

One Piece: So What If I Sin, Lie, and Lust? I'm Still a Good Marine

Chapter 16 - 16: I Am the Genius of the Headquarters—Tokikake!

As Daren charged forward in powerful strides, the ground beneath him quaked violently. The earth cracked open as if struck by an invisible giant hammer, caving in with a burst of flying debris.

With this surge of inhuman strength, Daren shot out like a cannonball, cloaked in a violent hurricane. In the blink of an eye, he lunged toward the enemy.

In that instant, Vinsmoke Judge felt an overwhelming pressure crash into him. A chill ran down his spine, as though he had been locked onto by a colossal Sea King. The killing intent radiating from the Marine Captain was like that of a demon rising from a mountain of corpses—so intense it felt like even the sea breeze carried the stench of blood.

"Kill him! Take him down!!"

Recalling the ruthless methods this Marine used to suppress pirates, Vinsmoke Judge's eyes were bloodshot as he roared the command.

The moment the order left his lips, dozens of surrounding Clone Soldiers raised their weapons and charged at Daren.

Twin gleaming longswords came slicing down at him. Daren's lips curled into a faint smirk as he tilted his body to the side.

The blades narrowly missed him, skimming past.

In that brief moment as they passed each other, the Marine Captain's hands—like steel-forged lances—morphed from open palms into blades, and with terrifying speed, he drove them into the throats of the two Clone Soldiers.

Shhk!

Blood burst into the air as their pupils quickly dimmed.

Wasting no time, Daren surged forward again like a tiger let loose from its cage.

His body, as tough as iron, crashed into the formation of Clone Soldiers like a tiger charging into a flock of sheep, tearing through them with unstoppable force.

From a distance...

The tightly packed army of Clone Soldiers had completely surrounded the Marine Captain. From the heart of the encirclement came the chilling sounds of flesh being shredded and bones snapping.

Warm, blood-soaked bodies were flung out from the crowd, splattering blood as they fell.

In less than ten seconds, the battlefield was drenched in red, with mangled corpses strewn across the ground.

From the warship, Gion and Tokikake stared at the scene in shock, their expressions pale, their hearts pounding.

At that moment, Daren had become a killing machine—efficient and unrelenting.

Everywhere he went, the Clone Soldiers, whose physical strength far exceeded that of ordinary humans, were slaughtered in an instant. None could survive even a moment under his monstrous body and brutal close-range combat.

He tore through them like a storm sweeping fallen leaves. Every part of Daren's body had become a lethal weapon, reaping lives at a terrifying pace.

Bullets, steel swords, battle axes, longswords... no matter the weapon, when they struck his body, it was like hitting solid steel. Sparks flew, and at most, they left shallow red marks.

The blood-drenched Marine Captain laughed wildly, his once-white cloak of justice now soaked in crimson.

"That guy... he's enjoying the thrill of the kill."

Gion stared blankly at the grinning Marine Captain, and the image of yesterday's training ground flashed through her mind.

Back then, Daren had chosen to tank her sword technique, "Iron-Cutting," head-on.

Now, it was clear—he wasn't just relying on his body's defense. He was reveling in that razor's edge between life and death... completely immersed in the chaos of battle.

"This... he's a total maniac!"

Gion gritted her teeth, unable to stop herself from cursing under her breath.

Beside her, Tokikake glanced over and noticed her staring blankly at Daren's back.

Suddenly, as if something clicked, he spun around and shouted urgently at Momonga.

"Hurry up! We're going too!"

"I'm going to beat the crap out of Vinsmoke Judge!"

Momonga blinked in surprise, confused by how this usually lazy, pig-headed guy had suddenly gotten so fired up. He blurted out instinctively,

"You sure? Captain Daren doesn't like us interfering in his fights."

"He's having a blast right now... Besides, according to our intel, Germa 66's commander Vinsmoke Judge is no joke. The high-tech weapons he developed—"

Before he could finish, Tokikake grabbed him by the collar.

His face flushed bright red as he snapped,

"Damn it, Momonga! Who do you think I am!?"

"I'm Tokikake, the genius of HQ!"

