

One Piece 651

Chapter 651: What Harm Can Being Flirtatious and Lustful Do?

The early morning light spilled from the clear blue sky, outlining the land in warm golden hues.

A gentle breeze stirred, and dewdrops glistened as they slipped from coral branches and leaves, sparkling under the morning sun.

Inside the hotel suite, chaos reigned.

Clothes were strewn across the floor, long dresses lay shredded, and even the once-soft bed had collapsed halfway.

"What a satisfying battle..."

Daren stood in front of the full-length mirror, fully dressed, adjusting his black tie. A faint smile played on his lips.

"I—I only did it to uphold world order. Don't get any weird ideas..."

Stussy lay weakly on the bed, her pupils slightly unfocused, lips parted. Yet she stubbornly turned her head away, gritting out the words in protest.

The guilt in her voice, however, was unmistakable.

"Yes, yes, congratulations on successfully preserving world peace."

Daren rolled his eyes.

So prideful—typical woman. And to think she'd been so eager last night.

Just thinking about those hazy, near-delirious cries of "master" filled Daren with a surge of unexplainable satisfaction. He felt completely rejuvenated.

"Well then, I'm heading out. The warship's not going to wait."

He lit a cigar, clamped it between his teeth, and stepped out with a grin.

The door closed behind him.

Stussy lay there for a full half hour before she finally managed to sit up.

She glanced down at the two "正 (I am rightly yours)" characters marked on her legs, and her charming face flushed with shame.

Grinding her teeth, she muttered bitterly,

"That shameless bastard... Now I can't wear short skirts anymore!"

...

Fish-Man Island, inland port.

The warships had long since been coated, their sails now lowered, revealing the bold, sweeping characters for "Justice."

The docks were packed with people.

"Vice Admiral Daren, I love you!"

"Daren-san, come visit Batia sometime!"

"Vice Admiral Daren...!"

The queens, noble ladies, and princesses of various Member Nations completely ignored the murderous glares of their fathers and husbands as they threw flirtatious glances at their dream lover—some even bursting into tears.

On the outer edges stood the citizens of Fish-Man Island, waving enthusiastically.

"Daren-nii-san! Don't forget our promise! When I grow up, I'm gonna marry you!!"

From the Germa 66 fortress warship, little Reiju clung to Vinsmoke Judge's leg, her face red as she waved and shouted.

Daren stood atop the warship deck, waving and smiling in every direction.

"Daren really is popular! He's truly my greatest rival!"

Kuzan's eyes sparkled as he watched Daren's tall, dashing figure, his heart filled with excitement.

"Pfft, what's the big deal... The cleaning lady said that guy didn't even leave his room all night."

Beside him, Tokikake scoffed, sneering sarcastically.

"So what if he's popular... Still just a thief who lacks the nerve."

As cheers and farewells echoed from the crowd, the warship slowly pulled away from the inner harbor.

It passed through Fish-Man Island's entrance tunnel and, escorted by Ryugu Palace guards riding sea beasts, entered its designated course.

Behind them, the dreamlike paradise of the deep sea faded quickly into the distance.

Darkness and silence descended over the ship as it slipped into the depths.

"Vice Admiral Garp, we're heading straight back now, right?"

Daren lit another cigar and reclined on a beach chair, eyes closed.

Last night had been too wild. Now a heavy wave of drowsiness rolled in, threatening to knock him out.

"Yeah. The Shichibukai appointment ceremony is about to begin."

Garp pulled out a bag of senbei from who-knows-where and munched loudly, grinning.

"If I had to guess, some of the Shichibukai are probably already at Marineford by now."

Daren chuckled with his eyes half-lidded.

"Sounds like things are about to get real lively back at headquarters..."

...

Marine Headquarters, Admiral's Office.

Steam curled from freshly brewed tea, its fragrance filling the room.

Staff Officer Tsuru picked up the teapot and poured a cup for herself and Sengoku.

"Try this tea."

She gently pushed the teacup toward him.

"Mmm, this tea smells wonderful..."

Sengoku raised the cup to his nose, inhaling deeply, a look of contentment spreading across his face.

His mood was excellent.

No more of that idiot Garp constantly sneaking in to steal his senbei, no more of Kuzan's hot-blooded rambling, no more of Tokikake's endless nagging...

The world finally felt quiet.

"This tea is a gift from that kid, Daren."

Tsuru took a small sip, her voice calm.

Sengoku blinked in surprise, then chuckled with a touch of sentiment.

"I have to admit, that brat really knows how to win people over."

He recalled the massive box of custom-baked senbei waiting at home in his quarters.

"...Definitely more dependable than the other troublemakers."

Tsuru chuckled behind her teacup.

"Though... he's a bit of a womanizer."

Sengoku waved it off with a dismissive shake of his head.

"That's nothing. Every man has his flaws. No one can be perfect."

"That brat Daren—strength, looks, presence, power... he's got it all. It's only natural the ladies are drawn to him. You can't expect him to turn off his charm, can you?"

Just then, a knock came at the door.

A messenger entered with a Den Den Mushi in hand.

"Admiral Sengoku, sir! This is a video transmission from Vice Admiral Garp—sent from Fish-Man Island!"

"Understood."

Sengoku took the Den Den Mushi, motioning for the messenger to leave, then activated its projection mode.

Turning back to Tsuru with a light smile, he spoke:

"Besides, being flirtatious never really causes any seri—what the hell is this!?"

His eyes flew wide open, jaw dropping to the floor.

Tsuru sputtered and sprayed tea all over the table.

The image projected by the Den Den Mushi showed an utterly outrageous scene:

A tall, handsome Marine Vice Admiral was completely surrounded by noble ladies and royal members of World Government Member Nations, all fawning over him, touching, kissing—giggling like love-struck fools.

The Vice Admiral skillfully entertained each one, drawing waves of laughter and sparkling eyes.

In the background, the kings, nobles, and dignitaries of those nations stood watching with murderous glares, their expressions dark as thunderclouds.

Sengoku: ...

Tsuru: ...

"Sengoku... what was it you just said?"

Tsuru's lip twitched as she gave him a sidelong glance.

Sengoku: ...

Staring at the image with growing horror, Sengoku suddenly had the urge to slap himself.

He had thought Garp, Kuzan, and Tokikake were too unreliable, so he let Daren attend the wedding as well—counting on Daren's polished political sense to keep things under control.

But now he realized...

Daren was the biggest disaster of them all.

Just then, chaos erupted outside the window—screams of panic, violent crashing, pained howls, and the unmistakable sound of arrogant, wild laughter.

Bang!

The office door flew open.

A breathless messenger stumbled in, face pale with fear.

"R-Report! Admiral Sengoku, we have a situation!"

"The—The Shichibukai... have arrived!!!"

Sengoku and Tsuru's expressions both changed instantly.

Chapter 652: Only One Arm Left

Marine Headquarters, Marineford.

Military Port.

Dozens of Marine soldiers were already in disarray, their faces a mix of shock and terror as they drew their weapons and began attacking each other right on the dock.

"What are you doing?! I'm your teammate!"

"No, this isn't what I want... My body... I can't control it!"

"Why?!"

"Damn it!!"

The sound of clashing blades echoed non-stop—chaos engulfed the entire port.

"Fufufufufu... So this is Marine Headquarters? Seems a little weak, doesn't it..."

A haughty figure slowly descended from the sky. A pink feathered coat billowed behind him in the breeze, and his golden short hair shimmered in the sunlight like a regal crown, radiating brilliance.

His fingers were curled like claws, twitching rhythmically—as if pulling the strings of some unseen force.

With each subtle movement of his hands, the Marines in the port fought even more ferociously, their expressions twisted in agony.

The moment his figure came into focus, the Marines in the distance who were aiming their rifles suddenly paled.

"It's Donquixote Doflamingo!!"

"Bounty: 250 million Belly!"

"One of the incoming Shichibukai!"

"So it's his ability!"

"Damn it! Should we open fire?!"

"..."

Hundreds of rifles were raised in unison, all aimed at the blond youth.

But no one dared pull the trigger. Cold sweat trickled down their faces.

Without explicit orders from a superior officer, no Marine was allowed to attack a Shichibukai candidate.

"Kishishishi... What a lively crowd!"

A chilling laugh rang out suddenly.

