

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

Chapter 26 - 26: The Navy's Biggest Problem

"Really?"

Gion nodded with a smile.

"Of course. That's what we Marines are here for."

She glanced at the flowers in the little girl's backpack.

"Let me have one."

As she spoke, Gion pulled out 200 Berry and placed it in the girl's hand.

The girl looked up in surprise, then clumsily set down her backpack and carefully sorted through the roses.

"Hmm... this one bloomed the prettiest."

She picked out the most vibrant red rose, held it up with both hands, and offered it to Gion.

Gion accepted it with a smile.

"Little one, why are you out here selling flowers at your age?"

The girl beamed sweetly and replied,

"Lia's not that little anymore. I can help my dad now."

Pride lit up her face as she looked at the roses in her pack.

"My dad grows these flowers. They're just as pretty as you, big sister!"

Gion chuckled softly.

So that's it—her dad's a flower grower.

"And your mom?"

"Mom..." The girl's expression dimmed. "She's sick. Daddy said she went really, really far away to get better."

Gion froze, a flicker of sadness passing through her eyes.

Then the girl turned to Tokikake standing nearby, bowed politely, and asked,

"Uncle, would you like to buy a flower?"

Tokikake's face instantly darkened.

He twitched, crouched down, and forced a smile he thought was friendly.

"Little girl, I'm not even 20 yet. You should be calling me big brother."

The girl blinked in surprise, studying the man in front of her with the brown hat and cigarette in his mouth. After a long look, she shook her head firmly.

"No, you don't look like a big brother. You look like a uncle."

Tokikake: ...

Grinding his teeth, he forced a stiff smile.

"If you call me big brother, I'll buy all your flowers."

The girl's eyes sparkled at first, but she quickly hesitated. Her small hands nervously fidgeted in front of her as she looked conflicted.

"Lia really wants to sell all the flowers... but Daddy said I mustn't lie."

Thud!

Tokikake collapsed face-first onto the ground.

He scrambled back up, fuming.

"Damn it! Look closely! I'm only 19!!"

He shouted in frustration.

"Alright, alright..." Gion, seeing the girl on the verge of tears, shot Tokikake a glare and kicked him flying with a sharp snap.

She crouched down again and gently patted the girl's head.

"That guy might look a little scary, but he's a good person. Don't be afraid."

The girl blinked her big eyes and slowly nodded.

Then she opened her hand and counted the 200 Berry she'd just earned. After a moment of fumbling, she placed 40 Berry into her left pocket and the remaining 160 into her right.

Seeing this, Gion asked curiously,

"Why do you separate your money?"

The little girl answered seriously,

"Daddy said we have to give up part of what we earn, or people with weapons will come and cause trouble."

Gion's expression shifted slightly.

Just then, a man came running over in a panic. He grabbed the girl's hand and gave Gion a quick, nervous bow.

"I-I'm terribly sorry, Marine-sama. Lia doesn't know any better—she was just talking nonsense."

With that, he scooped his daughter into his arms and hurried away like he was fleeing.

"Bye-bye, big sister! Bye, uncle!"

From her father's arms, the girl waved cheerfully at Gion and Tokikake.

"Damn it! I told you I'm a big brother, not a uncle!"

Tokikake snapped in frustration.

Gion watched the father and daughter disappear down the street, a dawning realization flashing across her face.

Handing over part of the income... armed people... taxes...

She frowned deeply, picked up her pace, and moved to intercept Momonga, who was nearby directing troop deployments.

"Lieutenant Commander Momonga, tell me—did that guy Daren go off to do something shady again!?"

Her expression was dead serious.

Momonga let out a sigh, rubbing his temples as he looked at her.

"Lieutenant Commander Gion, as the commanding officer of all Marine forces in the North Blue, Base Commander Daren naturally has matters he needs to handle."

"As his subordinates, our top priority is to carry out the orders he gives."

"And right now, our most important task is to secure the area for Saint Xildes-sama."

Gion shook her head stubbornly.

"No, I want to know exactly what Daren is doing."

"If headquarters has already issued orders, then Marineford must've already coordinated with Batia Island's leadership. There's no reason for Daren to personally oversee the handover."

"And if protecting Saint Xildes-sama is such a critical mission, then Daren, as the commanding officer, has even less reason to leave."

