

The World Is Mine For The Taking #Chapter 1151 - 175 - Leonamon's Mercenary Group (4) - Read The World Is Mine For The Taking Chapter 1151 - 175 - Leonamon's Mercenary Group (4)

Chapter 1151: Chapter 175 - Leonamon's Mercenary Group (4)

I took pictures of her while she looked like she wanted to confess to me.

It wasn't something dramatic or exaggerated. It was subtle—quiet, almost fragile. The way her shoulders were slightly stiff, the way her fingers fidgeted when she thought I wasn't looking, and most of all, the way her eyes kept meeting mine and then darting away again. That shy mannerism of hers wasn't forced. It came naturally, like she didn't even realize she was doing it.

She looked at me with those timid, hesitant eyes, her expression soft and unsure, like she was standing right on the edge of saying something important but didn't quite have the courage to push herself over that line. And honestly? It was kind of cute. No, scratch that—it was *very* cute.

If I were a guy, it would've absolutely made my heart skip. I could picture it clearly—someone freezing in place, breath caught in their throat, wondering how someone could look at them like that without even trying. I mean, how could she be this cute just by acting like she was looking at Leon?

It was ridiculous how effective it was.

For a moment, even I forgot that this was supposed to be a photoshoot. She wasn't just posing anymore. She was selling a feeling. The kind that made people stop scrolling. The kind that made them stare just a little longer than they intended to.

She was literally some kind of angel. That was the only word that fit. Soft lighting caught on her features just right, her expression gentle and earnest, like she didn't belong in the messiness of the world. Even I had to admit it, and I wasn't exactly someone who handed out compliments lightly.

And honestly, looking at her like this, I knew I'd made the right decision giving her this role.

I didn't even have to coach her that much. She was locking into it naturally, as if this role had been waiting for her all along. Every shot came out better than the last, and with each click of the camera, I felt more confident that this gamble was paying off. I'd really lucked out. No—this was more than luck.

"This is it! Yes, just look at me like that," I said, unable to stop the grin spreading across my face. "Make your eyes a little wider. Yeah, just like that. Don't overthink it. Perfect. Yes—yes, that's right."

The camera of my phone shutter clicked again and again, the sound almost rhythmic. Every pose she made carried that same shy charm, that same gentle vulnerability. The photos were turning out so well that I could already imagine them posted, drawing attention, pulling people in before they even realized what they were reacting to.

It felt like it was going to work. No—*it was* going to work.

By the time we finished, Ella looked completely spent. She slumped slightly, breathing heavier than before as she reached up to put her glasses back on. Her fingers trembled just a little as she retied her hair into a twintail, a clear sign that she'd pushed herself harder than she usually did. She was panting, not dramatically, but enough to make it obvious how exhausted she was.

I told her that she might want to leave her hair down. And maybe take the glasses off since that would accentuate her beauty more.

She hesitated immediately when I told her that. I could see it on her face. I mean, this wasn't how she usually presented herself, and asking her to stay like that felt like stepping outside her comfort zone. Still, after a brief pause, she nodded and did it anyway.

And she did it so well.

Her hair fell naturally around her shoulders, framing her face in a way that made her look completely different from her usual self. Without the glasses, her eyes stood out even more, clear and expressive. I couldn't take my eyes off her. Not because it was flashy or seductive, but because it felt... right.

If she styled herself like that more often, I was sure she'd be even more popular than she already was. It wasn't about looks alone—it was the presence she carried when she allowed herself to be seen.

"Now then..." she said, a little hesitant, catching her breath. "Are those good enough?"

I leaned back slightly, pretending to think it over. "Well, I could've used a cleavage shot, but—"

"That's out of the question," she said immediately, cutting me off without hesitation.

I laughed softly and raised my hands. "Don't worry, I know. I wasn't serious. These are more than enough." I glanced at the screen one more time, then nodded. "I'll post them online now... and—there! All done!"

She blinked. "That was fast."

"Now we just wait," I said. "Someone's bound to show up."

After I posted the pictures and advertised the mercenary group recruitment online, I finally understood just how terrifying Ella's beauty could be when it was put to proper use.

