

One Piece 601

Chapter 601 - 601: Volume 4 – Chapter 120: Right, There Are No Poneglyphs Here

Dark light danced, purple flames bloomed like flowers, spewing out a domineering and cold sharpness.

Only then did everyone finally see the appearance of the sword.

The 21 Great Grade Blades, Enma, the "Destroyer of Hell"!

Drip, drip...

Kozuki Oden's eyes were filled with bloodshot veins as he stared intently at the cursed sword trembling in front of him.

The sharp blade had sliced through his palm, and half of the tip was embedded into the flesh of his chest, blood gushing out.

"Oden-san..."

Looking at the emaciated, hunched figure with one shoulder's sleeve hanging empty, Shanks' expression turned extremely complex, a deep sadness welling up in his heart.

Since the last crushing defeat against that Marine on Fish-Man Island, Oden had completely changed.

The spirit and boldness that once shone in his eyes had vanished, replaced by endless days and nights of drowning himself in alcohol, drinking until he was utterly drunk.

His eyes were empty. Sometimes he would weep loudly, sometimes laugh maniacally.

The rare moments when he was sober were only when Captain Roger asked him to interpret the ancient writings on the Poneglyphs.

He no longer practiced swordsmanship.

What sword did he have left to practice with?

Not only had Enma been taken, but even the Ame no Habakiri, said to rival Enma and capable of cutting the heavens, had been stolen away by that damned Marine.

Still, none of Roger's crew tried to comfort him or say anything.

They simply sighed inwardly.

For a powerful dual-wielding samurai, to lose both swords—and even an arm—was a blow no ordinary person could bear.

Rayleigh also gave Oden a deep look before refocusing on the sword flashes still darting through the sky, unable to spare any attention elsewhere.

"Enma..."

Kozuki Oden whispered softly, gripping the trembling cursed sword tightly.

A wisp of black and red Armament Haki swirled around his arm, trying to transfer into Enma.

However, just as the Ryuo was about to touch Enma, the cursed blade suddenly rejected him with violent tremors.

Hiss!

A burst of blood splattered from Kozuki Oden's palm, and with a grunt of pain, the cursed sword tore itself free from his grasp.

Immediately after...

The four swords that had been weaving through the air, forming a storm of sword shadows over the Oro Jackson, suddenly froze midair, as if displaying a human-like hesitation.

It was as if they had taken a deep, scrutinizing look at Roger's pirate crew—then, with a simultaneous cry, they shot off as four streaks of light toward the depths of the island.

The suffocating sense of threat disappeared without a trace.

Bang!

Shanks and Buggy both collapsed onto the deck with a thud, gasping for air, their faces pale.

"We finally survived..."

Buggy muttered, relieved beyond words.

Shanks forced a smile and said,

"You couldn't have died. Those four swords wouldn't have killed you."

"You have the nerve to say that! I haven't even settled the score with you yet!"

Buggy sprang up like a cat stung by a bee, grabbed Shanks' face with both hands, and growled through gritted teeth:

"You bastard, you used me as a shield!?"

Shanks' face twisted under Buggy's grip, but he laughed it off without a care.

The other crew members sat scattered across the deck, still shaking, their tensed hearts and bodies finally beginning to relax.

The fear of being impaled at any moment and the extended period of high tension had left them all physically and mentally drained.

Rayleigh gripped his sword with one hand, panting slightly, sweat beading on his forehead.

He gazed toward the depths of the island, his eyes heavy with thought, and let out a long sigh.

"Is it over..."

...

Deep in the jungle on a desert island.

Two figures, bursting with fighting spirit, collided wildly like roaring beasts, their sword flashes cascading like waterfalls and explosive whirlwinds violently intertwining, tearing apart everything in their path.

From high above, the jungle's towering trees could be seen collapsing across a vast area, sending smoke and dust billowing into the sky.

"Wahahaha! Daren! Come on!"

Roger laughed wildly, swinging the long sword in his hand.

The sword light poured down like a waterfall, dense with black and red lightning flashing back and forth.

"Roger!"

Daren also let out a fierce laugh, his body covered in blood.

Yet he charged forward without hesitation, one hand forming a domineering dragon claw, the other a crushing iron fist, both bursting with terrifying black lightning.

Boom!

Another violent collision!

A powerful shockwave rippled out, lifting all the trees and vegetation within hundreds of meters like ocean waves.

A hellish gale swept through every corner of the jungle.

The long sword sliced into Daren's flesh, carving a deep gash along his side that exposed the bone.

The iron fist hammered Roger's chest, and the sound of cracking ribs rang out sharp and painful.

In the next second...

The two men, locked together, crashed into the ground like falling stars, carving a long trench over a hundred meters through the earth.

"Wahahaha! That feels good!"

Roger's eyes burned with unrestrained battle spirit.

Despite the searing pain from his fractured ribs, he paid it no mind, gripping his blood-soaked sword tightly.

As the thick smoke and dust quickly dispersed, Roger froze at the sight before him.

"What is this?"

The ruins of a grand palace lay in devastation, blood pooled across the ground, and corpses were scattered everywhere...

Among them, the mutilated body of a Celestial Dragon.

"Let's call it here for today, Roger."

Roger jerked his head up, his pupils shrinking.

He saw the blood-streaked figure of the Vice Admiral, Daren, hovering in the sky above, looking down at him with a faint smile.

"You bastard!! Don't you dare run! Our fight isn't over yet!"

Roger roared furiously.

He had only just begun to enjoy himself!

Daren grinned but ignored him, swooping downward like a hunting falcon.

His speed was astonishing—within the blink of an eye, he had vanished toward the coast.

...

Meanwhile, near the coast.

Doflamingo, barely standing against Gaban's relentless assault, was already covered in wounds and swaying unsteadily.

Facing Gaban, who was once again charging with his giant axes raised, blood seeped from Doflamingo's mouth and nose as his consciousness blurred.

"Let's end this, young man!"

Gaban leaped high into the air.

The blood-stained double axes reflected a chilling gleam in the sunlight.

Suddenly—

A figure dove down from the sky at unimaginable speed, slamming into the ground.

Black, polished military boots kicked out with devastating force, the impact like a collapsing mountain.

A whip kick collided heavily with the descending giant axe.

Clang!

Boom!!

An explosive shockwave erupted outward.

Gaban's face changed, forced back several steps.

The terrifying force transmitted through the axes made it feel as if he were grappling against a warrior of the Giant Race.

Before he could react, four blinding streaks of light tore through the air, forcing Gaban to retreat even further.

Caught off guard, bloody wounds ripped open along his waist and legs.

Daren, grabbing the unconscious Doflamingo with one hand, sensed something and turned his head.

His fierce gaze met the distant figures aboard the Oro Jackson.

In those eyes filled with rage and hatred, there was also an undeniable shadow of dread.

"Goodbye, and good luck."

Daren casually wiped the blood from his face, a small smirk tugging at his lips.

"By the way, there are no Poneglyphs here."

As his words fell, he lifted Doflamingo easily with one hand and soared skyward, disappearing into the clouds within moments.

Four sword lights followed close behind, tearing through the air with sharp, piercing screeches, leaving long smoky trails across the sky.

...

Chapter 602 - 602: Volume 4 – Chapter 121: Yes, I Did It!

The raging sea gradually calmed down.

The Roger Pirates stood there, staring blankly in the direction where the Vice Admiral had disappeared, falling into a long silence.

An indescribable sense of frustration and anger slowly spread across the deck.

"Of course we know there are no Poneglyphs here!"

Bang!

Buggy suddenly stabbed the dagger in his hand into the deck, his eyes bloodshot with rage.

The others were also gritting their teeth furiously.

One man had managed to toy with their entire pirate crew, leaving the others completely helpless.

Instead of fighting back, they had been thrown into chaos by just four swords, barely surviving.

"That damn Marine... How dare he do this..."

"Don't let me see him again!"

"Bastard!"

"..."

The Roger Pirates began cursing and swearing.

"We, the Roger Pirates, have sailed the seas chasing freedom and dreams. When have we ever been humiliated like this?"