She gritted her teeth.

"Don't tell me... Daren went to collect 'taxes' from the mafia with the mayor!"

Momonga froze, caught off guard.

As naive as Gion could be sometimes, she was sharp—she had hit the mark.

"I knew it!"

Gion clenched her fists tightly.

Momonga's reaction had confirmed everything.

"How could you all go along with this?!"

(40 Chapters Ahead)

/ PinkSnake

Chapter 27 - 27: I Want Her

"Take the money, do the job."

Momonga didn't bother to explain. He just kept walking steadily, speaking flatly.

"That's Daren's rule—and the rule of the North Blue."

...

As they spoke, they arrived in front of a lavish mansion.

It was clearly newly built—blue roof, white walls, and a carefully maintained flower garden decorating the grounds.

Outside the estate, a few hundred poorly equipped militia had formed a basic security perimeter.

"You worthless trash! You can't even handle something this simple!"

A furious voice exploded from inside, followed by the sound of things being smashed.

Moments later, the militia at the front began trembling and dropping to their knees one by one, their faces turning pale.

From the grand entrance, a man in a white silk robe stepped out, his head encased in a glass dome. As he moved, the wave of kneeling spread outward like ripples in water.

Saint Xildes-sama was livid.

He never imagined that what was supposed to be a leisurely outing would end up with him running into that lunatic Byrnndi World.

What shocked him even more was that some lowly commoner actually dared to attack a World Government ship—his personal flagship, no less!

Most of the CP agents accompanying him had perished in that nightmare of a disaster, and then a sea storm had swept him onto this backwater island.

It was the most humiliating moment of his life.

"Damn it all..."

Saint Xildes clenched his teeth, seething with rage.

He glanced back at the two CP agents in black suits behind him.

They were all he had left.

"Move! Get out of my way!"

Irritated, he kicked a kneeling militiaman out of his path, then looked up to see a Marine in a snow-white cloak approaching.

"Saint Xildes-sama. I am Momonga, Vice Base Commander of the 321st Branch in the North Blue. Under orders from Marine Headquarters, I've come to ensure your safety."

Momonga stepped forward and offered a salute, his expression unreadable.

Saint Xildes gave him a sidelong glance, his tone dripping with arrogance and contempt.

"Oh? So the little lapdog from the Marines finally shows up."

"And they only send a vice base commander? Where's your boss?"

Momonga clenched his fist but quickly let it go, responding in a low voice,

"Base Commander Daren is currently coordinating security matters with the city government. From this point forward, your safety will be under the protection of the North Blue Marines until the CP department's ship arrives."

"Tch... I didn't expect much from you house-sitting fools anyway," Xildes scoffed without even trying to hide his disdain. "Whatever. The Cipher Pol ship'll be here in a couple hours. I'll tolerate you until then."

He turned away, not even sparing a glance for Momonga's darkened expression.

Then his eyes landed on Gion—and they lit up.

The greed and lechery in his gaze made Gion instinctively tense. She took a step back, her brows furrowing in discomfort.

"Well, well, well... didn't expect to find such a beauty among the Marines..."

Saint Xildes ogled her openly, his gaze crawling across her like a predator sizing up its prey.

Momonga's expression darkened.

Tokikake's pupils narrowed, and he instinctively stepped forward.

They'd heard stories about the Celestial Dragons' depraved tastes. If he had really set his sights on Gion...

"It's just a pity you're too old... So close, so close—you almost caught my eye and could've become my eighteenth wife! Hahaha!"

Saint Xildes leered at Gion, wagging his brows in amusement.

"Come on, let's go out and find some fun. I've been bored to death holed up in this dump."

With the Marines watching in grim silence, Saint Xildes swaggered out of the mansion.

"That bastard... he actually dared to make a move on you," Tokikake muttered bitterly.

"Obviously, I'm the one who should be your husband."

Gion rolled her eyes, loosening her grip on the sword hilt. Still, a quiet sense of relief settled in her chest.

As a Celestial Dragon, a World Noble, Xildes-sama wielded near-absolute authority. If someone like him had truly taken a liking to her, it would've caused enormous trouble—for her, for Tsuru, for everyone.

"Let's move," Momonga said, his face darkening.