"How could some second-rate Germa 66 clown be a match for me!?"

He let go, spun around dramatically, his beady eyes darting sideways to steal a glance at Gion, then looked solemnly toward Germa 66's fleet. With a low, theatrical laugh, he said,

"It's been ages since I felt this kind of blood-pumping thrill..."

"Didn't think anyone in the North Blue could put pressure on a genius like me."

Watching Tokikake's "cool" retreating figure, Momonga's mouth twitched.

With a sigh, he waved his hand and gave a signal.

The Marines sprang into action. The engines roared to life, and the warships surged forward at full speed, heading straight for Germa Kingdom's fleet.

...

Clang!

A sharp metallic clash rang out.

Several steel blades struck Daren's chest with full force, sending sparks flying—then snapped in half.

The Clone Soldiers in front of him stared at their broken swords in disbelief.

Though Vinsmoke Judge had stripped them of pain, fear of death, and betrayal, they still retained some basic emotions.

Yet they couldn't understand it—why was this man's body harder than the weapons they'd forged with refined steel?

And more than that—compared to earlier, the Marine's defense had clearly become even tougher!

"Almost there... Just as I thought, real combat is the best way to grow stronger."

Daren grinned.

Within the field of perception granted by his "Insight" talent, he could feel it clearly—after the last bout, his physique and strength had risen sharply. His endurance, in particular, had just broken past the 60-point threshold!

"Time to get serious."

Now that his body had reached 60 points, fighting the Clone Soldiers no longer brought significant gains.

And since these guys lacked fear, never tired, and weren't afraid of dying, dragging the fight out would just be a waste of time.

With that thought, Daren licked his dry lips.

A sharp whistle sliced through the air behind him.

Several Clone Soldiers leapt high into the sky, steel blades raised, aiming to slash down on his neck.

But the next moment—they froze in shock. Their swords, still a hand's width from the back of Daren's head, suddenly stopped midair.

A low hum reverberated through the stifling silence, spreading through the battlefield.

The hovering blades trembled and buzzed.

Then—without anyone seeing Daren make a single move, the ground beneath him suddenly came alive!

Black steel bars erupted from below like giant serpents, weaving together as if sentient, forming a dense, writhing net that shot toward the Clone Soldiers.

They had no time to react. In an instant, the bars wrapped around them, binding them tightly before violently ripping them apart.

The steel bars pierced their bodies, both ends driving deep into the ruined earth, squeezing tighter and tighter.

In Vinsmoke Judge's horrified, near-frozen gaze, hundreds of Clone Soldiers within a hundred-meter radius of Daren were caught in the steel trap that had burst from the ground, bound and crushed.

Blood gushed in streams. The rusted steel bars tore into their flesh, cutting through muscle and skin.

In just seconds, blood flooded the ground. Their bodies were impaled, twisted, and torn apart by the writhing steel, their organs spilling everywhere.

The battlefield fell silent.

At the center of a wasteland soaked in crimson, the supreme commander of the North Blue Marines stood still, surrounded by black steel bars thrashing like serpents—like a demon risen from the depths of hell.

(40 Chapters Ahead)

/ PinkSnake

Chapter 17 - 17: The Navy Is the True Overlord of These Seas

Dust swirled in the air.

Cold steel thrashed wildly.

Vinsmoke Judge stared at the wreckage that was once the Germa Kingdom, his eyes bloodshot with rage.

"Damn it! I was supposed to lead Germa to dominate the North Blue!"

Daren narrowed his eyes with a faint smile.

"The Marines rule these seas. You're not the king of anything—certainly not the North Blue."

He raised his hand and swung it forward.

Dozens of twisted steel bars surged to life, stretching and elongating violently. Under the pull of a magnetic field, they pierced through the air and shot toward Vinsmoke Judge with a shriek.

Hiss!

White jets burst from the heels of Judge's combat boots. Boosted by the thrusters, he soared into the sky like a monstrous bird.

"Then let me show you the true power of Germa 66, you little brat!"

Spinning the metal spear in both hands, he knocked away the incoming steel bars one by one. Then he dove from the sky, golden hair streaming behind him.

Crackling sparks lit the air.

