

One Piece 41

Chapter 41 - A Performance

North Blue, Kyiv Island.

Kyiv Island was a small, neutral territory in the North Blue. With only a town of a few thousand residents and no allegiance to any nation, it had slowly become a haven for all kinds of illicit forces due to its lack of governance.

Thieves ran rampant. The mafia ruled the streets. Pirate ships docked at the rundown harbor without a care. Gunshots occasionally rang out in the alleys.

At the port, Daren and Momonga stood side by side, smoking. Their black hooded coats concealed their figures almost entirely, making them unrecognizable.

The dock bustled with crowds. Shouts, bartering, and the scraping of crates against the ground filled the air.

The place reeked.

Rotting fish, spoiled fruit, expired spices, human waste, even dismembered corpses floated by the shore—the stench was enough to make one believe they'd stumbled into hell itself.

"Is everything set?"

Daren squinted at a merchant ship slowly pulling out of port, smoke curling from his lips as he asked.

"Yeah. I didn't show my face. We passed her off to a mafia group under our control. There's no way it'll trace back to us."

"She's heading somewhere new. Starting over with a new life."

Momonga spoke quietly, expression solemn. His face was calm, but his heart pounded.

"No need to be so tense..." Daren noticed his unease and turned, grinning as he patted his shoulder.

"Aside from her, no one on that ship made it out alive. Even if they do open an investigation, they won't find a thing."

"As far as the world knows, that little flower girl went down with the official ship."

Momonga took a deep drag from his cigarette and rolled his eyes.

Easy for you to say...

Even now, his palms were still sweating just thinking about what Daren had pulled off.

That was a Celestial Dragon!!

A so-called "god" with absolute power and status!!

But still, after hearing the operation had succeeded, there was an undeniable sense of satisfaction inside him.

He couldn't help but recall the innocent, pure smile on that little girl's face when they said goodbye.

Maybe—for a smile like that—the risk had been worth it.

Daren, you were right.

That Celestial Dragon really did deserve to die.

"What about her father? What do we do with him?"

Momonga exhaled a cloud of smoke, voice low.

Daren paused to think.

"Won't be long before someone gets sent to investigate Batia Island. We can't tell her father the truth yet. We'll need him to play along—put on a show."

Momonga's pupils narrowed slightly.

"An investigation? I thought you said they wouldn't find anything."

Daren sneered.

"They won't."

He had used his Jiki Jiki no Mi powers to completely block the surveillance Den Den Mushi's signal.

Even if the government went through the footage afterward, all they'd see was a sudden signal loss.

And from that, they'd conclude that the ship was destroyed in an instant.

That would naturally shift the investigation toward high-level threats—those with terrifying power.

He was just a "mere" Captain in the eyes of Headquarters.

No one would suspect him.

"But either way, the investigation team has to at least put on a show. That's the only way to give the government a proper explanation."

Momonga suddenly understood, then frowned.

"You think the government will keep digging into this?"

Daren shook his head.

"Not a chance. They don't have the patience for it."

"The key point is, this 'Celestial Dragon Incident' is still under wraps. Aside from the investigation team and a few top brass, no one else knows a thing."

"And with no one aware, there's no real political pressure on the government."

This time, the incident involving the Celestial Dragons was completely different from the Sabaody Archipelago incident in the original timeline.

Back then, Luffy—the Straw Hat himself—punched a Celestial Dragon right in public view. Everyone on the island saw it. Word spread fast that a Celestial Dragon had been attacked, and the World Government was forced to respond harshly under mounting political pressure.

An Admiral was dispatched. Kizaru led a "crusade" against the Straw Hats, but the mission ultimately failed. In the end, all they could do was haul in 500 unlucky pirates to save face.

But this time, things were different.

No one knew a Celestial Dragon had died.

The clues and evidence had been sealed off completely.

This investigation would only end in a quiet sweep under the rug.

Listening to Daren's analysis, Momonga couldn't help but sigh.

"I honestly don't know how your mind works... You're from the North Blue, yet your insight into the upper ranks is that sharp."

"But if the investigation digs deep enough, Tokikake and Gion might start piecing things together... Aren't you worried they'll slip?"

He turned to Daren, a faint trace of concern in his voice.

No matter how you looked at it, Tokikake and Gion were still "outsiders" to the North Blue Marines.

And they hadn't exactly had a good impression of Daren from the start.

Daren chuckled.

"Even if they suspect something, they won't speak up. They wouldn't dare."

He looked out at the filthy, soot-stained harbor, a calm ease in his demeanor, as if this was where he belonged.

"They're good people. Better than me. Better than you. Better than most in this world."

"They're too clean, too pure. That's their greatest strength—and their biggest weakness."

"I did what they wanted to do but didn't have the guts to. So of course, they would stay silent."

"And once they made their choice..."

The Captain's eyes turned sharp, with a hint of something deeper.

"They're already aboard our ship."

Momonga felt a jolt in his chest. He took a deep breath, then let out a bitter laugh.

"So you used them too? You really are a devil."

Daren just smiled, unbothered.

"Momonga, you know something?"

"Life—real life—has never been about good versus evil. It's always been about choosing the greater evil or the lesser one."

"This world's already upside down. Pure justice has no place to survive."

"Most Marines either swallow their pride and become watchdogs for the government, or they stand by helplessly, watching crimes unfold with no power to stop them."

"But me? I refuse to be a dog. And I refuse to be a bystander."

He turned, eyes firm, locked onto his longtime adjutant, comrade, and partner. His gaze was defiant and unwavering.

"One day, all of this will change."

"But until then, I have to be the devil..."

He exhaled a plume of smoke like a dragon rising, voice layered with meaning.

"...because we've already been living in hell for a long time."

Momonga stood there, listening in silence, lost in thought.

Then, as if shaking off the weight of his words, Daren's expression eased again. He flicked away his cigarette and stretched with a lazy yawn.

"Come on, let's head back. Time to welcome our Admiral Sengoku," he said with a grin.

...

Batia Island.

A massive, battle-worn warship slowly approached the dock.

Its bow was shaped like a giant Buddha, and grim-faced Marines stood at attention on the deck—clearly elite forces.

Civilians and merchants at the port stood frozen in shock as they stared at the behemoth, its massive cannons and oppressive aura radiating the unmistakable presence of war. Instinctively, they stepped back and scattered, hearts pounding in awe and fear.

It was like a floating fortress.

Sengoku led a group of Marines down from the deck. Hidden among the crowd, a masked CP0 agent quietly observed.

"This island..."

Sengoku frowned as he took in the blue-tiled roofs and white walls that defined Batia Island's architecture.

An aide stepped up beside him and whispered a few words in his ear.

"So that's how it is..."

Sengoku let out a quiet sigh. Although he was clearly displeased with how Batia Island's city government operated, he could only shake his head helplessly.

Tap, tap, tap...

Just then, the sound of hurried footsteps echoed from the far end of the street.

Sengoku looked up, and a warm smile quickly spread across his face.

Gion and Tokikake were approaching, leading over a hundred Marines in tight formation.

"Admiral Sengoku!"

The two stopped in front of him and saluted smartly.

The surrounding onlookers gasped in disbelief.

That plain-looking man with black-rimmed glasses and a strange seagull hat—was actually a Marine Headquarters Admiral? One of the World Government's top fighting forces!?

"Good, very good. Looks like your time in the North Blue has helped you grow."

Sengoku studied the two of them, a look of approval gradually forming in his eyes.

From the aura he sensed through his Observation Haki, both Gion and Tokikake had become significantly stronger since leaving Marineford.

"Seems that brat Daren really put in some effort training you."

At the mention of that name, both Gion and Tokikake's expressions darkened with visible irritation and frustration.

"But tell me, why are only the two of you here?"

"Where are Daren and Momonga?"

Sengoku glanced around as he asked.

Just as he finished speaking, a calm voice with a trace of laughter came from the other side of the street.

"Admiral Sengoku gracing the North Blue—what an honor for us."

Everyone turned toward the voice.

Daren and Momonga, both in uniform, were walking briskly toward them.

But the moment Daren appeared, Sengoku keenly sensed through his Observation Haki...

The people of Batia Island were looking at him with a mix of anger, resentment... and fear.

It was the look of those who wanted to speak but dared not.

This is...

Sengoku's brow furrowed slightly.

Chapter 42 Consensus

Batia Island.

City Hall, conference room.

Everyone else had tactfully left, leaving only five people seated: Daren, Momonga, Gion, Sengoku, and Borsalino.

This was an internal meeting of the North Blue Marines.

Daren lit a cigar, gave a quick glance at Borsalino behind his toad-shaped sunglasses, then turned to Sengoku with a smile.

"So, how did the operation against Byrnndi World go, Admiral Sengoku?"