At that moment, Buggy, still clutching his head, muttered faintly,

"All the time..."

Everyone: ...

They thought back over their journey since setting out again.

Chased across the sea by Garp from the Marines.

Cornered to the brink by Shiki in the Battle of Edd War.

Nearly losing their ship at Fish-Man Island.

And now, this...

Well, thinking about it... it did make some sense.

Their mouths twitched as they tried to speak, but no words came out.

Damn it!

"Wahahaha, you're all okay, that's great!"

Just then, Roger, his face swollen and bruised, slowly walked out from the jungle.

When he saw everyone safe on the ship, he laughed heartily.

He gave Rayleigh and the others a big thumbs-up and roared with laughter,

"As expected of my crew! Looks like you all knew I wanted a fair fight with Daren, so you stayed put on the ship, right?"

"Well done! Wahahaha!"

"..."

Looking at their idiot captain, face swollen like a pig's head, everyone was covered in dark lines.

They took a deep breath, struggling to hold back the flood of anger surging inside them.

Rayleigh's eyelid twitched violently as he clutched his chest.

We didn't stay on the ship on purpose!

We wanted to help too!

But with those four deadly swords glaring at us, we couldn't even get off the ship!

The sound of teeth grinding echoed across the deck.

Seeing their silence, Roger thought they were upset about not getting to join the fight, and quickly added with a carefree smile,

"Don't be so down! There'll be plenty of chances for you all to get in on the action later. If not, we can always go find Garp again!"

Everyone: ...

"Hehehe, right! I didn't find the Poneglyph... but guess what I did find!"

Roger scratched his head, then suddenly looked like he had discovered a priceless treasure.

His eyes shone brightly as he turned around and dragged something out from the jungle.

"Hisssssssss!"

When the Roger Pirates saw what Roger had dragged out, their faces instantly turned pale, and they gasped in unison.

"T-That's..."

"That outfit... If I'm not mistaken..."

"Heavens... Heavens..."

"Damn it..."

Everyone, including Rayleigh, stood there completely dumbfounded, staring at the thing Roger had dragged back.

"—Celestial Dragons!!!!"

Buggy screamed, his face suddenly turning pale as he frantically backed away like a caterpillar.

"Wahahaha, yeah, looks like this guy's a Celestial Dragon."

Roger laughed, flashing his white teeth.

Seeing their captain acting so carefree, everyone felt a jolt of panic shoot through their hearts and started shouting anxiously:

"Captain Roger, put that thing down!!"

"We need to destroy the body and get rid of the evidence!"

"Throw it into the sea! Or bury it!"

"Damn it! We have to get out of here!"

"What the hell is going on!?"

"We absolutely can't let the Marines or the government find out!"

"..."

Some wailed, some cried, some screamed, and others ran around in a panic.

But just then—

"Roger!! What's that in your hands!?"

A booming voice like thunder suddenly echoed from across the sea.

Hearing that familiar voice, everyone on Roger's pirate crew froze as if struck by lightning.

The blood drained from their faces.

Buggy's teeth chattered uncontrollably as he stiffly turned his head.

"G-Garp..."

Far away on the sea, a dog-headed warship was cutting through the waves.

A sturdy, powerful figure stood atop the figurehead with his arms crossed, wide-eyed as he stared in surprise at the corpse in Roger's hands.

"You... You actually killed a Celestial Dragon!?"

"Garp!!"

Seeing Garp, Roger's eyes lit up.

"Deny it!!"

"Quick, clear yourself of any connection!!"

"Tell him you didn't do it!"

"..."

Buggy and the others frantically signaled to Roger, their faces turning as red as beets.

"This?"

Roger looked down at the Celestial Dragon corpse in his hand, then at the bloodstains covering his body.

No matter how he looked at it, it seemed obvious he had done it.

"This, uh, this isn't..."

Before he could finish, Garp suddenly burst out laughing:

"Well done!"

"As expected of you! Bwahahaha!!"

Roger: ???

Crew: ???

The hundreds of Marines behind Garp: ???

The Marines on the warship twitched uncontrollably, their mouths gaping, unable to believe what they had just heard.

They instinctively turned to look at Lieutenant Commander Bogard for help, only to find that he had already turned his head away, covering his ears with both hands, pretending he hadn't heard anything.

Seeing that, the other Marines trembled and hurried to copy him.

"I've always hated those trash! Bwahahaha!! It's just that because of my position, I couldn't kill them myself!"

Garp gave the corpse in Roger's hands a disdainful glance, picking his nose with a snort.

Roger blinked, stunned, then after a brief moment of thought, suddenly raised the corpse high over his head proudly, planted his hands on his hips, and roared with laughter:

"Wahahaha!! That's right!! I killed him!!"

"Well, Garp! Admit it! You're impressed now!!"

He raised his head so high his nostrils pointed to the sky, his two nose hairs proudly trembling.

"I even did something you didn't dare to do! Wahahahaha!!"

Bang!

Everyone in the Roger Pirates fell backward onto the deck in shock.

Their faces were burning red, on the verge of exploding with frustration, wishing they could rush over and tear their idiot captain's smiling face apart.

What's there to be proud of!?

He had killed a Celestial Dragon, a World Noble!!

How much trouble were they about to be in now!?

Rayleigh covered his forehead in agony, sitting on the railing and sighing heavily.

"Forget it. It's not the first time anyway."

Back during the Battle of God Valley, Roger didn't even know how many Celestial Dragons he had "accidentally" killed.

It was just that many of the newer crew members weren't aware of those hidden events.

Gaban gave a helpless, bitter smile as he knocked his twin axes together with a resonating clang.

"Get ready for battle."

Chapter 603 - 603: Volume 4 – Chapter 122: No One Can Make You Submit

A deserted island.

Doflamingo slowly woke from his deep coma, his fingers trembling slightly. He struggled to open his eyes and immediately snapped awake.

Instinctively, he reached up and touched his face, then let out a breath of relief.

Luckily, his sunglasses were still there.

"You're awake?"

A low, amused voice came from beside him.

Forcing himself to ignore the burning pain all over his body, Doflamingo gritted his teeth and sat up with great difficulty, cold sweat pouring down his face.

Only then did he notice that the horrific wounds inflicted by Gaban had been roughly treated and had stopped bleeding.

"Godfather..."

Doflamingo turned his head toward the man sitting casually on a boulder nearby, a cigar between his fingers, his expression unreadable.

The Vice Admiral was bare-chested, revealing crisscrossed old and new scars. Under the sunlight, his powerful, chiseled muscles exuded a wild intensity.

Blood still stained his body, and even though his wounds had stopped bleeding, the deep gashes—some exposing bone—made Doflamingo's eyelids twitch.

His injuries were clearly even worse than Doflamingo's, yet he sat there as if nothing was wrong... He was a true monster.

"Where are we?"

Doflamingo looked around.

They were on the coastline of an island, with golden beaches, a blue sea, warm sunlight, and a refreshing sea breeze that made the place feel almost idyllic.

"It doesn't matter."

Daren smiled faintly and turned his eyes toward his battered godson.

"How do you feel?"

How do I feel?

Doflamingo instinctively clenched his fists and answered,

"I'm badly hurt, but not fatally. With half a month of rest, I should recover."

"No, I meant..."

Daren stared at him deeply, a trace of interest flashing in his eyes.

"How did it feel to fight Scopper Gaban?"

Doflamingo froze.

Seeing Daren's meaningful smile, he forced himself to calm down and focused carefully on his own condition.

A few seconds later, his sunglasses-covered eyes widened slightly, his pupils shrinking.

"My control over Haki and my Devil Fruit... it feels stronger..."

He muttered in disbelief.

Daren's lips curled into a satisfied smile.

"Now you get it, right?"

Doflamingo felt as if he had been struck by lightning, staring at the Vice Admiral in shock.

Could it be... he hadn't thrown him into a fight with Gaban to have him killed, but to make him stronger?

This man... was he really that kind?

"Don't look at me like that, Doffy."