Everyone froze and turned toward the voice.

A pirate ship flying a bat-themed Jolly Roger was slowly sailing into port. At the bow stood a tall, ghostly pale figure.

He stood over six meters tall, with flaming red hair and devilish features.

Two horns protruded from either side of his forehead. His ears and teeth were sharp, and his head and neck were marked with thick, crisscrossed stitches, like surgical scars. He wore a bat-collared shirt and a gothic ensemble.

He had only one arm.

"Bounty: 218 million Belly!"

"Gecko Moria!"

"Another Shichibukai candidate!"

The Marines grew increasingly tense.

"Hey, kid—you're the one who was added to the Shichibukai list at the last minute, right?"

Moria sneered, casting a scornful glance at Doflamingo.

"Kishishishi... Don't tell me you pulled some strings to get the title?"

Doflamingo casually looked over at the emaciated, bat-like man and chuckled coldly.

"I don't waste time talking to weaklings with only one arm."

"You bastard!!"

Bloodshot veins surged in Moria's eyes as he let out a sharp roar and swung his lone arm fiercely.

His shadow twisted violently, transforming into a sharp black spear that shot forward like an arrow, piercing straight toward Doflamingo.

Those words had struck a raw nerve deep inside him, sending his fury soaring.

"Tsuno-Tokage!"

Clang!

A massive web of razor-sharp threads blocked the incoming shadow spear, triggering a deafening explosion. Sparks flew as violent shockwaves rolled outward.

Doflamingo narrowed his eyes at the trembling spear of darkness hovering less than half a meter from his chest. Behind him, his pink feathered coat billowed in the wind as he let out a cold, mocking laugh.

"Fufufufufu... Is that all you've got?"

"I'd say you're not even qualified to stand on equal footing with me... Gecko Moria."

"Then try me!"

Moria let out a murderous cackle. With his lone arm, he raised a massive serrated blade and leapt from the prow of the ship.

Countless shadow bats swarmed around him with a disorienting screech. Purple lightning crackled around his jagged blade as he charged at Doflamingo like a madman.

"Once I slice your head clean off, let's see if you can still act so smug!!"

His killing intent surged wildly!

"Fufufufu... Now that's more like it!"

A gale burst forth with his pressure, sweeping through the air. Battle lust gleamed in DoFlamingo's eyes as he released control over the possessed Marines and launched himself forward.

Like a flamingo in a low-flying dive, he covered the distance in an instant—arriving before Moria in a heartbeat.

Their eyes flashed simultaneously with a bloody gleam.

One arm slashed out!

One blade swept forward!

Clang!!

Steel collided violently as threads infused with Armament Haki clashed with the serrated broadsword. Shockwaves rippled out in waves.

Their auras burst outward with terrifying force. Purple, red, and black lightning crackled in the air, distorting space itself.

The sky changed color.

Cracks split the ground beneath them, sending debris flying in every direction.

"A clash of Conqueror's Haki!!"

"Those two... They've both awakened Conqueror's Haki!!"

"..."

The surrounding Marines were forced to retreat by the sheer pressure of the collision. They raised their arms to shield themselves from the flying debris, their faces pale with horror.

They were the elite of Marine Headquarters. Neither man's Haki was enough to knock them out, but the oppressive aura still made their scalps tingle and their backs break out in cold sweat.

"Only one arm, huh... Still got some bite in you."

Doflamingo grinned as he felt the force behind Moria's strike.

"Don't underestimate people, you punk!"

Moria snarled back.

"Even with just one arm, I can still kill you!"

Their eyes flared with killing intent, ready to unleash even stronger attacks—

Buzz!

A sharp, resonant hum echoed across the harbor—the unmistakable sound of a blade being drawn.

Both Doflamingo and Moria felt it instantly. Their eyes narrowed, and without needing a word, they leapt apart in perfect sync, instinctively widening the distance between them.

Hiss!!

The moment they parted, a tremendous dark green slash swept across the battlefield like an unstoppable tide.

The earth split effortlessly beneath its path. The sword light surged forward and bisected a ten-meter-high gun turret in the distance—its cut surface smooth as polished glass.

"H-holy...!"

Every Marine on-site gasped in unison.

The sheer power of that slash was beyond comprehension.

They whipped their heads toward the source—only to see a vast crack slicing through the port and stretching all the way over the sea's surface.

At the end of the crack floated a black, coffin-like boat.

Green candles burned faintly on its deck, casting an eerie glow.

Seated upon it was a youth in a black top hat and burgundy shirt, composed and silent. A massive black blade taller than himself was strapped to his back.

He slowly lifted his head, revealing sharply defined features... and a pair of dull yellow hawk-like eyes that gleamed with piercing clarity.

He, too, had only one arm.

Chapter 653: Shichibukai Free-for-All

"It's Hawk Eyes Dracule Mihawk!"

"A Great Pirate with a bounty of 369 million Belly!"

"They say he once single-handedly wiped out a massive pirate crew with over 1,000 men and a combined bounty exceeding 400 million!"

"No wonder his sword strikes are so terrifying!"

"But why does he, like Gecko Moria, only have one arm?"

"Is this... just a coincidence?"

...

The sudden arrival of the hawk-eyed youth sparked murmurs among the Marines present.

They looked warily at Doflamingo and Moria, who had pulled apart, then turned toward Mihawk, who leapt calmly from the black coffin boat. For a moment, no one knew what to do.

"Fufufufu... another one-armed guy, huh?"

Doflamingo floated smoothly to the ground, landing in a crouch on the barrel of a warship's main cannon. With an arrogant smirk, he glanced at the black-cloaked swordsman and sneered.

"What's the deal with you people?"

"One by one, you're all missing arms. You're making the Shichibukai look bad..."

Mihawk's dull golden hawk eyes swept over to Doflamingo.

"Unlike certain people, I gambled this arm on the new era of swordsmanship."

The new era... of swordsmanship?

What the hell does that even mean?

Doflamingo blinked, clearly not following the cryptic remark.

Before he could respond, Moria's pale face flushed a furious red. His teeth gnashed.

"Hawk Eyes, what the hell is that supposed to mean!?"

Mihawk glanced at him without emotion.

"You're not even qualified to speak to me."

"You bastard—!!"

Moria's rage finally boiled over. With a vicious sweep of his hand, a swarm of shadow bats burst forth, screeching like a deathly storm as they closed in on Mihawk.

"Brick Bat!"

What do you mean you're different!?

We both challenged that man and lost! We both lost an arm!

What are you pretending to be!?

A new era of swordsmanship? I staked my arm on the new era of the world!

...

Facing Moria's onslaught, Mihawk calmly stepped forward and drew the massive black blade on his back.

As he unsheathed it, his lips moved as if to utter the name of the technique—but he seemed to think better of it, suppressing the words.

No build-up. No flourish.

The future world's strongest black blade erupted with a storm of sword light that shot skyward like a cyclone, shredding the swarm of shadow bats to pieces.

As the gale howled—

Mihawk lunged like a black hawk, soaring forward to clash head-on with the enraged Moria.

The serrated sword wreathed in violet-black lightning met the plain but peerless black blade in a mid-air collision that blasted shockwaves across the port, whipping their cloaks in the wind.

"Fufufufu... now this is getting interesting."

Doflamingo grinned as he floated down from the cannon.

"Let's see if either of you actually deserves to stand as my equal."

He raised both hands and yanked free two sharp threads laced with Haki, slashing them down ruthlessly at Moria and Mihawk.

The three Shichibukai erupted into open battle—right in the heart of Marineford's port.

Before the stunned eyes of the countless Marines still arriving from all directions, they clashed without restraint.

"They're fighting again..."

"What's going on?"

"Why are the Shichibukai candidates attacking each other the moment they meet?"

"...Admiral Sengoku!?"

The Marines stood frozen in confusion at the chaotic scene before them—until they spotted Sengoku and Staff Officer Tsuru arriving on site. Immediately, their expressions stiffened, and they snapped into formal salutes.

Sengoku waved them off and narrowed his eyes, studying the three combatants locked in battle in the open port square.

"These Shichibukai really are monsters. Each one of them is freakishly powerful... Admiral Sengoku, should we step in?"

A glowing figure, tall and unusually shaped, formed beside Sengoku from countless golden particles. Borsalino stroked the stubble on his chin, speaking with interest.