Looking at the Admiral's frustrated expression, Daren couldn't help but find it a little amusing.

With two of the Marine Headquarters' three Admirals absent—Zephyr fully devoted to teaching and Garp refusing promotion—nearly all the menial and troublesome tasks had fallen squarely on Sengoku's shoulders.

A truly pitiful burden to bear.

Sengoku shook his head.

"Something happened along the way. The mission had to be called off."

He took a small sip of tea, his sharp gaze sweeping across each face in the room. His expression grew solemn.

"The reason I've come here this time is precisely because of that."

Noticing the seriousness in Sengoku's tone, Gion and the others sat up straighter, their faces turning grave.

After a brief pause, Sengoku spoke slowly.

"One day ago, something happened in the North Blue that sent shockwaves through the World Government."

"Not long after leaving Batia Island to return to the Holy Land Mary Geoise, Saint Xildes, a Celestial Dragon, was attacked during the voyage... and killed on the spot."

As soon as the words landed, Daren's expression changed dramatically, and he stood up abruptly.

"What? That's impossible!"

Momonga's face also showed the perfect amount of shock—stunned disbelief.

Gion and Tokikake stiffened.

Their eyes flicked instinctively toward Daren, as if something had just occurred to them—but when they saw the look of "shock" on his face, they hesitated, briefly stunned.

Sengoku, overwhelmed by the chaos of the situation, didn't notice the subtle shift in their expressions. He simply rubbed his temples in frustration.

Only Borsalino seemed to pick up on something, the smile at the corner of his lips turning a shade more knowing.

"The Celestial Dragon attack remains classified," Sengoku continued, "but I've already received government orders to launch a full investigation."

He sighed.

"But so far, the surveillance Den Den Mushi on the official ship hasn't revealed any clues."

"What we do know is that the attacker's strength was terrifying. The World Government's guards didn't even have time to react before the ship was completely destroyed."

"Here's the intel."

Sengoku handed a document to Daren.

Daren took it, skimmed through quickly, then muttered,

"Wiping out a government ship in an instant... Even on the Grand Line, there are only a handful who could pull that off—let alone in a small sea like the North Blue."

He passed the file along to Momonga and the others.

Momonga quickly read it too. Even though he'd expected it, he was still shocked.

The intel matched Daren's earlier analysis exactly. Sengoku's investigation had followed the same conclusions.

"Admiral Sengoku... Have you identified any suspects yet?"

Daren asked seriously.

"Since it happened in the North Blue, I have to take responsibility. I, along with the North Blue Marines, will fully cooperate with your investigation."

Sengoku was clearly pleased with his attitude and nodded.

"Hmm. Handing the North Blue over to you really was the right decision."

"That said, I've already reviewed all known individuals capable of something like this—but so far, no leads."

"I came to Batia Island to dig deeper. After all, considering the timeline, Saint Xildes departed for Mary Geoise from right here."

"...I see." Daren nodded slowly, looking thoughtful.

"You were in charge of guarding Saint Xildes during his time on Batia Island..."

Sengoku tapped his fingers lightly on the table.

"Before Saint Xildes-sama set sail, did you notice anything strange on the island? Anyone unfamiliar? Anything unusual?"

After he spoke, Sengoku noticed Gion and Tokikake's expressions shift subtly. They looked like they wanted to speak but held back.

"To be honest, Admiral Sengoku..."

Daren spoke up slowly, his expression layered with complexity.

"Something did happen before Saint Xildes-sama departed."

"Oh?" Sengoku raised an eyebrow. "What was it?"

Gion and Tokikake turned to look at Daren in surprise.

The Captain let out a sigh.

"It was... an unfortunate event."

After pausing to find the right tone, he began recounting the story of the flower-selling father and daughter on Batia Island.

...

Bang!

A massive fist slammed down, and the conference table in front of Sengoku splintered into pieces.

"Damn it!!!"

He shot to his feet, fists clenched so tightly they shook.

It wasn't clear who exactly he was cursing.

But in his mind flashed the image of a frail little girl being violently dragged into a ship's cabin, curled up and shivering in a dark corner.

Gion and the others didn't dare speak as they watched the fury etched across Admiral Sengoku's face.

It took a long moment before Sengoku finally forced himself to suppress the rage burning in his chest.

"This meeting is over. I'm tired."

His voice was hoarse as he spoke, and without another word, he turned and left the room.

Gion and the others hurried after him.

Only Daren and Borsalino remained in the now-silent conference room.

Both wore faint, ambiguous smiles.

"It's been a while, Rear Admiral Borsalino."

Daren suddenly broke the silence with a chuckle, pulling out a gold-embossed cigar and tossing it to Borsalino.

Borsalino caught it, brought it under his nose for a sniff, and grinned.

"It's been years, but you haven't changed one bit, Daren. Still living the good life."

Daren lit a cigar for himself, shrugged.

"Being a Marine is hard enough. No reason to make it harder on yourself, right?"

Borsalino gave him a long, deliberate look, then suddenly smiled.

"Looks like you're doing just fine here in the North Blue."

He paused, his tone layered with meaning.

"Daren... this is just the beginning, isn't it?"

Daren smiled calmly.

"Who knows? I'm not a fan of trouble... Learned that from you, actually."

Borsalino scratched his head, looking slightly troubled.

"Yeah... Trouble's never a good thing."

"But trouble always finds its way to you," Daren replied.

"Just as long as it doesn't involve me..." Borsalino stretched lazily, stood up, and walked toward the door.

"Thanks for the cigar."

He waved casually behind him as he stepped out.

But just as he reached the threshold, his steps halted. He turned back with a faint smile.

"By the way... I have a feeling the truth behind the Celestial Dragon incident isn't all that complicated."

"Oh? Rear Admiral Borsalino, what's your take?" Daren flicked some ash off his cigar.

Borsalino's sunglasses glinted with a strange light.

"I'd say... it was probably just a Sea King attack."

"A ship that big, sailing out in the open like that—pretty easy target, wouldn't you say?"

"Just an accident. Don't you agree, Daren?"

Silence.

Heavy, suffocating silence.

Borsalino stared at the Captain sitting there smoking, as if trying to read something from his face.

But Daren only answered coolly,

"Sharp as ever, Rear Admiral Borsalino. I think so too."

They locked eyes for a few moments.

Then both laughed—

Like a pair of cunning foxes.

Chapter 43: Eliminate All Impossibilities

The next day.

Batia Island, City Hall meeting room.

After a full day of intelligence gathering and investigation, the final meeting on the Celestial Dragon attack officially began.

Everyone took their seats.

The room was so quiet, a pin could drop. The only sound came from Sengoku flipping through the intel files.

No one spoke. Everyone waited in silence.

After a few minutes, Sengoku closed the file, looked up, and swept his gaze across the room.

"Let's hear your thoughts."

He pinched the bridge of his nose.

Everyone exchanged glances. In the end, it was Borsalino who spoke up first.

With a smile, he said,

"My stance hasn't changed. Judging from the surveillance footage, this incident was most likely just an accident."

"The odds of a Sea King attack aren't high—but not impossible either."

Sengoku rolled his eyes and didn't even bother responding to the lazy remark. He turned instead to the top officer of the North Blue Marines.

"Daren, what's your take?"

Daren considered his words, then spoke in a steady tone.

"Admiral Sengoku, I agree with Rear Admiral Borsalino's assessment."

"There's a saying from my hometown... 'Once you've ruled out all the impossible, whatever remains—no matter how improbable—must be the truth.'"

"In truth, there's no one in the North Blue capable of instantly destroying a World Government vessel. We've already ruled out every other possibility. So the only logical conclusion... is that this was indeed an attack by a Sea King."

Sengoku frowned slightly.

Just then, Daren turned to look at Gion and Tokikake.

"Perhaps Lieutenant Commanders Gion and Tokikake have a different view?"

Both Gion and Tokikake flinched at the sudden question. Under Daren's calm gaze, a sense of unease crept in.

"You two have something else in mind?"

Sengoku turned to them as well.

"I..."

Tokikake opened his mouth, but in his mind, he saw the image of the little girl's father on his knees, sobbing in despair.

"I agree with Captain Daren," Gion suddenly said, voice cold.

Her fists were clenched so tightly her knuckles had turned pale.

Tokikake turned to her in shock, caught completely off guard.

Sengoku noticed the odd reaction between the two and was briefly puzzled—then quietly sighed in realization.

To see civilians, the people they were sworn to protect, seized by a Celestial Dragon and turned into "slaves"... yet be powerless to stop it—

For people who believed in justice, that must have been a crushing blow.

Sengoku shook his head.

So in the end... is the truth really what Borsalino claimed?

That thought lingered in his mind as he turned to glance at Borsalino, who sat looking completely zoned out. A strange expression crept onto Sengoku's face.

