

One Piece 361

Chapter 361 - 361: Volume 3 – Chapter 4 - What Are You Doing Here

Dim sunlight filtered through the slits of his barely opened eyes.

Daren slowly forced his eyelids open.

A spinning ceiling fan, grayish-white walls, an IV bag hanging beside the bed, and various life-monitoring devices glowing faintly in the corner of his vision.

This was a hospital room.

"Yo, you're finally awake."

A familiar voice came from beside him. Daren turned his head and was met with Tokikake's scruffy, ugly face.

He was sitting with one leg crossed over the other, wearing a pair of floral shorts that exposed his hairy thighs, flip-flops on his feet. He held a banana in his right hand, awkwardly peeling it with his teeth as he spoke.

His left hand was wrapped in a cast, with a sling hanging around his neck.

Daren glanced at the half-unwrapped fruit basket on the floor, the corner of his mouth twitching as he said irritably,

"You've got some nerve. That fruit basket was meant for me, wasn't it?"

"...It's not like you could finish it all."

Tokikake took a bite of the banana, let out a snort, and pointed toward the wall.

Over there, dozens of fruit baskets had been piled up into a small mountain, filling the entire private ward with a sweet, fruity aroma.

"I fought too, and got injured. Not a single damn fruit basket for me..."

Tokikake mumbled through a mouthful of banana, his face full of indignation.

Daren took in his bird's-nest of a hairstyle, the greasy sheen on his face, and that whole lazy, thrown-together look. For a moment, he didn't even know where to start complaining.

"Got a smoke?"

He shook his head and asked.

Tokikake fumbled one-handed in his pocket for a bit, then reluctantly pulled out a box of fancy cigars. With a pained expression, he took one out and handed it over.

Daren's eye twitched.

If he had to guess, this was probably another gift meant for him.

But he couldn't be bothered to argue with that bastard. He bit down on the cigar and started looking for a lighter.

"You got a light?"

Tokikake blinked in confusion.

"Hang on."

He dug into another pocket, and with a clatter, over a dozen lighters spilled out and scattered across the floor.

Daren: "..."

Tokikake: "..."

"Hehehe."

Tokikake chuckled sheepishly as he picked one up and handed it over.

You're really something... Even the lighters aren't safe from you.

Daren rolled his eyes, lit the cigar, and took a deep drag.

The spicy smoke rolled down his throat, waking him up a bit.

He pushed himself up with great effort, sitting upright on the bed. Even that simple movement cost him a lot of strength.

A burning pain shot through every muscle, and a tidal wave of exhaustion hit him, cold sweat instantly breaking out across his forehead.

"That was way too close..."

After briefly checking his condition, Daren gave a bitter smile.

It was worse than he'd imagined.

Severe overexertion, at least thirty fractured bones, large-scale muscle tears, massive blood loss...

He couldn't even remember the last time he'd been this badly hurt.

With injuries like these, he'd need at least a week just to start recovering.

Leaning back against the bed, Daren quietly smoked his cigar. After resting for a while, he finally asked,

"How did you end up here?"

Tokikake muttered,

"There were too many wounded in this battle. There are only so many high-end rooms, and all of them got taken up by you monsters and the seriously injured."

"The rest of us had to cram into the standard wards. The guy I was stuck with was that creepy Onigumo. Just seeing his face ruins my appetite and gives me nightmares."

He's even picky about Onigumo's looks now... Daren rubbed his temples in silence.

Knock, knock, knock...

A soft knock came at the door.

Moments later, a burly figure wrapped in blood-stained bandages strode in.

Zephyr glanced at Daren, who was now awake, and a smile appeared on his face.

"Daren, you're up. How's your body feeling?"

Daren smiled.

"Looks like I'll need a few days of rest, Zephyr-sensei."

Zephyr gave him a quick once-over, then nodded in agreement.

"Yeah. Even if you're built like a monster, it's best to take a few more days to heal properly. You don't want any lingering damage."

He'd been dropping by Daren's room frequently these past two days, clearly worried about his condition.

Seeing the kid alive and kicking now, puffing on a cigar, finally let Zephyr relax a little. He let out a quiet sigh of relief.

Then his gaze shifted to Tokikake, still sitting cross-legged nearby, and he frowned.

"Tokikake, what are you doing here?"

Tokikake opened his mouth, about to explain, but Zephyr waved a hand dismissively.

"Forget it. Just stop coming by so much. Daren needs peace and quiet to recover."

Tokikake: ...

Right then, an excited voice suddenly rang out from the doorway.

"Yo, Daren!! You're finally awake!!"

Everyone turned in surprise. Kuzan came limping in, a bandage wrapped around his forehead, eyes gleaming as he stared at Daren.

"That move of yours was insane!! You pierced through an entire island with a single slash!!"

He struck an exaggerated pose, stars practically shining in his eyes.

"When you're better, you have to show me that move again!"

Then he paused, eyeing Tokikake with confusion.

"Wait, Tokikake, what are you doing here?"

Tokikake: ...

Before he could get a word out, another figure stepped in, exuding a cold, heavy presence.

His bare upper body was wrapped in blood-soaked bandages, and the sheer intensity radiating from him made people instinctively want to keep their distance.

"Awake?"

Sakazuki looked at Daren, his tone flat and direct.

"Yeah, doing alright."

Daren replied with a smile.

Sakazuki nodded, then turned to Tokikake with a cold glance.

"What are you doing here?"

Tokikake: ...

His face instantly turned red.

"Next time you see a superior officer, remember to salute. It's regulation."

With that, Sakazuki turned and left without another word.

He had barely stepped outside when yet another figure strolled in.

"Seems like it's gotten pretty lively in here..."

The voice was all too familiar—and just as irritating. Borsalino leaned on a crutch, his left leg in a cast, smiling as he looked over at Zephyr and Kuzan.

His gaze drifted lazily, almost unintentionally, past Tokikake.

"What? You all can drop by, but I can't?"

Tokikake finally snapped. He shot to his feet, grinding his teeth.

"I didn't say anything..."

Borsalino raised a hand like he was surrendering, pretending to be shocked.

Then, eyeing the panting Tokikake with interest, he added,

"But now that you mention it... why are you here?"

Tokikake: ...

Chapter 362 - 362: Volume 3 – Chapter 5 - Are You Sure?

Tokikake left, grumbling all the way.

On his way out, he even had the nerve to carry off a few of the biggest fruit baskets, leaving everyone in the room speechless.

Daren shook his head, then turned to Borsalino and asked,

"What about Enma?"

After delivering that final slash, he'd blacked out from exhaustion and heavy injuries. He had no idea what happened after that.

But when he woke up, Enma was nowhere to be found. Most likely, it had been recovered by the Marine Science Division.

Borsalino smiled lazily.

"Your sword's condition is still really unstable. After all, letting a dead object eat a Devil Fruit is a brand-new technological breakthrough. Plus, the deconstruction of the Paramecia-type is still incomplete, so it's safer to keep it with the Science Unit for now."

Daren nodded in understanding.

He'd sensed the instability himself when wielding Enma.

Unlike Spandam's sword from the original story, which had eaten the Zou Zou no Mi and gained the "vitality" and "soul" of a Zoan-type, Enma had consumed the Paramecia-type Moa Moa no Mi—and it hadn't gained any of those Zoan traits.

In other words, it was still Enma's own "will" that was controlling the Moa Moa no Mi's power.

But the Moa Moa no Mi's abilities were too strong. It felt like a child trying to wield an adult's weapon—clumsy and rough, lacking finesse.

Still, Daren wasn't worried that Borsalino or the Marine Science Division would try to snatch his sword.