Not even a full minute passed.

My phone started vibrating almost immediately. Notifications piled up so fast that the screen barely had time to light up before another alert replaced the last. Comments. Reactions. Shares. Messages. It just kept going.

There wasn't even a contest. The reception was overwhelmingly positive. I stared at the screen, scrolling through the responses, barely able to process how fast it was all happening. I knew it would work—but not like this.

It was so surprising that my mind went a little numb.

I hadn't realized the full impact at first, but word spread quickly. Apparently, people immediately went out to grab the recruitment papers that had been posted earlier that day. Some didn't even hesitate—they took one look at the post and ran straight toward our base of operations.

Less than an hour later, the cabin was swarmed.

It was small, never meant to handle this many people, and yet applicants packed the area inside and out. There were people I didn't recognize at all—faces from outside the region, some clearly more experienced than the average applicant. Veterans, by the look of them.

We had results. Real ones.

From there, everything escalated into a full-blown operation.

The mercenary group didn't waste time easing into it. Almost immediately, it was rebranded as Leonamon's Mercenary Group, officially placing it under the Leonamon Company. That alone gave it legitimacy, but making it a subsidiary of the largest company in the world turned it into something undeniable.

Publicity followed naturally.

Leon approved everything without much resistance, which smoothed the process even further. With his backing, our credibility skyrocketed. Within no time at all, we reached one hundred official members and secured affiliations with seven major adventurer parties across the Milham Kingdom.

Profit started coming in almost immediately.

And every single part of it traced back to Ella.

She became the official ambassador of the mercenary group, the face people associated with it. The symbol of its rise.

Things were finally moving forward, and for the first time in a while, it felt like we were on a genuinely good path. A future worth looking forward to was waiting ahead.

Leon's POV

To think that Charlotte actually pulled it off—building her own mercenary group from the ground up—was genuinely surprising. The speed alone was impressive. More than that, she did it entirely on her own, without relying on me even once.

She even spent all the money she'd carefully saved just to make it happen.

That kind of resolve wasn't something I'd expected.

I'd never felt this impressed by her before. This wasn't a small achievement, and she didn't stumble her way into it either. Both she and Ella did exceptional work, and the results spoke for themselves.

Unexpected as it was, this development was necessary. A large mercenary force could be invaluable if war ever broke out in the capital. Mercenaries were practical like that. As long as I continued funding them, they'd fight for the money without question.

Now then... onto the next report.

"Hmmm..." I muttered while reading through it.

It seemed the heroes from another world were about to embark on their first real expedition.

I was curious about who they really were, but right now, I didn't have the time to look into them properly. Still, once I finished the work I had planned, I'd definitely go see them for myself.

Chapter 1152: Chapter 176 - The First Expedition (1)

Myrcella's POV

Today was the day.

The first expedition for the heroes was finally happening.

From the moment I woke up, that thought sat heavily in my chest, like a stone I couldn't quite swallow. This expedition wasn't just some routine mission or ceremonial outing—it was meant to be their training. Their first real step into the world of blood, fear, and uncertainty. Their first genuine experience with battle, not sparring matches or controlled exercises, but something real. Something that could hurt them. Something that could kill them.

It would be the first time they were ever subjected to something like this.

On the surface, I told myself I wasn't worried. I repeated it again and again, like a mantra meant to keep my thoughts in order. The heroes were strong—exceptionally so, even compared to trained knights. And they weren't going alone. There would be many people accompanying them, people who were more than capable of protecting them if things went wrong.

That alone should have been reassuring.

For one thing, Miss Shredica would be there.

Even now, thinking about her presence eased me just a little. Although she was officially labeled as "skillless," she had already proven—countless times—that such a label meant almost nothing. Being skillless had never truly hindered her. If anything, she had shown, again and again, that raw experience, instinct, and discipline could more than make up for what skills could not provide. She had displayed her abilities so clearly that anyone who underestimated her quickly learned their mistake.

Still... this was different.

No matter how strong they were, no matter how many capable people surrounded them, this would be the heroes' first time stepping into real danger. They didn't have true battle experience. They hadn't felt the pressure of life-or-death decisions, the chaos of an actual fight where mistakes weren't reset and injuries didn't fade after a good night's rest.