Something about this didn't sit right. But he couldn't put his finger on it.

Was it really... a Sea King?

...

Temporary office.

"So, this is your conclusion, Sengoku?"

"...A Sea King attack?"

Across from Sengoku sat a CP0 agent clad in white silk robes. His voice was cold, and the lifeless eyes behind his eerie mask stared directly at him.

"You're not joking, are you? The higher-ups won't accept that."

Under the weight of CP0's stare, Sengoku felt a bit uncomfortable. He cleared his throat.

"Yes."

As if trying to add weight to his words, he paused and then added,

"There's a saying from my hometown... 'Once you've ruled out the impossible, whatever remains—no matter how improbable—must be the truth.'"

CP0 replied icily,

"Sengoku, do you really think the higher-ups will buy that?"

Sengoku fell silent.

The CP0 paused for a moment, then suddenly said,

"What about the little girl's father? I believe he should be interrogated. After all, he had a motive."

Hearing that, a surge of anger rose in Sengoku's chest. He gritted his teeth.

"I don't believe there's anything suspicious about that man. He's just a civilian."

He had already visited the little girl's father in secret.

Gaunt, hollow-eyed, like a man who had lost his soul—just a shell, wandering through life.

Exactly how a man who'd lost his beloved daughter would look.

What was there to suspect?

As for motive?

Of course he had one.

Saint Xildes had dragged the girl away by force. If he hadn't been a Celestial Dragon, guarded on all sides, the man wouldn't have hesitated to tear him apart the first chance he got.

But the CP0 remained unmoved, replying coldly,

"This case involves the World Nobles. No level of caution is too much."

"Sengoku... don't forget, this is a direct order from the government. As a Marine Admiral, you are expected to comply—without question."

"I am complying with the government's orders!"

Sengoku cut him off sharply.

He planted both hands on the desk and slowly rose to his feet. Leaning forward, he radiated an overwhelming pressure as he stared down at the CPO agent.

His voice was hoarse and forceful.

"By your logic, everyone on Batia Island had a motive. What now—are we going to arrest the entire island and torture them all for answers!?"

"If necessary," CPO said flatly.

Sengoku stared at him... and suddenly let out a bitter, almost ridiculous laugh.

"Sorry. I can't do that."

"The Sea King attack... that's the conclusion I reached from the investigation."

"As for that man who lost his daughter—he's just a broken, grieving father. Nothing more."

"Report it to the Five Elders."

CPO stared at Sengoku, who stood firm and unwavering, then fell silent for a few seconds.

"Understood."

...

Holy Land Mary Geoise.

World Government Headquarters, small Western-style villa.

Steam rose from boiling green tea.

The Five Elders—the highest authority in the World Government—stood or sat, expressions grim. The air was heavy with tension.

"Honorable Elders, this is the report from Sengoku,"

The CP0's raspy voice came through the military Den Den Mushi.

"We've received it. Remain on standby," said the blond Five Elders expressionlessly.

"Yes, my lord."

The line went dead.

"What nonsense," Topman Warcury sneered suddenly.

"Actually, it's not entirely impossible," the blond Elder remarked out of nowhere.

"I'm well aware of that," Topman Warcury said, shaking his head. "But the Xildes family won't accept this explanation."

At that, the other Elders fell silent.

They represented the interests of the Celestial Dragons—but in truth, the death of a useless, gluttonous noble didn't concern them.

What did concern them... was calming the fury of the powerful families back in the Holy Land.

Saint Xildes may have been worthless, but his family wielded considerable influence in Mary Geoise.

"Finding the truth," in essence, was just a way to appease them.

"Perhaps... we need to broaden the scope of the investigation."

The moment Topman Warcury said that, the others all frowned.

A cold gleam flickered in his aged eyes.

"In my life, I've seen countless wars. And I've come to one conclusion—"

"...There are no such things as 'accidents' in this world."

The other Four Elders raised their brows.

"What are you implying?"

Topman Warcury let out a cold laugh.

"Sengoku's conclusion is absurd, yes. But he did say one thing that rang true—

'Once you've ruled out the impossible, whatever remains—no matter how improbable—must be the truth.'"

"We've ruled out pirates. We've ruled out civilians. That leaves us with only one possibility."

The others froze.

"You don't mean..."

"That's right. I suspect—though of course, it's only a possibility..."

Topman Warcury narrowed his eyes.

"The one responsible... could it have been..."

He slowly uttered a word that made the rest of the Five Elders shift slightly in their seats.

"...the Marines?"

Chapter 44: First, Eliminate Him as a Suspect

"The Marines?"

As Topman Warcury finished speaking, the remaining four Five Elders all froze for a moment. Then, one after another, they turned to him with expressions of disbelief—confused, skeptical, even stunned.

"What exactly are you implying?"

"That's impossible!"

"We're talking about the Celestial Dragons—the World Nobles!"

...

They couldn't believe the Marines would ever dare to make a move against a Celestial Dragon.

Not because they lacked the power—But because they wouldn't dare.

As the largest enforcement arm under the World Government, the Marines were fully dependent on government funding.

While the Marines had, since their inception, maintained a relatively independent command structure, the World Government still held considerable authority over them.

Beyond the political constraints and the doctrine of Celestial Dragon supremacy, the sheer control over military funding alone was enough to keep the Marines on a tight leash.

If there was anyone in this world least likely to strike at the Celestial Dragons...It was the Marines.

"Are you sure your suspicion is grounded? If this turns out to be true, it will change the nature of everything.

"This is an extremely sensitive issue."

The bald elder, who had remained silent while polishing his long sword, suddenly spoke in a raspy voice.

Clad in samurai garb and sitting cross-legged, he held a sheathed blade across his lap. The katana shimmered under the lamplight, its purple-black flame patterns gleaming with a sinister, chilling edge.

A peerless cursed sword.

As he spoke, he lifted his head.

His withered, veiny arms continued to clean the sword as his clouded eyes—hidden beneath rimless glasses—fixed directly on Topman Warcury, his old friend from childhood and fellow recipient of elite education.

"My fellow Elders, I understand your concerns," Topman Warcury said calmly.

Despite his short stature, he radiated a power that felt like a mountain rising from flat ground.

"On the surface, it seems impossible for the Marines to have done this. But it's not absolute."

He gave a cold smile.

"After all, there are plenty of fools in the Marines still clinging to their laughable sense of 'justice.'"

"And more importantly... our own kind has, at times, done things so despicable they defy reason."

"That is the basis of my suspicion."

At those words, the others turned toward him again, expressions shifting.

"Topman Warcury!! What are you saying?!"

"Don't forget—your current power and position were granted to you by the very bloodlines you're criticizing!"

"Mind your tone!!"

...

Topman Warcury met their anger with composure.

"I'm not insulting anyone. I'm simply stating facts."

"I come from the weakest and poorest of the 19 Celestial Dragon clans. I climbed to where I am today, and I understand our kind better than anyone."

"Tell me—am I wrong?"

Silence fell across the room.

They knew.

They knew all too well the corruption at the heart of the Celestial Dragons.

Born into boundless wealth, absolute power, and the highest status, these people stood at the top without lifting a finger.

Words like 'effort,' 'morality,' or 'struggle' never figured into their lives.

Their only goal—was to seek pleasure.

Each boundary crossed, each indulgence taken further—until it turned sick, twisted, and grotesque.

Even the Five Elders themselves often found the Celestial Dragons' behavior disgusting.

But bound by blood ties and the political weight of the Holy Land, they could only look away and keep silent.

"Topman... investigating the Marines isn't off the table."

"But it must be done with care,"

Ethanbaron, the Five Elders member dressed in samurai robes, slowly rested his hand on the hilt of his cursed sword and spoke with a rasp.

"...And it must have limits."

Seeing his old friend speak first, Topman Warcury smiled.

He understood the meaning behind Ethanbaron's words perfectly.

Two things:

First, the investigation can proceed—but discreetly, in secret.

Second, it must not go too far. Push too hard, and there will be consequences.

He spoke slowly.

"This is only natural. Sengoku's retreat has already left Kong quite displeased."

"If the Marines were to find out we're investigating them now, it would definitely spark a serious backlash."

"Of course, the investigation may amount to nothing. We're only entertaining a potential possibility—I won't insist on pursuing it if it leads nowhere."

The other three Five Elders exchanged glances.

"So... who should we choose? We can't use the CP department—it's far too conspicuous."

"Once the Cipher Pol gets involved, the Marines will become wary."

"It's better to find someone within the Marines... but who would be suitable?"

As they discussed, their eyes eventually fell on Saint Topman Warcury.

Within the elite ranks of the Celestial Dragons in the Holy Land, the name Topman Warcury was synonymous with "strategic brilliance."