No one but him could bring out Enma's full potential.

Not even a top-level swordsman.

Since the Moa Moa no Mi had been consumed by Enma itself, its power only worked on Enma—it couldn't be used like Byrnni World's ability to multiply other objects.

Even a swordmaster wouldn't gain anything from using it. What, was he supposed to swing around a hundred-meter-long blade in battle?

More importantly, with Daren's current accomplishments, status, and strength, no one in the Marines would dare risk crossing him to take Enma away.

"Anyway, I just came by to update you on that... I need to go get some rest now."

Borsalino scratched his head, then pointed at his left leg in a cast, looking helpless.

"This time I'm really messed up. Won't be back to duty for a month or two. What a shame..."

Daren: "..."

Zephyr: "..."

Kuzan: "..."

As they watched Borsalino hobble out on crutches, all three of them twitched at the corners of their mouths.

With that monster physique of his, a minor leg fracture like that would probably heal in ten days tops.

Still, none of them said anything.

It wasn't their problem—Admiral Sengoku was the one who'd be dealing with it.

That said, Daren was genuinely surprised Borsalino had even gotten injured.

Just went to show how terrifying Shiki's power really was.

...

"By the way, Daren."

Zephyr paused for a moment, weighing his words, then spoke slowly.

"I didn't just come to check on your condition. There are a few other things I wanted to discuss with you."

Daren smiled.

"Go ahead, Zephyr-sensei."

Zephyr grinned with satisfaction.

This kid Daren might have a questionable attitude and personality, but when it came to work, he was as proactive as they came.

"The first thing is about Big Mom."

Zephyr's face turned serious as he looked at Daren and asked cautiously,

"You and Charlotte Linlin..."

"No way! Absolutely not!"

Daren waved his hands in protest and shut it down on the spot.

"You sure about that..."

Zephyr eyed Daren suspiciously, clearly trying to read something from his expression.

Hey, hey, hey—what do you mean, am I sure?

Daren's eyelid twitched.

Whether or not I've done anything with Charlotte Linlin—that insane, curvy, overly sexy maniac—of course I'd know!

"Of course I'm sure!"

Facing Zephyr's skeptical look, Daren couldn't help gritting his teeth.

"Zephyr-sensei, I admit my reputation in this area isn't exactly the best."

"It's not just bad—it's downright awful."

"...What I mean is, I still have principles," Daren said, trying to keep a straight face.

"You sure about that?" Zephyr asked again.

Daren: "..."

"I'm absolutely sure!"

He said through clenched teeth.

Zephyr glanced at him, then turned to Kuzan, who was sitting nearby, eyes shining with curiosity as he listened in.

"Kuzan, go get me a cup of coffee. The machine's at the end of the hall."

Still caught up in the conversation, Kuzan replied without thinking,

"Why coffee, Zephyr-sensei? Water's fine."

A few veins popped on Zephyr's forehead. He smacked Kuzan on the head and snapped,

"Did I say I wanted coffee? I'm telling you to leave!"

Kuzan winced, rubbing his head.

"Oh."

Once Kuzan walked out of the ward, Zephyr shook his head in frustration.

Each of his students was more gifted than the last—but every one of them was a headache in their own way.

He sighed and looked back at Daren.

"I know about you and Gion."

Daren's expression froze, confusion flashing across his face.

"Me and Gion? There's nothing going on between us, Zephyr-sensei."

"...You're a better actor than I thought."

Zephyr rolled his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Don't forget, Gion was my administrative officer back at the training camp. Her changes don't slip past me."

Spacing out at work, emotional swings, and most tellingly, that youthful inexperience in her eyes slowly giving way to maturity... Zephyr had spotted the signs right away.

He'd been through it himself.

He still remembered how his own wife behaved when they'd just started dating—constantly anxious, emotions all over the place.

And most importantly, Gion's mood shifts clearly revolved around Daren's presence at Marineford.

Every time Daren returned from a mission or came back from the North Blue, Gion would show up to work the next day with a glow in her eyes that she just couldn't hide. Zephyr could only shake his head.

"I didn't want to believe it at first. But turns out it's true... You really had the guts to go after Gion."

Zephyr narrowed his eyes at Daren.

Daren blinked, then suddenly pulled a cigar from a nearby gift box and held it out with both hands, smiling.

"Ahem... Zephyr-sensei, want a smoke?"

Zephyr: "..."

He took the cigar.

Daren quickly grabbed a lighter and lit it for him.

"What I'm trying to say is, the whole Big Mom thing—it's not exactly a small matter."

Zephyr took a puff and said thoughtfully,

"I know your personality probably won't change, but still... don't do anything too outrageous."

"Charlotte Linlin... is a pirate."

Chapter 363 - 363: Volume 3 – Chapter 6 - The Hearing

"You're not the same brat you were back in the North Blue. You can't go around doing whatever you want like you used to."

Zephyr wasn't wearing his usual sunglasses today, so Daren could clearly see the seriousness in his eyes.

"This time, the Marines were able to hold Marineford thanks in no small part to you."

"With the merits you've earned from this battle, you're more than qualified to step into the core decision-making ranks of headquarters."

"Officers, enlisted men, even civilians—all of them have high hopes for you. If you were to stir up some scandal with Big Mom right now..."

His words were vague, but Zephyr knew Daren was smart and politically sharp enough to understand exactly what he meant.

And Daren did.

Still, aren't you worrying a little too much?

Am I really that kind of guy?

The grotesque image of Big Mom's monstrous "meat mountain" form from the original story popped into his head, and a chill ran down his spine.

He shuddered, then sighed and gave a helpless smile.

"Zephyr-sensei, please don't worry. There's no way I'd ever be involved with Big Mom."

Zephyr eyed him suspiciously, then said out of nowhere,

"I heard that back in the North Blue, you had quite the thing for mature women... Charlotte Linlin might be a bit older, but she's still quite the looker."

"Cough, cough!"

Daren burst into a coughing fit.

Even with his thick skin, facing such a serious accusation from Zephyr made him squirm.

"I really have no interest in her, Zephyr-sensei!"

"Then why is she after you?"

"Because she wants my body! She wants to have my kids! She's a pervert!"

Daren growled through gritted teeth.

Zephyr studied his face carefully, then slowly nodded.

"Good. Just wanted to give you a heads-up... And as for Gion—I'll pretend I don't know anything."

Daren quietly let out a breath of relief.

Zephyr continued,

"Aside from that, there's the matter of the training camp graduation."

"As per tradition, every Officer Training Camp ends with a commemorative graduation ceremony... and at the ceremony, the top of the class gives a speech on behalf of the other cadets."

"You're unquestionably the top of this year's class. That's not even up for debate."

"You should prepare something inspiring for your fellow cadets and juniors. Share some of your insights and experiences—it'll be meaningful."

As he said this, something seemed to come to Zephyr's mind, and the corner of his mouth twitched slightly.

Daren, quick to pick up on it, asked,

"Zephyr-sensei, is something bothering you?"

Zephyr suddenly looked like he'd just eaten something rotten and waved his hand dismissively.

"It's nothing. Just focus on your speech... I've got faith in you, kid."

No way was he going to tell Daren just how "outrageously memorable" the speeches from the last two top cadets had been.

With that, Zephyr patted Daren on the shoulder, stood up, and left the room.

...

Ten days passed in a flash.

During that time, Daren enjoyed a rare stretch of paid vacation—and finally understood the joy Borsalino always seemed to bask in.

Thanks to his special status and incredible battlefield contributions, he'd been assigned to a top-tier private ward, the kind normally reserved for Vice Admirals and above.

The doctors were top-class, the nurses attentive and charming.