Brilliant blue electricity surged along the spear, flashing with blinding intensity.

"Denji Shaft!"

In an instant, Judge had closed the distance, driving the electrified spear down toward Daren with full force!

The intense current and piercing momentum cracked the air with a resounding blast.

"The power of technology, huh?"

Daren gave a quiet chuckle as the deadly spear bore down—sharp enough to pierce steel and shatter fortresses.

The wind whipped at his black hair. The spear's tip closed in fast, its scorching heat prickling at his brow. Yet he didn't flinch. He kept smiling.

A magnetic pulse suddenly rippled out from his body.

The air shimmered.

The speeding spear hit something—an invisible resistance. Its momentum slowed drastically, like it had stabbed into gelatin, until it came to a complete stop.

Vinsmoke Judge's pupils shrank.

No matter how much strength he poured in, the high-tech weapon in his hands—once unstoppable—refused to budge, as if clamped in an iron grip.

"Trying to beat me with tech? That's your biggest mistake," Daren said calmly.

"Damn it! I don't believe this!"

Judge roared, voice hoarse with fury. He let go of the spear and twisted in midair, his boots flaring with light as he lashed a fierce kick at Daren's head.

"Denji Crack!"

But the same thing happened again.

The boots, spewing bursts of white energy, froze in place—suspended midair, completely immobilized by that same eerie force.

A flicker of terror crossed Judge's face.

His cutting-edge weapons... completely neutralized by this man's Devil Fruit power?

Before he could react, everything blurred.

The Marine Captain in front of him vanished.

So fast!

The shockwave of his movement exploded beside him. Judge clenched his teeth, a chill running down his spine.

Behind him, Daren's cloak rippled like a living thing and suddenly wrapped around him.

Boom!

A heavy boot smashed into his gut.

With that crushing blow, the commander of Germa 66 was launched like a cannonball, slamming into a distant military fortress.

Rumble...

The fortress was pierced through instantly. Cracks spiderwebbed across its walls before the entire structure collapsed with a deafening crash.

Chunks of rubble rained down. The earth groaned under the weight.

Daren landed steadily.

"Damn it! This can't be happening! My technology is supposed to be invincible!"

Watching Vinsmoke Judge stumble out of the rubble, Daren let out a satisfied smile.

He had been testing the limits of the Raid Suit.

Unlike some of his future children, Vinsmoke Judge hadn't undergone any genetic modifications. He didn't have that monstrous, weapon-proof body. Nearly all of his strength came from his high-tech gear—the Raid Suit.

Without it, he wouldn't be stronger than a typical Navy officer.

Although this was only the first-generation Raid Suit—far less powerful than the ones seen during the Whole Cake Island arc—it was still more than adequate. Judging by the force of Judge's attacks and how well the cloak had held up, Daren was quite pleased with its performance.

In his estimation, any professionally trained Marine equipped with a similar suit could reach a level of combat power comparable to a Navy Commodore.

Just then...

"Hahahaha!! Let me help you, Daren!! The genius of Marine Headquarters, Tokikake, will defeat the evil army's commander in this battle, rescue the war-torn Yadis Kingdom, and become a hero of the Marines!!"

A boisterous laugh echoed from nearby.

Daren blinked and turned to look.

At some point, their warship had docked. Gion and Momonga were leading the Marines in fierce combat against the remaining Clone Soldiers.

Tokikake charged out of the crowd with dramatic flair, kicking up clouds of dust as he charged at Vinsmoke Judge like a human battering ram.

A few dark lines formed on Daren's forehead.

This guy... showing off again?

He instinctively opened his mouth to say something, but Tokikake shouted proudly:

"Daren! Don't interfere!!"

Daren paused, then decided to let him go.

Tokikake's heart leapt with joy.

Staring at the winded Vinsmoke Judge, a smug grin crept onto his face.

From what he'd seen so far, this guy wasn't that strong. If he could take him down, Gion would definitely start seeing him in a new light.

And even if she didn't, he'd still be hailed as the hero who saved the Yadis Kingdom. How many noble ladies would be waiting for his attention then?

Pumped up by the thought, he charged even faster.