"Lieutenant Commander Gion, stay away from him."

Gion nodded silently, praying nothing else would go wrong.

The group picked up their pace, trailing behind the Celestial Dragon with their escort of Marines.

Led by Saint Xildes-sama, the procession made its way through Batia Island's main commercial street.

Wherever they passed, the once-bustling road fell instantly into silence.

Civilians dropped to their knees in waves, like a tide washing through the streets, their faces pale with fear. No one dared to get too close.

The World Government had ruled the world like a towering giant for over 800 years. Before these so-called gods, wielding the highest authority on the seas, ordinary people could only tremble in awe.

But then—

A child's voice suddenly rang out, sharp and clear, cutting through the dead silence like a blade.

Gion's face turned pale.

Tokikake and Momonga's pupils shrank.

They looked up—and their bodies began to shake.

A little girl with black hair and a floral dress stood there, a large bundle of roses strapped to her back.

She beamed brightly, holding a single vibrant rose high in her tiny hand. Her eyes, wide and innocent, looked straight at the man wearing the glass dome.

"Uncle, would you like to buy a flower?"

Time seemed to freeze.

Under the horrified stares of Gion and the others, they saw a twisted smile slowly spread across the pockmarked face of Saint Xildes-sama—flushed, trembling with delight.

Greed and possessiveness flooded his eyes.

That warped obsession radiated an uncontrollable, sickening excitement—like a spoiled child finding a shiny new toy.

Gion and Tokikake tensed up, their jaws clenched.

Because they saw that grotesque Celestial Dragon slowly raise his jeweled, sausage-like fingers and point at the sweet little girl before him with a chilling grin.

"I want her."

(40 Chapters Ahead)

/ PinkSnake

Chapter 28 - 28: Audience with Saint Xildes

"I want her!!"

Saint Xildes-sama's feverish laughter echoed through the dead-silent street.

Gion and Tokikake's faces drained of all color.

At that moment, a man covered in dirt and grime stumbled through the kneeling crowd in a panic. He pushed forward desperately and dropped to his knees with a thud in front of Saint Xildes-sama.

He yanked his daughter behind him, shielding her tightly with trembling arms. Pale-faced and shaking, he stammered,

"M-My lord... I'm sorry. My daughter was in your way. I'll take her away immediately."

Only now, seeing the fear on her father's face, did the little girl—Lia—realize she had done something wrong. Her own face turned pale, and her small hands clutched his clothes tightly.

"In my way? No, no... she wasn't in my way at all."

Saint Xildes-sama chuckled darkly, his sickening gaze fixed on the child without wavering.

"She's your daughter, right? Hm... very nice."

"Starting today, your daughter will experience the greatest fortune of her life—becoming the eighteenth wife of me, the magnificent Saint Xildes-sama! Hahahaha!!"

At those words, the middle-aged man's legs gave out completely. His eyes went wide as he collapsed further.

He bowed low, forehead to the ground, his eyes bloodshot.

"Please, Saint Xildes-sama... I beg you, don't take my daughter."

"She's all I have left in this world."

Bang. Bang. Bang...

His forehead slammed against the ground with such force that it left smears of blood behind.

Behind him, Lia stood frozen in terror, unable to speak. Big tears welled up in her eyes and rolled down her cheeks.

Saint Xildes-sama let out a displeased snort. He raised his foot and stomped hard on the back of the man's head.

"What's wrong? You still won't comply?"

"I've taken a liking to your daughter. That's the greatest honor you could ever receive! You should be thanking me!"

"Do you have any idea how many people on these seas would kill to marry their daughters to a great, holy, noble Celestial Dragon like me?"

"If your daughter becomes my wife, you'll never have to worry about food or shelter again. You'll live like a true upper-class citizen!"

Blood oozed as the man's face was ground into the pavement, contorted in pain.

Still, he forced out a strained, broken laugh.

"Saint Xildes-sama... I'm grateful for the offer... but Lia is still just a child. I only want to live a quiet life with her."

Fury twisted Saint Xildes-sama's face. He lashed out with a vicious kick to the man's face.

The man tumbled several meters, his face swelling grotesquely as blood streamed from his mouth.

"Daddy...!"

The little girl finally broke into sobs.