And so, Daren found himself living a dream life—meals delivered to him, clothes laid out for him.

Add to that Amatsuki Toki's doting care and the delicious, nutritious meals she cooked for him every day, and Daren felt like life couldn't get any better.

As for Gion?

She was annoyed at first about Big Mom setting her sights on Daren, but the moment she saw the "devastating" state of his injuries, her anger vanished.

In fact, after a little coaxing from Daren, she even gave in and played along with some shameful games in the ward's soundproof room—not entirely unwilling.

...

"Daren-san, your injuries are fully healed! Your body is strong as a tiger!"

The female doctor, with long auburn hair and half-rimmed glasses, looked at the test results in her hand. A look of disbelief and admiration appeared on her refined face.

"Aizawa-san, as my personal doctor, shouldn't you be the one who knows best how strong I am?"

Daren smiled, puffing on a cigar as he looked at the woman in her early thirties standing before him.

She had the restrained air typical of someone in the medical field, but even her white coat couldn't hide her graceful, alluring figure. It was a sight for sore eyes.

"Daren-san..."

A faint blush appeared on Dr. Aizawa's face, though she couldn't help sneaking another glance at Daren's bare upper body.

His sharply defined muscles radiated masculine strength, and the crisscrossing scars only added a wild edge. Paired with his striking looks and the legendary status surrounding him...

Just as she was getting carried away in her thoughts, Daren finished his cigar and got out of bed. Under her slightly disappointed gaze, he began putting on a freshly pressed uniform.

After adjusting his black tie with meticulous precision, Daren gently took the doctor's hand. As she blushed even deeper, he lowered his head and placed a light kiss on the back of her fair hand, smiling.

"Well then, Aizawa-san. Thank you for taking such good care of me."

With that, he left the lovestruck doctor behind, draped his white cape over his shoulders, and stepped out of the ward.

...

He walked through the corridor and exited the military hospital.

Three towering figures, each built like no ordinary man, were already waiting outside.

Sakazuki stood tall in a crisp military uniform, cap on his head and a lit cigar between his lips. He was like a battle-hardened spear—firm and unyielding.

Borsalino stood with his hands in his pockets, looking relaxed, gaze wandering off as if daydreaming.

Kuzan, who had been throwing punches into the air with a fired-up look, spotted Daren and waved enthusiastically.

"Daren! We've been waiting ages for you!"

Daren smiled and walked over to the group.

"Ready?"

Sakazuki gave him a calm glance and spoke slowly.

"The hearing to promote you to Vice Admiral might just be a formality, but that doesn't mean there won't be people asking awkward questions."

Daren chuckled.

"Doesn't bother me... What about you? Not worried someone might vote against you?"

Sakazuki didn't respond. He just turned and strode off toward the Fleet Admiral's office, his presence imposing as ever.

His large cape billowed behind him, as if infused with iron will and blood-soaked resolve.

"They wouldn't dare."

Daren shrugged.

Yep, classic Sakazuki.

Off to the side, Borsalino smirked and quipped,

"With that kind of vibe, anyone would think we're heading into a war..."

Chapter 364 - 364: Volume 3 – Chapter 7 - The Navy's Core Decision-Making Body

As they walked from the military hospital toward the Fleet Admiral's office, Daren—who had been confined to a hospital bed for ten days—finally got a clear look at the current state of Marineford.

The military zone remained in ruins. Along the way, wounded Marines occasionally paused their patrols to salute the four of them, eyes filled with admiration.

The rubble from collapsed buildings and military fortifications had mostly been cleared, but the ground was still riddled with cracks and craters. What lay ahead was a vast emptiness, bleak and desolate.

Only a few skeletal structures of buildings and forts had been hastily erected—early steps toward the long road of reconstruction.

Daren couldn't help but frown repeatedly at the sight.

The devastation caused by Shiki's assault was even greater than the Marineford War he remembered from the original timeline.

More than half of the military district had been destroyed. The civilian areas hadn't been spared either—not even his own residential complex, which had been leveled by a "meteorite" that fell from the sky.

Fortunately, Zephyr had acted swiftly at the outbreak of the attack, organizing a proper evacuation effort. Thanks to that, civilian casualties had remained low.

Still, across Marineford's scarred landscape, the mood was grim. Many Marines bore exhausted expressions, and civilians stood in front of their shattered homes, dazed and silent—some openly weeping.

To Shiki, this war had been nothing more than a game, a whim, a way to vent his anger at the Navy.

But to the countless Marines and civilians who lived here, it had been a catastrophe. They had lost loved ones, friends, lovers, and homes.

Even Daren, who had grown emotionally calloused in the brutal North Blue and had long become numb to war and suffering, found himself weighed down by the scene before him.

"Damn that bastard Shiki. I'll make him pay for this!"

Kuzan gritted his teeth, fists clenched so tightly the veins on the backs of his hands stood out.

"Marineford was fine just days ago... now look at it. If only I were stronger—I could've saved more people!"

As a "double disciple" of both Zephyr and Garp, two old hardliners in their own right, Kuzan had naturally inherited their understanding of justice and their unwavering commitment to it.

To them, true justice wasn't just about hunting pirates—it was about protecting civilians and the next generation of Marines.

Kuzan had embraced that belief wholeheartedly.

His eyes blazed with grief and fury—rage at Shiki's cruelty, and even more at his own powerlessness.

Daren gave him a look, then patted his shoulder reassuringly.

"You did great, Kuzan. Without your powers, this battle could've cost us a lot more."

And that was no exaggeration.

To stop Shiki's floating island from crashing directly onto Marineford, Daren had used Enma to slice it in half, sending the pieces into the sea instead.

But even then, the island was massive—so massive that when it hit the ocean, it triggered towering tidal waves that threatened to flood nearly half the city.

If Kuzan hadn't acted in time and frozen the sea with his Devil Fruit powers, the consequences would've been unimaginable.

Before Kuzan could respond, Sakazuki spoke in his usual flat tone.

"Casualties are part of war. There's no avoiding it."

His pace didn't falter even in the face of the surrounding devastation.

"Instead of wasting time complaining or getting emotional, we should be planning our next move."

Staring at Sakazuki's cold, unyielding back, Kuzan gritted his teeth and muttered under his breath,

"Cold-blooded bastard."

Daren said nothing.

That was just who Sakazuki was.

He had forged himself into a merciless engine of war—unyielding, immovable, like a towering wall of iron. Unshakable and beyond reform.

To him, emotions like pity, grief, sympathy, or sorrow were nothing but obstacles. They clouded judgment and got in the way of eliminating the enemy.

"Sengoku's been having one hell of a time lately... Post-war compensation, tending to the wounded, temporary housing for civilians, rebuilding Marineford... Everything hit all at once. Even the Science Division's research budget took a serious cut."

Borsalino sounded like he was trying to ease the mood, casually shifting the topic with a relaxed smile.

His injuries had long since healed. He walked with a spring in his step, as if he'd never been hurt at all.

"What about government military aid?" Daren asked.

Borsalino shrugged, both hands raised with a sly grin.

"Shiki killed a Celestial Dragon. The news couldn't be contained, and now the Five Elders are probably losing their minds..."

"Fleet Admiral Kong has already gone to Mary Geoise to give a report."

Military funding had always been the biggest obstacle to the Navy's development—without question.

The Marines relied entirely on appropriations from the World Government. They had no other source of income, meaning all operations were bound by the government's decisions.

This had been an inescapable dilemma for centuries, and no solution had ever been found.

It was precisely because he understood how suffocating financial restraints could be that Daren had done whatever it took to amass funds in the North Blue, eventually forming his own independent North Blue Fleet.

