeper onto Borsalino's face.

Sakazuki's fierce gaze sharpened, and his gloved fists slowly clenched.

...

On the high platform, Daren took a long breath, as if wrestling to keep his emotions in check.

He looked out at the countless faces below—so many marked with grief, doubt, and pain—and finally let out a sigh.

"I know... these words are hard to accept."

"But they're the truth."

"No matter how much we dress it up, no matter how we try to hide it—the truth is still the truth."

"Our Holy Land of Justice was nearly taken."

"Marine Headquarters was almost sunk beneath the sea, reduced to dust... and a joke in the eyes of the world."

He paused for a moment, hesitation flickering in his eyes—but it was quickly replaced by determination.

"A few days ago, the senior brass at HQ spoke to me about this graduation ceremony."

"They all agreed—after everything we'd suffered in the war, the trauma and loss were already heavy enough. They didn't want to burden everyone with more, so they asked me to give an uplifting speech."

"Fleet Admiral Kong, Admiral Sengoku... their concerns were valid. Honestly, I agreed with them at first."

"We'd celebrate, lift our spirits, rebuild Marineford... and everything would return to normal."

"But do you know what?"

A glimmer of sorrow flashed in Daren's eyes.

"I couldn't do it."

"I thought I could, but when it came down to it, I couldn't say the words."

"Because when I look at all of you... when I see the pain you're hiding—your grief for loved ones, for friends, for lovers and comrades lost... when I hear these hollow words trying to paint a picture of peace..."

"I just can't do it."

"All I see is sadness. All around me—ruins."

"I can't deny that harsh, bitter reality."

Daren clenched his fists tight.

"I... find it hard not to be angry."

He raised his head, his piercing gaze sweeping across every face in the crowd.

"Even pirates understand the meaning of vengeance—yet the Marines cower."

"Yes, I'll admit it. We are in pain. We are under pressure."

"Marineford must be rebuilt. The wounded need care. The dead must be honored. We need funding... Marine Headquarters is standing on the brink."

"I know you're afraid. But..."

"Are we—the righteous Marines—just going to stand by and let pirates flaunt their power above our heads?"

"Are we going to let them run free in our seas?"

"Are we going to swallow this humiliation and crawl through life like cowards!?"

With each line, his voice rose, sharper and more impassioned. Faces across the square turned red, their eyes filled with emotion.

"No!!"

Daren's eyes burned crimson. He stepped forward, throwing his hand out forcefully.

"We are Marines!"

"We carry justice on our shoulders!"

"When faced with pirates and their evil, I say this..."

He took a deep breath, his voice echoing like thunder across the heavens.

"No compromise!!"

In an instant, the crowd erupted.

"Well said!!"

"No compromise!!"

"That's right! Mourning won't bring back the dead—those pirates are still in the New World! Let's take the fight to them!!"

"War! War!!"

...

One after another, Marines surged to their feet, their grief replaced by seething fury. The flames of rage blazed high.

They waved their arms, eyes locked on the man on stage—Rogers Daren.

To them, he was now the hope of true victory.

Sengoku's face went pale.

None of this had gone how he imagined.

Was Daren... rallying for a full-scale war against the Great Pirates of the New World!?

Kong's expression darkened, clouded and shifting.

He hadn't expected Daren to seize the stage like this, igniting the emotions of the entire military... the situation had spun out of control.

Zephyr stood stunned, shaken by what he was witnessing.

Borsalino finally cracked a satisfied smirk and murmured to himself, just barely audible,

"You really went for it... Daren."

Beside him, Sakazuki's eyes glinted with newfound intensity.

Tokikake swallowed nervously, darting glances around the rapidly spiraling crowd.

"No compromise!!"

As the cries reached their peak, Daren raised his arms high and bellowed,

"Will we let the pirates continue to strut across the seas?"

"Will we let the flag of justice be smeared with filth?"

"Will we allow this great, free ocean to fall into the hands of criminals?"

"Never! I swear it—we will never abandon our duty to hunt them down!"

"Brothers in arms, comrades... trust me—we will win!"

Amid a storm of battle cries and thunderous roars, under a sea of raised fists and the eyes of the world watching from Marine Headquarters and beyond...