Gion's face turned ashen. Her hand moved instinctively to the hilt at her waist.

Tokikake's fists clenched, his teeth grinding together.

All around them, the townsfolk stayed kneeling, trembling with fear. No one dared to speak. No one even dared to look up.

Their hearts were heavy with helpless rage.

The Celestial Dragons were descendants of nineteen of the twenty kings who created the World Government eight centuries ago. They called themselves the "descendants of the Creator" and wielded absolute privilege.

They were untouchable. Any act of resistance or defiance against them would invite the full wrath of the World Government.

If even a single Celestial Dragon was offended, a Marine Admiral or CP0 would be deployed immediately for retribution.

And now, this little girl had caught a Celestial Dragon's eye.

It was nothing to celebrate.

Everyone on the sea knew the Celestial Dragons' obsessive, perverse, and twisted natures. They didn't bother to hide it.

They called them "wives," but in truth, they were nothing more than toys.

To Celestial Dragons, everyone else was beneath them—vermin to be discarded at will. The life or death of a toy meant nothing.

Once someone became a Celestial Dragon's plaything, death became a luxury.

Lia... would become Saint Xildes-sama's eighteenth wife.

So where were the previous seventeen?

The answer needed no explanation.

"Hahahaha, come now. Follow me back to the Holy Land, Mary Geoise."

Saint Xildes-sama didn't even glance at the bloodied man collapsed on the ground. Laughing wildly, he strode toward the little girl, hand outstretched.

"No! You're a bad man! I don't want to go with you!"

Tears welled in the girl's eyes as she bit down hard on Saint Xildes-sama's hand and broke free from his grasp.

He yelped in pain, but instead of anger, his eyes sparkled with twisted excitement.

"Yes... that look. I like that look..."

He licked the corner of his mouth, staring at the trembling girl trying to muster her courage, and smiled with sick satisfaction.

Terrified, pale, yet still defiant—such resistance thrilled him to the core.

It was a delicious experience, one he knew he wouldn't tire of anytime soon.

"Grab her. Don't hurt her though—if you do, I'll have you butchered and fed to the dogs."

He gave the order with a vicious grin.

The two CP agents behind him moved without hesitation, closing in step by step.

"Damn it! No!!"

The fallen man finally caught his breath and, eyes bloodshot, pushed himself up. With a roar, he lunged toward Saint Xildes-sama.

One of the CP agents stepped forward and drove a brutal punch into the man's stomach.

He doubled over instantly, eyes bulging, choking for air. Blood sprayed from his mouth as he collapsed again.

"Ungrateful trash..."

Impatience flashed across Saint Xildes-sama's violent eyes. Without warning, he pulled out a golden pistol.

"Damn it!" Tokikake cursed, lowering into a stance.

Gion's hand gripped her sword hilt.

Just as they were about to move—

A figure appeared between them like a phantom. One hand pressed Tokikake's shoulder; the other shoved Gion's blade back into its sheath.

They froze in confusion—until their eyes widened in shock. Their pupils contracted, and blood-red veins spread across their vision.

"Die! You filthy vermin!"

Saint Xildes-sama cackled and pulled the trigger—

In the father's desperate eyes...

In the little girl's anguished scream...

Bang!!

The gunshot rang out.

And then—silence.

Time seemed to stop. Everyone stood frozen in place.

The CP agents stiffened.

Saint Xildes-sama froze mid-laugh.

The man and the little girl stood motionless.

A faint humming, like something straining under immense pressure, echoed softly in front of the man.

He knelt there in a daze, not even breathing.

A single bullet, spinning violently, hovered just inches from his forehead, trembling in place.

Suspended.

As if caught by some invisible force.

One second...

Two...

Three...

"Who the hell is that!?" Saint Xildes-sama snarled, veins bulging across his forehead.

From among the silent Marines, a figure slowly stepped forward—his presence cold, vast, and terrifying.

Short black hair. Deep, chiseled features. A face as stern and immovable as a cliff face.

He towered over the others, nearly three meters tall.

A wide, snow-white Marine cloak billowed behind him without wind.

He walked calmly toward the bloodied man, expression unreadable, and lifted the suspended bullet from midair with a casual motion.

Then he turned.