The four of them chatted idly as they made their way to the central military fortress.

This was where the Fleet Admiral's office was located.

On one side of the grand fortress wall, a massive and jarring hole gaped open. Workers nearby were patching it up with steel and lumber.

That was the crater Borsalino had blasted through after taking a direct kick from Shiki.

"Gentlemen, the hearing is about to start. Admiral Sengoku and the others are already waiting in the conference room."

A uniformed messenger strode up quickly and gave a sharp salute to the four of them.

An internal Marine hearing.

It was the Navy's standard review process for newly promoted Vice Admirals, carried out by the upper ranks. In most cases, it was little more than a formality.

The Navy had a rigid and detailed hierarchy—from the lowest-ranking support staff who weren't even allowed on the battlefield, all the way to the Admirals hailed as the "World Government's strongest fighting force." Every rank had clearly defined authority.

Each promotion was a major leap forward, signifying greater power and status.

But only after reaching the rank of Vice Admiral could one truly be said to have entered the Navy's core decision-making body.

These Vice Admirals, often referred to as the "pillars of the institution," were the true backbone of global justice.

And today, Daren was about to face such a hearing himself.

Once he passed, he would officially step into the Navy's upper echelon—gaining the right to participate in most core operations, command his own flagship and independent forces, take charge of a Grand Line branch, and even receive authorization to carry out the legendary Buster Call.

Daren looked up at the imposing, majestic structure that housed the Fleet Admiral's office. His gaze burned with unhidden ambition.

He knew—after today, the door to the Navy's highest power would begin to open for him, even if just a crack.

Chapter 365 - 365: Volume 3 – Chapter 8: Tit for Tat

When Daren and the other three, led by a messenger, stepped into the highest conference room of the Fleet Admiral's residence, they were immediately met with dozens of sharp, piercing gazes.

Aside from Fleet Admiral Kong, who was away in Mary Geoise to report on affairs and request additional military funding, every Marine officer ranked Vice Admiral or higher from Headquarters was in attendance.

They sat around a massive oval conference table, each one dressed in a sharp black suit and draped in a broad Marine cloak, their expressions stern and unreadable. In front of each person lay a thin file—personnel dossiers for Daren, Sakazuki, and Borsalino. These files contained detailed records of their duties since enlisting, the commendations they'd earned, and notable incidents throughout their service.

This internal inquiry was focused squarely on the three of them.

Sakazuki and Borsalino needed no introduction. Both held the rank of Rear Admiral and were just a step away from being promoted to Vice Admiral. Their strength was beyond question. Even by the strictest

standards, their accumulated military achievements already qualified them for promotion. The only reason it hadn't happened sooner was their age.

But after the recent Battle of Marineford—where the Headquarters' so-called "monsters" had stood face-to-face with the legendary pirate Shiki—both their reputations and accomplishments had peaked. Promoting them to Vice Admiral was now a matter of course.

Daren, though younger than Sakazuki and Borsalino, had played the most critical role in the war. His previous achievements alone were enough to warrant a promotion to Rear Admiral, but that had been delayed due to the incident involving Dragon. After this battle, his contributions had tipped the scale decisively.

The spacious room exuded authority. Flags of the World Government and the Marines' Justice Seagull hung on the walls, creating an atmosphere of solemnity and pressure.

Among the crowd, Daren recognized a few familiar faces—like Zephyr-sensei's former subordinates from the battle against Shiki—but he also noticed several unfamiliar figures. These people watched the three of them with looks of scrutiny, arrogance, and even thinly veiled disdain or mockery.

"If I'm not mistaken, these must be the ones holding real power in the Headquarters' Inspection Department..."

The thought crossed Daren's mind, and the corner of his mouth curled in mild amusement.

Beyond the combat units tasked with military operations, Marine Headquarters also included administrative, strategic advisory, and disciplinary inspection departments. These handled the Marines' internal affairs, facilitated command communication, and supported frontline missions. They weren't part of the combat ranks.

Among them, the Disciplinary Inspection Department stood out as unique.

Completely independent from other departments, it reported only to the Fleet Admiral. Its main responsibility was to oversee all Marine officers. If anyone acted beyond their authority, the department could issue warnings, push for impeachment, or even expel them from service.

It was, in essence, a "military within the military"—a self-regulating body for the Marines. Most of its members, however, were officials the World Government had embedded within the organization.

Daren was certain that if anyone were to oppose the three of them during this internal hearing, it would be one of those self-important officials who thrived on flexing power within their own ranks...

"You're all here..."

As the three entered, Admiral Sengoku, seated at the head of the table, looked up with a smile and said,

"Take your seats. No need to be nervous."

He gestured toward a long table placed in front of the main conference table, facing the gathered officers. It was set up on a raised platform, like a press conference podium, clearly arranged for the upcoming questioning.

As he spoke, he shot Daren and the others a look that said, "You brats better behave."

Sakazuki didn't hesitate. He was the first to step up onto the platform, taking the seat on the far left. Daren turned to Borsalino, who gave him a cheerful wave, motioning for him to go ahead. Daren smiled, didn't argue, and took the center seat. Borsalino followed last, settling into the spot on the far right.

The three now faced the high-ranking officers below. Some looked at them with warmth or encouragement, others with scrutiny or skepticism—each gaze different.

And then, in the middle of this serious, almost oppressive atmosphere...

All three of them did the exact same thing at the same time.

They crossed their legs.

Tit for tat.

Sengoku's smile froze in place.

Tsuru quietly covered her face in exasperation.

Zephyr's mouth twitched violently.

Garp perked up and pulled out a bag of rice crackers.

From his spot near the wall, Kuzan's eyes lit up. He murmured to himself, "So cool..."

The officers from the Marine Disciplinary Inspection Department frowned in unison, their gazes sharpening.

'So the rumors were true—these kids are just as arrogant as they say...'

'No manners at all...'

'Do they think our department can't handle them?'

The officials exchanged looks, similar thoughts flashing through their minds.

No one could deny that these three young Marines were exceptionally gifted. But the officials saw themselves as agents of the World Government—aloof, superior. To them, the so-called Marine "monsters" carried no real weight.

"Ahem... It seems our heroes who defended Marineford are still recovering from their wounds. They probably came straight from the hospital and must be tired," Sengoku said with a forced smile, trying to defuse the tension.

"Is that so? I feel completely recovered already," Borsalino replied with a grin as he took off his round black cap and lit a cigarette.

"Same here," Daren added with a bold smile. He lit a cigar without hesitation and passed another to Sakazuki.

"I'm ready to head out on a mission anytime," Sakazuki said coolly, placing the cigar in his mouth. The black leather glove on his hand emitted a burst of heat that instantly lit it.

The three sat there, smoking casually, looking down at the officers below as an ominous pressure subtly emanated from their presence.

The officials from the Inspection Department stiffened. They turned sharply toward Sengoku and Zephyr, their eyes filled with displeasure.

Sengoku opened his mouth, but no words came out.

Zephyr's mouth twitched. He turned his head away.

Chapter 366 - 366: Volume 3 – Chapter 9: Any Objections?

Those damn brats!!

Sengoku glared at the three arrogant punks seated on the stage, his face flushing red with fury, fists clenched tight. He could barely hold himself back from storming up there and beating the crap out of them.

This was supposed to be a serious inquiry hearing! Sure, most of the time it was just a formality, but it still played a part in their promotion to Vice Admiral!

Worse yet, the headquarters was strapped for funds. This was the crucial moment to ask the World Government for financial support, and these three idiots had just stirred up trouble—making it even harder to deal with that stuck-up group of officials.