It was only natural to be doubtful. To worry.

I wanted to go with them. More than anything, I wanted to stand at their side, to see for myself that they were safe, to intervene if something went wrong. But that desire had been shut down immediately.

My father had forbidden it.

He told me that if the heroes remained in a stagnant position—constantly protected, constantly shielded—they would never grow as much as they could. Growth, according to him, required exposure to danger. Pressure. Fear.

And... logically, I understood that. I really did.

But then he said something else. Something that still made my stomach churn no matter how many times I replayed it in my head.

He said he wouldn't care if one or two heroes died during the expedition.

Not with anger. Not with regret. He said it calmly, like it was a simple calculation. According to him, such losses would only serve to strengthen the resolve of the survivors. It would force them to acknowledge their own weakness and solidify their need to grow stronger. If they didn't, then dying would simply be the natural outcome waiting for them.

I hated it.

It was sickening—the way my father looked at them, not as people, but as tools. Resources. Pieces on a board that could be sacrificed if the outcome was favorable enough. I wanted to scream at him. To argue. To demand that he stop.

But I couldn't.

I still didn't have the power to do that.

"Letting children fight like this... you people are absolutely sick."

The sharp voice cut through my thoughts.

One of the summoned heroes was shouting near the courtyard entrance. She looked a little older than the rest, and the way the others instinctively gravitated toward her made it obvious—she was their teacher. Or at least, the closest thing they had to one.

She was wearing what looked like standard hero attire, adjusted to suit her role as a healer. The fabric was lighter, more flexible, designed for mobility rather than offense. Despite her outfit, she herself was very petite. Small. At a glance, anyone would assume she was the youngest among them.

In reality, she was the oldest.

Right now, she was facing off against one of the magic knights assigned to escort the heroes.

"Have you no shame?!" she continued, her voice rising. "I understand your kingdom is in danger, but forcing us into this? Dragging us out of our world and making us fight for you like this—how is that right? We have families! Lives! You yanked us away and now expect us to pick up swords and wands like it's nothing!"

She was practically screaming at this point, doing her best to make herself seem larger and more intimidating. She even stood on her tiptoes, puffing out her chest as if that alone might make the knight take her seriously.

Unfortunately, the knight was far taller than her. Vastly so.

He didn't respond. Not a single word. He simply turned around and walked away, completely ignoring her outburst.

"Hey! Wait! I'm talking to you!" she shouted after him.

Watching her like this was... honestly, a little adorable. The way she tried so hard, despite knowing how futile it was. But beneath that, her words carried weight. She wasn't wrong. And unlike most people in the castle, I couldn't just pretend she was.

"Lady Hasegawa," I called out.

She froze.

"O-Oh—P-Princess!" she said, immediately bowing deeply the moment she realized who had spoken.

"You don't have to bow every time you see me," I said gently, offering her a small smile.

"B-But I do," she replied, her voice trembling. "You're royalty."

"Fufufu... it's really not mandatory," I told her. "You're fine like this." I paused, then added, "It looks like you've been trying to get them to send you back again."

She nodded quickly. "Yes. But a normal magic knight won't even listen to me. They just walk away."

"That's because they don't have the authority to do anything about it," I said quietly.

Her shoulders slumped. "I can't even get an audience with your parents. And the Commander didn't seem interested either. If they won't listen to you... then what can I even do?"

I didn't have an answer for her.

I had tried. I really had. And I had failed just as badly. No matter what I said, no matter how much I argued, the decision had already been made. That was why Lady Hasegawa had resorted to appealing to lower-ranking officials, even though they had no real power to change anything.

"H-Have you spoken to the person you mentioned before?" she asked hesitantly. "The one you said might be able to help us?"

She meant Leon.

I had told her before that he might be able to find a way to send them all back home.

"Yes," I said. "I did."

Her eyes lit up, just a little.

"But he only returned last week," I continued. "I want to give him some time to rest before asking him what we can do. I don't want to rush him."