His towering frame cast a shadow over Saint Xildes-sama, exuding an overwhelming pressure that made the Celestial Dragon instinctively recoil half a step.

Only then did the man speak, smiling faintly.

"Rogers Daren, Admiral of the North Blue, Supreme Commander of the North Blue Marines, Captain of Marine Headquarters—at your service, Saint Xildes-sama."

(40 Chapters Ahead)

/ PinkSnake

Chapter 29 - 29: I Admire You

"Rogers Daren, Admiral of the North Blue, Supreme Commander of the North Blue Marines, Captain of Marine Headquarters—at your service, Saint Xildes-sama."

Captain Darren's voice was laid-back, calm, and magnetic as it echoed through the silent street.

The blood-covered man stared blankly at the tall, imposing figure before him, completely still.

Gion, Tokikake, and the others were equally stunned, exchanging glances in disbelief.

Darren... had stopped that bullet...

He had stopped the Celestial Dragons from firing.

Yet, for some reason, both Gion and Tokikake let out a quiet sigh of relief.

"North Blue... Admiral of the North Blue?"

Saint Xildes was momentarily stunned. The overwhelming presence of the Marine made his back break into a cold sweat. With a fierce but hollow tone, he growled,

"You dare stop me?"

He paused, then suddenly let out a crazed roar.

"You dare defy a Celestial Dragon!?"

Darren suddenly laughed.

His eyes narrowed, and a sly grin curled on his lips like that of a cunning fox.

"No, Saint Xildes-sama. I had no intention of stopping you."

"I just happen to think..."

Without warning, Darren turned sharply and lashed out with a brutal kick.

His gleaming black military boot slammed hard into the man's abdomen.

The sheer force of the blow was so intense the man couldn't even cry out. He flew back like a severed kite, tracing a bloody arc through the air before crashing down over ten meters away.

Whether he lived or died was unclear.

"Sss..."

Everyone watching drew a sharp breath.

Gion and Tokikake's eyes were bloodshot, and a surge of uncontrollable fury boiled up inside them. One gripped the hilt of their sword, the other tensed every muscle, both on the verge of action.

But before they could move, Momonga stepped in front of them. With a cold expression, he spoke in a low voice,

"Do you want everyone on this island to die because of your stupidity?"

The chill in Momonga's voice and the severity of his words hit them like a bucket of ice water, sending shivers down their spines.

Their trembling, bloodshot eyes flickered, and their breathing grew ragged. But despite the fury coursing through their veins, they forcibly relaxed their tense bodies.

They understood.

If they made a move here and provoked the wrath of the Celestial Dragons, Saint Xildes-sama would unleash his fury on the entire Batia Island.

And by then, it wouldn't be just one civilian's life on the line.

Everyone on this island would be dragged to the grave with them—all because of their recklessness and rage.

They clenched their teeth so hard it was a wonder they didn't shatter.

Even Saint Xildes-sama himself looked on in stunned disbelief, unable to grasp what the Marine Captain was thinking.

At that moment, Darren withdrew his foot and said with a cheerful smile:

"There's no need for Saint Xildes-sama to dirty his hands dealing with a pariah like that, is there?"

Saint Xildes-sama was briefly stunned, then a smug grin spread across his face.

"Hahahaha! Very good! You truly live up to being a watchdog of the Celestial Dragons—so obedient..."

Darren replied with a smile that didn't reach his eyes.

"Serving the great Celestial Dragons and the esteemed World Government has always been our duty as Marines."

Not far away, Gion and Tokikake were seething, their eyes bloodshot, chests heaving with barely suppressed rage.

Darren stepped forward, leaned close to Saint Xildes-sama, and lowered his voice.

"Saint Xildes-sama, with your status and stature, there's no need to waste your time on these lowborn trash."

"You rarely grace the North Blue with your presence. The Marines here have prepared a modest gift for you. I hope you won't refuse it."

"This is a token of the North Blue people's admiration and hospitality toward the great and holy Saint Xildes-sama—and a small personal gesture from me as well."

As he spoke, he clapped his hands. Within seconds, Mayor Hunter came trotting over, grinning ear to ear, followed by a dozen militiamen carrying heavy crates.

"Greetings, Saint Xildes-sama!"

Mayor Hunter bowed repeatedly, his face smeared with a sycophantic smile.