"No. Let them go at it for now."

Sengoku pondered for a moment, then slowly shook his head.

Turning to Tsuru, he said,

"Tsuru, issue the order. Have the Marines stationed at the port pull back. We don't want them caught in the crossfire."

Tsuru paused briefly, then quickly understood what Sengoku was planning. She nodded and turned to carry out the command.

"If we don't let this unruly bunch burn off some energy now, there's no way the investiture ceremony later will go smoothly."

As Sengoku watched the three clash, he was quietly awed by their raw strength.

All three were astonishingly young. The eldest, Gecko Moria, was barely in his early twenties. As for Dooflamingo and Mihawk, they were barely fifteen or sixteen.

Yet their combat power already exceeded the level of elite Vice Admirals at Marine Headquarters.

Compared to them, Sengoku admitted even he hadn't been this strong at their age.

Rising stars, powerful and proud... every one of these Shichibukai candidates had a high opinion of themselves. None would ever settle for being beneath the others.

Even within the Shichibukai, fierce rivalry brewed.

So it was only natural for them to start fighting the moment they crossed paths.

If he were a candidate himself, Sengoku figured he'd be just as eager to test the others' strength.

After all, beneath the polished, "legal" title of Shichibukai, these were still pirates—rebellious, arrogant, ruthless, and lawless.

Why should you be my equal?

That thought alone was enough to set this group of wild dogs loose on each other.

Sengoku was content to sit back and watch.

In fact, it was the perfect opportunity to evaluate their true power.

As for how things would be resolved...

A knowing smile curved Sengoku's lips.

If they wanted to stir up trouble at Marine Headquarters, so be it. Let them fight. The more intense, the better—let them walk away with grudges so deep they'll never truly trust each other again.

That outcome would suit both the World Government and the Marines just fine.

And since not all the Shichibukai candidates had arrived yet, once they were all assembled, he'd step in—crushing them all with overwhelming force.

That would cement his authority over the Marines, the Shichibukai, and even the Government.

"Marine Headquarters Admiral Sengoku single-handedly subdues the Seven Shichibukai—The Marines are the true rulers of the sea!"

Sengoku couldn't help but mentally write tomorrow's headline for the press.

Next to him, Borsalino noticed the subtle upward curl at the corners of Sengoku's mouth. He seemed to guess what was on the Admiral's mind, smiling slyly as he squinted.

"Kuhahaha, you guys sure don't waste time starting a fight."

Just then, a hoarse, ominous laugh echoed from the sea.

Everyone paused.

Above the port of Marine Headquarters, fierce winds suddenly began to swirl.

Sand whipped across the ground, and golden dust began to gather.

"Someone else is coming!"

The Marine officers who had just arrived stiffened, their expressions turning grave.

Chapter 654: The One-Armed Man and the One with Two Arms

"Sables!"

With a cold shout, the yellow sand swept across the ground like it had received a command, suddenly surging violently.

In the blink of an eye, the swirling sand condensed into a towering sandstorm over ten meters high, roaring toward the three fighters in the melee with crushing force.

"A sandstorm?!"

"A Logia-type Devil Fruit user?!"

"That ability... It has to be him!"

...

The sudden upheaval made the nearby Marines tense.

In the midst of battle, Doflamingo and the other two reacted instantly, retreating in perfect sync as they activated their abilities!

Threads surged like saw blades, blades flashed like waterfalls, and shadows twisted like serpents...

Together, they shredded the massive sandstorm hurtling their way!

The next second, all three figures shot backward out of the swirling sand and landed steadily, cold smirks on their faces as they stared at the figure forming at the center of the storm.

"Kuhahaha, not bad."

"But if that's the best you've got, you're not qualified to stand alongside me as one of the Shichibukai..."

A low, mocking laugh echoed. The flying sand began to settle, as if alive, and the figure at its core gradually became clear.

A tall man appeared, clad in a mafia-style overcoat, an orange vest, and black trousers. His hair was slicked back, and a lit cigar hung from his mouth.

His left wrist was gone—replaced with a gleaming golden hook.

"It's Crocodile!"

"Bounty: 281 million Belly!"

"They say he was the first Great Pirate recruited into the Shichibukai!"

"Wait... why is he missing a hand too?!"

"Hold on... among all the Shichibukai candidates here—besides Doflamigo—everyone's lost an arm!"

As the Marines around them exclaimed, Crocodile narrowed his eyes. His smile froze briefly, like he was recalling something unpleasant.

Moria's eye twitched as well.

"Fufufufu, looks like it's true, huh?"

Just then, Doflamigo let out a sly chuckle, fingers twitching as he eyed the three before him with mock amusement.

"Is this the latest trend or something?"

"As a fellow Shichibukai, maybe I should chop off one of my arms too?"

Crocodile's eyes sharpened.

Clang!

A blade of sand clashed midair with a bundle of silk threads, erupting in a deafening boom.

"Fufufufu, struck a nerve, did I?"

Doflamingo licked his lips and sneered at Crocodile, whose arm had crumbled into floating sand and whose gaze had turned deadly.

"Crocodile, right? I remember your name..."

"You wrecked two of my bases in the New World. I haven't settled that score yet..."

Crocodile sneered.

"Scum like you are what disgrace the name of pirates. Can't cut it as a real one, so you scurry into the underworld like a filthy rat... I just couldn't stand watching it."

As he finished, his arm suddenly expanded. With a powerful swing, a massive desert blade tore through the earth, howling toward Doflamingo.

"Fufufufu, still better than you one-armed weaklings dreaming of being a Shichibukai!"

Doflamingo burst into wild laughter.

His words spurred Moria and Mihawk to act as well.

All three launched their attacks at the blond youth who had been mocking them!

"Desert Spada!"

"Tsuno-Tokage!"

...

The devastating sand blade, the razor-sharp shadow spear, the cutting force of a sword slash... all thundered down, laced with deadly killing intent!

Doflamingo's pupils shrank behind his shades.

But in that moment—

"Fishman Jujutsu: Kairyu Ipponzeoi!!"

Boom!!

The oval-shaped military port was thrown into chaos. As countless bubbles surfaced, a raging torrent erupted from beneath the sea, surging upward with terrifying force and shattering all three attacks instantly.

Everyone, including Doflamingo, froze in disbelief.

Splash...

A downpour of seawater rained from the sky.

At some point, a towering figure had appeared in front of Doflamingo.

His skin was blood-red, his body massive and muscular. Clad in casual clothes, with thick lips and steam rising off him—he looked like a monster.

"Fishman?"

Crocodile frowned as he sensed the sudden rise in humidity.

Moria's expression darkened as well. After being drenched in seawater, he felt his control over the shadows grow sluggish.

"It should be about time, right?"

The towering, blood-red fishman stood with clear water swirling around his arms, eyes locked sternly on the "one-armed trio" before him.

Only then did the nearby Marines get a clear look at his face.

"It's Fisher Tiger—the Blood Dragon!"

"Bounty: 263 million Belly!"

"The only fishman among the Shichibukai!"

"Why is he helping Doflamingo?!"

"Wait—don't tell me it's because he still has both arms like Doflamingo?!"

...

The Marines buzzed with speculation, as if they'd stumbled onto some hidden connection.

Doflamingo glanced at Fisher Tiger and curled his lips into a smirk.

Of course he knew why Fisher Tiger stepped in—it had nothing to do with missing arms.

It was because back then, he and his Godfather were the ones who rescued this guy from the Celestial Dragons.

"Fishman, why are you helping that guy?" Moria asked sharply.

Fisher Tiger replied coldly,

"That's none of your concern."

"But if it's a fight you want, I'm happy to oblige!"

He turned and leaned toward Doflamingo, murmuring,

"Thanks for the help with those ships."

Doflamingo shrugged.

Just a few slave trade route details from the underworld. Since the guy wanted them, he handed them over. He'd never been interested in that outdated business anyway.

Not that it had anything to do with a certain man telling him to stay away from it.

Hearing Fisher Tiger's words—and watching the two still-armed men exchange silent signals—Crocodile, Moria, and Mihawk glanced at each other.

Slowly, the tension in the air thickened as battle lust flared.

The two sides subtly shifted into formation. Swords drawn, claws ready, the atmosphere grew dense, like a storm waiting to break.