That small spark dimmed almost instantly. I could see the disappointment clearly on her face. Even knowing that I had already spoken to Leon, it still hurt that nothing could be done in time to stop this expedition—an expedition that might very well put their lives in danger.

"I see..." she murmured.

Then she bowed again.

"Thank you, Princess," she said softly. "I really do appreciate everything you've done."

Even in her disappointment, she still thanked me.

Chapter 1153: Chapter 176 - The First Expedition (2)

After I finished talking with Lady Hasegawa, I didn't head anywhere in particular right away. I let my feet carry me as I walked around for a minute, my eyes naturally scanning the training grounds and nearby corridors. I was looking for someone specific—the disciple I had personally been teaching how to fight.

It didn't take long before I spotted her.

Asada Kaori.

She stood out, not because she was flashy, but because of how composed she looked. Kaori was one of the healers, and not just an average one either. She had an exceptional grasp of mana control—clean, efficient, and stable. That alone already put her above most people. Because of that, she could use magic without much strain, weaving spells almost instinctively.

And yet, despite all of that, she had chosen to use a sword.

That decision still caught me off guard every time I thought about it. A healer picking up a blade wasn't unheard of, but it wasn't common either. The way she trained, though, made it clear she wasn't just dabbling. She was serious. It honestly felt like she was walking the path of a magic swordsman—someone who could stand on the front lines while still wielding healing magic when needed. That kind of hybrid role was rare, and even rarer when someone could actually make it work.

I knew that better than anyone.

I was a magic swordsman myself. That was exactly why I had become her instructor. Mixing magic into swordplay wasn't something you could casually learn. It demanded absurd levels of focus. You had to control your body, your blade, your breathing, your mana veins, and the mana in your surroundings—all at the same time. One misstep, one lapse in concentration, and everything fell apart. Because of that, very few people ever managed to use magic naturally in the middle of a swordfight.

And yet... Kaori was doing it.

Not flawlessly, but well enough that it surprised me every time I watched her. She adapted quickly, corrected mistakes on her own, and absorbed feedback like a sponge. Her talent was obvious. Sure, the fact that she was a Hero probably played a role in how fast she was growing, but talent alone didn't explain everything. She had genuine potential.

So much potential that I was starting to feel uneasy.

If I was being honest, it might not be enough for me to be the one tutoring her anymore. That thought lingered longer than I expected. Maybe Leon should take over at some point. He had more experience, a sharper edge when it came to combat instincts. If she trained under him, I was sure she'd grow even stronger.

When I finally took a closer look at her, I noticed she was wearing armor.

It wasn't the heavy, bulky kind that restricted movement. It was light armor, carefully crafted to balance protection and mobility. Every piece fit snugly, allowing her to move

freely without obstruction. Even as she walked, there was no awkward stiffness, no hesitation in her steps.

Still, "light" was a relative term.

Armor like that still carried weight. Walking around in it for extended periods wasn't easy. It took strength, endurance, and proper conditioning. Most people would tire quickly, their movements growing sluggish over time. The fact that Kaori walked so naturally, as if the armor was just another layer of clothing, spoke volumes about how far she had already come.

"Princess, how is it?" she asked, spinning around lightly as if to show everything off.

The movement was smooth and controlled. No wasted motion.

I looked her over once more, taking in the details. She definitely looked stronger now. Strong enough to handle monsters that weren't considered particularly dangerous. Still, strength alone didn't erase uncertainty. There were always unknown factors—unexpected situations that could easily turn lethal if she wasn't careful.

"It looks good on you," I said honestly. "Though... doesn't it feel a bit heavy? You could wear something lighter and something more flexible."

"Well, this gives me extra protection," she replied without hesitation. "So I think I'll keep wearing it."

Then she glanced at me sideways, a playful glint in her eyes.

"What? Are you worried about me or something?" she added with a grin. "I didn't expect that from you."

That smile...

This was probably how she used to be back then. She was cheeky, confident, and just a little reckless.

"You really don't need to worry," she continued as she walked past me. "I remembered everything you taught me. I even came up with a few ways not to die, so I think I'll be fine."

Her tone was light, but there was confidence behind it. She was probably heading toward the courtyard, where the expedition briefing was about to take place.