Daren smiled as he shook his head, exhaling a dragon-like puff of smoke.

"As your godfather, I have high expectations for you."

He cast a casual glance at Doflamingo.

"But you, brat, are always on guard, wary of me."

"But I can understand it—and I even approve."

"Living on this vast ocean, staying vigilant is a good habit. No one wins all the time, but as long as you stay cautious and careful, you won't keep losing either."

"You can hate me. You can even want to kill me. I don't care. In fact, I look forward to it."

Doflamingo pressed his dry lips together, his fists clenching tightly.

"I don't dare," he gritted out.

But what Daren said next made him freeze.

"No, you must dare."

Daren laughed freely.

"Hatred may not be the best emotion, but it's definitely one of the greatest motivators for growth."

"Your hatred for the Celestial Dragons, your hatred for the World Government—none of it is as direct or as powerful as your hatred for me."

He slowly stood up, his tall, blood-stained figure towering before the young, still-green Celestial Dragon.

The sunlight cascaded down like brilliant gold, making the Vice Admiral's frame seem even more grand, magnificent, and unshakable.

Under Doflamingo's horrified gaze, the gruesome, mottled wounds across Daren's body began to visibly stop bleeding, slowly closing and scabbing over before his eyes.

"Keep fighting, keep getting stronger, Doffy."

Daren smiled gently at the blond boy, whose expression was frozen in shock.

"Carry the ambition to kill me. Let that drive you to grow stronger."

"Remember this: you are a king by birth. No one—except your godfather—should make you feel fear, nor should they deserve it."

"Scopper Gaban, Dark King Rayleigh, Whitebeard Edward Newgate, Big Mom Charlotte Linlin, even Kaidou of the Beasts... no one has the right to make you submit."

Under the sunlight, beside the roaring sea, the Vice Admiral crouched down until his gaze met the boy's, ruffled Doflamingo's golden hair with a bright, almost gentle smile.

"Do you understand?"

...

The New World.

On a certain sea route, a slave trading ship was slowly sailing toward Mary Geoise.

On the deck, rows of bloodstained, foul-smelling iron cages were piled haphazardly. Occasionally, the air was split by the crack of whips and the muffled groans of slaves in pain.

"Hahahaha, this batch of slaves is pretty good. There are even three Fishmen among them."

A fat-faced slave trader grinned greedily as he looked at the blood-soaked figures locked in the cages, locking eyes with their hateful, burning stares.

"Hey, don't hit them so hard! If they die, we lose money."

"These toys were hard enough to catch for the noble lords."

Rubbing the jeweled rings on his fingers, the slave trader chuckled darkly.

Thinking about who he would be trading with this time, he couldn't help but tremble with excitement.

After all, he was dealing with gods—the Celestial Dragons, who controlled everything in the world.

As long as he served the Celestial Dragons well, he could have anything he wanted!

But just as he was lost in these pleasant fantasies, a violent crash suddenly shook the merchant ship beneath his feet.

Bang!

The deck rocked fiercely. Crew members and guards staggered and fell, and the cages clattered against each other with sharp, grating sounds.

"What's happening!?"

"Is it a Sea King!?"

"No, I don't see anything!"

"Wait... what is that!?"

Panicked cries echoed all across the deck. The slave trader stumbled toward the rail, gripping it tightly as he stared down at a crimson blur slicing through the water at terrifying speed.

His eyes widened in horror.

Before he could even react—

Whoosh!!

A surge of water exploded upward from the sea like a bursting arrow... piercing straight through his throat.

Chapter 604 - 604: Volume 4 – Chapter 123: Magellan: I-I'm About to Break...

Gurgle...

The slave trader's eyes widened as he clutched his throat with both hands, but bright red blood continued to gush through his fingers.

Staggering backward, the light quickly faded from his pupils, and with a heavy thud, he collapsed to the ground, his body convulsing violently before finally falling still.

He never could have imagined that he would be killed... by a few drops of water.

"Boss!?"

"Damn it!! Enemy attack!!"

"Open fire!!"

"Kill him!!"

"..."

The slave trader's death threw the ship's guards into chaos. They fired frantically into the sea.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Bullets splattered the water, but their poor aim couldn't catch even a glimpse of the figure darting through the sea.

Whoosh!

Whoosh!

Whoosh!

Jets of water screamed from the surface, piercing hearts and throats one after another.

In moments, more than a dozen corpses lay scattered across the deck, the blood flowing like rivers.

"What the hell is that...?"

"It's a Fishman..."

"How can he be this strong...?"

"..."

The few remaining guards, their faces deathly pale, staggered back, trembling as they stared at the carnage around them.

Drip... drip...

Suddenly, the sound of dripping water echoed from behind them. A towering shadow loomed up, casting them into darkness.

A bone-chilling cold surged through their backs as they turned around, shivering.

A wide, blood-red hand rapidly expanded in their terrified pupils...

...

One minute later.

Crack!

Fisher Tiger twisted a lock off a cage with one hand and, panting slightly, looked at the slaves inside.

"You're free now."

One by one, shivering figures stumbled out of the cage. The deck was now covered with battered, wounded slaves.

They glanced timidly at the bodies scattered across the deck before finally fixing their gazes on the blood-drenched Fishman.

"I am Fisher Tiger."

Seeing their numb and hollow expressions, Fisher Tiger let out a slow breath, pointed to the blood-red brand on his chest, and smiled.

"I was once a slave too, just like all of you."

When they saw the brand on his chest, a faint light returned to their dull faces.

"Tiger-san, is there... anything we should do for you?"

A small, thin young man asked cautiously.

Fisher Tiger shook his head.

"That's a question you should ask yourselves. You are free now. You don't need to obey anyone's orders anymore."

But his words were met only with confusion and anxiety.

What a pitiful sight...

Fisher Tiger sighed deeply in his heart.

He had seen this expression far too many times.

When someone is imprisoned and enslaved for too long, they gradually lose their own will. They lose the courage to make choices for themselves.

Even if the chains are broken from their bodies, the ones shackling their hearts still remain.

He paused for a moment, calmed himself, and gave a gentle smile.

"If you wish, you can come with me and roam the seas freely."

"If you don't, you're free to return to your homeland and live the life you want."

"This ship will sail for three more days. You have three days to make your decision..."

"No, I've already decided!"

The scrawny young man gritted his teeth, stared intently at the tall Fishman before him, and summoned his courage as if making a final decision.

"I want to follow you, Tiger-san!"

As his words fell, others gritted their teeth and clenched their fists one after another, shouting,

"Me too!"

"I'll follow you as well!"

"That's right, Tiger-san, without you, we're nothing but walking corpses!"

"Please let us follow you and sail freely across this sea!"

"..."

One after another, their once extinguished courage flared to life again. They stared deeply at Fisher Tiger.

Their bodies still trembled, and their clothes remained torn and filthy, but a light of hope gradually returned to their eyes.

...

Day turned to night, and time passed swiftly.

A month flew by.

At Marine Headquarters, Marineford.

In the military academy's poison gas isolation zone.

The same sealed, tightly locked room.

Purple poison gas thickly filled the space, so dense that one could hardly see a thing.

Under the corrosive effect of the gas, even the sturdy rock walls were now marked with acid burns.

Suddenly, from the thickest part of the gas, a weak moan rang out.

"Instructor Daren... I... I can't hold on anymore..."

Cross-legged, Daren sat enveloped in the deadly mist. He frowned and said sternly,

"No, you have to hold on, Magellan!"

His voice was firm, brooking no argument.

"Only if you endure it can you achieve real mastery and control!"

"Besides, you don't want to stay locked in a sealed room like this forever, isolated from everyone, right?"

The weak voice replied again, clearly gritting his teeth to persevere, shouting,

"I don't want to!!"

But as soon as the words fell, the poison gas in that area suddenly stagnated.

Daren sighed helplessly, opened his mouth, and took a deep breath.

It was like the roar of a dragon or the gulp of a giant whale. All the purple poison gas in the room formed a vortex visible to the naked eye and rushed into his mouth and nose.