Around them, the Marines watched, faces flushed with a mix of nerves and excitement.

"It's about to start..."

"A full-on clash between the Shichibukai!"

"The one-armed camp versus the full-armed camp!"

...

A brawl between Shichibukai—this was the kind of rare spectacle most people wouldn't witness in a lifetime.

And here they were, front row, popcorn in hand.

At the same time...

Powerful figures began arriving from the distance, flashing into view one by one.

Their long, white capes billowed behind them as they lined up atop the fortress wall in a commanding display.

"These Shichibukai are getting way too reckless..."

"Do they think this is just some playground?!"

"Looks like Admiral Sengoku wants to see what they're really made of..."

"Then let's wait and watch."

As the commotion mounted, the surrounding Marines turned their heads.

"It's the elite officers of our 'Golden Generation!'"

"Almost all of them are here!"

"Rear Admiral Gion, Rear Admiral Yamakaji, Rear Admiral Onigumo, Rear Admiral Doberman, Commodore Strawberry..."

...

Gazing at the commanding line of officers standing tall atop the wall, a surge of pride welled up in their chests.

The battlefield quieted.

Five Shichibukai faced each other in a tense standoff, lines drawn.

Water churned around Fisher Tiger's arms.

Doflamingo twitched his fingers, lips twisted in a grin.

Moria's shadow writhed behind him.

Mihawk stood with cold eyes, his black blade seeming to devour the light.

Sand spiraled around Crocodile's body.

The air was taut—like a bowstring pulled to its limit, ready to snap at any moment.

Chapter 655: Show Me Some Respect

As the five Shichibukai took their stances, the atmosphere on the field grew unbearably tense.

It felt like even the air had frozen.

Many young Marines swallowed nervously, their scalps tingling from the pressure.

"Sengoku..."

Staff Officer Tsuru quietly approached Sengoku and spoke in a low voice.

"We can't let this drag on. The title conferment ceremony is about to begin. Ships from major news outlets around the world have already passed through the Gate of Justice and will arrive at Marineford any moment now."

Sengoku, who had been watching with some amusement, frowned and responded in a hushed tone.

"What's the rush? Not everyone's arrived yet."

Tsuru gave him a sidelong glance. After working together for so many years, she saw right through him and couldn't help but say irritably,

"The Intelligence Division already has visual Den Den Mushi set up. Everything here is being recorded."

"If we wait until the press actually arrives and this chaos is still ongoing, we won't be able to control what they write."

The reminder snapped Sengoku out of his mood.

He immediately understood.

The Marine's own Intelligence Division had already captured enough footage. If he stepped in now, they could shape the narrative.

But if he waited too long and let independent journalists get their footage instead, who knew what kind of wild headlines they'd come up with to boost their sales?

At that point, tomorrow's front page could easily go from "Marine Admiral Sengoku Dominates the Shichibukai with Authority" to "Shichibukai Run Wild in Marineford, Justice Humiliated."

Realizing this, Sengoku shot Tsuru a grateful look.

Thank goodness for Tsuru. As expected from the one overseeing both Staff and Intelligence—this was her specialty.

"Mm. You're absolutely right..."

Sengoku nodded solemnly.

"That's exactly what I was thinking."

Tsuru: ...

Her mouth twitched.

Then she saw Sengoku clear his throat, stepping forward to draw everyone's attention. With a calm, confident smile, he addressed the five hostile Shichibukai.

"It's about time. If you have personal grudges, settle them in private later."

"For now, let's stop here. Show an old man some—"

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Sudden footsteps thundered against the ground.

Sengoku's voice had completely broken the fragile tension on the field—setting off the powder keg.

All five Shichibukai lunged from their positions at once, launching attacks on their respective targets.

Sengoku's expression froze. His movements stiffened.

No one listened to him.

They didn't even look his way.

Clang!!

Sharp threads of silk hissed through the air and slammed into the massive black blade, sending sparks flying.

Doflamingo's pink-feathered coat flared behind him as he sneered at the calm-faced Mihawk, a mad grin twisting his features.

"Fufufufu... Even though that black sword of yours is chipped, it still looks pretty good. I've got a friend who loves collecting rare Meito."

A glint of killing intent finally flashed in Mihawk's eyes.

"If you're not afraid to die, go ahead and try."

With a twist of his wrist, Mihawk flipped his sword and forced Doflamingo back. Then, like a hawk diving on prey, he surged forward, blade moving like a phantom, locking onto the flamingo's wings.

Their clashes erupted again and again, shockwaves ripping through the ground, slicing into buildings and cannons—leaving deep, jarring gouges that forced the surrounding Marines to back away in panic.

...

Elsewhere on the field, Fisher Tiger was holding off both Moria and Crocodile on his own.

"Fish-Man Karate: Gosenmaigawara Seiken!"

A powerful punch, charged with the raw strength of the Fish-Man race, landed dead center and blasted the incoming Desert Spada into a cloud of shattered sand.

As the grit scattered through the air, Fisher Tiger stomped down. From the sea near the edge of the port, a towering column of water surged upward.

With a light wave of his massive red hand, the water column twisted like it had a will of its own, transforming into a high-pressure torrent that erupted with force.

"Fish-Man Jujutsu: Mizugokoro—Kairyu Ipponzeoi!"

Boom!!

The water cannon tore through Moria's swarm of shadow bats and forced both Moria and Crocodile into a hasty retreat.

Their expressions had grown dark—gone was the swagger from moments ago.

This damn fishman's strength alone was already on par with theirs. But combined with the Fish-Man race's natural control over water, and the port's proximity to the sea, Fisher Tiger now held a crushing advantage over the two Devil Fruit users.

Crocodile felt especially miserable. The seawater had drenched him, and now even his Logia powers were sluggish. His Suna-Suna no Mi was being completely suppressed by this fishman.

Chaos erupted across the battlefield.

Sand raged, blades flashed, shadows writhed, seawater screamed through the air... A flurry of techniques exploded across the arena. The military port beneath them shook violently under the sheer pressure, groaning under the strain.

And yet—

Sengoku was still standing there with one hand half-raised, the confident smile on his face frozen in place.

Under the awkward stares of countless Marines, his old face flushed slightly. He silently lowered his hand.

...

"The Shichibukai are really something... Not a single one even bothered to show you respect, Admiral Sengoku."

Borsalino commented casually, looking regretful.

"Want me to just take them all down?"

Sengoku: "..."

The surrounding Marines: "..."

Staff Officer Tsuru buried her face in her hand.

"Borsalino... Sometimes silence is a gift."

Sengoku growled, gritting his teeth with a forced expression.

Borsalino raised both hands innocently.

"I was just trying to back you up, Admiral Sengoku... but that look on your face is terrifying."

Sengoku: "..."

Clutching his chest, Sengoku's face contorted in pain.

Bzzzzzz—

Suddenly, a sharp buzzing rang out from the distant sky.

It grew louder and closer, like some kind of deadly weapon slicing through the air at high speed.

"What's that...?"

Sengoku's face shifted slightly.

Borsalino raised an intrigued eyebrow.

The five Shichibukai locked in fierce combat all sensed it at once. Their pupils shrank.

A chill surged up from the soles of their feet, racing along their spines and exploding in their minds.

Their scalps tingled. Every pore screamed in alarm.

Overwhelmed by a surge of danger, the five simultaneously abandoned their fights. As if driven by instinct, they threw themselves backward without hesitation.

The next instant—

Two razor-sharp beams of light, one black and one white, shot down from the sky like phantoms and struck the earth.

Boom!

Boom!

The entire massive elliptical port trembled violently, and a thick cloud of dust shot into the air.

Chapter 656: They Didn't Even Show an Old Man Some Respect...

A violent shockwave mixed with dust swept across the area, forcing many Marines to instinctively duck to the ground, wide-eyed in confusion.

"What... what just happened...?"

"Something fell from the sky!"

"A meteorite?"

"Don't be stupid! If it was a meteorite, this entire port would be gone!"

...

Smoke and dust surged in waves.

The intense battle ground to an abrupt halt. The massive military port fell into eerie silence.

As the cold sea breeze slowly cleared the haze, the ground came back into view.

The five Shichibukai, who had been fiercely clashing moments ago, now stood spaced apart, expressions tense and wary.

Two swords.