Saint Xildes-sama didn't spare him a glance. He simply narrowed his eyes at Darren, then stepped forward and casually pried open one of the crates.

A dazzling, multicolored gleam burst from the crack—it was packed with gold and silver treasure.

At last, a look of satisfaction appeared on Saint Xildes-sama's face.

"Hmmm..."

He closed the lid and looked at Darren with newfound appreciation, bursting into laughter.

"Darren, was it? Excellent. I like you."

"With your talents and capabilities, staying in the North Blue as just an admiral is a waste."

Though Celestial Dragons were nobles of the world, wielding unimaginable power, even they often lacked money.

The World Government's provisions for each noble were fortunes that common folk could never imagine, yet for the indulgent, depraved, and extravagantly wasteful Celestial Dragons, it was never enough.

Darren smiled and shook his head.

"It's all for the sake of justice and the Marine cause. No matter the post, so long as you do your part, that's what matters."

"North Blue may not match the excitement of the Grand Line, but I grew up here. I'm deeply connected to these waters."

"Saint Xildes-sama, a World Government official arrived at the port two minutes ago. For your safety, I suggest departing for the Holy Land as soon as possible."

Saint Xildes-sama nodded at that.

"True enough... The air in the North Blue reeks of filth and vulgarity. It's repulsive."

He cast a look of disdain at the surrounding buildings, their blue roofs and whitewashed walls, and scoffed.

"And this architectural style... a pathetic imitation."

Sweat streamed down Mayor Hunter's forehead as he forced a smile.

"Saint Xildes-sama is absolutely right! I'll order a full redesign immediately!"

Wiping nothing, he spun around and barked at the militiamen.

"Hey! Move faster! Get Saint Xildes-sama's gifts to the port!"

Darren gestured politely.

"Then... right this way, Saint Xildes-sama."

Saint Xildes-sama smiled and started walking, but suddenly halted as if remembering something.

"Almost forgot..."

Gion and Tokikake's faces instantly went pale.

He cast a greedy glance at little Lia, whose face was ghostly white, then turned to Darren with a smile full of sinister amusement.

"Arrest my bride and bring her with me to the Holy Land. Once we arrive... we'll be wed!"

As the words left his mouth...

The smile on Darren's face... slowly vanished.

(40 Chapters Ahead)

/ PinkSnake

Chapter 30 - 30: Stay Alive

"Seize her!"

Saint Xildes-sama burst into triumphant laughter as he gave the order to his two CP bodyguards.

"No... please don't..."

The little girl's eyes were swollen from crying. Watching the two suited men step toward her, she backed away in terror, struggling desperately.

The two CP agents approached without a word, their expressions blank. They roughly grabbed her by the arms and shoulders, ignoring her gasping sobs. Blood quickly welled up where their grip tore at her skin.

The civilians kneeling nearby could no longer bear the sight. One by one, they turned their heads away, unable to watch the cruelty unfolding.

Gion and the other Marines stood frozen, faces dark with fury. Their rage burned so intensely it felt like it might ignite them from the inside out, yet their limbs were like they'd been sunk in concrete—too heavy to move.

Daren took a deep breath.

"Saint Xildes-sama..."

"What is it, Captain Daren? Do you have a problem with my decision?" Saint Xildes-sama cut him off mockingly, staring at him with a smirk.

Daren's eyes narrowed slightly, but a bright, almost overly enthusiastic smile suddenly appeared on his face.

"Of course not. For Saint Xildes-sama to take an interest in her—it's her blessing, and an honor to the people of the North Blue."

"I'm just worried your subordinates might be a little too rough with your bride. Allow me to assist you."

As soon as the words left his mouth, Daren's figure vanished like a shadow.

A moment later, he reappeared in front of the girl.

Before anyone could see how he moved, the two CP members were pushed back by an unseen force.

With a casual flick of his hand, the long blade at one CP agent's waist was torn free. It spun through the air, twisting and melting into liquid metal. Most of it solidified into shackles, binding the girl's hands and feet.

The rest of the metal formed into a gag, sealing her mouth and cutting off her cries in an instant.

Only her wide, terrified eyes—brimming with tears—remained exposed.

Daren stepped closer, crouching slightly to meet the girl's hateful gaze. His face remained cold and expressionless.