They might be enjoying themselves now, smoking and lounging with their legs crossed, but it'd be him who had to suck up to those pompous bureaucrats later!

The more Sengoku thought about it, the more his veins bulged. He pressed a hand to his chest, trying to calm himself.

But then again... these three had gone head-to-head with the Golden Lion and held their own. Honestly, he probably couldn't even take them anymore. That realization gave Sengoku an even bigger headache.

He instinctively turned to Zephyr, who had turned his face away. Sengoku shot him a look and subtly signaled with his eyes.

"Get your students under control!"

Zephyr rolled his eyes and ignored him completely.

"You're the future Fleet Admiral. They're your problem, not mine."

Sengoku: "..."

"Ahem... Let's move directly into the inquiry."

At that moment, Tsuru pinched her temples, cleared her throat gently, and broke the deadlock.

She smiled at the group of Inspection Department officials and said,

"Rear Admiral Sakazuki, Rear Admiral Borsalino, and Commodore Daren each have rather unique personalities, but they mean no harm."

"As senior officers of Marine Headquarters, we ought to be more tolerant of the younger generation, don't you think?"

Tsuru's words made the officials frown, but their irritation began to ease.

As the Chief Staff Officer of Marine Headquarters, Tsuru had plenty of dealings with the Inspection Department. Like it or not, they had to give her some respect.

"A little arrogance in the young... it's normal."

"Vice Admiral Tsuru has a point."

"Let's just begin."

The officials responded haughtily, their tone laced with cold disdain.

"Very well. We'll begin by reviewing and questioning Rear Admiral Sakazuki's promotion request to Vice Admiral."

Tsuru nodded, picked up one of the files in front of her, and began with a smile.

"Rear Admiral Sakazuki hails from the North Blue. He served as a Captain in a North Blue Marine branch, then as Deputy Base Commander, and eventually as North Blue Admiral. After that, he trained at the Marine Headquarters Officer Training Camp, and upon graduation, served as adjutant to former Marine Admiral Zephyr."

"His current post is Rear Admiral at Marine Headquarters. Over the course of his career, Rear Admiral Sakazuki has completed 736 combat missions and eliminated 36,225 pirates. Among them, over 3,000 had bounties exceeding ten million Belly."

"He possesses unwavering resolve and determination in carrying out justice, with a mission completion rate exceeding 95%. His overall evaluation is 'excellent.'"

"After careful deliberation, Admiral Sengoku of Marine Headquarters has officially submitted a recommendation to promote Rear Admiral Sakazuki to Vice Admiral."

"If any of you have questions or objections regarding Rear Admiral Sakazuki's promotion, please raise them now."

Silence fell over the room.

Many Marines were visibly stunned by the numbers Tsuru had just read aloud.

Over 700 missions. More than 30,000 pirates eliminated. A completion rate of over 95%!

Only fellow officers could truly grasp the terrifying weight behind those statistics.

Monster.

That was the only word that came to mind.

Even the proud officials of the World Government, faced with such an overwhelming record, fell into a prolonged silence.

They stared at the documents in their hands—packed with dense, detailed mission data. The endless rows of numbers seemed to radiate a bloodstained glow that sent chills down their spines.

But what unsettled them most was that every single mission report had the same brief yet chilling remark in the notes column.

"Exterminated."

Not a single survivor.

In Sakazuki's hands, pirates didn't even get the chance to be sent to Impel Down. The only outcome was death.

That realization made the Inspection Department officials look at Sakazuki with completely different eyes.

Wary. Hostile. And beneath it all—undeniable fear.

He's a madman.

That same thought crossed all their minds at once.

And then, from the questioning table, Sakazuki suddenly spoke.

His voice was hoarse and cold, like steel scraping across stone.

"So... does anyone have an objection to my promotion?"

Sakazuki bit down on his cigar, his broad hands pressing against the marble table. A deep red glow flared beneath his palms, scorching two clear handprints into the surface as faint wisps of black smoke curled from his body.

He leaned forward slightly, like a predator poised to strike. His cold, piercing gaze swept across the bloated faces of the officials seated below.

Not a single one dared to meet his eyes.

The room was dead silent.

Sengoku let out a long sigh, his face tense, the corners of his mouth twitching.

You're outright threatening them!

Just then, as if the silence had become too humiliating for the World Government's dignity, one of the Inspection Department officials gritted his teeth and suddenly spoke up.

"I have a question!"

Sakazuki cast him a glance.

That hellish, bone-chilling stare instantly sent a cold sweat down the official's back. But unwilling to lose face, he swallowed hard and forced himself to speak.

"A year ago, during the operation in the Bada Kingdom, your actions resulted in the death of the prince. According to CP's investigation, your attack was suspected of being an intentional strike. How do you explain that?"

Sakazuki stared at him with a blank expression, the pressure making the man's nerves fray. Then he broke into a sinister smile.

"I don't have an explanation."

"My mission was to 'prevent the marriage between Big Mom Charlotte Linlin and the Prince of the Bada Kingdom.' And in the end... because of my actions, that marriage never happened."

"The Bada Kingdom wasn't absorbed into Totto Land. And a few months ago, after the 'natural death' of the old king, the pro-World Government prince took the throne. The Bada Kingdom is now a member nation of the World Government."

"That is the best possible outcome."

"As for casualties during the operation? I won't deny it."

He narrowed his eyes, now filled with palpable menace, and locked eyes with the official.

"After all... taking down pirates isn't child's play."

The official visibly flinched, his face turning pale. He didn't dare say another word.

"So... any more objections?"

Sakazuki looked down at the room once again.

No one spoke.

Faced with the madman before them—someone who carried tens of thousands of lives on his back—none of them dared raise a single word of protest.

If he bore a grudge, they'd never sleep soundly again.

The vote commenced.

Unanimous approval.

Sakazuki smiled.

He turned to Sengoku.

Sengoku sighed, already imagining the fallout he'd have to deal with later.

He stood from his seat and declared solemnly,

"I hereby officially announce: Rear Admiral Sakazuki's application for promotion to Vice Admiral of Marine Headquarters... is approved!"

Chapter 367 - 367: Volume 3 – Chapter 10: The Results of the Marine Special Science Group

Unanimous approval!

The outcome took Sengoku, Tsuru, and the others by surprise. Usually, in hearings for Vice Admiral promotions, there would be at least a few dissenting votes just to keep up the appearance of "fairness" and "impartiality."

But clearly, no one dared to oppose a madman like Sakazuki.

Especially after the way he stared at the World Government officials in the audience—there was genuine killing intent in his eyes, and it was no bluff.

"Next... we will begin the review and questioning for the promotion of Rear Admiral Borsalino to Vice Admiral. If anyone has questions, feel free to speak up."

Tsuru pressed on with the meeting, her expression stern as she picked up another file.

"Rear Admiral Borsalino hails from the North Blue. He has served both there and at Marine Headquarters. He was part of the first graduating class from the Marine Officer Training Camp and, as the top of his class, was assigned as an adjutant to Admiral Sengoku upon graduation."

"In addition, Rear Admiral Borsalino leads the Marine Special Science Group, which has helped develop many valuable technologies and weapons for the Marines."

"He's always been serious and responsible in his duties. To date, he's completed 513 missions and captured a total of 16,309 pirates."

As Tsuru finished, the audience of Marine officers turned their attention to the man at the inquiry table—a young man with sunglasses, stubble on his chin, and a faint, unreadable smile on his face.

Then came the collective reaction from the World Government officials...

They all frowned.

"This guy just looks sleazy..."

"More like a pirate than a Marine..."

"That smug grin... it's so punchable."