It was precisely due to that reputation that they agreed to his proposal to investigate the Marines.

Sensing the room's focus shifting toward him, the newly appointed Supreme Authority of the World Government, Saint Topman Warcury, lifted his head proudly, a confident smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

"As for the candidate, there are several conditions that must be met."

He began analyzing clearly and methodically.

"First, the person must be intelligent, cautious, and capable. Only someone like that can carry out a covert investigation flawlessly."

The others nodded in agreement.

"Second, they must possess a strong desire for power... ideally someone from a lower background. That kind of person is easier to control."

The Five Elders nodded thoughtfully, some even chuckling in approval.

"Third, they must not reek of that nauseating sense of 'justice.'"

Saint Topman Warcury spoke with ease, his aged eyes gleaming with shrewdness.

"And most importantly—the ideal scenario—is that this person has an extremely bad public reputation, a foul name, and grovels before the World Nobles. That would immediately eliminate them as a suspect."

"In summary..."

With confidence radiating from his expression, he swiftly picked up a Marine officer's personnel file and flipped through it.

Then—

Smack!

He slammed his hand down on a page.

"He's the best candidate."

The other Five Elders leaned in. At first, they looked surprised, but smiles of satisfaction soon appeared on their faces.

"Hmph, as expected of Topman Warcury..."

"I approve."

"Seconded."

"Agreed."

On that page—

A striking Marine officer with short black hair and a cocky expression.

Name: Rogers Daren

Position: Admiral of the North Blue, Captain of Marine Headquarters

Evaluation: Extremely power-hungry, greedy, lecherous, exploits civilians, infamous reputation.

Nickname: 'The Scum of the Marines'

...

As he listened to his peers' unanimous approval, Saint Topman Warcury grinned with pride.

He stared at the photo of the black-haired Marine. For some reason, he felt a strange sense of familiarity, as if fate had linked them somehow.

As he had once said, his own family was the weakest of the 19 Celestial Dragon lineages.

Even as a child, he had vowed to be different.

So he endured the finest education, survived the harshest trials, and even fought in brutal, unforgiving wars under false names, his body bearing more than a hundred wounds both large and small.

He had devoured strategy texts, sharpened his intellect, and used his unrivaled cunning and strength to claw his way up through one ruthless power struggle after another.

And now, he had reached the rank of one of the Five Elders.

He had to prove himself.

Prove that he was wiser, stronger, more capable, and more commanding than the others!

Only then, without the backing of the Council of Elders, could he secure his seat among the Five Elders, and eventually become the one who stands above them all!

For most, the Celestial Dragon incident was a disaster.

For him, it was an opportunity.

Gazing at the smiling photo of the black-haired Marine,

Saint Topman Warcury felt as if destiny itself was smiling back at him.

Chapter 45: Gotta Pay More

North Blue, Batia Island.

A private estate.

"This way, please. Captain Daren is waiting for you in the parlor."

Momonga looked at the CP0 agent who had come to the door and gestured politely.

The estate was massive, spanning over 2,000 square meters, with rock gardens, landscaped courtyards, fountains, and even a training ground—fully equipped with all manner of facilities.

As he led the CP0 agent through the lush garden, cold sweat began to seep into the palms beneath his leather gloves.

CP0 had come personally, asking to meet Daren by name... Had the government sensed something?

Momonga forced himself to stay calm, instinctively quickening his pace until they reached the parlor doors.

"Captain Daren."

He raised his hand in salute.

Inside, Daren sat with his legs crossed, leisurely smoking a cigar. Smiling, he stood and walked over warmly.

"A guest of your stature—I apologize for not greeting you at the door."

The eerie mask hid the CP0 agent's expression, but a cold, emotionless voice came from beneath it.

"Captain Daren, I come on behalf of one of the highest authorities in the World Government... Lord Topman Warcury."

"Oh?" Daren raised an eyebrow, motioned for the agent to sit, then walked over to the bar and poured two glasses of whiskey, dropping a few ice cubes in each.

He'd heard of the man.

A newly appointed member of the Five Elders from a minor Celestial Dragon family, who had managed—through sheer strength and cunning—to secure the majority vote in the Holy Land's council. In one stroke, he rose to the top ranks of the World Government.

It was, no doubt, a story worth telling.

Still, that name... it carried a certain unease.

It was said to symbolize immense power—yet it was unstable, easily seized by others.

In other words, a lingering fear of catastrophe.

"I wonder what orders Lord Topman Warcury has for me?"

Daren handed a glass of whiskey to CP0, then sat down and casually took a sip.

CP0 didn't touch the drink. He simply set the glass down and glanced expressionlessly at Momonga.

Momonga gave another salute, turned, and left the room, quietly closing the door behind him.

Only then did CP0 retrieve a top-secret military Den Den Mushi from his coat and place it on the polished table, dialing a signal.

"Blub blub..."

The Den Den Mushi let out a steady ring.

Daren narrowed his eyes at the sight.

To require a direct call with the Five Elders... just how classified was this?

If he weren't absolutely sure he hadn't left behind any evidence or traces, he'd be thinking the government was preparing to take him out.

The call connected.

Shff—

A projection beamed out from the Den Den Mushi.

Inside a refined yet imposing western-style room, five elderly figures stood or sat, their eyes filled with a strange gleam as they studied the Marine Captain.

Upon seeing this, Daren immediately set down his glass with respectful caution, stood up, and gave a slight bow.

"Rogers Daren, Captain of Marine Headquarters and Admiral of the North Blue, greets the Five Elders."

The Five Elders sneered in unison at his display.

"Enough with the theatrics."

"We all know exactly what kind of man you are."

"The infamous 'scum' of the Marines..."

...

Daren smiled faintly.

"You flatter me, my lords."

The Five Elders: ...

Daren chuckled.

"So, may I ask what business requires the Five Elders to contact a subordinate directly?"

"Fleet Admiral Sengoku is also on Batia Island. You could've reached out to him anytime..."

"No need," Topman Warcury interrupted with a wave of his hand. "This matter is not for Sengoku to know."

His gaze sharpened as he looked directly at Daren.

"Regarding the recent attack on the Celestial Dragons in the North Blue, we hold a different view."

Daren frowned, cautiously probing.

"What exactly do you mean, my lord?"

Topman Warcury let out a cold snort.

"We're ordering you to begin a covert investigation—look into the movement of Marine warships at the time of the incident, and all personnel with flight or flight-like abilities."

"You're the highest-ranking officer in the North Blue. This shouldn't be difficult for you."

Daren's eyes widened in shock.

"You suspect... what exactly?"

Topman Warcury replied indifferently.

"You know very well what we suspect. If you want to remain Admiral of the North Blue, then follow orders."

Daren's face darkened.

"You want me to investigate my fellow officers!?"

"I'm a Marine. You're asking me to investigate my own comrades!?"

"You want me to betray the trust of those who serve alongside me!?"

The Five Elders all furrowed their brows.

"So, are you saying you intend to defy the orders of the government?"

Daren took a deep breath and replied in a low, steady voice.

"No. What I'm saying is..."

He clenched his fists and spoke with force.

"The rank of Captain is too low."

The Five Elders stared in stunned disbelief, as though they'd just heard something utterly absurd.

This brat... was he seriously asking for a promotion? In front of them?

A mere Marine Captain, demanding authority from the Five Elders—the highest echelon of the World Government?

"Hahahaha!"

Topman Warcury suddenly burst out laughing, his eyes gleaming with approval as he looked at Daren.

"Very good. I knew I wasn't wrong about you."

To the World Government, the Marines are their face—the dogs of the Celestial Dragons.

And the more ambitious and greedy the dog, the easier it is to control.

What truly troubled the Five Elders were the stubborn ones loyal to their own ideals—immune to pressure and bribery.

"Do your job well, Daren."

"With your talent, staying a mere Captain really would be a waste."

Topman Warcury gave Daren a meaningful look before cutting off the Den Den Mushi call.

The image faded out.

The CP0agent silently packed away the Den Den Mushi and stood up.

"Not staying for a drink?"

Daren grinned.

"After all, we'll be working together under the same lords from now on."

The CP0 hesitated, took a sip from the glass, then vanished on the spot—his figure flickering away like a ghost.

Once CP0 was gone, Daren's smile slowly faded.

A faint arc of purplish-blue electricity sparked between his fingers. An invisible magnetic pulse rippled outward.

Hmm. No sign of CP0's life signature.

Satisfied, he tapped the table lightly.

Momonga stepped in briskly from outside.

"What happened?"

Lighting a cigar, Daren spoke calmly.

"The World Government's starting to suspect that the Marines might've been involved in the Celestial Dragon incident."

"One of the Five Elders contacted me directly. It's that new one—Topman Warcury."