"To serve the great Saint Xildes-sama is your privilege."

He took her by the hand and led the dazed, despairing child to Saint Xildes-sama.

"Saint Xildes-sama, this way, at least your journey will be a little more peaceful."

Saint Xildes-sama glanced at Daren, then suddenly burst out laughing again.

"Hahahaha! Amusing! Truly amusing! You Marines are full of surprises!"

His gaze toward Daren was filled with both approval and twisted amusement.

"You're not bad at all, Daren... I'll put in a good word for you with those old geezers in the government."

Under the countless hateful, grief-stricken stares of the civilians, Daren gave a slight bow and smiled.

"Thank you, my lord."

"Hahahaha..." Saint Xildes-sama laughed again. "Then let's head back."

As his voice faded, a CP agent approached swiftly and dropped to all fours like a trained, obedient hound.

Saint Xildes-sama climbed onto his back without hesitation, arrogantly heading for the port.

The other CP member followed behind, dragging the little girl—her face blank, as if fear had stripped her of all reason.

"No... don't..."

A hoarse voice suddenly broke the silence.

Everyone froze.

The little girl's father was trembling as he slowly pushed himself up from the blood-soaked ground. His expression was hollow as he reached out in the direction where the Celestial Dragons had disappeared.

As if trying to grab something.

But in the end... there was nothing to grasp.

Gion's face twisted with sorrow. She stepped forward, intending to help him up.

"I'm sorry..."

She spoke in a whisper, unable to meet the man's heartbroken gaze.

She watched as the Celestial Dragons' escort reached the lavish government ship, set sail, and vanished into the distance.

Then, on the man's blood-smeared face, a stiff smile slowly appeared.

A smile that held sorrow, despair, and absurdity—so unbearable it was hard to look at.

"Maybe... Lia will end up living a decent life..."

Gion murmured words of comfort even she couldn't believe.

"You should try to live on too—"

Suddenly, the man slammed his head into the wall of a nearby building.

Thud!

Blood splattered across Gion's face.

Her vision blurred, overtaken by a blinding red. Everything twisted before her eyes—upside down, like a scene from hell.

Through the haze, she saw his blood running down the freshly whitewashed wall of City Hall, painted pristine in honor of the Celestial Dragons' visit.

Blood red and snow white... bled together into a grotesque swirl of color.

That dull impact echoed in her mind, again and again... a deafening hum.

Panicked screams erupted—calls for a doctor, shouts of anger, frantic footsteps—shattering the deathly stillness of the street.

"Help him, quick!"

"He's still alive!"

"He can still be saved!"

...

Gion sat motionless, kneeling where she was, her body drained of strength.

In her hand, she clutched a fully bloomed rose.

The thorns pierced deep into her palm, drawing blood.

But she didn't feel a thing.

Live on...

She suddenly realized how meaningless those words had been.

The little girl's mother had already passed away. The man's only light in life had been his daughter.

And now, she had been ripped away—taken by the Celestial Dragons.

This man, whose hands were calloused with soil and hardship, was now completely alone.

What reason—what strength—could he possibly have left to keep living?

In a daze, her thoughts drifted back to what she had once said to that little girl.

"Don't worry. I'm a Marine. I'll protect you..."

"Of course. That's what Marines are for."

Gion suddenly began to tremble.

She looked up, her eyes dazed and empty, staring at the sky.

It was dark. Overcast. As if something had smothered the light.

Boom—!!

A sudden crack of thunder tore through the sky.

Snowflakes began to fall—soft and slow, like drifting feathers.

"It's snowing... but it's still midsummer..."

She muttered blankly.

In the year 1492 of the Sea Circle Calendar, Batia Island—tropical heart of the North Blue—saw its first snowfall in decades.

The snow, though not cold, settled quietly on Gion's shoulders.

She turned her head, stunned, gazing at the silent figure of the North Blue Admiral standing nearby. Her thoughts felt frozen—numbed and hollow.

And in that moment of stillness...

She finally understood.

She understood the words Admiral Sengoku had once said:

"This sea... is far too vast. The light of the Just Seagull flag can never reach every dark, filthy, and forsaken corner."

(40 Chapters Ahead)

/ PinkSnake