The newly appointed Vice Admiral drew the sword at his waist, its blade flashing as it pointed toward the horizon.

Toward the New World.

"The age of the Marines hiding in safety is over!"

"The New World... is our true battleground!"

His defiant voice echoed outward, carried on a surge of force that tore the air, whipping his wide Vice Admiral cloak behind him like a banner in the wind.

As if answering his call, every seagull-adorned flag in Marine Headquarters snapped to life in unison, blotting out the sky.

Daren raised his sword and roared:

"From this day, upon my graduation—I, Rogers Daren, will take the lead and command the G5 Marine base in the New World!"

"We will not back down until the mission is complete!"

He drew a deep breath and shouted with all his might:

"—Eradicate every last pirate!!!"

Just then, a sword cry split the air like lightning.

BOOM!

A streak of black, overwhelming energy burst from the earth, ripping through the sky and hovering high above the square.

Everyone recognized the blade at once.

The cursed sword—Enma!

Enma quaked violently, resonating with its master's unyielding fighting spirit.

Its chilling aura swept outward, stoking the fury and bloodlust in every Marine.

"No compromise!!"

The crowd erupted again, a tidal wave of rage. Their eyes gleamed red with killing intent.

"Set sail! Hunt the pirates!"

Kuzan waved his arms wildly, face flushed with passion.

Below the stage, Garp smashed his stool to pieces and roared, teeth clenched,

"I'm heading out right now—to kill that bastard Roger!"

Kong, Sengoku, and Zephyr stood frozen, speechless before the rising storm.

"It's over..."

At last, a satisfied smile appeared on Daren's face.

It was time for the final blow.

Clenching his fist, he raised his voice with resolute conviction.

"All of you who carry justice—join me on the frontlines."

He flashed a bold grin.

"This time, I'll lead you... to true victory."

With a sharp clang, Daren sheathed his sword.

His snow-white cloak billowed behind him, heavy with iron resolve.

"Justice will prevail—and I'll be waiting for you... at the Fortress of Justice."

Chapter 380 - 380: Volume 3 – Chapter 23: You Tell Me If It Worked or Not
Fleet Admiral's Office, Marine Headquarters.

Bang!

Kong slammed his fist into the desk, shattering it into splinters that scattered across the room.

"Daren, you bastard!! I told you to boost morale—not to ignite a damn war!"

He roared, chest heaving as he glared at the Vice Admiral calmly lounging on the sofa across from him, puffing on a cigar like nothing had happened.

The fury in his voice shook the ceiling of the Fleet Admiral's office. Bits of plaster rained down from the walls.

Sengoku stood silently nearby, not even daring to breathe.

Garp sat across from Daren, happily crunching on senbei.

Zephyr had one hand over his face in silent anguish.

Tsuru's expression was unreadable, tinged with complicated emotion.

Sakazuki stood expressionless.

In the corner, Borsalino's lips curled into a faint, amused smile.

Kuzan stood behind Garp, eyes sparkling as he watched the scene unfold.

Only an hour had passed since the graduation and award ceremony for the Officer Training Camp, but that was enough time for Vice Admiral Rogers Daren's fiery speech to send shockwaves through the entire headquarters.

Tensions were boiling. Dozens of officers had already submitted requests to be stationed at the G5 branch in the New World.

Before Kong even had time to sort through the fallout, he had slapped on a stiff smile to congratulate Daren at the ceremony, then stormed back to his office and immediately convened this emergency meeting.

Now, he was furious.

"Daren, aren't you going to explain yourself?!"

Seeing Daren still sitting there calmly, leisurely smoking his cigar, Kong gritted his teeth so hard they nearly cracked.

"What exactly are you trying to do!?"

Daren looked up as if genuinely caught off guard.

"Fleet Admiral Kong, sir," he said innocently, "wasn't I just carrying out the task assigned to me?"

He spoke with an air of righteous conviction.

"Delivering a speech to lift the morale of our Marines, injecting some much-needed passion and strength into our troops..."

Then, without skipping a beat, he added, matter-of-factly,

"You tell me—did it work or not?"

"..." Sengoku's mouth twitched.

"..." Zephyr looked away, grimacing.

"..." Tsuru let out a long, quiet sigh.