"Vinsmoke Judge, commander of the evil army! I, Lieutenant Commander Tokikake of Marine Headquarters, in the name of justice—"

He didn't finish the sentence.

Boom!

A pair of combat boots crackling with blue electricity slammed squarely into his face.

And then—

He was sent flying back at double his original speed, crashing into a military fortress with a loud crash.

Not far away, Momonga covered his face in pain.

Judge's total defeat wasn't because he was weak—it was just that Daren was too damn strong...

Gion shook her head in silence.

After kicking away the clueless Marine who'd just jumped into the fray, Vinsmoke Judge, breathing heavily, turned and glared at Daren.

"Damn it... One after another... you Marines just keep getting in the way!"

Boom!

The thrusters on his boots ignited once more, launching him back into the air as he dove toward Daren again.

He refused to accept it—the technology he'd spent years developing with Vegapunk... completely overpowered?

But as he closed in, Daren simply raised his hand and made a light clenching motion.

A magnetic field rippled out.

Vinsmoke Judge froze midair.

An instant later, a sharp pain tore through his limbs.

Hiss!

The sound of flesh being pierced rang out.

The metal spear in his hand—

The combat boots on his feet—

The embedded metal components twisted and shot out like living things, stabbing through his hands and feet, blood pouring out.

"Aaaghhh!!"

The pain was unbearable. He couldn't help but scream.

But then, thick steel bars burst from the ground, coiling around him like snakes and locking him in place midair.

Clang!

A slab of metal sealed over his mouth, cutting his screams short.

Blood vessels burst across the whites of his eyes, filling them with crimson.

"Shh..."

The Marine Captain stepped in front of him, holding a finger to his lips with a gentle smile.

"Sorry... but your plan to dominate the North Blue ends here."

(40 Chapters Ahead)

/ PinkSnake

Chapter 18 - 18: Then... I'll Leave?

That evening...

Yadis Kingdom, capital city of Verna.

Inside a lavish side chamber of the royal palace.

"Daren, you little bastard!! That was Germa! A member of the World Government—and you almost wiped it off the map!?"

A furious roar erupted from the military Den Den Mushi on the coffee table, its face vividly mimicking Admiral Sengoku of Marine Headquarters, veins bulging as he raged.

"Do you have any idea!? The Germa Kingdom isn't just some regular member state—they're one of the few nations with a seat at the Reverie!"

"Do you understand the political disaster you've nearly caused!?"

"Protecting member nations is the Marines' duty and responsibility!"

...

Daren sat casually on a plush leather sofa, one hand holding a glass of whiskey over ice, the other gripping a lit cigar.

He puffed leisurely, one leg crossed over the other, listening to Sengoku's rant without the slightest care.

Gion, Momonga, and Tokikake—whose face was still swollen like a pig's—stood nearby, holding their breath, eyes cast downward in respectful silence.

"...Damn it!! Daren, are you even listening to a word I'm saying!?"

Sengoku had been shouting nonstop for nearly two minutes, and seeing Daren still refusing to respond only made him angrier.

"Are you trying to quit your post as North Blue's Admiral!?"

Daren let out a small laugh.

"Then should I resign?"

Sengoku: "..."

Back in the Admiral's office on the other end of the call...

Sengoku instantly fell silent, his old face flushing red.

The North Blue was a mess, and he hadn't forgotten the disasters that came from letting Borsalino and Sakazuki handle the region in the past.

Only this sly brat Daren had managed to bring order to the chaos.

If he were to step down, without Daren's iron grip, the North Blue would probably fall right back into being a playground for pirates and mafia families.

"Just kidding..."

Daren's smile deepened. He raised his glass and took a slow sip of whiskey, feeling the rich, burning liquor roll down his throat. He said casually,

"No need to get so worked up, Admiral Sengoku. I'll handle everything."

Hearing the North Blue Admiral's breezy tone, Sengoku nearly lost it again. His eye twitched uncontrollably.

He took a deep breath, barely restraining the urge to storm into the North Blue and beat Daren senseless.

"Daren, what the hell are you thinking... A single misstep here could trigger a chain reaction."