"And if I do end up dying," she muttered quietly, almost to herself, "at least one person would cry for me."

There was a wry smile on her face as she said it.

I didn't respond. I just watched her walk away, the faint clink of armor echoing softly with each step.

Later, I stood at a distance, observing as the Heroes gathered for their briefing.

They were all dressed in their assigned gear, standing in loose formations. Just by looking at their equipment, it was obvious how much money had gone into it. Their armor and weapons were easily comparable to those of magic knights. The craftsmanship was excellent and the enchantments were subtle but powerful.

It was only natural, really.

The kingdom wanted to emphasize their importance. These Heroes weren't just assets—they were symbols. And judging by the gear alone, the kingdom wasn't holding back on budget.

"Heroes from another world," Commander Lilia began, her voice clear and confident. She wore her usual charismatic smile, the kind that made people feel seen and reassured. "It has already been a few months since you arrived here, and I must say, I'm truly surprised—and genuinely happy—to see how much you've all grown."

She let the words sink in, her gaze sweeping across the group.

"Unfortunately," she continued, her tone shifting slightly, "this request comes from necessity. Please understand that everything we do is for the benefit of the kingdom—to protect its prosperity and secure its future."

Her expression softened, just enough.

"With that in mind, I ask for your forgiveness, as well as your cooperation. From the bottom of my heart, I ask for your help."

The sorrow in her voice was carefully measured.

I could tell immediately.

She was good. Really good.

Commander Lilia was a master manipulator, someone who knew exactly how to present herself depending on her audience. Every pause, every shift in tone, every expression—it was all deliberate.

Ironically, many of the female Heroes weren't buying it. They could see the cracks, the performance behind the words. But most of the Heroes were male, and they were completely caught in her charm. Their eyes were fixed on her, their expressions earnest, almost eager.

From the looks of it, her speech was working perfectly.

"With this expedition," Lilia continued, "we are not asking you to recklessly risk your lives. Rather, we hope to build something genuine—something that will allow you to stand strong and defend our shared interests."

She straightened slightly, her presence commanding attention.

"This will be your first real battle," she said. "So I pray that the Goddess of Victory smiles upon you."

A brief pause followed.

"Now then," she concluded, "show us how much you've grown. Not in a mock battle—but in the real one that awaits beyond these walls."

Silence followed her words, heavy and charged.

The Heroes stood there, weapons at their sides, faces filled with a mix of tension, excitement, and resolve. And as I watched them, one thought lingered quietly in my mind.

This expedition would change them.

Whether for better or worse... only time would tell.

Chapter 1154: Chapter 176 - The First Expedition (3)

Kashiwagi Yuuto's POV

After what felt like an endless stretch of training—day after day of swinging weapons, controlling mana, bruising our bodies, and sharpening instincts we never thought we'd need—we were finally told that our first expedition was approaching.

The announcement didn't come with fanfare. No dramatic speech, no heroic music playing in the background. Just a calm statement, delivered as if it were routine. And maybe for the people of this world, it was routine. For us, though, it felt different. Heavy. Numbing. The kind of feeling that crawled up your spine and settled in your chest, making it hard to breathe properly.

Terrifying was probably the right word.

Still, there was no avoiding it. If we wanted to go back home—to our families, our old lives, our familiar world—then this was the path laid out for us. We had to earn it. Fight monsters. Kill things that wanted us dead. Prove that we were worth sending back.

At least, that was how it was supposed to be.

Because lately, I couldn't shake the feeling that most of my classmates didn't actually want to return anymore.

It wasn't subtle. It was written all over their faces, in the way they laughed more easily, stood taller, and moved with a confidence that didn't exist before. During the nights, the boys were given sexual services by the maids. And it was clearly arranged and clearly intentional. The purpose wasn't even hidden. It was meant to erode our desire to leave and to tether us emotionally and physically to this world.

And honestly? It worked.

It was only natural. If someone offered you pleasure like that—unfiltered, indulgent, and intoxicating pleasure—how could you not hesitate at the thought of leaving it behind? How could you still cling to the idea of going home when this world kept rewarding you for staying?

I wasn't exempt from that.