His face shifted colors from pale to a sickly blue-purple. After several seconds of enduring intense pain and discomfort, Daren finally managed to suppress it and slowly opened his eyes.

A sharp gleam flashed deep within his pupils, then quickly faded.

"You're giving up already, Magellan..."

He looked down at Magellan lying sprawled on the ground, gasping for breath, and spoke with a hint of disappointment.

Magellan's eyes spun, his pupils unfocused, his body twitching like limp mud. He muttered dazedly,

"Feels... like I'm broken..."

Daren pinched his temples.

What a lousy line.

"Take a good rest. I'll come back for you when I have time."

He said casually, then stood up and pushed the door open without hesitation.

He looked just like a heartless guy who had wiped his mouth clean after a meal.

However, the moment he opened the door, a burly figure clad in protective gear stood there with arms crossed, staring at him with an expression that was odd, suspicious, and even faintly contemptuous.

"Daren, you... don't have some strange fetish, do you?"

Zephyr stared at him suspiciously, holding back for a long time before finally asking with a weird tone.

Daren: ...

That ridiculous, dramatic kid Magellan always says crazy things. What am I supposed to do about it!

He rolled his eyes impatiently and said,

"I'm training him, Zephyr-sensei!"

"You've seen it yourself. In just two months, Magellan's poison has at least doubled in lethality and corrosiveness compared to when he first arrived at camp."

Zephyr looked him over skeptically.

"I'm willing to believe you... but you've been spending an awful lot of time with Magellan. It's enough to make anyone suspicious..."

Daren: ...

"What brings you here?"

He said with a forced smile.

Seeing that look in Daren's eyes, Zephyr shivered involuntarily, coughed awkwardly twice, and said in a deep voice,

"Ahem, Fleet Admiral Kong has called a meeting of the top officers. It's about discussing candidates for the Shichibukai."

Chapter 605 - 605: Volume 4 – Chapter 124: The Final List?

The selection of the Shichibukai...

On his way to the Fleet Admiral's office, Daren was lost in thought.

Although he had already made the necessary arrangements in advance, he couldn't be completely certain whether his selected candidates would make it onto the government's final list.

After all, the final decision for the Shichibukai lay with the World Government.

"I wonder how Fisher Tiger is doing..."

Daren frowned slightly and casually lit a cigar.

"How's Magellan doing now?"

Zephyr, walking ahead, suddenly asked.

Daren snapped out of his thoughts, smiled, and replied,

"He's doing quite well. The kid's just a little eccentric, but considering the Doku Doku no Mi's special and bizarre nature, it's understandable."

"In terms of talent and potential, Magellan is definitely on par with Kuzan and me."

Zephyr nodded in satisfaction.

"That kid Kuzan has grown up fast... In the blink of an eye, he's become a pillar of our Marines. Feels like it was only yesterday he joined the training camp."

As he said this, a trace of sentimentality flashed in Zephyr's eyes, and a gentle, mellow smile spread across his face.

He had long given up the dream of hunting down pirates, dedicating himself instead to training outstanding students.

For Zephyr, the chief instructor of the military academy, nothing was more fulfilling and pride-inducing than seeing the students he personally nurtured grow into fine Marines.

"But Daren, are you really sure that... inhaling large amounts of Magellan's poisonous gas won't cause any problems for your body?"

Zephyr seemed to remember something. He turned his head, glanced at Daren, and asked somewhat worriedly,

"If you're not sure, you should get checked out at the military hospital or the Special Science Group."

"Borsalino has already made some progress in breaking down Magellan's toxins and has developed a special antidote. Even if something goes wrong, it can be dealt with in time."

He pursed his lips.

"Don't push yourself too hard and end up with permanent damage."

Hearing the concern in Zephyr's voice, a wave of warmth welled up in Daren's heart. He smiled and said,

"Don't worry, Zephyr-sensei, there's no problem."

He definitely didn't want to end up lying on a lab table while that sleazy Borsalino stroked his chin and pretended to be surprised, saying, "How scary."

Just picturing it gave him a chill and made his skin crawl.

"I'll keep an eye on Magellan, but I have a feeling that kid is still holding something back."

"Oh?" Zephyr raised an eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

Daren pondered for a moment and frowned.

"How should I put it? With his talent and ability, his progress in developing his Devil Fruit powers shouldn't be this slow."

Zephyr: ...

He was momentarily speechless, the corners of his mouth twitching slightly.

This is slow?

After just two months of special training, Magellan's poison had already reached a level where even Zephyr himself, a former Marine Admiral, wouldn't dare carelessly touch it.

Judging by the corrosion of the quarantine zone's walls, Magellan's poison was already starting to condense from gas into mist. At this rate, it wouldn't be long before it compressed further into liquid.

Looking at Daren's serious face, Zephyr couldn't bring himself to complain. He could only sigh silently in his heart:

Sure enough, monsters view the world differently from ordinary people.

You really can't lump all physiques together.

Thinking about the brat Daren in front of him, who at just 22 years old already possessed combat strength on par with a Marine Admiral, while he himself had only achieved that rank at 38, Zephyr couldn't help but feel a little discouraged.

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

Daren exhaled a stream of smoke, paused, and said,

"I feel that Magellan is holding back his potential."

Hearing this, Zephyr fell silent.

After a moment, he shook his head with a bitter smile and sighed,

"...What a kind-hearted kid."

No one wants to stay weak.

It's a basic instinct of life.

Especially for natural "monsters" like Magellan, Kuzan, and Sakazuki, that instinct, etched into their very genes, burns even stronger.

But Magellan was trying hard to suppress that drive to grow stronger, and there could only be one reason for it.

He was afraid that if his powers grew too much, he wouldn't be able to control them—afraid that one day, he might hurt or even kill the people around him.

"I'll have a talk with him later," Daren said, coming to a stop.

Before them, the central military fortress loomed, solemn and imposing.

Across its towering gray-black walls, the bold, sweeping characters for "Justice" were emblazoned in deep black, exuding a heavy and oppressive aura.

They had arrived at the Fleet Admiral's residence.

Led by the guards, Daren and Zephyr climbed the steps and soon reached the top-level military conference room.

"Reporting, Fleet Admiral Kong—Zephyr-san and Vice Admiral Daren have arrived."

The guards knocked lightly and entered after receiving a response.

"Come in."

At the head of the oval conference table sat Fleet Admiral Kong, his massive, bronze-toned upper body exposed, muscles coiled with explosive strength.

He wore a Fleet Admiral's cloak draped over his shoulders, his aura steady and unyielding like a mountain.

When he saw Daren and Zephyr enter, a faint smile crossed his face, and he gestured for them to take their seats.

Daren saluted sharply, his eyes sweeping the room, noting that all the high-ranking officers were already assembled.

Admiral Sengoku, Staff Officer Tsuru, and Garp—who was absentmindedly picking his nose—were all naturally present.

Sakazuki sat with his arms crossed, face cold and stern.

Borsalino lounged lazily, cleaning his nails as if oblivious to everyone around him.

Kuzan was the only one waving at him enthusiastically...

Among the attendees were many Vice Admirals, and in the observers' section, Daren also spotted Gion, Tokikake, Yamakaji, Doberman, Onigumo, and others from the "Golden Generation," all seated with solemn expressions.

It was probably their first time attending a meeting of such high level and importance, and none dared to lose focus—every one of them sat stiff and upright, their gazes fixed downward in disciplined attention.

"As for the main agenda of today's meeting, I believe most of you already have a general understanding,"

Kong said, clearing his throat, his voice deep and commanding.

"The concept of the Shichibukai system... has sparked considerable debate, both within the Marines and around the world, ever since it was proposed."

"Some believe that establishing the Shichibukai can help ease the pressure on our Marines when it comes to dealing with pirates, allowing us to recruit powerful pirates as a countermeasure to deter and weaken other major pirate forces."

"But others argue that the existence of the Shichibukai represents a betrayal of justice—a retreat, a compromise. That it seriously damages the reputation and authority of our Marines."