Borsalino's smirk grew just a little wider.

Kong's face turned from red to purple.

He could feel the decades of self-discipline and calm he'd cultivated about to snap.

He clenched his jaw and hissed,

"Daren, you know the state of Marine Headquarters—short on funds, heavy losses. What we need now is rest and recovery!"

"Don't tell me you don't understand that!"

Daren nodded seriously, his tone earnest.

"I absolutely agree with Fleet Admiral Kong's farsighted judgment."

Kong nearly spat blood on the spot.

Agree? Then why the hell did you whip the entire Marine force into a frenzy!?

He wasn't buying it. Not for a second.

Knowing this little punk, Daren wasn't suddenly overflowing with "justice."

He was deliberately stoking the Marines' anger and hatred toward pirates, manipulating the crowd, and setting the stage for war.

But what Kong couldn't figure out was—

Why was Daren so desperate to start one?

"The current state of Marine Headquarters does call for rest and recovery—and I fully agree with that."

Daren smiled as he spoke.

"But that doesn't mean that during this period, we Marines should just retreat into a corner and remain on the defensive."

At those words, Kong, Sengoku, and several other senior officers all furrowed their brows.

"What do you mean by that?"

Sengoku raised his head, his eyes narrowing as he stared at Daren.

Even Garp paused mid-bite, his senbei momentarily forgotten.

Daren exhaled a slow puff of smoke, curling like a dragon into the air, then smiled.

"The Battle of Marineford was, without a doubt, a tremendous failure—and a disgrace to the Marines. I think everyone here would agree with that, wouldn't you?"

Kong opened his mouth, but in the end, said nothing.

The others remained silent as well.

None of them could refute Daren's statement.

No matter how much the Marine PR division tried to glorify the courage and sacrifice of the soldiers, it couldn't change the brutal reality.

Yes, the defense of Marineford might have been a valiant stand.

But in terms of the broader impact—it was no victory.

The Marines, proud standard-bearers of justice tasked with eliminating evil, were attacked right at their doorstep by just a few pirates. Had Daren not intervened at the last minute to turn the tide, Marineford itself might've been reduced to rubble at the bottom of the sea.

If that wasn't disgraceful, what was?

Seeing their expressions, Daren's smile deepened. His voice was steady, even relaxed.

"We can fool ourselves all we want—but not everyone out there is a fool."

"The Battle of Marineford didn't show the world our strength. It exposed our weakness."

"The war's over. Time can't be reversed. The three Great Pirates who invaded us? They're long gone—we can't change that."

He flicked the ash from his cigar and slowly stood, his expression sharp and rebellious.

"Right now, the Marines' reputation, status, and authority across the world... have plummeted."

"If we continue to 'rest and recover' after suffering such a humiliating blow, all the powers of the world—all the pirates—will come to the same conclusion: 'They let pirates storm their headquarters and didn't even strike back. The Marines aren't so scary after all.'"

The silence in the office grew heavier.

Daren's cold eyes swept across every face in the room. His voice turned razor-sharp.

"If we don't act now, rebuilding the dignity and glory of the Marines will become nearly impossible."

"If we don't act now..."

"The pirates will look down on us!"

"The World Government will look down on us!"

"The member nations will look down on us!"

"Hundreds of millions of people around the world will look down on us!"

"Even our own lower-ranked Marines... will look down on us!"

Each word hit like a thunderclap.

Expressions across the room shifted.

Then, after a brief silence, a grim, hoarse voice cut through the air.

"I agree with Daren's assessment."

Sakazuki lifted his head. His eyes, cold and unflinching beneath the brim of his cap, locked onto Kong's.

"Only pirate blood can wash away the shame of that battle."

"There's no other way."

Kong's brow twitched.

He turned to look at Sakazuki—who met his gaze head-on.

Then he glanced at Borsalino.

Borsalino grinned, eyes narrowing as he chimed in,

"I'm with Daren too."

As for Kuzan, Kong didn't even bother checking. The look on the kid's face said it all—he was practically sparkling.

These damn brats...

Kong and Sengoku both had the same thought at the same time: They've grown up... but is that a good thing or a bad thing?

Still...

"So, Daren—what exactly are you planning to do?"

Sengoku asked, his voice low and serious.