"This is the top graduate of the first training camp?"

"Suddenly, that kid Sakazuki doesn't seem so bad..."

"At least Sakazuki looks like a soldier..."

...

Countless thoughts flashed through their minds as they eyed Borsalino's lazy, cigarette-smoking street punk demeanor. Their frowns only deepened.

The Inspectorate officers flipped through his file. Soon, the first question came.

"Rear Admiral Borsalino, your mission records show that in nearly every operation, you failed to kill the pirates. There are even instances where you let them escape... Can you explain why?"

At that, Daren's expression turned subtly amused.

Borsalino spread his hands with a helpless look.

"I really did try, you know. But today's pirates... they're downright terrifying. Strong as monsters, every last one of them."

The officials: "..."

Sengoku: "..."

Zephyr: "..."

Garp: "..."

Tsuru: "..."

Hey, come on, that's a little too half-hearted, isn't it?

Seeing that yellow monkey acting like he couldn't care less, the World Government officials finally snapped. After enduring Sakazuki's intensity, they were itching to take it out on Borsalino.

"Rear Admiral Borsalino, we have a few questions for you regarding the Marine Special Science Group you oversee."

One of the chubby, big-eared officials finally spoke, smirking coldly. He seemed well-prepared.

He signaled to a subordinate, who activated a Den Den Mushi, and soon a series of images began to play before everyone.

The official pointed to the first image—it showed a flashlight.

"I'd like to know—what exactly does this flashlight do?"

Borsalino glanced at it, and his expression gradually turned serious.

"It's a remarkable flashlight."

"It absorbs light as energy and then uses it to illuminate."

"It lights up... where there's light."

The official responded coldly,

"And what about where there isn't any light?"

Borsalino's face took on the serious, professional demeanor of a scientist as he answered with a straight face,

"It absolutely won't light up!"

Everyone: "..."

Sengoku and the others covered their faces in exasperation.

The official's mouth twitched before he slammed the table in fury.

"Rear Admiral Borsalino! Is this how the Special Science Group under your leadership uses the research funds allocated by the government?!"

"According to the records, just this so-called flashlight alone cost 150 million Belly in development!"

The entire room gasped.

150 million Belly!

That was a staggering sum—enough to build two warships!

If spent on military gear, it could fully outfit an elite unit of a thousand Marines.

And with that much money, Borsalino's Special Science Group had produced... a flashlight that doesn't work in the dark?

"Do you have anything to say for yourself?"

The Inspectorate officials stared at Borsalino, convinced they'd found a fatal flaw in his defense.

But Borsalino just smiled and said cheerfully, "It's actually a truly groundbreaking invention..."

"You're joking, right?"

"Not at all."

Borsalino suddenly raised a hand.

A brilliant golden glow began to gather at his index finger, radiating a lethal aura that locked directly onto the World Government official.

The man froze, cold sweat breaking out across his forehead.

"Wh-What are you trying to do?"

He knew full well how terrifying Borsalino's Devil Fruit power was—one casual flick could burn right through him.

With a half-smile, Borsalino said,

"The real innovation behind this invention is the energy conversion mechanism it's built on."

"In other words..."

As the official sat there sweating bullets, Borsalino slowly withdrew his finger with a grin.

"...the Marine Special Science Group has begun to develop an automatic energy charging system for laser weapons."

Silence fell over the room.

The officials had nothing to say.

The energy supply problem had always been the greatest hurdle in deploying laser weapons. If what Borsalino said was true, it meant these weapons might actually become viable on the battlefield.

That would be a major technological breakthrough.

In that light, spending 150 million Belly on developing the flashlight... suddenly seemed like a brilliant investment.

"Then... let's proceed with the vote," Sengoku said immediately, seizing the moment.

The Inspectorate officials glanced around at each other, then all raised their hands in agreement.

Unanimous approval!

...

While they were still voting, Daren leaned in close to Borsalino and whispered,

"So... can that tech really be put into use?"

Charging a flashlight and charging a laser cannon weren't even in the same league. The bureaucrats from the World Government might be clueless, but Daren knew exactly how hard that was.

Borsalino smirked.

"Who knows... Maybe in twenty years, when the tech's fully developed, it might actually work."

Daren: "..."

He gave a thumbs-up, resisting the urge to yell "Nice!"

...

"Next is Commodore Daren's hearing."

With Tsuru's voice signaling the final round of the meeting, everyone in the room immediately straightened up.

At the back of the room, Kuzan waved his arms excitedly and shouted,

"Go get 'em, Daren!!"

Chapter 368 - 368: Volume 3 – Chapter 11: I'm Just Looking Out for the People

"The next item on the agenda is the application for promotion of Commodore Rogers Daren of Marine Headquarters to Vice Admiral."

Tsuru flipped through the file in her hands and began to calmly explain to the gathered officers:

"Commodore Daren, like the two Rear Admirals before him, hails from the turbulent North Blue. He began his career as a low-ranking deckhand and rose through the ranks step by step, eventually becoming the highest-ranking military commander in the region..."

"Under his leadership, the North Blue Marine forces doubled in size within just two years. The region, once overrun by pirates and criminal syndicates, saw a dramatic improvement in public order."

"According to the latest assessments, North Blue is now one of the most stable, peaceful, and prosperous seas among all four Blues—and even across the Grand Line."

"Most importantly, during Commodore Daren's tenure as North Blue Admiral, every major member nation of the region publicly expressed support for his policies... He has laid a strong foundation for the long-term development of the North Blue and provided solid security backing, playing a key role in reinforcing the government's authority."

Tsuru's voice remained steady and clear, ensuring that everyone in the room heard her without confusion.

"Beyond his excellent administrative capabilities, Commodore Daren has also been outstanding in the execution of Marine operations."

She didn't hold back on the praise. Despite her personal distaste for Daren's hunger for power and his indulgent tendencies, once she realized his connection with Gion, Tsuru had no choice but to speak in his favor.

"Since joining the Marines, Commodore Daren has completed 613 missions, taken down more than 20,000 pirates, and captured over 2,000 with bounties exceeding 10 million Belly."

"Furthermore, he defeated the 'World Destroyer' Byrnni World, and engaged multiple times in battle with Whitebeard, Kaidou, Big Mom Charlotte Linlin, and Gol D. Roger without falling behind. He even single-handedly annihilated the pirate fleet under the command of the 'Flying Pirate' Shiki, and thwarted Shiki's scheme during the Battle of Marineford, ultimately protecting Marine Headquarters..."

As Tsuru listed Daren's jaw-dropping accomplishments, the Marine officers present couldn't help showing looks of pride and amazement.

Garp and Zephyr in particular wore expressions of satisfaction, practically beaming with a "that's our student" kind of pride.

In the back row, Kuzan was trembling with excitement, eyes glowing.

"...In light of Commodore Daren's outstanding achievements and contributions to justice, Marine Headquarters has submitted a special request to promote him to Vice Admiral."

Tsuru slowly closed the file and said in a low voice,

"If anyone has any objections, you may raise them now."

At her words, the World Government officials from the Inspectorate glanced at each other, momentarily at a loss.

Leadership, political skill, strength, strategy—Daren had it all. There were simply no weak points to attack.

He had Sakazuki's ruthlessness and resolve, along with Borsalino's finesse and tact.

"I have a question!"

Suddenly, one of the World Government officials stood up.

A smirk tugged at his lips as he stared mockingly at Daren, clearly thinking he had him cornered.

"Commodore Daren, according to our intelligence, during your time stationed in the North Blue, you engaged in inappropriate relationships with numerous queens, princesses, and noblewomen from various nations. Because of this, you've earned the nickname 'Scum of the Marines.' This behavior has seriously damaged the reputation of the Marines. What do you have to say in your defense?"