One black, one white—two slender Meito were buried deep in the earth before them.

The sheer impact had gouged a massive crater nearly ten meters wide into the ground.

The two blades stood like insurmountable barriers, dividing Doflamingo and Mihawk from Fisher Tiger, Crocodile, and Moria.

The moment their eyes landed on the swords, each of the five Shichibukai reacted differently.

Doflamingo froze—then let out a sinister chuckle.

Fisher Tiger exhaled a long breath, lowering the stance he'd taken with Fish-Man Karate.

A spark of fierce light erupted in Mihawk's hawk-like eyes. His grip on his blade trembled slightly—visibly.

Moria and Crocodile's pupils shrank to pinpoints. Cold sweat beaded down their foreheads.

The air was completely still.

"That's Vice Admiral Daren's swords!"

"Enma! And... Ame no Habakiri!!"

"Vice Admiral Daren is back!!"

...

Gasps of recognition and excitement spread through the oval-shaped port as Marines scanned the sea, eyes lighting up in search of the man himself.

"That guy always makes an entrance at just the right time..."

On the city wall, Doberman slowly loosened his grip on his sword, chuckling wryly.

"That's just how he is, right?" said Yamakaji with a grin.

Gion's bright eyes shimmered as she softly exhaled.

The others exchanged quiet, knowing smiles.

In truth, the moment Admiral Sengoku spoke, these core headquarters officers had been ready to intervene. But now, with those two swords appearing, the tension in their hearts had finally eased.

Somewhere along the way, they'd started trusting that so-called "Marine Scum" without question.

That guy carried an aura of unshakable assurance—like no matter what happened, everything would fall into place the moment he arrived.

And it was true.

He hadn't even shown up yet. Just two seldom-used, symbolic swords... and the five prideful Shichibukai were already standing down, cautious as if walking on thin ice.

There was probably no one else in Marine Headquarters who could pull that off—except Daren.

"You five... that's enough. This is Marine Headquarters, not your playground."

A deep, slightly exasperated voice echoed calmly from the sky above.

Everyone instinctively looked up—and their eyes widened.

Two figures floated leisurely down through the cloudless sky, one leading, one trailing.

The man in front was tall and composed, radiating a calm and immovable presence, as if he were untouchable.

His black hair fluttered gently in the breeze. Beneath the disheveled strands, his eyes shone like stars. Behind his sharp suit, a broad white cloak flared in the wind.

He stood atop a gleaming Meito, arms slightly spread—like a deity overseeing all below, commanding the entire battlefield with a glance.

The awe-inspiring sight left every Marine present wide-eyed with admiration. A few female officers even had stars in their eyes.

Trailing behind, Garp wobbled left and right, balancing atop another sword. Wearing his signature dog-headed cap, he wore a goofy grin like a kid discovering a new toy—clearly enjoying this strange method of travel.

Behind them, a dog-headed warship approached from the sea. On its bow, a slouched figure could be seen, gnashing his teeth in frustration, pacing back and forth as if ready to explode.

Daren landed softly, a calm and effortless smile playing on his lips.

His gaze swept over Doflamingo and the others one by one, and he spoke calmly.

"Do me a favor."

"Let's end this farce here and now."

"Of course... if anyone still insists on making trouble—"

Vice Admiral Daren twitched his fingers. Sparks of electricity danced between them.

Swish! Swish! Swish! Swish!

Four razor-sharp sword beams tore through the air, whipping up fierce gales before halting precisely behind Daren, their tips locked on the Shichibukai present.

"...I'll be happy to oblige."

The entire scene fell deathly silent.

Sengoku looked like a man giving commentary from on high, shaking his head with a sigh.

"These brats wouldn't even give me face... how could they possibly..."

"Vice Admiral Daren has done a great service to Fish-Man Island."

Fisher Tiger suddenly spoke up, giving Daren a long, meaningful look. He nodded, then crossed his arms and backed off a few steps.

Daren gave him a friendly smile.

Doflamingo retracted the massive thread network he'd set up in the air and let out a cold chuckle.

"Fufufufu... it's no fun if the enemy is the Marines."

Mihawk said nothing. He simply sheathed his sword again and stared intently at Daren, eyes burning—as if there were too many words left unsaid.

Crocodile, his face dark, glared at Daren and growled,

"The Shichibukai don't take orders from the Marines."

Daren shot him a lazy glance, then suddenly grinned.

"Seems like you're quite fond of that golden hook. Want me to make you another one?"

Crocodile's expression froze.

The moment he said that, many Marines suddenly caught on. Their eyes widened as they stared at Crocodile's golden hook, and a collective gasp rippled through the crowd.

Could it be... Vice Admiral Daren was the one who cut off Crocodile's arm?

But Crocodile wasn't the only Shichibukai missing a limb...

"Wait—you too?!"

Moria abruptly turned toward Crocodile and blurted it out.

Crocodile didn't respond. His face darkened even more, veins bulging across his forehead.

The surrounding Marines quickly put the pieces together.

So... were all those missing limbs among the Shichibukai somehow connected to Vice Admiral Daren?

The senior officers, who had already been briefed during a previous meeting, could only sigh in resignation.

"Hey, let's team up... This guy's too damn cocky."

Moria snarled through clenched teeth, eyes red as he locked onto Daren.

"Between your powers and mine, we could take him down."

His words clearly hit a nerve—Crocodile inhaled deeply.

But instead of answering, he shot Moria a contemptuous look, swallowed his fury, and silently turned away.

Moria: ...

"Fine. I'll cut you some slack!"

He huffed and stormed off.

"Excellent. The Shichibukai are Marine allies, after all. From now on, let's all try to get along."

Daren smiled, clearly satisfied.

At that moment—

Clap!

Clap, clap!

Clap, clap, clap!!

Marines around the scene started applauding, faces glowing with excitement.

Soon, the applause erupted like thunder.

"Looks like Vice Admiral Daren commands even more respect..."

Borsalino stretched lazily and muttered under his breath, just loud enough for himself to hear.

Tsuru: ...

Sengoku's stiff expression darkened instantly—his face now black as the bottom of a pot.

Chapter 657: The Honest Man Gets Angry

Seeing the Shichibukai all back down, the Marines around the port let out a collective sigh of relief.

"Vice Admiral Daren really has clout..."

"He just showed up and immediately stopped the fight!"

"He truly is the backbone of Marine Headquarters!"

"Shhh... keep it down. Admiral Sengoku's face is about to explode."

...

The whispers spread quickly—but with ears as sharp as Sengoku's and the others', every word was crystal clear.

"Ahem... Sengoku, it's really not a big deal..."

Staff Officer Tsuru glanced at Sengoku's face, now red as a beet, and winced—she was just about to say something to smooth things over.

"Tsuru."

Sengoku suddenly cut her off, his voice hoarse.

"Can you do me a favor?"

"Say it," Tsuru answered immediately.

"Cut that clip of me speaking earlier out of the footage."

"...Alright."

Sengoku gave a stiff nod, drawing a deep breath like he was trying to compose himself. Tsuru looked at him and couldn't help but let out a bitter smile.

Just then—

Plop, plop...

Plop, plop...

Ripples began spreading across the vast surface of the military port.

One by one, bubbles rose from beneath the sea, and wave after wave of concentric ripples spread as though the seabed itself was rumbling.

The bubbles kept coming—more and more—until it looked like the entire ocean surface was boiling.

"What's going on?"

"Something's rising from the seabed!"

"Alert! Stay sharp!"

The Marines closest to the disturbance immediately noticed the strange activity, raising their flintlocks and watching the water with wide, uneasy eyes.

Crocodile and the others narrowed their eyes, frowning in unison.

Through their Observation Haki, they sensed a chilling, blood-soaked aura closing in from the depths beneath the oval-shaped port—and it was surging upward at terrifying speed!

"The most annoying one just showed up..."

Borsalino rubbed the stubble on his chin with amusement, eyes locked on the roiling sea.

Up on the fortress walls, the "Golden Generation" officers like Gion also seemed to sense it. Their bodies tensed instinctively, a flicker of unease flashing across their faces.

They stared at the bubbling surface, hands unconsciously tightening around the hilts at their waists.

"What a crushing sense of pressure..."

"This kind of presence..."

"It's unreal..."