As Kong's words fell, Daren noticed the various expressions on the generals' faces.

"But!"

Kong's tone sharpened suddenly.

"From this day forward, I don't want to hear any more of these debates!"

As he spoke, he nodded toward Sengoku.

Sengoku responded by pulling out a thick stack of documents and handing them to the messengers, who began distributing them among the officers.

"The establishment of the Shichibukai is imperative.

As the World Government's law enforcement arm, the Marines' duty is to fully support the government's decisions, not to question or challenge them."

Kong's voice grew even heavier.

"Although the process has been full of twists and turns—there was even a disgraceful incident where Shichibukai candidates were targeted and killed—"

He glanced meaningfully at Daren and said,

"Here, I would like to commend Vice Admiral Daren for his outstanding investigative work."

Daren nodded in response with a small smile.

"But after a series of investigations and screenings, the core candidates for the Shichibukai have now been finalized."

As each officer received a sealed document, Kong interlaced his fingers and said solemnly,

"What you hold in your hands is the final list of the Shichibukai."

Chapter 606 - 606: Volume 4 – Chapter 125: “Empty Sleeve”? No—“Arm-Cutter” Daren!

The final list!

Hearing Fleet Admiral Kong's words, everyone present narrowed their eyes, feeling the sealed document in their hands grow heavier.

According to the original concept behind the Shichibukai system, each Shichibukai must be a Great Pirate whose power is enough to intimidate—or even destroy—a country.

And now, they were holding such a list in their hands.

Thinking about how these infamous and arrogant Great Pirates would soon become their "comrades-in-arms" in the Marines, a strange feeling stirred in everyone's hearts.

"Open them and take a look," Sengoku said in a deep voice.

Everyone carefully tore open their seals, and the atmosphere grew increasingly tense.

A flash of anticipation appeared in Daren's eyes as he casually opened his own document.

Soon, the list was laid out before him.

The moment he glanced at it, an intrigued smile curled at the corners of Daren's mouth.

There were five names on the list, all familiar to him:

"Demon Heir" Douglas Bullet, former member of Roger's pirate crew, former bounty: 2,174,000,000 Belly!

"Desert King" Crocodile, former bounty: 281,000,000 Belly!

"Gecko Bat" Gecko Moria, from West Blue, bounty: 218,000,000 Belly!

"Hawk Eyes" Dracule Mihawk, bounty: 369,000,000 Belly!

"Blood Dragon" Fisher Tiger, bounty: 263,000,000 Belly!

'Didn't expect Tiger to move so fast and put so much pressure on the government and Marines... Looks like the Fishmen truly are a dominant force at sea.'

The thought crossed Daren's mind. He set the list aside, pulled out a cigar, lit it, and his mood lifted instantly.

The only regret was that the brat Doffy wasn't on the final Shichibukai list, but Daren wasn't too surprised.

After all, because of the events of that year, all the Celestial Dragons, including the Five Elders, viewed the Donquixote family as traitors—a disgrace to the World Nobles.

Although Doflamingo nominally retained some privileges of a Celestial Dragon, the government was firmly against him becoming a Shichibukai.

Unlike Daren's composed attitude, however, the other officers showed varied reactions. Especially the Vice Admirals and Rear Admirals sitting in the audience, who widened their eyes and stared hard at the list in their hands.

Sakazuki furrowed his brows, his expression growing darker.

Borsalino just glanced at the list before setting it aside, continuing to casually trim his nails as if nothing else in the world mattered.

Kuzan, face flushed, clenched his fists tightly and muttered, "All famous Great Pirates... I really want to fight them..."

"Hmm. Sengoku, you explain," Kong said as he lightly tapped the conference table, pulling everyone's attention back.

"Yes, Fleet Admiral Kong," Sengoku nodded seriously and said,

"Regarding the selection criteria for the Shichibukai, powerful combat ability is essential, and the bounties of the individuals on this list speak for themselves."

"Now, I'll briefly explain the privileges granted to this batch of Shichibukai."

"First, once they become Shichibukai, all past crimes will be wiped clean, and they will gain the legal right to plunder."

"Second, for Shichibukai who have no plundering needs, the government will promise them specific privileges."

Sengoku lifted the document in his hand.

"'Demon Heir' Douglas Bullet, former member of Roger's pirate crew, is someone the government is particularly keen to work with."

"As a former crewmate of Roger, he's rumored to possess strength comparable to 'Dark King' Rayleigh. Both the government and the military agree that turning him into a Shichibukai would deal a heavy blow to Roger's pirate legacy."

"And he agreed to become a Shichibukai on one condition."

At this point, Sengoku gave Daren a strange look.

"...That is, he demands the special privilege of being allowed to attack Vice Admiral Rogers Daren of Marine Headquarters at any time."

As soon as the words fell, everyone couldn't help but look at Daren.

"..." Daren's hand trembled slightly as he held his cigarette.

That bastard Bullet... he really won't let it go.

"Looks like Douglas Bullet is still brooding over the beating he took from Vice Admiral Daren..." Borsalino said lazily, glancing at Daren with a faint, amused smile.

Sakazuki stared coldly at Daren and said flatly,

"You shouldn't have held back before."

Kuzan, his face full of excitement, said,

"To be targeted by a powerhouse like Douglas Bullet... that's really..."

He took a deep breath.

"So cool!!"

The other officers looked at Daren with eyes full of sympathy.

If it were them being targeted by a battle maniac like Bullet, obsessed with fighting, they definitely wouldn't be able to eat or sleep peacefully.

"In addition, both Gecko Moria and Crocodile made their own demands," Sengoku continued, though his expression grew increasingly strange.

"They strongly demanded that Marine Headquarters severely punish Vice Admiral Rogers Daren for his brutal actions during the Shichibukai recruitment."

At those words, everyone's expressions stiffened.

Daren raised an eyebrow in dissatisfaction, a cold smirk playing at the corners of his mouth.

"But their demands were directly rejected by Headquarters," Sengoku quickly added after noticing Daren's reaction.

"Uh... Admiral Sengoku, may I ask what exactly Vice Admiral Daren did?"

From the audience, Yamakaji suddenly leaned forward, raised his hand, scratched his head, and asked curiously.

Sengoku glanced at the Vice Admiral who was casually smoking, his eye twitching slightly before he sighed,

"Their arms... were both cut off."

"Hiss!"

A gasp echoed through the audience, and everyone's faces changed dramatically.

Tokikake stared at Daren with a shiver running down his spine, his eyelids twitching uncontrollably.

He had been present when Crocodile was summoned, and had personally witnessed Daren draw Enma and ruthlessly sever Crocodile's arm.

But he hadn't expected that not only Crocodile, even Gecko Moria had suffered the same fate!

Wait!

His pupils suddenly shrank as he remembered something else.

"Wasn't... Douglas Bullet's arm was also cut off by Daren?"

He muttered in disbelief, unable to suppress his shock.

The other generals, with their sharp hearing, naturally caught his words, and their gazes toward Daren grew even stranger.

Vice Admiral Daren... could he possibly have some sort of unusual obsession?

Why did he always target people's arms?

"Empty Sleeve"... no, more like "Arm-Cutter" Daren!?

Chapter 607 - 607: Volume 4 – Chapter 126: My Personal Safety Is Insignificant!

With this in mind, the generals present looked at Daren with increasingly strange expressions.

"Wait... Hawk-Eyes Mihawk lost an arm too?"

At this moment, Doberman, who was flipping through the list in his hand, suddenly let out a low cry.

Everyone was taken aback and began flipping through the documents.

The list of the Shichibukai was accompanied by descriptions of each person's physical characteristics, abilities, and other relevant information, as well as bounties.

When they turned to the page with "Hawk Eyes" Mihawk, they were all stunned.

They saw clearly that the bounty photo of the young man with unparalleled swordsmanship and sharp eyes like an eagle's had only one arm!

Swoosh!

They all turned their heads and stared at Daren.

"Ahem..."

Daren raised his hands innocently and said,

"I didn't cut off his arm."

Everyone breathed a sigh of relief.