Momonga's pupils shrank.

Topman Warcury, the newest of the Five Elders, known for his intellect.

At his recent inauguration, the master of ceremonies had read out the meaning behind the name given to him by his father:

"A symbol of the supreme blade of judgment, suspended above the world, commanding all to submit—representing the ultimate divine authority over power and privilege!"

"Could they really have uncovered something—"

Daren cut him off with a smile and a shake of his head.

"No need to panic. They're only suspicious for now."

"They've ordered me to begin a secret investigation targeting all Marines."

"This is bad... damn it!"

Momonga swore instinctively, then paused, realizing something was off.

"Wait!!"

He stared at the smiling Daren in disbelief.

"You mean... they told you to investigate!?"

Daren exhaled a stream of smoke like a dragon and grinned broadly.

"That's right. They asked me to investigate."

He heavily emphasized "me."

"A truly wise decision."

Daren winked.

"After all, a notorious, shameless, bootlicking, power-worshipping Marine 'scum' like me would never dare attack the Celestial Dragons, right?"

Momonga's face flushed crimson, his expression twisted into something hard to describe.

What was this supposed to be?

Did he just... eliminate the real culprit by default?

Chapter 46: Some Wisdom, Not Much

"So... what do you plan to do? Are you really going to investigate the Marines?"

Momonga furrowed his brows, lighting a cigar without thinking, concern showing in his eyes as he looked at the Marine Captain before him.

Even though this was a direct order from the highest authority of the World Government, the targets of the investigation were fellow Marines—his own people. No matter how you looked at it, Momonga couldn't help but feel uneasy about the so-called mission.

"Investigate? Why not?"

Daren casually lifted his glass, took a sip, and gave a mocking smile.

"This is an order directly from the great and noble Five Elders. Of course we have to handle it beautifully."

"But now that the 'Celestial Dragon attack incident' is under my jurisdiction, we hold the initiative."

Momonga glanced at him, unable to suppress a slight chuckle.

One had to admit, Topman Warcury—hailed as the most brilliant mind in a hundred years—did indeed possess uncanny insight to have caught on to the irregularities in this case.

But still... not quite enough.

Letting the culprit chase down the culprit... Momonga's lips twitched.

"But this can't be dragged out any longer. We need to close this case quickly."

Daren took a long drag from his cigar, his deep-set eyes gleaming.

"As long as this remains unresolved, CP0 and the investigation team won't leave the North Blue. And I don't like being watched."

Momonga nodded in agreement.

Since the arrival of the investigation team, many of their operations had been put on hold.

With Sengoku, the Fleet Admiral himself, present, it was hard to push anything too far...

...

The next day.

Batia Island City Hall.

Conference Room.

"What!? The investigation into the Celestial Dragon attack is being handed over entirely to Daren!?"

Sengoku stared at the government order CPO had just presented, his face full of disbelief as he blurted out in shock.

Gion and Tokikake turned their heads in sync, looking at Daren like they'd just heard something absurd.

Wearing a mask and draped in a long white silk robe, the CPO agent read the government decree in a flat, indifferent tone:

"In light of Admiral Sengoku's pressing duties at Marine Headquarters, and the urgency of pursuing the pirate Byrnni World, the investigation into the 'Celestial Dragon attack incident' is hereby fully transferred to the North Blue's supreme commander, Captain Rogers Daren, effective immediately."

After finishing, CP0 cast a cold glance at Daren.

"The matter is urgent. Captain Daren, begin the investigation at once."

Daren gave a courteous nod and smiled.

"Rest assured."

CP0 gave a short nod and turned to leave.

But Sengoku couldn't hold back.

"Didn't I already submit my findings? This was clearly an accident—the one who attacked Saint Xildes was a Sea King..."

His voice trailed off, faltering.

Because CP0 was now staring at him with a cold, disdainful look—like they were watching a fool.

Seeing Sengoku awkwardly sink back into his seat, the CP0 member remained silent and slowly faded into nothingness, vanishing from the room.

Now, only the Marines remained, seated in silence.

The room was dead quiet.

Gion and Tokikake exchanged a subtle glance.

'Why was the investigation handed to Daren?' Tokikake's eyes were wide.

'How should I know? It came straight from the top.' Gion's brows furrowed deeply.

Tokikake arched an eyebrow. 'Could it be that Saint Xildes's death really wasn't his doing?'

'I just don't think it's that simple.' Gion narrowed her eyes.

'...' Tokikake.

"Hey, hey, hey! What's with the weird faces and whispering over there?" Sengoku snapped, clearly annoyed.

Gion and Tokikake immediately sat up straight.

"Perhaps Lieutenant Commanders Gion and Tokikake have new thoughts about the investigation?"

At those words, both officers shuddered. Looking up, they saw the North Blue Admiral calmly smoking a cigar, gazing at them with a half-smile, half-sneer. An inexplicable sense of unease welled up in them.

"Uh... no, nothing at all,"

Tokikake said with a sheepish grin.

After giving the two troublemakers a light warning, Daren smiled and turned his gaze away.

"Daren, what's your take on all this? Why would the government hand the investigation over to you?"

Sengoku now fixed a serious gaze on him, his tone low and heavy.

Daren paused for a moment, then said slowly,

"Admiral Sengoku, I think the government's decision makes perfect sense."

"Oh?" Sengoku frowned slightly.

Daren continued,

"This investigation into the Celestial Dragon incident has dragged on for too long. You're the Fleet Admiral—your responsibilities are already overwhelming. It wouldn't be efficient for you to keep leading the investigation and wasting time on it."

Sengoku rubbed his temples and let out a sigh.

"In that case, they should've just accepted my findings and wrapped this up early."

He suddenly shot a suspicious look at Daren.

"Or don't tell me... you've uncovered new intel or clues?"

Daren raised both hands in mock surrender.

"Of course not. Personally, I agree with Rear Admiral Borsalino's take on the matter."

He gave Borsalino a friendly nod and smiled.

"The Celestial Dragon incident was, at its core, just an accident."

Sengoku narrowed his eyes, a flicker of doubt passing through them as he murmured,

"If there's no new evidence, then the government had no reason to strip the investigation from me..."

"That's great. Saves us a lot of hassle,"

Borsalino suddenly chimed in, lazily trimming his nails with a clipper, a grin on his face.

He spoke like it was nothing, but Sengoku clearly picked up on the subtext.

His eyes lit up.

That's right!

This was actually a blessing in disguise!

He hadn't wanted to get involved in this mess anyway—thankless work, through and through.

Now that Daren was taking full responsibility for the case, Sengoku could focus on his real priorities.

Whether it was returning to Marine Headquarters at Marineford or continuing the hunt for Byrnni World, either option beat hanging around here chasing ghosts over a dead Celestial Dragon.

With that thought, Sengoku smiled in satisfaction.

He looked up, cleared his throat, and spoke in a serious tone,

"Well then, since the government has placed such trust in you, Daren, you'd better do your best. Don't let them down."

Daren smiled humbly,

"I'll still be counting on your guidance, Admiral Sengoku."

Sengoku's smile widened as he stood up and gave Daren a hearty pat on the shoulder.

"Then I'll leave it to you."

...

That evening.

After finishing his daily training at the grounds, Daren made his way back to his private residence on Batia Island, soaked in sweat.

The sun was setting.

His uniform was torn to shreds, hanging from his body like rags.

His sharply defined muscles glistened with sweat, and his skin was marked with faint craters and scorched grime—evidence of taking bullets and artillery head-on.

"You really haven't changed at all..."

A lazy voice came from behind.

Daren stopped, the corner of his mouth lifting slightly as he turned around.

A tall figure stood in the twilight, arms crossed, leaning against the wall. His broad cloak was lit crimson by the setting sun.

He stared at Daren's bloodstained, scarred body, a sly smile glinting beneath his sunglasses.

"Still living like a beast every day. Doesn't it wear you out?"

Daren tossed him a cigar and lit one for himself, chuckling.

"Not all of us are born monsters like you, Rear Admiral Borsalino."

Chapter 47: Got Promoted Too?

Borsalino raised his hands in a mock gesture of surrender.

"How could that be? You're a man approved by Sakazuki."

"Why does that sound so wrong..."

Daren patted the dust off his hands.

Borsalino gave him a long, steady look, then suddenly broke into a wide grin.

"So the government's starting to get suspicious?"

As expected from a guy as sharp as Kizaru—he caught on that quickly...

That thought flashed through Daren's mind in an instant.

As a transmigrator, Daren had a certain understanding of the original plot.

But Borsalino was still someone he couldn't read.

Even back when they worked together during Borsalino's time stationed in the North Blue, when Daren served as his subordinate, he could never quite figure out where the man stood.

"Unclear Justice," huh... could that really be called justice?