Sengoku's voice dropped, his tone grim.

"The Germa Kingdom has been a member of the World Government since its founding—three hundred years."

"If word gets out that the Marines attacked an allied nation... even I won't be able to cover for you."

Daren exhaled a puff of smoke, smiling faintly.

"Of course I understand, Admiral."

"But there's a reason for what happened. Vinsmoke Judge led Germa 66 in an assault on the Yadis Kingdom—which is also a government member state. If I hadn't intervened, that kingdom would've already fallen into chaos and bloodshed."

Sengoku's mouth twitched.

You call that intervening? You nearly wiped out Germa's entire army!

Daren continued.

"As for the chaos in the North Blue, I'm sure someone as sharp as you already sees it clearly."

"Conflicts between nations keep flaring up. This incident sends a message—a warning—to the rest of them."

"As for the Germa casualties... their army is almost entirely made up of Clone Soldiers. Products of cloning technology, essentially weapons—not civilians."

"Given Vinsmoke Judge's ambition and arrogance, this was the only way to make him remember. If we don't crush him with overwhelming force, he'll only grow more reckless and unrestrained. And when that happens, it won't just be the Yadis Kingdom that's dragged into war."

"Who knows how many innocent lives will be lost... how many families torn apart because of Germa's ambition?"

Hearing Daren's righteous speech, Gion and Tokikake—standing silently to the side—both rolled their eyes.

You don't care about civilian casualties. You're just worried war would ruin your money-making.

On the other end of the Den Den Mushi, Sengoku fell silent.

He knew Vinsmoke Judge well enough. That ambitious commander of Germa—everything Daren said was true. The attack on Yadis was only the first step. Judge's real goal was to dominate all of North Blue.

"...So, Daren, what's your plan?"

Sengoku's tone had calmed, much of the anger gone.

He still disapproved of what Daren had done, but it was too late to change anything now. And with Daren's abilities, tactics, natural gifts, and military achievements... there was no denying he was one of the Marines' most vital future assets.

Sengoku also knew this sly, sharp-minded brat never acted without a backup plan. No matter how politically sensitive the issue, Daren always found a way to clean it up perfectly.

"You don't need to worry about that, Admiral."

Daren flicked the ash off his cigar and smiled with interest.

"I'll handle everything—and give Vinsmoke Judge an offer he can't refuse."

"He won't lodge a protest with the World Government. Germa will remain a member nation. The Marines won't take any political fallout. And peace and stability will continue in the North Blue..."

He leaned forward, grin sharpening.

"...under Marine control."

The chamber fell into silence, with only Daren's commanding, deliberate voice echoing faintly.

Three seconds later—

"...Then I'll leave it to you, Daren. No matter what, this needs to be handled properly."

Sengoku's low voice came through the Den Den Mushi.

Daren smiled with satisfaction.

"Consider it done, Admiral."

Bloop.

The Den Den Mushi went silent.

Daren turned to Momonga.

"How's the situation with Germa?"

Momonga replied in a low voice,

"We've redeployed ten warships and over five thousand troops from other North Blue branches. The Germa Kingdom is now fully under control. Their fleet has already left Yadis waters under our 'escort.'"

"As for Vinsmoke Judge, he's being held aboard one of our ships, just as you ordered."

Daren nodded.

After years of working together, he trusted Momonga's efficiency completely.

"What do you plan to do with Vinsmoke Judge? He is, after all, a king."

Gion, silent until now, finally spoke up.

Daren looked at her and suddenly grinned.

"No need to worry about that, Lieutenant Commander Gion."

"Right now, we've got something more important."

"What is it?" Gion blinked.

Daren clapped his hands and laughed.

"Celebrating our victory."

(40 Chapters Ahead)

/ PinkSnake

Chapter 19 - 19: Our Inescapable Duty as the Navy

As Daren clapped his hands, the ornate doors of the side hall swung open.

One by one, soldiers of the Yadis Kingdom, clad in regulation military uniforms, began hauling in massive wooden crates.

In less than a minute, dozens of crates were stacked atop the marble floor, forming a small mountain.

"Daren... this isn't what I think it is, is it...?"