"...He cut it off himself after he lost to me."

Everyone: ...

So you did cut it after all!

The generals looked at the Vice Admiral of the Marines sitting there leisurely smoking, their faces filled with rage, the corners of their mouths twitching wildly, their heads filled with black lines.

"Let's not mess with him in the future..."

This thought flashed through their minds at the same time, and they felt one of their arms go cold.

Of the five confirmed candidates for the Shichibukai, four had their arms cut off by Daren!

The only one who escaped unscathed and remained "physically intact" was Fisher Tiger, the "Blood Dragon" from Fish-Man Island.

No wonder this group of Shichibukai hated Vice Admiral Daren so much, and all of their requests for privileges were related to him. Who wouldn't be angry?

With this in mind, everyone's expressions toward Daren changed.

Kuzan's eyes became even more fanatical, and he subconsciously rolled up his sleeves, wishing he could drag Daren out for a duel right then and there.

Borsalino smiled deeply, amused.

Sakazuki's eyes flashed with approval.

"Ahem..."

Sengoku cleared his throat, bringing everyone's attention back to him.

"Regarding the privileges requested by the remaining two Shichibukai... Dracule Mihawk, known as 'Hawk Eye,' and Douglas Bullet are similar in that they wish to have the right to duel Vice Admiral Daren at any time."

Upon hearing this, the generals present froze again, their mouths twitching.

Sword fighting?

When did Vice Admiral Daren learn sword fighting?

Sengoku also suppressed the strange feeling in his heart and looked solemnly at Daren and said,

"What is Vice Admiral Daren's opinion on the conditions of these two people?"

Hearing this, the others also fell silent.

They were not stupid to be attending this military meeting, so they naturally understood the implications of these two conditions.

Once Vice Admiral Daren agreed to the privileges requested by the two Shichibukai, it meant that he would have to accept their challenge at any time.

The pressure behind this was enormous!

After all, each of the Shichibukai was a Great Pirate with the power to destroy a country!

Facing their gazes, Daren just smiled casually and said,

"I have no objection."

"Whether it's Douglas Bullet or Dracule Mihawk, they are both pirates with astonishing strength and pose a great threat to world security. It is precisely because of their potential destructive power and dangerousness that the government and our Marines have sent them invitations to become Shichibukai."

"My personal pressure and safety are insignificant compared to world peace and stability."

"This is my responsibility as a Marine."

The moment he finished speaking, everyone's eyes lit up with a fiery glow, and they looked at Daren with admiration and even worship!

"So cool! Sacrificing yourself to defend justice and peace! Daren, you are truly my worthy opponent!"

Kuzan slammed his hand on the conference table with a loud bang and stood up with bloodshot eyes, scaring Garp, who was picking his nose next to him.

The others were also deeply moved.

Many people in the audience were moved, and several Commodores and Rear Admirals, including Yamakaji, had tears in their eyes.

Vice Admiral Daren said this casually, but in reality, they couldn't even imagine the pressure he was under.

"Hmm, I wasn't wrong about you, Daren."

Sengoku smiled with satisfaction, his heart filled with emotion.

If he were in Daren's shoes at his age, facing the same situation, he would not have been able to remain so calm.

Kong, Garp, Zephyr, Tsuru, and the other Marine pillars also smiled, looking at Daren with undisguised admiration in their eyes.

Putting aside this kid's usual bad habits of smoking, drinking, and being greedy and lecherous, when it came to taking responsibility, Daren was always unambiguous.

No matter what kind of opponent or enemy he faced, no matter how difficult the task, he always did his best to carry it out.

This sense of responsibility was truly unmatched by anyone else.

They couldn't help but glance at Borsalino, who was still sitting there picking his fingernails, and the corners of their eyes twitched.

Then, they paused and subconsciously looked at Sengoku.

Sengoku: ...

His face darkened, and he wanted to strangle his bastard adjutant right there.

"Ahem, then, regarding the privilege request of the last Shichibukai."

Sengoku pretended not to see the looks on the faces of Kong and the others and continued speaking as if nothing had happened.

"Fisher Tiger, you may not know much about him, so let me give you a brief introduction."

"Fisher Tiger was born on Fish-Man Island and is a powerful member of the Fish-Man race. Before becoming a pirate, he was a world-renowned adventurer and traveler... More than a month ago, for some unknown reason, he began attacking merchant caravans and Noble ships, which led to him being added to the Marines' wanted list."

"This man possesses strength that is more than ten times that of humans, which is natural for the fishmen, and in sea battles, he has combat power that humans cannot imagine... Our headquarters once

sent two Vice Admirals, three warships, and a total of 1,000 soldiers to try to defeat him, but they all returned empty-handed."

"In the end, he even used the abilities of the fishmen to easily sink a warship."

As Sengoku explained, the expressions of everyone present gradually became solemn.

A picture involuntarily appeared in their minds.

A blood-red figure darted through the deep sea at an astonishing speed, like a swordfish, and neither cannon fire nor bullets could pose the slightest threat to him.

He remained hidden in the murky waters, like a lurking sea monster, watching his prey on the surface, ready to strike at any moment!

Chapter 608 - 608: Volume 4 – Chapter 127: I Will Never Lose, Daren!

Before the blood-red figure gliding through the deep sea, all the Marines' sturdy ships and powerful cannons instantly lost their advantage, leaving them as helpless prey waiting to be slaughtered!

Thinking this, everyone present felt a chill run down their spines.

"Because Fisher Tiger himself is incredibly powerful at sea, making him extremely difficult to capture, and he holds a revered reputation within Fish-Man Island..."

"...Considering that Fish-Man Island is a member nation of the World Government, after careful deliberation, the government and headquarters have jointly decided to extend an invitation to Fisher Tiger to join the Shichibukai."

Sengoku scanned the room, taking in everyone's reactions, and said in a deep voice,

"This way, on one hand, we can ease the hostility between humans and fishmen to some extent. On the other hand, we can establish a cooperative relationship between the Marines and the fishmen, and perhaps one day bring Fish-Man Island under the Marine banner."

Hearing Sengoku's words, everyone nodded in agreement.

To strengthen the Marines' combat power, headquarters had long sought to integrate the fishmen into the combat system, much like they had with the giants.

Among the elite forces of Marine Headquarters, there were already giant troops, some of whom had even risen to the rank of Vice Admiral thanks to their overwhelming strength on land, forming a vital part of headquarters' backbone.

If the giants were the rulers of land, then the fishmen, blessed with natural gifts, were the kings of the sea.

If the Marines could absorb the fishmen into their ranks, it would dramatically boost their naval dominance and combat effectiveness.

In fact, this idea had been proposed years ago, but the deep-seated hostility between humans and fishmen had kept it from ever being realized.

"So, what are Fisher Tiger's conditions?"

Sakazuki, who had remained silent until now, finally spoke up in a hoarse voice.

Sengoku glanced at him and replied slowly,

"Fisher Tiger demands that Fish-Man Island be included within the Marines' protection zone. Specifically, he wants at least one warship patrolling a 100-mile radius around the island."

"The scope of protection includes, but is not limited to, pirate raids. It also covers the extermination of slave hunters."

At those words, Sakazuki sneered coldly, the corner of his mouth curling up mockingly.

"Does he really think the Marines are the fishmen's personal bodyguards?"

"Fighting pirates is one thing, but hunting down slave traders... that's not exactly our job."

"Besides, headquarters is already stretched thin. Roger, Whitebeard, Kaidou, Big Mom... So many dangerous pirates are still roaming the seas. How could we possibly spare enough manpower to provide twenty-four-hour protection for Fish-Man Island?"

"G5," Sengoku said suddenly.

Sakazuki froze.

The others looked equally surprised.

Then, as if by instinct, they all turned their gazes toward Daren.

Sengoku gave Daren an apologetic look and said helplessly,

"According to Fisher Tiger's terms, only the G5 branch in the New World is capable of handling it."

"Vice Admiral Daren, as the head of G5, do you think it's feasible to meet Fisher Tiger's demands?"