What he could say for certain, though, was that this guy hid things deep—and never got himself into any trouble.

A dozen thoughts raced through Daren's mind, but outwardly, he kept his usual smile.

"I'm just following orders."

Borsalino exaggeratedly opened his mouth a bit and scratched his head.

"That's really strange..."

He shot Daren a meaningful glance.

"But I guess it makes sense. After all, you're the least suspicious one."

This bastard... always watching from the sidelines, enjoying the show no matter how big it gets!

Daren's mouth twitched slightly.

He was certain Borsalino had probably guessed something. This was another attempt to probe him.

And yeah... that smile of his really made you want to punch it.

"That's for sure."

Daren replied with a calm smile.

If you're going to test me, I won't make it easy for you either.

"It's just... after thinking about the Celestial Dragon attack some more, I think I might've remembered something else."

"Oh?"

Borsalino asked, feigning surprise.

"What would that be?"

He looked at Daren with a mocking grin.

"I thought you were with me on this one—that the Celestial Dragon was attacked by a Sea King?"

"Who knows? People change their minds."

Daren shrugged.

Borsalino tilted his head.

"So what's your current take on it?"

Daren smiled and raised one finger.

"First—whoever attacked the Celestial Dragon had overwhelming firepower. They destroyed the government ship in a flash."

Borsalino nodded with a smile as he watched him.

"Yes..."

Daren ignored the layered look in his eyes and raised a second finger.

"Second—based on the timeline, the attacker had to have been in the North Blue at the time of the incident."

Borsalino stayed silent, still wearing that damned smile... and just stared at him.

Daren raised a third finger.

"Third—I've already had our people check the registered warships and vessels across the North Blue. Nothing stood out. So the attacker most likely has high-speed flight capabilities."

"In summary... Rear Admiral Borsalino—there's one person I can think of who fits all three conditions."

"Oh? And who might that be?"

Borsalino asked with a casual smile—until he noticed Daren was staring straight at him.

"..."

His smile froze.

"Hahahahaha! I'm kidding..."

Daren suddenly burst into laughter.

For some reason, seeing this smug Kizaru flinch gave him a strange, deeply satisfying sense of relief.

"Of course I'm on your side, Rear Admiral Borsalino."

With that, Daren turned and walked into his private residence, waving casually behind him.

"Get some rest, Rear Admiral Borsalino."

"Tomorrow, you and Admiral Sengoku will be setting sail again. I'll be sure to see you off."

...

In the setting sun, Borsalino stood silently.

The mirrored surface of his oversized sunglasses clearly reflected Daren's retreating figure.

The cooling breeze lifted the folds of the large cloak behind him.

"It's getting more and more interesting, Daren..."

He muttered to himself.

The corners of his mouth curled up once again into an amused, intrigued smile.

...

The next day.

Batia Island, the harbor.

The North Blue Navy, led by Daren, had already sealed off the port, organizing a grand and festive send-off for the departing Admiral of Marine Headquarters.

Flowers lined both sides of the streets. Marines stood in formation. Salute cannons were fired.

As fireworks burst into the sky in vibrant colors, the Marines aboard Sengoku's flagship watched with delight and pride on their faces.

"You little brat, always pulling these pointless stunts."

Sengoku scolded Daren with mock irritation, though his face was already lit up like a blooming chrysanthemum.

Daren bowed slightly with graceful composure.

"This has nothing to do with us subordinates. The North Blue Marines organized all of this on their own to show their admiration for Admiral Sengoku."

"You brat..."

Sengoku chuckled, waving a hand, feeling more and more fond of Daren the longer he looked at him.

Capable, diligent, respectful, quick-witted, thoughtful—and best of all, good-looking and pleasant to have around.

Now, compare that to his own adjutant?

He hadn't even boarded the ship yet, and that guy was already sprawled out in a deck chair on the deck, basking in the sun and sipping watermelon juice.

Who exactly was the Admiral here!?

Just thinking about spending every day at sea staring at Borsalino's smug face put Sengoku in a foul mood. With a long, melancholic sigh, he slumped a little.

Always hanging around making weird comments, throwing in "that's scary" at every opportunity... Just the thought was irritating!

He must've been blind to ever pick that guy as his second-in-command!

"Blub blub... blub blub..."

Suddenly, the Den Den Mushi in Sengoku's coat began to ring.

He paused, pulled it out, and connected the call.

"Sengoku..."

A hoarse voice came through.

Hearing it, Sengoku's heart instantly sank. He straightened his posture and replied respectfully.

"Topman Warcury-sama, regarding the Celestial Dragon incident—"

He automatically assumed the Five Elders were calling to push for progress and began to defend the delay.

"No, that matter has already been resolved."

Topman Warcury's voice sounded surprisingly cheerful over the Den Den Mushi, even carrying a rare hint of a smile.

"Admiral Daren of the North Blue has submitted the case file. We're very pleased with his investigation results."

"Sengoku, you did well. That kid Daren made it clear in his report—without your guidance, he wouldn't have uncovered the truth behind this incident."

Sengoku: ?

He froze, completely baffled.

The investigation results... are in?

When?

It hasn't even been a day!

Daren has been here on Batia Island the whole time!

Unable to help himself, Sengoku turned to glance at Daren—

The latter simply gave a modest bow and smiled, saying nothing.

"Sengoku, did you hear that?"

Before Sengoku could respond, Topman Warcury's voice came from the Den Den Mushi with a hint of irritation.

"Yes, I heard!"

Sengoku snapped back to attention and quickly answered.

"Well then, the government is very satisfied with your performance this time."

Topman Warcury's tone carried clear praise.

"You truly live up to your reputation as a 'wise general'."

Sengoku was still confused, but faced with praise from a Five Elder, he couldn't help but smile with a hint of pride.

"You flatter me, Warcury-sama."

"You flatter me, Lord Warcury."

"Alright, that's all for now... oh, and that kid Daren—he's quite something."

Topman Warcury paused, then added,

"With his abilities, the rank of Captain really doesn't do him justice."

Sengoku immediately understood the implication and responded seriously,

"Captain Daren has already passed the Officer Training Camp's assessment. Once his current duties are complete, he'll head to Marine Headquarters at Marineford for further training. His consistent excellence hasn't gone unnoticed by Marine leadership—we would never waste someone with his potential."

"Good."

With that, the line went dead.

Sengoku stared blankly at the now-sleeping Den Den Mushi in his hand. A few seconds later, he suddenly turned his head and glared at Daren, gritting his teeth.

"You brat... when did you solve the case!?"

Daren smiled.

"It was all thanks to Admiral Sengoku's guidance."

Sengoku rolled his eyes in annoyance.

Without even realizing it, he'd ended up owing this kid a favor.

"Who was the culprit?"

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

""World Destroyer' Byrnni World."

Sengoku: ???

"What!?"

His jaw dropped in disbelief. He nearly bit his tongue.

"Byrnndi World? That's impossible—he didn't even have the time to do it. At the time of the incident, I was in the middle of chasing him down—"

Sengoku suddenly stopped.

Something clicked. He stared at Daren in a daze.

Daren lit a cigarette casually, smiling with a deeper meaning.

"Who cares about the truth?"

That single line thundered through Sengoku's mind.

Right. Who cared about the truth?

There were no witnesses to the attack, and the Navy had sealed off all information.

Meaning that aside from Marine HQ and a very small circle, almost no one in the world even knew a Celestial Dragon had died.

The government's real concern was finding a "reasonable conclusion" to present to the Celestial Dragon families back at Mary Geoise.

What they needed wasn't the truth.

At least, not a truth as ridiculous as "killed by a Sea King."

And Daren's "investigation result" had solved the problem perfectly.

Officially, Saint Xildes had been killed by the infamous pirate "World Destroyer" Byrndi World.

This deflected pressure from Xildes's family and the Holy Land.

From their perspective, being killed by a notorious pirate was far more acceptable than dying to a random Sea King attack.

And in reality, the truth of the incident had been uncovered—it was, simply, an accident.

This conclusion satisfied both sides.

The Marines had something to report to the World Government. The World Government had something to report to the Holy Land.

It was a solution everyone could accept.

Well, everyone except Byrnni World.

Actually... if he found out he'd "killed" a Celestial Dragon, he'd probably be pleased too.

A truly perfect ending for everyone.

And now, all that was left was to arrest Byrnni World—the reckless criminal who dared to strike down a Celestial Dragon!

Which was exactly what Sengoku had planned to do anyway.

The more he thought about it, the brighter his eyes gleamed.

Daren... this kid was a genius.

"Hahahahahaha! You did great, kid!"

Sengoku suddenly burst out laughing, beaming as he gave Daren a hearty slap on the shoulder.

"I knew I was right to leave this case in your hands!"