The entire port fell into dead silence again. Everyone felt it—something was wrong. They instinctively held their breath.

Suddenly—

BOOM!!

A deafening roar burst from the sea as a towering column of water exploded upward!

From within the crashing waves, a uniquely designed metal submarine shot out like a spear through ice, cleaving through the water in defiance of nature, trailing a storm of white foam in its wake.

"Kahahahahaha!!"

A wild, thunderous laugh rang out. From the speeding submarine, a massive figure threw open the hatch and stepped out with agile ease.

Golden hair whipped through the wind. He wore a stark black military uniform, his sharp, domineering features radiating an oppressive, almost overwhelming aura.

"He's here!!"

"The current Shichibukai member with the highest bounty!"

"A former core member of the Roger Pirates!"

"The fearsome pirate known as the 'Demon Heir'!!"

"Douglas Bullet—former bounty: 2.174 billion Belly!!"

All eyes were wide with disbelief as the metal submarine erupted from the sea, and the overpowering blond figure atop it struck terror into the hearts of those watching.

Yet Douglas Bullet didn't spare a glance for anyone else. With a loud thud, his military boots slammed onto the sub's hatch.

His body leaned forward like a pouncing beast. Golden hair whipped through the air, and his fierce eyes burned with a blinding intensity as they locked onto the black-haired Vice Admiral standing on the port. With his remaining arm, he pointed at the man and burst into wild laughter.

"Kahahahaha!! Daren!! We meet again!!"

"Let's settle this once and for all! Show me what you've learned since last time!!"

As the words left his mouth, Bullet's eyes widened.

Boom!

An overwhelming wave of Haki burst from his massive frame, as if hell itself had descended—radiating across the entirety of Marineford in an instant!

A visible shockwave exploded outward. Everyone felt as if color had been stripped from their world.

The hurricane-like wind screamed violently. Black and purple lightning filled the sky, swallowing the horizon.

Thunderbolts crackled through the heavens, dense and oppressive. The clouds scattered, the very ground of the port cracked beneath the pressure.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Dozens of Marines dropped to one knee, pale and trembling beneath the impact of Bullet's Conqueror's Haki.

Even top officers of the "Golden Generation" like Onigumo instinctively stepped back, visibly shaken.

"This is... Advanced Conqueror's Haki!" Mihawk's eyes lit up with unprecedented brilliance as he muttered in awe.

Until now, he had only felt Haki of this caliber from one person—

Daren.

Doflamingo grinned with manic glee.

"Fufufufu... This guy's like a walking demon. That aura—he's practically a demon born from hell!"

Crocodile and Moria's faces had turned stone-cold.

Especially Moria, who had awakened his own Conqueror's Haki—he felt it now, crushed beneath Bullet's overwhelming willpower.

It was like reliving that day in the North Blue... when he dared to challenge that damned Marine.

Everyone at Marine Headquarters stared at the red-eyed, golden-haired man, stunned and shaken.

Then—

Footsteps.

Through the warped, lightning-laced air, a single silhouette stepped forward—broad-shouldered, unshaken. The Vice Admiral.

And then—

BOOM!!

The world seemed to explode.

A torrent of black and red Haki surged skyward with an unstoppable force, colliding head-on with Bullet's aura.

They clashed—black-red lightning against black-purple, devouring each other, tearing at the very fabric of space.

Above them, the sky split apart. The clouds parted like a wound carved across the heavens.

"Kahahaha!!"

Bullet only laughed louder at the resistance.

"Just like I thought! Admirals, Yonkōs, it's all garbage!"

"Only you, Daren!!"

"Only you can push me this far!!"

He crouched slightly—his monstrous body like a coiled spring.

The submarine beneath his feet groaned and buckled under the pressure, metal warping from the sheer force of his stance.

"Come on... Daren!!"

Bloodshot eyes locked onto the Marine Vice Admiral, Bullet bellowed with lunatic excitement.

"Let's tear each other apart tod—huh?"

A golden light surged behind him.

Bullet blinked, then instinctively turned to look.

A towering golden Buddha, wrapped in black-red lightning, loomed above him—its colossal palm descending with thunderous force!

"Brat!! You think this is your playground?!"

Sengoku, roaring like a storm, had finally snapped. His voice cracked as he unleashed his fury, holding nothing back.

"This is MY Marine Headquarters—no, the Headquarters of Justice!!"

The golden radiance exploded like a sun.

"Impact Wave!!"

BOOM!!

"You... sneak... atta—!"

Bullet's face twisted in shock as blood gushed from his mouth and nose.

He crashed to the ground like a meteor, and a terrifying shockwave erupted outward.

The earth rolled like the ocean, waves of stone surging dozens of meters high.

Cracks split the military port open, the sound of tearing ground echoing far and wide. Sengoku's furious strike had nearly shattered the entire battlefield.

Dust swirled into the sky like a dragon.

Daren blinked slowly.

An honest man's wrath... really is terrifying.

Chapter 658: I Once Fought Him to a Draw

The ground trembled like a coiled dragon surging beneath the earth, kicking up clouds of dust.

Cracks spread with thunderous roars, ripping through the terrain. Within the swirling haze, a massive crater—dozens of meters wide—came slowly into view, a terrifying sight to behold.

Everyone on site stared in stunned silence, their eyes wide, jaws nearly hitting the floor.

"Th-this..."

"This is insane..."

"Unbelievably strong..."

"As expected of Admiral Sengoku..."

Ever since Sengoku gradually took over the core operations of Marine Headquarters from Fleet Admiral Kong, he had intervened in battle only a handful of times in recent years.

To many of the younger Marines, their impression of Sengoku—this "pillar" of the Navy—was that of a bespectacled old strategist, always seated at his desk, plotting, bickering with Garp-san, and occasionally swearing in frustration.

They never imagined that the man known for his "honest" and composed demeanor could become so terrifying when angered.

And his opponent wasn't just anyone—it was a pirate with a bounty over two billion Belly!

Douglas Bullet, the "Demon Heir"—his bounty alone surpassed the combined bounties of the other five Shichibukai!

Just unleashing his Conqueror's Haki had been enough to paralyze half the port.

And yet... a pirate that powerful, that ferocious, that overwhelming...

Had been slapped into the ground like a fly by Admiral Sengoku!

It was...

"...So freaking cool!!"

At that moment, Kuzan leapt down from the dog-headed warship, his face full of uncontainable excitement as he waved his arms toward the massive golden Buddha still hovering in midair.

Behind him, Tokikake instinctively shrank back.

Just thinking about how he'd constantly pestered Sengoku for sparring matches—and the exasperated look on Sengoku's face—made cold sweat bead on his back.

"Bwahahaha! It's been ages since I've seen Sengoku this fired up!"

Garp stood with his hands on his hips, laughing heartily.

Daren winced, rubbing his forehead with a sigh.

Staff Officer Tsuru covered her face with both hands, her expression pained.

She knew Sengoku's thoughts too well.

He'd clearly been waiting for an excuse like this for a long time...

The other Shichibukai were also left twitching at the corners of their eyes.

Crocodile and Moria, in particular, felt a chill run down their spines as they recalled how they'd just dismissed Sengoku's authority without a second thought.

Now, as everyone turned their eyes toward Sengoku—some with awe, others with fear—he landed gently, returned to his human form, and felt as though every pore in his body had just opened in satisfaction.

Yes... this was the feeling.

His mind was crystal clear.

...

"You damn old man... you actually sucker punched me..."

A raspy voice broke the silence, followed by the sound of violent coughing from deep within the dust.

The wind blew through, scattering the smoke.

In the center of the crater, Douglas Bullet pushed aside a boulder pinning his body and slowly stood, swaying as he rose from the wreckage.

He wiped the blood from the corner of his mouth, eyes sharp and burning as he glared fiercely at Sengoku.

"You're not my opponent!"

He suddenly turned to Daren, voice sharp.

"Daren, what the hell is this!?"

"I agreed to join the Shichibukai, but not to fight some washed-up old geezer!"

Daren: ...

He glanced at Sengoku's darkening expression and thought, Bullet, do yourself a favor and shut up.

After all, Sengoku wasn't the only "washed-up old geezer" here.

With Sengoku's fury flaring again, Garp itching for a fight, and Zephyr now standing atop the city wall alongside Gion and the other officers—having somehow arrived without anyone noticing—Daren quickly spoke up.