Daren pretended to ponder for a moment, looking slightly troubled.

"That wouldn't be a major issue, but G5's forces are already quite limited. If..."

Hearing this, Sengoku's eyes lit up. He waved his hand decisively and said,

"That's not a problem. Within reason, I'll authorize you to transfer some forces from headquarters."

That's exactly what I wanted to hear!

Daren laughed secretly to himself.

Although he had taken over G5, it had struggled to grow due to a lack of mid- and high-ranking officers.

If he could bring in a few strong personnel, he might be able to turn G5 into his second base of operations after the North Blue Fleet.

After all, given G5's reputation as a "rogue branch," it was perfectly suited for building his own private army...

"Since it is an order from Admiral Sengoku, although it is extremely difficult, I will do my best to carry it out."

Daren hesitated for a moment, pretending to be reluctant, but finally nodded "reluctantly" in agreement.

Upon receiving his reply, Sengoku breathed a sigh of relief.

He felt a little guilty towards Daren. After all, the establishment of the Shichibukai system had placed almost all the pressure on this young man.

Of the five confirmed members of the Shichibukai, almost all of the privileges they requested were directly or indirectly related to Daren.

If it had been anyone else, they would have quit long ago.

But Daren had unhesitatingly shouldered the responsibilities of an excellent Marine, which was truly rare.

'It seems that I must confirm his candidacy for Admiral as soon as possible...'

Sengoku secretly decided.

"Well, that's basically it for this meeting."

Seeing that the entire meeting agenda had been passed, Kong smiled with satisfaction.

"Vice Admiral Daren, you are under a lot of pressure. If you have any questions, you can bring them up to headquarters or even to me directly, and I will do my best to accommodate you."

He slowly stood up.

With him leading the way, Sengoku, Garp, and the other high-ranking Marines, as well as everyone else present, stood up straight in unison.

"Salute!"

Swish!

All the Marine generals present solemnly saluted the only Vice Admiral who was sitting and smoking.

...

At the same time.

New World, Pleasure District.

Top floor luxury box.

The Queen of the Pleasure District, dressed in a long black dress, sat gracefully in her office chair, her slender fingers holding a lady's cigarette, her legs crossed, her white toes gently hooking her high heels.

But her expression was changeable, sometimes gritting her teeth, sometimes staring at the list in her hand with reluctance, not even noticing the cigarette ash falling from it.

"How is this possible..."

Looking at the newly confirmed list of the Shichibukai, Stussy couldn't believe her eyes.

It was exactly the same!

This list was exactly the same as the one that shameless bastard had told her before!

Everything was within that despicable guy's plan!

"No!"

Stussy suddenly gritted her teeth and tore the list in her hand into pieces.

Just thinking about that Marine's smug, confident smile and that shameful bet made her teeth itch with hatred.

An unprecedented panic gripped her heart.

A few seconds later, she seemed to have made up her mind, picked up the Den Den Mushi, and dialed a number.

Soon, the Den Den Mushi connected.

"It's me."

Stussy's voice was decisive.

"Contact Doflamingo and tell him that Stussy, Queen of the Pleasure District, has business to discuss with him."

With that, she hung up the Den Den Mushi.

Clenching her fists, Stussy's eyes filled with determination and a burning desire to win.

"I will never lose to you, Daren!"

Chapter 609 - 609: Volume 4 – Chapter 128: The Shichibukai Appointment Ceremony!

Marine Headquarters, Fleet Admiral's Office.

Admiral Sengoku was announcing the final matter:

"The meeting is now adjourned. Regarding the implementation of the Shichibukai system, there must be a suitable candidate to follow up..."

His serious gaze swept across the room.

Sakazuki raised his head and stared intently at him.

Sengoku paused for a moment, frowned, and continued to look around.

He didn't linger on Borsalino for even a second. Sengoku glanced at Kuzan, who raised his hand with a red face, looking like a good student in class scrambling to answer a question.

Sengoku: ...

He sighed in his heart and finally turned his gaze to Daren.

"...This task is yours, Vice Admiral Daren."

Daren smiled, not surprised by the news, and raised his hand in salute:

"Yes, Admiral Sengoku, I will do my best to complete the mission."

Sengoku smiled with satisfaction and nodded:

"Well, that's all for today's meeting. Dismissed."

As the meeting ended, the officers in the audience slowly withdrew under the guidance of the guards.

"Vice Admiral Daren, thank you for your hard work."

"Vice Admiral Daren, you are truly the pillar of our Marines."

"With the power of one man, you attracted the hatred of all the Shichibukai... No, you suppressed all the Shichibukai..."

"..."

One after another, as the generals left the conference room, they brushed past Daren, expressing their heartfelt admiration with looks of respect in their eyes.

They knew very well how much Daren had sacrificed and how much pressure he had been under to establish the Shichibukai system.

Our Vice Admiral Daren is not the biggest scoundrel in the Marines... He is clearly a true hero of the Marines!

When everyone in the audience had left, Sengoku said in a deep voice to Daren and the others,

"The government insists on holding a grand ceremony to award these guys the title of 'Shichibukai' in public."

"In this way, on the one hand, it will show that the power and status of the Shichibukai are bestowed by the Marines, and on the other hand, it will send a message to the whole world..."

"...Even powerful pirates like Douglas Bullet and his crew will have to submit to the power of the Marines and the government!"

Sengoku stood up straight, clenched his fists, and looked somewhat spirited.

As the current Admiral of the Marine Headquarters, Sengoku was the main person responsible for establishing and promoting the Shichibukai system. As long as the Shichibukai system was ultimately successful and achieved its intended purpose, it would be a considerable achievement for him.

This would further enhance his image and influence within the government, which would be a huge political boost for his future promotion to Fleet Admiral.

Hearing this, the others did not react much.

Only Sakazuki frowned, hesitated, and finally said nothing.

"Twenty days."

A smile appeared on Sengoku's lips as he said in a deep voice,

"Twenty days from now, all members of the Shichibukai will gather at Marine Headquarters for a collective ceremony to receive their titles."

"At that time, most of the world's news agencies will come to report on the ceremony, and it will also be broadcast live via Den Den Mushi."

"Don't screw this up..."

Sengoku glared fiercely at Borsalino, who was still picking his nails.

"I'm talking about you, Borsalino, do you hear me!?"

Borsalino immediately raised his hands in surrender and said slowly,

"No problem, Admiral Sengoku."

...

He walked out of the Fleet Admiral's residence.

Daren didn't care much about the Shichibukai appointment ceremony; his mind was still caught up in something else.

What he was more concerned about was Magellan's training progress—

Or rather, more precisely, his own.

Compared to the incredible gains from the first month of "poison resistance" training, the past month had seen him hit a bottleneck once again.

In that first month, his physique had improved by 3 full points, and thanks to the overflow effect of his constitution, all his other stats had also seen impressive growth.

But after this month, even though Magellan's Devil Fruit ability kept strengthening, Daren's physique had only improved by a mere 1 point.

As he walked out of the Fleet Admiral's residence, he activated his perception talent and checked his various physical "stats":

Physique: 96.017 (Indestructible Body)

Strength: 86.677 (Giant's Strength)

Speed: 86.747 (Soru's Godspeed)

Fruit Ability Development: 86.186 (Island-Wide Coverage)

Armament Haki: 74.792 (Internal Destruction, Devil Form)

Observation Haki: 76.521 (Magnetic Field Induction)

Conqueror's Haki: 81.469 (Affects Matter)

"Looks like I've pretty much developed immunity. Unless Magellan's Doku Doku no Mi ability undergoes a major leap, maybe even reaching 'awakening,' there's not much point in trying to boost my strength through this method any further..."

Daren thought to himself, frowning slightly.

He had already expected this, so he wasn't too disappointed.

Since his time in North Blue, physique had always been his strong suit. Even across the current world, the only ones who could compare to him in terms of physical strength were the naturally gifted Kaidou and Charlotte Linlin.

In terms of pure physical defense and resistance to abnormal conditions, Daren even had the edge over them.