Off to the side, Gion and Tokikake were both silently cringing.

When did you decide that? Wasn't this investigation handed to Daren by direct order from the World Government?

Still, neither of them dared to speak.

"Well then, it does seem that the rank of Captain is a bit low for you."

Sengoku looked over Daren approvingly and smiled.

"When I get back to HQ, I'll file a recommendation with Marshal Kong..."

He winked at Daren.

"Congratulations—Commodore Rogers Daren."

The moment he said it, Gion and Tokikake froze in place.

They stared, stunned, completely speechless, their heads buzzing.

Especially Tokikake—his eyes looked like they were about to pop out of his skull.

Commodore!?

That was a flag officer rank!

Daren... that guy actually got promoted after killing a Celestial Dragon!?

Chapter 48: The North Blue Admiral's Mourning and Condolences

At that moment, Gion and Tokikake suddenly felt like the world around them had turned completely absurd—like they were trapped in a surreal dream.

Their mouths opened slightly, but no words came out.

This... this can't be right no matter how you look at it!!

He killed a Celestial Dragon! Even if he was careful enough not to get caught, how could he possibly get promoted for it...!?

Granted, they had no concrete evidence to prove that Daren was the one who killed Saint Xildes. It was only suspicion.

But Daren—this guy was a master of politics and power plays.

He had clearly and precisely identified the World Government's "political need" and effortlessly solved a problem that had left even Admiral Sengoku at his wit's end.

Thinking back on it, with someone as calculating and deep as Daren, wouldn't it be ridiculously easy for him to make the two of them vanish from the North Blue without a trace?

That thought alone was enough to make both of them instinctively lower their gaze, their eyes filled with a new layer of fear.

"Then allow me to thank Admiral Sengoku in advance for his support."

Daren had seen every flicker of emotion on Gion and Tokikake's faces. A faint smile rose to his lips as he raised a sharp, formal salute to Sengoku.

"Well, good. Very spirited."

Sengoku smiled in satisfaction.

"Then I'll take my leave..."

He glanced at the two speechless officers beside him, then added,

"Look after these two young ones for me."

Daren smiled and readily replied,

"No problem, Admiral Sengoku."

And with that, Sengoku turned and boarded the warship.

Amid the thunderous cannon salute and cheers of the North Blue Marines, the flagship Sengoku, carrying the Admiral of Marine Headquarters, slowly hoisted its sails.

The sea breeze billowed the sails wide, and the bold, flowing characters for "Justice" rippled with a sense of authority and power.

"Set sail!!"

A young Marine called out loudly from the lookout post.

The rudder lifted, the anchor turned, and the massive ship—like a fortress on the sea—moved out of the harbor into the crisp ocean wind.

Sengoku gave a final, high-spirited salute toward the shore, to Daren and the North Blue Marines.

Then he turned around—

Only to catch sight of someone lounging on the deck, basking in the sun. His mouth twitched involuntarily.

"Huh?"

Sengoku quickly noticed a large pile of wooden crates at the rear of the cabin.

"Borsalino, what is all this?"

He shouted.

Borsalino, hearing the call, slowly rose from his deck chair, stretching as he walked over.

"Oh, that?"

He rubbed the stubble on his chin with a relaxed smile.

"That's a farewell gift from Captain Daren."

Sengoku froze, a bad feeling rising in his chest. His expression grew stern.

That brat didn't try to bribe me with money, did he?

That would be a problem.

He hurried over and opened each and every one of the crates.

The moment he saw what was inside, Sengoku blinked in surprise.

Cigars, rice crackers, tea, donuts, liquor, fruits...

All sorts of items were stacked neatly inside, filling one side of the cabin.

Sengoku looked over the mountain of goods, and the severity in his expression gradually softened.

The gifts weren't extravagant—all modest, mid-range brands that any ordinary household could afford.

The cigars were Marshal Kong's preferred brand.

The rice crackers were his own favorite.

The jasmine tea? Tsuru's go-to.

Garp couldn't go a day without donuts.

The sherry was Zephyr's favorite.

And the fruit? Essential on long voyages—second only to fresh water and rations in preventing scurvy.

Sengoku stood before the thoughtful pile of gifts in silence for a long time, then smiled and shook his head.

"That brat Daren... really put some thought into this."

He sighed with a rare softness in his voice.

But the next second, his face suddenly changed—he jumped up and roared:

"Borsalino, you bastard!! What do you think you're doing?!"

Borsalino froze mid-reach, his hand hovering inches from a banana.

"I just wanted some fruit, Admiral Sengoku."

Sengoku stared at his "innocent" expression, veins popping with frustration.

"That's a gift from Daren—to me!!"

Borsalino blinked, then slowly raised his hands in surrender.

"Alright, alright..."

He turned away, muttering under his breath,

"Getting stingier by the day..."

Sengoku's mouth twitched violently.

...

Red Line.

Holy Land Mary Geoise.

World Government.

"My lords, this is the secret investigation report submitted by Admiral Rogers Daren of the North Blue."

A CP0 agent, clad in a deathly white silk robe, knelt on one knee and respectfully presented a document.

The Five Elders exchanged glances.

"That was fast... that kid Daren really doesn't waste time."

"He's certainly talented."

"Topman... your judgment is, as always, spot-on."

"..."

Topman Warcury's lips curled into a smug smile at the recognition from his peers.

That Marine brat Daren hadn't let him down.

In just a single day, he'd come up with a solution that satisfied everyone.

"But Warcury... why has Saint Xildes's family gone quiet all of a sudden?"

Ethanbaron, who had been polishing his eerie, purple-and-black demon katana, suddenly asked.

The other Elders turned their eyes toward Topman Warcury at the question.

While Daren's proposed resolution had been clever—providing them with a perfect excuse to fend off pressure from the Elder Council in the Holy Land—none of them were naïve enough to forget what kind of people the Saint Xildes family were.

Among the Celestial Dragon clans of the Holy Land, they were infamous for being "brutal," "rude," "paranoid," "twisted," and "insatiably greedy."

Topman Warcury chuckled lightly.

"Three hours ago, a merchant ship from the North Blue entered the inland sea of the Red Line. After passing multiple levels of inspection, it made its way into the Land of the Gods."

"More than one billion Belly worth of gold, silver, and priceless Northern specialties were unloaded from that ship and delivered straight to the estate of the Saint Xildes family."

"The caravan's manager handed a letter to Saint Xildes's father. Its contents were more or less: 'Rogers Daren, Admiral of the North Blue, expresses his deepest condolences and heartfelt grief over the loss suffered by the Saint Xildes family, and humbly presents a modest token of sympathy in honor of the great Celestial Dragons.'"

As he spoke, Topman Warcury's smile twisted with sarcasm.

"Supposedly, just ten minutes after receiving this 'condolence payment,' CP received an escort request for a noble patrol route."

"Saint Xildes's father, Saint Xildes, is currently en route to Pleasure District in the New World."

The other Four Elders: ...

Chapter 49: Even the Celestial Dragons Have a Price

"I see..."

The remaining Five Elders exchanged glances, then could only offer wry, silent smiles.

For the Celestial Dragons, bloodline was important—but not that important.

The powerful never dealt in mercy or compassion.

Only interests were eternal.

After all, sons... were easily replaceable.

"What a sensible brat."

"This saves us quite a bit of effort."

"One billion Belly isn't exactly pocket change."

"Indeed."

One by one, the Five Elders gave their remarks.

Topman Warcury smiled.

"Daren's a sharp one. Perhaps, after this incident, we should consider keeping long-term ties with him."

At those words, the other Elders' eyes brightened slightly.

That wasn't a bad idea at all.

Anyone with eyes could tell—Rogers Daren, Admiral of the North Blue, was destined to join the Navy's highest leadership.

With his talent and potential, becoming a Marine Admiral was just a matter of time.

And when that time came, having an Admiral who answered directly to the World Government would drastically tighten their control over the Navy—while also serving as a valuable check on the other Admirals.

Topman Warcury watched the shifting expressions of his peers and sneered silently to himself.

He was already one of the highest authorities in the World Government. With a mere word or glance, he could condemn nations to ruin.

But that wasn't enough.

His name was Topman.

His true ambition was the top seat among the Five Elders.

But unlike the others, the family behind Topman Warcury lacked the deep roots and influence within the Holy Land.

In terms of political backing, he was far outmatched by his fellow Elders.

If he wanted to reach that singular "one-above-all" position, he'd need power beyond his own.

And the Marines—the most powerful law enforcement force under the World Government—were his perfect opening.

Starting with Rogers Daren, he would push him swiftly into a position of real authority, then slowly draw more of the Navy's power into his grasp.

And from there, his influence within the World Government would naturally expand.

"But before that," Topman Warcury said with a faint smile, smoothly shifting the subject,

"Let's take a look at the results of this investigation."