"If you're looking for a fight, I'll gladly take you on."

"But today's about officially inducting the Shichibukai. Let's take care of business first, Bullet."

Bullet narrowed his eyes at Daren, making sure he wasn't being brushed off. After a long pause, he snorted coldly.

"You said it!"

Then he casually dusted himself off and walked to the side like nothing had happened.

The nearby Marines watched in stunned silence, their eyes twitching at Bullet's monstrous physique.

Bullet sat down heavily on the ground, his aura murderous and wild—completely contrasting with the other Shichibukai members, who were subtly sticking together.

"Hey, Crocodile, you sure this freak is one of us?"

Feeling the oppressive bloodlust radiating from Bullet, Moria bumped Crocodile with his shoulder—so hard that Crocodile's arm crumbled into sand.

"Of course. Come to think of it... I fought him once. Ended in a draw."

Crocodile didn't want to respond, but as if recalling something, he muttered coldly.

As he spoke, he nodded toward Bullet.

Bullet returned the nod.

"No winner? Kishishishi, yeah right."

Moria scoffed, curling his lip.

"You're strong, but compared to that monster who's like a walking nightmare, you're still a tier below, aren't you?"

Crocodile didn't reply, his face stony.

But thinking back to the aura Bullet had just unleashed, a seed of doubt crept into his mind.

'Wait a second... how did I end up drawing with that guy?'

'Am I actually that strong... and just don't know it?'

Crocodile looked down at his hand and the golden hook, momentarily lost in thought.

...

"Alright, now that all the Shichibukai are here, let's get started."

At that moment, Sengoku clapped his hands to get everyone's attention, his face beaming.

He seemed to sense something, turning to glance toward the sea.

Under escort from a Marine warship, a fleet of merchant ships bearing the flags of major news outlets was heading toward Marineford in an orderly line.

On the lead ship, Sakazuki stood in a dark red suit, hands in his pockets, unmoving like a granite monolith, his cape flapping sharply behind him.

The Marines on the ground moved quickly, scrambling to clean up the battlefield as much as possible.

"You really went too far this time..."

Tsuru walked up beside Sengoku with a helpless expression, glaring at his barely concealed grin.

"Hahaha, this is the Holy Land of Justice. I couldn't just let those guys do whatever they want."

Sengoku laughed heartily, his beard practically bristling with pride.

He paused for a moment, then lowered his voice as if remembering something.

"Right, Tsuru—help me edit out the part where I took action earlier."

Tsuru blinked, then smirked.

"Alright, I get it. As a Marine Admiral, it wouldn't look good to be seen attacking the Shichibukai."

Sengoku was still as cautious as ever.

"No, I mean edit it and send it to the media. Have them play it on loop."

Tsuru's face darkened.

"...So this was personal."

She gave him a sharp look.

Sengoku chuckled sheepishly and didn't deny it.

Tsuru's eyes gleamed mischievously.

"In that case, the repairs and reconstruction for the military port are coming out of your salary. Ten years' worth should just about cover it."

The smile on Sengoku's face froze in an instant.

And Tsuru's cheerful grin came right back.

Chapter 659: Yes, I Did It All

It took less than five minutes.

Under the escort of Sakazuki's warships, merchant ships bearing the flags of major news agencies gradually docked at the shore.

The reporters, dressed in black suits, had just stepped off their ships when they were greeted by the sight of the devastated, oval-shaped military port. Each one was left speechless.

"What happened here?"

"Wasn't today supposed to be the Shichibukai appointment ceremony?"

"Did someone attack Marine Headquarters?"

"Half the military port looks like it's been blown apart..."

"..."

The reporters from across the world exchanged shocked looks, whispering among themselves. Some had already begun snapping photos.

"What exactly happened here?"

Sakazuki, wearing his military cap, walked over to Daren with a grim expression. His cold gaze swept past Crocodile and the others before settling on Bullet.

He asked icily, "What happened here?"

Daren gave a helpless shrug.

"What else? The Shichibukai met for the first time and couldn't stand each other. So, of course, they fought."

Sakazuki narrowed his eyes into dangerous slits.

"And you just let them run wild?"

Daren gestured toward Sengoku with a slight smile.

"I just got here myself and stepped in right away to break things up."

"In the end, it was Admiral Sengoku who almost sank the port."

Sakazuki paused, stunned by the response, then fell silent. Still, Daren could tell he wasn't taking it well.

"...Welcome to Marine Headquarters. On behalf of all Marines, I extend our greetings to you all."

At that moment, Sengoku stepped forward and addressed the gathered reporters with a smile.

"The Shichibukai appointment ceremony is about to begin. Please proceed to the Fleet Admiral's main conference room."

...

Conference room.

Daren took his seat under the guidance of the guards.

He wasn't sure if he was imagining it, but he could swear Sengoku was looking at him with something like silent reproach.

The seating in the military conference room had been rearranged into a tiered structure, like a lecture hall.

At the front stood a temporary platform fitted with microphones.

Facing it was a long, rectangular table.

Six members of the Shichibukai were seated in a row at the massive table, their appearances and auras vastly different, each wearing a unique expression.

In the audience sat high-ranking Marine officials, with Admiral Sengoku at the head.

Dozens of prominent reporters had already set up their equipment, visibly excited as they prepared to capture a moment destined for the history books.

"But who's going to confer the Shichibukai titles?"

"Normally, it should be Fleet Admiral Kong, right?"

"No, I heard Fleet Admiral Kong went to Mary Geoise to report in. Most of Marine Headquarters' duties have been handed over to Sengoku."

"So Admiral Sengoku will handle it?"

"Seems like it."

"..."

As the reporters murmured among themselves, Sengoku cleared his throat and slowly stepped up onto the stage.

Standing before the microphone, he took a deep breath and forced a somewhat stiff smile.

"Well, under normal circumstances, I would be the one to conduct this appointment ceremony."

"But after thinking it over, I felt that perhaps younger people might relate better to one another. So this time, Vice Admiral Rogers Daren of Marine Headquarters will preside over the Shichibukai appointment ceremony."

The moment he said that, the Shichibukai, who had looked half-asleep until now, immediately perked up.

Some looked excited, others sneered, a few gritted their teeth, and some seemed genuinely interested...

Daren blinked in surprise, instinctively turning to glance at Staff Officer Tsuru beside him.

Staff Officer Tsuru gave a helpless look, gesturing for silence before lowering her voice.

"Fleet Admiral Kong just called. He found out the military port was nearly destroyed by Sengoku and flew into a rage. He's decided to have you handle the appointment ceremony."

Daren: ...

He finally understood why Admiral Sengoku had been glaring at him with such resentment.

"Daren, you're awesome! Get up there already!"

Kuzan shot him an excited look and pumped his fist in encouragement.

Shaking his head, Daren adjusted his tie and rose from his seat, walking tall toward the platform.

As he took the microphone from Sengoku, he could hear the latter gritting his teeth.

"Daren, I've gone to great lengths for you."

"I made a huge sacrifice. Don't you think you should show some appreciation?"

The corner of Daren's mouth twitched. He could only force a smile and say,

"Thank you, Admiral Sengoku, for your unwavering support. I have no way to repay you—so I'll contribute what I can to the reconstruction of the military port. All costs will be covered by me personally."

Sengoku finally broke into a satisfied grin.

He clapped Daren on the shoulder, turned to the crowd, and cheerfully announced,

"Let's give a warm round of applause to the rising star of Marine Headquarters, my most trusted right-hand man... Vice Admiral Daren!"

With that, he began clapping.

Clap clap clap!!

Thunderous applause quickly filled the room.

Standing atop the platform under the flashing lights of countless cameras, Daren wore a composed and polite smile.

"I'm grateful to Admiral Sengoku for giving me this opportunity. It's truly an honor."

At the sound of his voice, the room quieted down.

Only the steady clicking of keyboards and camera shutters remained.

"The Shichibukai system is a historic strategy launched by the World Government and enforced by Marine Headquarters. Its primary goal is to recruit powerful individuals as auxiliary forces to counter the ever-growing threat of pirates."

"Under the system, once someone is appointed as a Shichibukai, their bounty is immediately revoked."

Daren cast a half-smile at the six seated below.