Gion eyed the weighty boxes with growing unease, a bad feeling creeping into her chest.

Just then, a man dressed like a butler entered, his face plastered with a fawning smile as he bowed repeatedly.

"Admiral Daren, I am the Minister of Finance of the Yadis Kingdom..."

He gestured toward the crates.

"These are but a humble token of our gratitude. We hope the North Blue Marine fleet, the defenders of 'justice,' will kindly accept it."

With a wave, he ordered the soldiers to open the crates.

In an instant, Gion and Tokikake's eyes widened, their mouths forming matching O's.

Blinding light poured from the opened crates, casting a rainbow of reflections throughout the entire side hall.

Clink—clatter...

Mountains of glittering gold and silver, wads of colorful banknotes, a dazzling collection of rare treasures, premium cigars, fine liquors... Everything spilled out like molten silver, flooding the hall with the overwhelming scent of wealth and indulgence.

"T-This... this... this..."

Tokikake stared slack-jawed at the towering pile of treasure, his swollen, pig-like face contorting into a stunned, almost comical expression.

How much was this!?

He couldn't even begin to count it.

Raised in Marineford, he'd never seen this kind of fortune in his entire life!

Daren gave a satisfied smile.

"His Majesty is far too generous. As Marines, protecting allied nations from harm is our duty and responsibility."

The Finance Minister continued, beaming.

"But of course! Who in all of the North Blue doesn't know that Admiral Daren is selfless, upright, and tirelessly dedicated to protecting the lives and property of our people, never seeking personal gain?"

"Having Daren-sama's protection is a blessing for the entire North Blue."

"But we can't let the brave soldiers of the North Blue Marines leave empty-handed. Hospitality is a tradition here in the Yadis Kingdom—please don't refuse, Daren-sama."

Smooth talker... no wonder he's the finance minister.

Daren chuckled and was just about to nod.

Unexpectedly, Gion suddenly stepped forward, her face flushed with anger as she gritted her teeth.

"No! We can't accept this money!"

She turned and shot a fierce glare at Daren.

"The Marines must never take money through unofficial means! Daren, this is bribery!"

"If you dare accept it, I'll report you directly to Headquarters!"

Tokikake quickly chimed in.

"That's right! I'll report you too!"

The strain on his swollen face made him wince in pain, and resentment boiled in his chest.

If it weren't for that bastard Daren, he wouldn't have been one-shotted by Vinsmoke Judge and embarrassed himself in front of Gion.

Hearing their protests, the Minister of Finance froze mid-smile. He cautiously looked at Daren and asked respectfully,

"Daren-sama... may I ask who these two are?"

Daren puffed on his cigar, completely at ease, and chuckled.

"Oh, they're Lieutenant Commander Gion and Lieutenant Commander Tokikake, from Marine Headquarters... my adjutants now."

Direct from Marine Headquarters?

The Minister immediately picked up on the subtext in Daren's tone.

To rise to the role of Finance Minister in a kingdom like Yadis, he was no fool—an old hand at navigating politics.

He quickly turned, bowing politely toward Gion and Tokikake with a wide smile.

"So you're officers sent all the way from Headquarters—I must apologize for my ignorance and any disrespect."

Gion replied with a serious tone.

"Sir, I must make something clear."

"As Marines, we uphold justice and safeguard peace. Protecting civilians is our duty—it requires no reward."

She pointed at the piles of gold and treasure scattered across the floor, her voice firm.

"We cannot accept any of this. It would be a disgrace to the very idea of 'justice.'"

"Of course, of course... Lieutenant Commander Gion is absolutely right."

The Minister nodded along, looking deeply "moved."

"But since the two of you came such a long way, the Yadis Kingdom has prepared separate, modest tokens of appreciation."

"Lieutenant Commander Gion, you look like a formidable swordswoman. Coincidentally, our royal treasury holds a piece of refined steel—perfect for forging a fine scabbard for your blade."

"And for Lieutenant Commander Tokikake, we also happen to have some premium cigars."

Gion: ...

Tokikake: (★ ω ★)

"I said—we're not taking anything!"

Gion snapped.