He slowly opened the document in his hands.

...

North Blue, 321st Branch.

Base Commander's Office.

After sending Sengoku off, Daren returned directly from Batia Island with Momonga and the others.

"So... is it confirmed there won't be any problems from the Holy Land?"

Momonga looked at Daren, who sat calmly puffing on a cigar, and finally couldn't hold back his curiosity.

Daren exhaled a stream of smoke like a dragon and squinted with a grin.

"I sent the Saint Xildes family a rather sincere condolence. One they couldn't refuse."

He deliberately emphasized the word "sincere."

"What kind of condolence?" Momonga asked, confused.

"One billion Belly."

"What!?"

Momonga gasped, unable to believe his ears.

A billion Belly... that wasn't a small number by any standard.

It was more than the annual tax revenue of many small to medium-sized kingdoms.

Even across the entire North Blue, the tax collected from supporting countless mafia families and underworld forces barely exceeded two billion Belly per year.

And now, just for a "condolence," the North Blue Marines had essentially worked half a year for free!

Let alone the fact that in their original plans, the development of the North Blue fleet was already a bottomless pit for resources and funding.

"Are you insane?"

Momonga looked helplessly at Daren's relaxed posture.

As Daren's adjutant, he served as both "housekeeper" and "strategist."

Watching Daren throw money around like it was nothing made his heart bleed.

"It was worth it,"

Daren said as he gently flicked his ash.

"You can always earn more money, but not everyone gets the chance to send gifts to the Celestial Dragons."

"If I hadn't connected with Topman Warcury, that merchant ship I sent wouldn't have even qualified to enter the Red Line's inland sea."

One billion Belly was a terrifying sum.

And considering it was only the year 1492 of the Sea Circle Calendar—the Great Pirate Era hadn't even begun—the Belly's purchasing power was still incredibly strong.

Even Byrnni World, the so-called "World Destroyer," only had a bounty of 200 million Belly.

Ten times that... five Byrnni Worlds.

But Daren believed every coin was worth it.

In this world, strength always comes first.

After that comes power—not wealth.

Momonga considered Daren's reasoning carefully and found it not entirely illogical, though he still winced.

"It's still too expensive..."

"Expensive?"

Daren looked at him and suddenly chuckled.

"I think it's pretty entertaining."

Momonga blinked in confusion. "What do you mean?"

Daren took another drag from his cigar, then said,

"The Celestial Dragons have the highest authority in the world. They can treat anyone like pigs, dogs, or livestock—buy, sell, and exploit at will. To them, money is the measure of everything."

"But this time... it proved one thing."

He paused, his smile tinged with mockery.

"The life of a Celestial Dragon has a price too."

Momonga let out a silent, bitter laugh.

Only Daren—this rebellious, half-mad lunatic—could come up with logic like that.

After a moment...

Momonga recalled something and cautiously asked,

"What about the internal Marine investigation...?"

Daren laughed.

"The report's been submitted. Whatever the government wants, I've given them—no conditions."

"Ship movements during the incident, the location of every Marine officer... including our North Blue division, of course."

Momonga frowned. "And what about you?"

"Me?"

Daren smiled faintly.

"As the Admiral of the North Blue, I was naturally stationed on Batia Island when the incident happened... fulfilling my duties."

"And on that point, every member of the North Blue fleet—and the inspectors from Marine HQ—Lieutenant Commanders Tokikake and Gion—can testify."

"Perfect alibi."

With that, Daren stubbed out his cigar and slung on his Marine cloak.

"Let's move. The big shots are gone, time to get to work."

Momonga blinked in confusion.

"Where to?"

Without missing a step, Daren pushed open the door.

The icy sea wind whipped his cloak into a wild frenzy behind him.

"We lost money on one Celestial Dragon. Time to earn it back... from another."

Momonga froze—then instantly understood.

One name flashed across his mind.

Donquixote Doflamingo.

Chapter 50: You've Crossed the Line

North Blue, Rubeck Island. The sky was overcast and somber.

Gunfire and explosions echoed through the town as hundreds clashed in the streets. Terrified civilians screamed, fleeing in all directions, their cries filling the air. Buildings, set ablaze by the relentless assault,

collapsed amidst roaring flames. The intense heat transformed the fire into massive, fiery wings that seemed to engulf the sky.

"Damn you, Donquixote Family! Rubeck Island is Vils Family territory! You've overstepped your bounds!" A man wearing a newsboy cap, black overcoat, and suit shouted in fury as he slashed the throat of an approaching pirate. Blood splattered across his face, staining his white shirt red. His bloodshot eyes locked onto a blond youth nearby.

The boy, around eleven or twelve years old and approximately 1.4 meters tall, had short blond hair and wore sunglasses, a white shirt, and cropped pants. Despite his youth, a cruel and maniacal smile played on his lips—a smile that even the seasoned gangster leader feared.

Donquixote Doflamingo.

Emerging from nowhere, this ruthless and cold-blooded boy had led the Donquixote Family in causing havoc since their arrival in the North Blue. They had already eradicated several prominent mafia families on nearby islands, seizing their territories and rapidly expanding their influence by recruiting more members.

Trebol, slimy and holding a cane, with snot hanging from his nose.

Diamante, dressed like a Native American, his face painted in vibrant colors.

Vergo, with a piece of steak stuck to his face, wearing a vacant expression.

"Overstepped?" Doflamingo sneered, his exaggerated expression exuding confidence. "No, no, no, I haven't crossed any lines."

Vils glanced around at his fallen family members, his anxiety mounting. The Donquixote Family's recent recruitment had bolstered their strength and armament far beyond that of the Vils Family. If this continued, they would be annihilated within minutes.

Clenching his bloodied sword, Vils gritted his teeth. "The territories of the gangs are clearly divided to maintain stability. Crossing boundaries is against the North Blue's rules!"

Doflamingo's grin widened. "No, you still don't understand. Rules are shackles imposed by the strong to bind the weak—a cage for the incompetent, the mediocre, the useless, and the trash! I haven't crossed any lines..." He licked his chapped lips, spread his arms wide, and laughed cruelly. "Because the entire North Blue is mine for the taking! The rules of this world mean nothing to me, Doflamingo!"

As his laughter echoed, hundreds of Donquixote Family members sneered, wielding rifles, cannons, battle axes, and swords. Like ravenous beasts, they charged into the Vils Family ranks. The street, once bustling and lively, was now awash with clashing steel and spilling blood—a deep crimson blooming amidst the chaos.

"You're asking for it!" Vils roared, eyes blazing with fury. He slammed his foot into the ground, shattering the pavement—then, in a flash, he was on top of the cocky blond youth.

Gripping his blood-stained sword with both hands, he swung it down with all his might toward Doflamingo's head. The sheer force of the strike created a white airwave as the blade sliced through the air. Murderous intent gleamed in Vils' eyes; he could already envision the impudent brat's head cleaved in two by his blade.

But just as the sword was about to connect, Vils' pupils contracted sharply. He noticed the cold smirks on Doflamingo and his subordinates' faces—a cat-toying-with-a-mouse expression.

Clang!

Sparks erupted as Vils' blade halted abruptly, mere centimeters from Doflamingo's forehead. No matter how much strength he exerted, the sword wouldn't budge further. It was as if an invisible force in the air was blocking his strike, producing a sharp, grating sound reminiscent of clashing swords.

"How... how is this possible..."

Vils's throat moved as he forced out the words, dry and rasping.

Looking at the smirk on the blond brat's face, his heart suddenly pounded wildly, as if gripped tight by an invisible hand.

"Fufufufufu... how boring..."

Doflamingo let out a sinister laugh, his fingers twitching suddenly like clawed talons.

Vils's pupils shrank to needle points.

The sharp sound of a blade slicing through the air exploded without warning.

In that instant, it felt as if an invisible sword had split his chest open—blood erupted in a violent spray.

Shhhk!!

Scorching blood shot from the deep, bone-exposing wound in his chest, splattering across Doflamingo's face, twisting his youthful, arrogant features into something monstrous and devilish.

Vils's face turned pale as he slowly collapsed.

Blood gushed out beneath him, spreading into a chilling pool.

"You... crossed the line... Daren... the Marines... won't... let you off..."

The dim sunlight was swallowed by a face twisted with brutality. All Vils could see now was shadow.

Cold. Dark. Bloody. Twisted shadow.

"The Marines?"

Doflamingo looked down at the mafia boss of Rubeck Island and sneered.

"I'm really looking forward to it..."

With those words, Doflamingo slowly lifted his foot.

The pointed shoe came crashing down on Vils's head!

Bang!

A dull thud echoed—Vils's skull exploded like a watermelon, red and white matter mixing into a grotesque mash.