There it is!

The moment he asked the question, Sengoku, Tsuru, and Zephyr all felt their hearts sink.

They'd expected this. These Inspectorate bastards were bound to go after Daren's discipline and personal conduct.

Before Daren could respond, Sengoku hurriedly interjected.

"Commodore Daren's private affairs shouldn't be considered in today's session. They have no bearing on his ability to fulfill his duties as a Marine—"

"Admiral Sengoku," the official cut him off with a cold smile, "according to the rules of the hearing, Commodore Daren must answer all questions personally."

Damn it!

Sengoku clenched his jaw and cursed silently.

They were hiding behind procedure, leaving him no room to argue. All he could do now was hope that Daren could bluff his way through.

"Commodore Daren?"

The officials from the Inspectorate turned toward the inquiry table, smirking as they eyed Daren.

Daren suddenly smiled.

"I don't see anything here that needs explaining."

He lifted his head, his tone righteous and unwavering.

"As the highest-ranking officer in the North Blue, it's my duty to pay attention to the needs of the people."

"This is about caring for the citizens. It's part of my responsibility as a Marine."

C-Caring for the citizens?

Sengoku was stunned.

Zephyr looked utterly baffled.

Garp froze mid-senbei, two streams of snot dripping from his nostrils.

The Marine officers in the room completely glitched out, staring blankly ahead.

The World Government officials flushed red in disbelief, clearly furious.

Caring for the people was one thing.

But caring for them in their beds? That wasn't part of the deal!

And more importantly, where was the "care" for the men?!

Utterly shameless!

And yet this level of shamelessness was delivered with such righteous conviction!

These seasoned officials prided themselves on their political experience, having dealt with all sorts of crooks, charlatans, and degenerates over the years. They thought they'd seen everything.

But this... they had never seen before.

"Commodore Daren! This is a formal hearing!"

The questioning official stood up, furious, slamming the table.

Daren simply shrugged.

"I'm answering seriously. It's not my fault if you're not taking it seriously."

"My efforts to care for the public have not only strengthened military-civilian cooperation and earned support from member nations, but have also elevated the Marines' standing among various royal courts..."

He smiled.

"So you tell me—has it worked or not?"

Everyone: ...

Kuzan rubbed his chin thoughtfully and muttered,

"You know... he kind of has a point..."

The official's face shifted from red to purple, cycling through a whole palette of outrage.

Then another voice cut in coldly.

"Commodore Daren, how do you explain this—under your command, the North Blue Marines earn several times more than those in other seas?"

"Headquarters allocates roughly equal military budgets across all four regions. So why does the North Blue receive such high salaries?"

"What exactly is the source of that funding?"

Sengoku, Zephyr, and the others tensed slightly at the sharp question.

This touched on a very sensitive issue—one they had long chosen to ignore.

"The budget, huh..."

Daren sighed, looking mildly troubled.

"How do I put it... the North Blue is chaotic, and our policies have to adapt."

"In these conditions, North Blue Marines suffer far higher casualty rates than other seas. So I believe that in high-risk environments, higher compensation is only fair."

"You can't expect people to risk their lives for the pittance from HQ alone, right?"

"Well, I'm just looking out for my men."

Sengoku: ...

Zephyr: ...

Tsuru: ...

Garp burst into loud laughter.

Chapter 369 - 369: Volume 3 – Chapter 12: I'm a Good Marine

As Daren spoke, Sengoku's eye twitched uncontrollably, and his fist clenched instinctively.

Hey, hey, hey, you little brat—just answer the question properly! Do you have to drag others down with you?

What do you mean, "pittance "...?

That's been the standard pay at Marine Headquarters for years. No one ever complained!

Running the Headquarters is no walk in the park. Even I, an Admiral, have it tough, you know?

Still, Sengoku knew this wasn't the time to argue with Daren, so he forced himself to let it go.

"Commodore Daren! Please take this seriously and answer the question properly!"

One of the World Government officials had gone red in the face, gritting his teeth in frustration.

Daren responded as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

"I am being serious. I'm just stating the facts."

"You honestly think that answer is going to satisfy everyone here?"

The official's voice was full of indignation.

"Then how do you explain the series of abnormal deaths involving several Celestial Dragons in the North Blue?!"

He looked like he'd finally found a fatal flaw, locking his eyes on Daren with burning intensity.

Daren's expression turned somber. His voice dropped to a heavy tone.

"I personally feel deep regret and sorrow for the unfortunate passing of the World Nobles."

"But the cause of those deaths has already been thoroughly investigated. There's no need for me to restate the obvious, is there?"

Just then, another official wearing gold-rimmed glasses suddenly stood up. He waved a document in his hand and sneered.

"We've also discovered that you possess wealth vastly disproportionate to your rank and position. How do you explain that?"

"If you can't provide a reasonable explanation, we'll have no choice but to suspect you of accepting bribes!"

Daren nodded thoughtfully, as if agreeing.

"I completely understand your concerns."

The man grinned smugly.

"Then explain it."

Before Daren could reply, a sharp ringing echoed from the Den Den Mushi in his pocket.

The official scowled and immediately cut the call off.

But a second later, it rang again.

Frowning, he pulled out his own Den Den Mushi. When he saw the signal, his eyes narrowed.

"Fleet Admiral Sengoku, I request a one-minute recess."

He turned toward Sengoku.

Sengoku blinked, clearly puzzled.

A request for a recess—at a moment this critical?

Strange...

But figuring it might buy Daren a bit of time, Sengoku gave a small smile and nodded.

"Of course. Go ahead."

The official nodded and quickly exited the chamber.

But then—

"Brrruu... Brrruu..."

"Brrruu... Brrruu..."

More Den Den Mushi began to ring one after another throughout the conference room.

The officials from the Inspectorate paused, stunned, as they realized all their personal Den Den Mushi were ringing simultaneously. They exchanged glances, then quietly slipped out of the room one by one.

...

Outside the chamber, the World Government officials answered their calls, impatience written all over their faces.

"I said I'm in a meeting!"

"Didn't I tell you not to disturb me?!"

"Damn it! Unless it's something really important, you're done!"

...

They all shouted into their Den Den Mushi, scolding their secretaries.

But what came through next instantly drained the fury from their voices.

"Sir, one hundred million Belly has just been deposited into your personal account at the underground bank."

The officials froze, then erupted in outrage.

"Damn it, is this supposed to be a bribe!?"

"This is an insult!"

"Who does he think we are!?"

"We're representatives of the World Government! Professionals sent to oversee the Marines!"

...

Then the Den Den Mushi chimed again.

"Sir, another two hundred million Belly has been deposited into your personal account."

The officials froze once more.

They exchanged glances, then responded to their Den Den Mushi in unison:

"Yes, understood."

...

Inside the conference room.

After confirming the World Government officials had all stepped out, Sengoku turned to Daren with a worried expression.

"Daren, you gonna be okay?"

Daren simply smiled and leisurely lit a cigar.

He didn't say a word.

Sengoku opened his mouth to ask more—but before he could, the officials re-entered the room.

Once seated...

Sengoku, clearly uneasy, resumed the proceedings.

"Then... Commodore Daren, please answer the previous question."

But just as the words left his mouth, something utterly unexpected happened.

The same official who had attacked Daren earlier now wore a beaming smile. His face was flushed as he spoke warmly,

"There's no need. Commodore Daren is a rising star in the Marine ranks. He shouldn't have to answer such demeaning questions."

The others immediately followed suit, doing a complete 180 as they chimed in with cheerful faces.