If anything, my own desire to return had been steadily dimming, flickering like a candle starved of oxygen. I was still aware of it, still clung to it out of habit more than conviction, but it wasn't as bright as it used to be. Just like any other man, there was no way I could completely resist what was being offered. The pleasure was overwhelming. It was actually borderline addictive. It lingered in my body long after it ended. The memory of warmth on my palms, the unmistakable sensation of skin rubbing against skin, the closeness, the intimacy. It clung to me when I trained, when I rested, when I tried not to think about it.

I knew the maids were probably ordered to do those things. I wasn't naïve. But knowing that didn't change how it felt. And worse, it didn't even make me care.

That realization disgusted me.

In a sense, I was sick. Or maybe I'd always been like this, and this world was just stripping away the parts of me that pretended otherwise.

The girls in our class weren't blind to the change. They could feel it in the air, sense it in the way the boys interacted with them as well as with each other. There was a subtle tension now, an unspoken divide.

One person, in particular, noticed immediately.

The vice president of the student council—someone infamous for being strict, observant, and uncompromising—had been watching me closely. Her gaze lingered just a bit too long whenever our eyes met, and it was as sharp and calculating as ever.

We'd known each other since we were kids. That alone made it impossible for her not to notice when something was off.

Her name was Sakai Ayaka.

She was a bespectacled woman with a disciplined posture and a presence that commanded respect without needing to raise her voice. In combat, she favored a thin, standard blade reminiscent of a katana. It suited her perfectly. Instead of bulky armor, she wore light attire that allowed free movement with her every step precise and deliberate. At first glance, it looked almost casual—but a closer look revealed intricate magic embroidery woven into the fabric, designed to prevent monsters from fully piercing her flesh.

The craftsmanship was impressive. Practical, elegant, efficient. It reminded me of samurai armor from long ago. It was minimalistic, yet deadly.

It made sense. She wasn't just the vice president of the student council. She was also the president of the kendo club back home, a seasoned competitor who had won multiple tournaments. That experience shaped her choices here. The thin blade matched what she was used to, and her fighting style was almost unchanged. It was clean, controlled, and disciplined. Watching her fight felt less like watching someone adapt to a new world and more like watching someone reclaim something that was already theirs.

"Kashiwagi-kun," she said as she approached me, her footsteps light but deliberate. "There's something I want to talk to you about, but... I couldn't find the right timing."

She paused briefly, adjusting her glasses.

"But this might turn into something dangerous, so I'll just ask. Did something happen to you and the other boys?"

Of course she noticed.

Sakai had always had strong intuition. The kind that picked up on subtle shifts, the kind that sensed danger before it fully revealed itself. She was the same person who noticed the anomaly before we were teleported here in the first place. If anyone could tell something was wrong, it was her.

"Nothing happened," I replied smoothly.

"Liar," she said immediately, without hesitation.

Her eyes narrowed slightly. "Something *is* happening. All of you feel different. More composed. No... more confident, maybe. I can't explain it well, but it's like you're all acting as if you want to stay in this world forever."

Her gaze locked onto mine.

"Seriously. It's not something like that, right?"

Her suspicion was reasonable. If the boys lost the desire to go home, then the balance would collapse. It would mean she could only trust herself—and maybe a handful of the girls. Judging by their expressions lately, the girls had already started connecting the dots.

"There's really nothing going on," I said, keeping my tone even. "I don't know what you're talking about. I honestly feel like I haven't changed at all."

She frowned.

"You're telling me that," she said quietly, "even though we've known each other for years? And don't act like you haven't noticed. Even Kubota-kun isn't acting like himself."

She wasn't wrong.

Kubota-kun had always been timid, someone who shrank into himself when pressured. Now, he walked around with a relaxed posture, smiling openly, like the world no longer scared him. There was a strange glow about him—not literal, but undeniable. Confidence that didn't come from training alone.

"I'm telling you," I said, forcing the words out one last time, "there's nothing wrong."

She stopped walking.

"I see..." she murmured.

Then she turned away, her back straight, and walked toward the other girls without another word.