"Let's give them a round of applause. From now on, they are officially the most loyal allies of the Marines and the World Government!"

Applause erupted once again.

But the expressions on Crocodile and the others stiffened visibly, clearly reminded of unpleasant memories.

"Now, let's officially announce the titles and code names of the Shichibukai."

Daren smiled, his gaze sweeping one by one across the six seated figures.

At that moment, every Marine in the audience rose to their feet in unison, expressions solemn.

"Donquixote Doflamingo, former bounty: 250 million Belly! Shichibukai codename... 'Flamingo'!"

"Crocodile, former bounty: 281 million Belly! Shichibukai codename... 'Desert King'!"

"Moria, bounty: 218 million Belly! Shichibukai codename... 'Gecko Bat'!"

"Dracule Mihawk, bounty: 369 million Belly! Shichibukai codename... 'Hawk Eyes'!"

"Fisher Tiger, bounty: 263 million Belly! Shichibukai codename... 'Blood Dragon'!"

"Douglas Bullet, former bounty: 2.174 billion Belly! Shichibukai codename... 'Demon Heir'!"

Daren leaned forward slightly, a sharp grin tugging at his lips as his eyes narrowed with amusement.

"Congratulations to all of you—our esteemed Shichibukai!"

He then turned toward the press and extended a welcoming gesture.

"Now it's time for questions from our friends in the media. Feel free to ask whatever you like."

The room fell momentarily silent.

Then, in a flurry, all the reporters shot their hands up, eager to be picked.

Daren casually pointed to one.

"I'm a reporter from the New World Gossip News."

The man with a handlebar mustache locked eyes with Daren, his tone sharp.

"Among the six official Shichibukai, four have only one arm. That's quite a coincidence."

"There are rumors that you're the one who crippled them. Vice Admiral Daren—is that true?"

The moment he said it, Crocodile and the others' faces turned dark.

The other reporters leaned forward, breaths quickening, as flashbulbs flickered madly.

Dozens of curious, gossipy eyes fixated on the tall, striking vice admiral standing on stage.

The flashes intensified.

Daren, standing under the lights, gave a resigned look.

"It was all just a bit of miscommunication during... negotiations. I've already come to terms with the Shichibukai."

"But as for your question—"

He paused, then said in a firm voice,

"Yes. I did it."

The room went dead silent.

Then all at once, it exploded into an uproar.

Chapter 660: They're All Trash!

"The rumors were actually true!"

"So it wasn't just a rumor after all!"

"That's brutal..."

"One, two, three, four... Out of the six Shichibukai, four of them had their arms cut off by Vice Admiral Daren!"

"No wonder they all look so miserable..."

"..."

The reporters began whispering among themselves, but their voices were loud enough for everyone in the room to hear clearly.

Among the "armless faction," Crocodile, Moria, and Bullet all had faces like thunder. Only the younger Mihawk remained calm, seemingly unfazed.

"Vice Admiral Daren, in your opinion, how would you rank the strength of these six Shichibukai?"

At that moment, a red-haired female reporter in a black skirt suit raised her hand.

Daren glanced at her.

She flashed a professional smile and added, "I'm Scarlett, staff reporter from the Field News Agency."

As soon as she asked the question, all six Shichibukai straightened up from their relaxed postures, suddenly alert, their eyes fixed on Daren.

"A strength ranking, huh?"

Seeing their intense gazes, Daren chuckled.

"Each of them has a unique set of abilities—deceptive, powerful, and difficult to compare. Trying to rank them by strength alone isn't exactly simple."

"The outcome of any battle depends on more than just raw power. The environment, weather, mental state, and willpower—all of these can influence the result."

He waved a hand and winked at Scarlett.

"From this point on, reporters, please direct your questions to the Shichibukai themselves."

"After all, they're the stars today, not me."

Scarlett nodded with a smile, then turned toward the long table. Her eyes finally landed on Moria.

"Moria-san, as the current Shichibukai with the lowest former bounty, what are your thoughts on that?"

With that, everyone turned to look at Gecko Moria, clearly expecting some drama.

Under those watchful, gossip-hungry eyes, Moria's sickly pale face slowly flushed red.

"That's just a misjudgment by the Marines!" he snapped, shooting to his feet as the shadow behind him began to writhe and twist.

"And besides, a bounty doesn't reflect strength!"

"Is that so?"

Five voices spoke in unison, each laced with doubt. The other Shichibukai looked up, all wearing the same cold, mocking expression as they stared at Moria.

His face froze mid-rant.

Then Daren's voice followed, faintly amused.

"So, Moria, are you questioning the judgment of the Marines?"

Moria's expression flickered between red and white. He opened his mouth—

"Tch! I'm not going to waste my breath on you lot!"

He gritted his teeth and sat back down.

Another reporter raised his hand.

"Mihawk-san, may I ask you a question?"

Mihawk turned toward him and gave a calm nod. "Go ahead."

The reporter let out a breath of relief, then asked seriously,

"You're the youngest among the Shichibukai, yet your bounty ranks second at 369 million Belly... With strength like yours, why did you choose to become a Shichibukai?"

"From what we know, you don't seem particularly interested in fame or authority."

"To pursue greater swordsmanship."

Mihawk's eyes gleamed as he answered without hesitation.

"From Vice Admiral Daren, I witnessed a revolutionary sword style—something that could define a new era. In fact..."

He gently brushed his fingers across his severed arm, a bold smile appearing on his face.

"I wagered this arm on the future of swordsmanship."

Revolutionary swordsmanship?

The reporters all froze, their faces blank with confusion.

Vice Admiral Daren... A hidden swordmaster?

The moment that thought hit them, they sprang into action—furiously typing on their keyboards, scribbling in their notebooks, muttering, "Big news, big news..."

Meanwhile, Gion, Tokikake, Yamakaji, and the other Marine officers who actually knew the truth could only twitch at the corners of their mouths, beads of cold sweat forming as they stared blankly ahead.

"Ahem, let's move on to the next question."

Even Daren looked a little embarrassed at this point and stepped in to steer things along.

"I have a question for Fisher Tiger!"

A reporter turned to the red-skinned fish-man, expression serious.

"Tiger-san, as a member of the Fish-Man race, is there a particular reason you chose to join the Shichibukai?"

Fisher Tiger paused in thought, then spoke with a solemn tone.

"I hope to use the authority of the Shichibukai to protect my fellow Fish-Men from illegal attacks by poachers."

"In fact, Fish-Man Island is preparing to launch a variety of cooperative efforts with the human world. I truly hope that Fish-Men and humans can one day forge a deep and lasting friendship."

"Thank you for your answer, Tiger-san," the reporter said with a smile.

Another hand shot up right after.

"Doflamingo-san, I have a question for you."

"According to our records, you're originally from the North Blue and once waged an intense war against Vice Admiral Daren when he was stationed there as admiral..."

"So now, do you still hold any resentment toward Vice Admiral Daren?"

"Resentment?"

Doflamingo gave Daren a sidelong glance and let out a cold, low laugh.

"Just holding myself back from killing him already takes everything I've got... What do you think?
Fufufufu!!"

A chilling wave of killing intent spilled from his body, and the reporter visibly froze, sweat forming at his temples.

"I-I see..." he stammered.

Daren smiled.

"All right, let's take one last question."

He casually pointed to an unfamiliar reporter.

The chosen reporter lit up with excitement.

"Thank you, Vice Admiral Daren, for this opportunity. For my final question, I'd like to ask Douglas Bullet."

"Bullet-san, among all the Shichibukai, your former bounty was the highest. In fact, your bounty alone surpasses the combined total of the other five members."

"How do you feel about that?"

The powerfully built Bullet grinned.

"Isn't that just how it should be?"

"My bounty's the highest because I'm the strongest."

"Unlike a few losers who couldn't even crack a billion—people like that don't deserve to sit at the same table as me."

"What did you just say!?" Moria shouted, his face turning crimson with rage.

The others didn't look too happy either.

"No, I'm not talking about you specifically."

Bullet sneered at Moria, and a suffocating wave of murderous intent radiated from him. Black-red lightning crackled faintly in the air around him.

He glanced at Daren on the platform, then turned back to the other Shichibukai.

His long golden hair whipped wildly as he grinned like a madman, bloodshot eyes gleaming.

"I mean every single one of you here... is trash!"