The Minister hesitated, then smiled again.

"Of course. In addition to the gifts mentioned, we'd also like to compensate both of you for your contributions in the battle."

"Our treasury holds many fine weapons. Lieutenant Commander Gion is welcome to choose any sword she likes."

"And for Lieutenant Commander Tokikake, our royal performers have prepared a special show for your enjoyment."

Tokikake: (☆▽☆)^o^

"Really?"

His eyes lit up as he blurted it out.

Boom!

Before he could finish, Gion kicked him clean across the room, his head embedding into the wall while his legs flailed in midair.

"Minister... when I said we can't accept it, I meant it. That wasn't a cue to up the offer."

Gion's face was pale with fury as she clenched her jaw, trying to calm her anger.

The Minister of Finance was left dumbfounded, looking conflicted.

You keep refusing—aren't you just trying to raise the price?

Wasn't it enough?

At that point, Daren finally stepped in with a helpless sigh.

"You've worked hard, Minister."

"We appreciate these gifts. Please convey our deepest thanks to King Ardis on behalf of the North Blue Marines."

The Minister let out a breath of relief and smiled again.

"Of course, of course. These gifts were all voluntarily donated by the people, who were simply eager to show their appreciation to the North Blue Marines."

"In addition, the royal family has prepared a banquet for tonight. We hope you'll attend."

With that, he gave a slight bow to Daren and the others, then quickly excused himself.

...

As the doors closed, Gion finally snapped, glaring at Daren, who had already sat down and crossed his legs again.

"Daren—!"

Before she could finish, Daren waved her off.

"Gion, you saw how desperate that minister was. If we don't accept the gift, he can't go back and report this properly."

"That's just how things work in the North Blue."

"To them, if you don't accept the money, they'll be on edge."

"Justice? That doesn't mean anything in these waters."

It's just human nature.

Seeing she still wanted to argue, Daren shook his head.

"Enough. Go get ready. We've got a banquet to attend."

(40 Chapters Ahead)

/ PinkSnake

Chapter 20 - 20: Tokikake, the “Protector of the People”

"Damn you, Daren! You've betrayed the ideals of justice! You're a disgrace to the Marines—a stain on everything we stand for!"

Gion's furious voice echoed from behind, but Daren just laughed as he strolled out of the palace's side hall.

He couldn't care less what others thought of him.

Caring too much about your reputation only ties your hands and keeps you from acting freely.

This world is ruled by the law of the jungle—only the strong thrive.

Daren didn't deny that there were Marines who genuinely upheld their beliefs in justice. He respected those people.

They were willing to give everything for their ideals—to protect what mattered most to them. Youth, effort, even their lives.

Such people were admirable, even great.

That's also why Daren didn't dislike Gion, despite how often she got in the way.

Because people like her—"fools" who still believed in justice—were what kept hope alive in this world.

But he knew he wasn't one of them.

Because walking the righteous path... was just too hard.

He didn't have the monstrous talent of Sakazuki, nor the privileged background of someone like Gion.

So he had to be cautious—always cautious.

He had to seize every bit of power, wealth, strength, influence, and status he could.

And now, it was time to collect the spoils of war.

With that thought, Daren quickened his pace.

...

Night fell.

The capital city of Verna in the Yadis Kingdom was ablaze with lights and filled with celebration.

Inside the palace's grand banquet hall, nobles, ministers, crown princes, celebrities, and wealthy merchants gathered in full formal wear. Glasses clinked, laughter rang, and conversation flowed freely.

Crystal chandeliers sparkled above, casting shimmering light that danced across the red wine in their hands.

In one corner of the hall, Tokikake stood in a brand-new tuxedo, putting on his best show. Swirling a glass of wine, he bragged proudly to a group of elegantly dressed noblewomen and young ladies.

"I tell you, that battle was absolutely intense. Germa 66 really lives up to the title of Evil Army. Their commander, Vinsmoke Judge—guy's like a walking monster."

"You probably don't know this, but the weapon he used was cutting-edge high-tech. The electricity from his spear could knock out an elephant in a single strike."

The noblewomen gasped, hands covering their mouths in shock.