Kaidou's "Indestructible Body" was more about monstrous regeneration and vitality, the result of his "oni" bloodline and his Mythical Zoan, the Uo Uo no Mi, Model: Seiryu.

Big Mom, on the other hand, focused more on sheer physical explosiveness—by the time she was only eight, she could already topple adult giants. Her "steel balloon" body was just an outward sign of her monstrous strength.

Each of the three had their own strengths.

Daren understood very well that at his current level, further improving his physique would be incredibly difficult. It could be said that just about every conventional and unconventional method had already become ineffective.

"Maybe I should find Sakazuki and work on building resistance to magma?"

A crazy idea suddenly flashed through his mind.

Fire had long ceased to pose any threat to him. Even against a Mera Mera no Mi user, the only attack that might hurt him would be the strongest move, "Entei."

Other flashy moves like Kyokaen probably wouldn't even leave a mark on his skin—let alone have any real training effect.

Chapter 610 - 610: Volume 4 – Chapter 129: I'll Just Have to Take It

However, the thought of finding Sakazuki was only a fleeting one, and was quickly rejected by Daren.

That guy doesn't care if you're sparring or not, for him, once he strikes, it's a kill.

Once he gets really angry, he won't care about your Indestructible Body, he'll just fire a Meigo at your head.

With the high heat of volcanic lava and the bonus from Armament Haki, Daren didn't think his Indestructible Body could withstand a single Meigo.

The slightest mistake, and Whitebeard was the best example.

"What a headache..."

Daren rubbed his temples with a slight headache and sighed deeply.

Having such a strong physique wasn't a good thing. It was really difficult to improve further.

He finally understood why Kaidou had gone around the world "committing suicide" and challenging the Marines with his stubbornness. He guessed that it was probably to find opportunities and methods to break through the limits of his body.

"If it really doesn't work, I'll put my physique training on hold and focus on improving my strength, speed, and Haki first."

Daren gradually came to this decision.

If he could strengthen his physique, that would of course be the best way to improve his strength.

After all, a stronger physique meant stronger defense, survival skills, and the ability to risk death... At least if he couldn't win, he could still barely remain undefeated. Daren had already experienced the benefits of this in the past.

But since he couldn't improve his physique now, focusing on training other abilities was also a good choice.

After all, his strength and speed were still in the 80s, while his Armament Haki and Observation Haki were even lower, only in the 70s. As long as he could find a reasonable way to train, or perhaps an excellent teacher, there was still a lot of room for improvement...

So, as he walked along absentmindedly, he began to sift through his mind for his next lucky candidate.

"Hm?"

Daren suddenly stopped in his tracks, and a scruffy face with a few pimples appeared in front of him, looking at him with a fawning smile.

"...What is it now?"

Looking at Tokikake, who looked like a sycophant, Daren had a bad feeling in his heart, rolled his eyes, and asked impatiently.

"Hehehe..."

Tokikake rubbed his hands together a little shyly and asked with a smarmy smile,

"Daren, what do you think our relationship is?"

Daren: "..."

"Nothing special, but if you really want to know, it's that you owe me a favor. After all, you've been using my unlimited black card."

"That's right!"

Tokikake familiarly put his arm around Daren's shoulder and winked at him.

"Look, you're even willing to let me use something so precious. Doesn't that prove that we're friends who would die for each other?"

Daren glanced at him.

"If you have something to say, just say it. Otherwise, I'm leaving. I don't have time to chat with you."

"Hehehe, I know you're busy..."

Tokikake rubbed his hands together excitedly, and this fly-like movement did not seem out of place at all when he did it.

"I'm just taking the initiative to help you with your worries... Didn't you say in the meeting just now that you wanted to transfer some of the forces from headquarters to G5? How about me?"

As he spoke, he took out a box of gold-embossed cigars as if presenting a treasure, pulled one out, and handed it to Daren with a smile.

Daren looked at him suspiciously, reached out, bypassed the cigar in Tokikake's hand, and took the whole box.

"..." Tokikake's smile froze for a moment.

Daren put the cigar into his pocket, then smiled and said,

"Are you sure? G5 is a godforsaken place, nowhere near as free as headquarters."

"Once you go there, you'll be stationed long-term. You won't have a chance to visit the Pleasure District anymore."

"In G5, it's not just women—getting enough food supplies is a challenge. Don't come crying to me later, begging to come back."

"I definitely won't!"

Tokikake raised his hand, his face flushed, and pounded his chest with a thud.

"Since I'm going to help you, I'll naturally shoulder the responsibility! I won't complain about any hardship!"

"What kind of relationship do we have? We're friends for life! You're in trouble, of course I should help you!"

"What do you take me for? A scumbag who betrays those who are kind to him?"

"Yes." Daren nodded without hesitation.

Tokikake: "..."

Hey, hey, hey, that answer was way too fast.

You could at least pretend a little.

Seeing Tokikake's stiff expression, Daren sighed and said,

"Honestly, you'd better just stay put at headquarters."

Tokikake hesitated for a moment, then awkwardly confessed,

"Uh... didn't the Shichibukai Fisher Tiger request a G5 warship to patrol Fish-Man Island?"

"I think I'd be a perfect fit."

He took a deep breath, raised his head, and said solemnly, his face full of righteous determination:

"I want to represent the Marines and justice, to protect the mermaids—ah no, to protect Fish-Man Island! To sacrifice myself for the friendly and peaceful coexistence of humans and fish-men!"

Daren's mouth twitched.

So you've got your eyes on the mermaids, huh?

Good boy...

He said irritably,

"With my black card in your hand, what kind of beautiful woman can't you find at the Pleasure District?"

Tokikake laughed sheepishly and said,

"It's always the same few hundred girls... I've gone so often, I'm starting to feel embarrassed freeloading off them."

Daren: "..."

"Tell me the truth!" he said through gritted teeth.

"This is the truth."

Tokikake said seriously, a hint of melancholy gradually appearing on his face.

"Daren, to be honest, I'm tired of that life of debauchery. Now I just want to find a gentle girl from a decent family... and treat her right."

"Forget it." Daren directly ignored his performance and turned away.

"Wait... Actually..."

Tokikake glanced around to make sure no one was nearby, then mumbled,

"They're too experienced... I... I feel like... I'm done before they even start."

At the last part, Tokikake wore the look of a tragic hero, sighing deeply.

Daren: "..."

"So, you see, Daren..."

Tokikake tried to say more, but he noticed the veins popping out on Daren's forehead, his fists tightening, and the murderous intent rising in his eyes.

"Forget it, never mind, the Pleasure District is fine! It's convenient and quick!"

Tokikake shivered, realized things were going south, and immediately bolted. In just a few flashes, he disappeared, showing off his impressive physical skills.

"...Unbelievable."

Watching Tokikake's fleeing figure, Daren took a few heavy puffs of his cigar before finally calming down.

He sighed, feeling a bit envious of that bastard Tokikake.

Living so freely and happily... Compared to that, was he maybe living too hard?

He shook his head, pulling a military Den Den Mushi from his pocket.

He dialed a secure line.

Soon, a deep, arrogant voice came through.

"Godfather-sama?"

Daren collected himself, his eyes sharpening instantly as he spoke calmly,

"Your name isn't on the latest list of Shichibukai."

"Doffy, you should know what to do."

The other end fell silent.

After a few seconds, Doflamingo's cold, crazed laughter echoed through the Den Den Mushi.

"Fufufufu, I understand, Godfather."

...

At the same time.

New World.

Doflamingo put away the Den Den Mushi, soaring through the sky like a flamingo.

White clouds, seabirds, and the blue sea rushed past beneath him.

The fierce wind whipped his pink feather coat into a frenzy.

"You old bastards... If you won't give it to me, I'll just take it myself. Fufufufu..."

A chilling glint flashed behind his sunglasses, and the grin on his face grew more and more unhinged.

In the distance, a prosperous island full of bright lights and decadent nightlife slowly came into view.

"Come on, Queen of the Pleasure District... Let's see what kind of business you want to discuss with me."

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