"Yes, yes! Commodore Daren has served in the North Blue for years. It's only natural he'd have some personal savings."

"I say we wrap up this meeting. I personally support Commodore Daren's promotion to Vice Admiral!"

"No point dragging this out—it would only take away from Commodore Daren's valuable training time."

"Absolutely!"

"I agree!"

"Agreed!"

...

Before Sengoku or anyone else could react, under the stunned eyes of the Marines, these once-impossible-to-please officials were now nodding eagerly and casting their votes in favor.

The room was suddenly filled with harmony, laughter, and good vibes.

Sengoku: "..."

Tsuru: "..."

Zephyr: "..."

Garp: "???"

Kuzan clenched his fists in excitement.

"They must've been moved by Daren's sense of justice! That has to be it! He's so cool!!"

Borsalino turned with a smirk and looked at the cigar-smoking Daren.

"So... how much did you spend?"

Daren shrugged casually.

"I was just... showing care for my superiors."

And with that, what had started as a tense, hostile hearing concluded in a strangely joyful atmosphere.

Unanimous approval!

...

"Alright then... Let's wrap things up with the traditional closing question, Commodore Daren."

Sengoku, numb to it all by now, gathered the ballots and looked over at the man on the witness stand.

At the inquiry table, the former Supreme Commander of the North Blue, top graduate of the Officer Training Camp, and soon-to-be Vice Admiral, Rogers Daren, bit down on his cigar and smiled calmly.

"I smoke. I drink. I'm greedy, lustful, power-hungry, a liar... I've done all sorts of shady things..."

As Sengoku and the others' expressions darkened...

Daren grinned.

"But I still consider myself a good Marine."

Chapter 370 - 370: Volume 3 – Chapter 13: This Is a Warning
North Blue.

Rubeck Island, Donquixote Family Estate Hall.

Dim, chilly light streamed down from the intricately carved marble dome. A cigar burned quietly on the coffee table, its smoke curling through the sunlight in ghostly, dissolving patterns.

"So... that's all?"

Doflamingo set down the Den Den Mushi and looked up at the man seated across from him, spine straight, expression calm.

Momonga, clad in a Marine coat, gave a small nod and smiled.

"That's more than enough."

A sneer tugged at the corner of Doflamingo's mouth, a glint of cruel amusement flickering behind his sunglasses.

"Fufufufufu... Who would've thought? The World Government's so-called Inspectorate officers at Marine Headquarters, bought off with a mere 300 million Belly. Cheap doesn't even begin to cover it."

"Bunch of greedy, useless drunks."

Momonga chuckled lightly and shook his head.

"Three hundred million Belly isn't exactly pocket change. But that's not why they gave in."

"Oh?"

Doflamingo's interest sharpened as he tilted his head.

He had already heard about Daren's special-promotion hearing for Vice Admiral.

Momonga had come to ask a favor—simple, really.

Using the Donquixote family's underground networks to locate the private slush funds of those Inspectorate officials... and discreetly deposit money into them.

For Doflamingo, the kingpin of North Blue's underworld, this was child's play.

The criminal syndicates were all tangled together beneath the surface, and his family's operations had already expanded deep into the New World, maintaining cozy ties with several of the dark world's reigning powers.

If Doflamingo wanted something done, they'd give him the courtesy.

Momonga gave a small smile, though there was a flicker of reflection in his eyes.

"The shift in their attitudes had little to do with the money. You know that. To most people, 300 million Belly is a fortune they'd never finish spending. But to them... it's nothing special."

Doflamingo narrowed his eyes slightly.

A spark of realization flashed behind his lenses before he let out a low chuckle.

"So... it's a warning."

Momonga nodded, quietly impressed by Doflamingo's sharpness.

Truthfully, if Daren hadn't explained it to him in detail, even Momonga might not have connected the dots so quickly.

"Exactly. It's more of a warning than a bribe."

"If Daren can uncover the existence of their hidden underground accounts, it means he could expose them at any time. And more than that—he can uncover everything."

"Their private villas, their secret mistresses, how many illegitimate kids they've fathered... Even where they shop, which restaurants they frequent, what brands they smoke, what liquor they drink, which doctors they visit, what prescriptions they're on... Daren can find it all."

...And that meant, if Daren ever wanted to, he could place bounties through the underworld—wipe them out quietly, without a trace.

That last part Momonga left unsaid.

But he was certain Doflamingo had already figured it out.

Doflamingo casually crossed one leg over the other, amused.

"Fufufufufu... Now that's entertaining."

Momonga stood slowly.

"Thanks for your help, Doflamingo."

Doflamingo let out a raspy chuckle.

"It's an honor to serve Godfather-sama."

Momonga nodded and turned toward the grand hall's doors.

As he stepped through the entrance, his pace suddenly stopped.

He hesitated for a moment, then spoke quietly, his voice almost soft.

"Doflamingo... you know, Daren actually cares about you."

Doflamingo froze.

A flicker of something unreadable passed behind the dark lenses of his sunglasses.

Before he could say a word, Momonga's form shimmered and vanished into a streak of lightning.

...

"Congratulations, Chief Staff Officer Tsuru. The Marine Headquarters just gained three more outstanding officers."

"Indeed—congratulations! A victory for justice."

"Commodore Daren—no, Vice Admiral Daren—is truly a remarkable man!"

"That's right. We'll be sure to sing his praises to the higher-ups!"

...

After the hearing, Tsuru found herself surrounded by a group of overly enthusiastic World Government officials, all beaming as they congratulated her. It took considerable effort for her to finally get away from them.

She couldn't remember the last time the Inspectorate crowd had treated her so politely.

In the past, they'd always carried themselves with arrogant airs, never really seeing themselves as part of the Marines—more like their superiors. Even toward her, the Chief Staff Officer of Marine Headquarters, they'd offer only perfunctory smiles, nothing remotely close to this level of warmth... in fact, it was borderline sycophantic.

Frankly, it unsettled her.

She much preferred their usual disdain. At least that felt honest.

'What the hell did those Den Den Mushi calls tell them to make them flip their attitude like that?'

Lost in thought, Tsuru made her way back to her office.

One thing was for certain—those calls had something to do with Daren.

Still preoccupied, she pushed open the door to her office, only to pause in surprise at the sight of two familiar figures.

"Gion, Tokikake?"

A soft smile crossed her face as she saw the two of them clearly waiting for some time.

"What are you doing here?"

Gion pressed her lips together, her expression tinged with concern, but didn't speak right away.

Tokikake, on the other hand, blurted out eagerly,

"Tsuru—how did the hearing go? Did it pass?"

Looking at the expectation gleaming in both their eyes, Tsuru chuckled and gave a nod.

"It passed."

As soon as the words left her mouth, a flicker of barely concealed joy lit up in Gion's usually composed eyes. Her fists clenched quietly at her sides.

"Damn it!!"

Tokikake immediately let out a disgruntled groan, grinding his teeth in frustration.

"That bastard Daren actually got approved?! What the hell were those Inspectorate guys doing!?"

Tsuru: ...

Right. So you two clearly weren't hoping for the same outcome.

She sighed and shook her head, sitting down at her desk as she began to pour tea.

"Alright, let's have it. You didn't come all this way just for the hearing news, did you?"

Gion hesitated for a second, then her face hardened with resolve.

"Tsuru-nee, I've made up my mind."

Tsuru blinked in surprise. She met Gion's eyes, then turned to Tokikake.

"You too, Tokikake?"

Tokikake pumped a fist and grit his teeth.

"Damn right! I've been staying in the background for way too long! If I keep this up, that guy Daren's gonna hog all the spotlight!"