"And then?" one of them asked breathlessly.

Tokikake lowered his voice for dramatic effect, adding a deep, charismatic tone, imitating Daren's usual cool demeanor. He gave a faint smile.

"Germa's tech might be impressive, but I'm a genius forged through countless battles at Marine Headquarters. A mere Vinsmoke Judge? Please. He was no match for me."

"I kicked him—just once—and sent him flying ten meters."

"He still tried to resist the power of justice, but in the end, I was sick of hearing him talk, so I shut him up."

Their eyes widened, admiration shining in their gazes as they looked at Tokikake.

"Lieutenant Commander Tokikake, you're incredible!"

"You really are the genius of Marine Headquarters!"

"To think you defeated Germa 66, that terrifying 'Evil Army,' so effortlessly!"

Soaking in the praise, Tokikake felt like his entire body was glowing with satisfaction.

The North Blue... really was the best.

So many beautiful noblewomen, the finest wines, premium cigars, and a royal performance from the court's dance troupe...

No wonder that bastard Daren never wanted to leave this place.

As for whether anything he'd said was true?

Well... the battle had taken place far from shore, shrouded by sea mist. Even the Yadis Kingdom's own soldiers couldn't clearly see what had happened—let alone these ladies here in the capital of Verna.

After carefully setting the stage, Tokikake took a slow sip of red wine, puffed on his cigar with a melancholy air, and sighed dramatically.

"You know..."

"I've spent my whole life searching for a worthy rival. I thought coming to the North Blue would finally bring this genius a little excitement—but in the end, I was just disappointed."

The noblewomen around him gasped again, eyes sparkling as they hung on his every word.

"If Lieutenant Commander Tokikake is already this strong... then just how powerful must Daren-sama be?"

"Right? Daren-sama isn't just powerful—he's handsome, charming..."

"So dreamy..."

As soon as Daren's name came up, the young ladies' cheeks turned rosy with shyness, while the noblewomen practically swooned, eyes sparkling with infatuation.

Tokikake: ...

Wait, were none of you listening to me!?

Weren't we talking about my brilliance just now!? Why are we back to that bastard Daren!?

He didn't even show up to this banquet!

Furious, Tokikake seethed internally, his facial muscles twitching as his expression darkened.

He took a heavy drag on his cigar, his face full of frustration.

"Um... Mister Tokikake?"

A soft, timid voice came from behind him.

He turned instinctively—and froze.

A girl in a flowing white lace gown stood there, cheeks tinged pink, her delicate hands fidgeting nervously in front of her. She radiated a gentle, youthful charm.

So pure. So beautiful.

Tokikake felt something strike his heart. His heartbeat skipped a beat. His eyes lit up with cartoonish hearts.

This... this is love!

His heart screamed.

"Um... Mister Tokikake, I was wondering..."

The girl glanced up at him shyly, only to flinch and look away like a startled deer. Her voice was soft and sweet.

"Can I... have... the Den Den Mushi contact...?"

She's shy!

She wants my Den Den Mushi number!

She must've heard about my heroic deeds!

She likes me!

Tokikake practically short-circuited with joy, nodding frantically.

"Of course! I'll give you my private Den Den Mushi number right now!"

He couldn't stop grinning.

"No... I meant... do you have Daren-sama's contact information?"

The girl tilted her head with a soft smile, her cheeks glowing red.

Crack!

It was like something shattered in Tokikake's chest. His heartbeat froze. The red hearts in his eyes turned to stone—then crumbled.

As the girl watched in confusion, he turned away like a deflated balloon, slumped toward the edge of the ballroom, and crouched in the corner without moving.

Two silent tears rolled down his face.

...

Elsewhere, Gion, dressed in a pink high-slit evening gown, had just turned down a dance request—for the fifteenth time.

She glanced over at Tokikake, still crouched in the corner, gloom radiating off him like a cloud of despair, and her lips twitched slightly.

She took a sip of her wine, bit her silver-dusted lip, and clenched her fist as if recalling something.

Meanwhile...

Daren had arrived at the port and stepped aboard the warship.

(40 Chapters Ahead)

/ PinkSnake