Chapter 1155: Chapter 176 - The First Expedition (4)

"Now then, I'm sure all of you have already been briefed. For the coming weeks, we'll be spending our time outside to train all of you," Miss Shredica said.

Her voice was calm, steady, and completely devoid of hesitation. She stood there with her usual composed expression, posture straight, hands relaxed at her sides—as if she were merely announcing a schedule change rather than sending us into a potentially

lethal environment. She had been assigned to accompany us on this expedition, not only to guide us but also to intervene if things went south.

Honestly, having her with us eased something deep in my chest.

I trusted her strength. No—I *believed* in it. She wasn't just strong in the way knights were strong, or even the way heroes were strong. There was something different about her and that something was heavier. Even now, no matter how much I trained, no matter how many times I tried, I still hadn't beaten her once.

That fact alone said everything.

"Hey," Amakawa-kun muttered beside me, suddenly leaning in and throwing his arm around my shoulder like we were close friends.

The weight of his arm alone irritated me.

"Have you fucked that chick who looks like Chihara yet?" he asked, his lips twisting into a crude, ugly grin. "Is she delicious? Can I go next?"

The words hit my ears like mud being flung at my face.

"Amakawa-kun, don't say things like that," I said, pulling away from him. "I have no intention of doing anything like that with my Master. And I absolutely won't allow you to do something like that to her either."

My voice wasn't loud, but it was firm. A warning, plain and simple.

I respected Miss Shredica. Not just because she resembled someone from my previous world, but because she had earned that respect—through discipline, strength, and the way she carried herself. She was my master. That alone made his words unforgivable.

"Tch. You're such a cheapskate," he scoffed. "Just admit you're fucking that bitch already."

The way he said it made my stomach churn.

"I mean, it's not like you'd pass up hitting someone like that, right? I'm pretty sure even the knights are ready to fuck. You just have to tell them we're heroes, and they'll do whatever the fuck we want. That's how it works, isn't it? Isn't that how it's supposed to be?"

His voice was loud enough that others nearby could hear. A few faces stiffened. Others looked away. No one stepped in.

I felt heat rise behind my eyes.

It wasn't just anger—it was disgust. The way he leaned on me, the way he talked like this world existed solely for his pleasure. For a moment, I genuinely considered punching him right there, consequences be damned.

Before I could move, a sharp presence cut through the air.

"Hey," Miss Shredica said. "What do you think you're doing?"

Her gaze locked onto him.

It wasn't just a glare. It was sharp, cold, and heavy enough that the air itself seemed to tighten. The irritation on her face wasn't hidden—it was written plainly, like she was done tolerating nonsense.

"Nothing," Amakawa-kun replied, raising his hands slightly. "I was just pointing out how similar you look to a classmate of ours who isn't here for some reason."

He kept talking. Too much. Far too much.

"And now I'm realizing something," he continued, eyes narrowing with a twisted sense of excitement. "She's not here, but someone who looks exactly like her is. Same face, same build. Just different hair and eye colors. Maybe it really *is* her."

A murmur rippled faintly through the group.

"What, did you get isekai'd here earlier than us?" he pressed on. "Is that why you were absent that day? It makes sense, doesn't it? There could've been a time gap. Enough time for you to become like this."

He sounded proud of himself, like he'd cracked some great mystery.

"Even if it was only one day back in our world, time might move differently here. That would explain why you're so experienced. You've been here longer, haven't you? Tell me I'm right."

He was convinced. Worse—he *wanted* to be right.

Truth be told, he wasn't the only one who'd thought about it. The resemblance was impossible to ignore. A lot of us had wondered.

Miss Shredica snorted.

It wasn't loud, but it was filled with contempt.

Her eyes sharpened, any remaining patience burning away as she stepped forward. No hesitation. No fear.

"What are you going to do?" Amakawa-kun said, puffing out his chest. "Don't tell me you want to hit me. Just so you know, I'm a hero. You wouldn't hurt a hero, would you?"

She stopped just inches away from him.

They stared at each other.

"Good," he sneered. "Know your place, woman."

The next moment happened so fast my brain barely caught up.

A dull, brutal impact echoed through the clearing.

"Guaaah—! Nnnnnnnnnnnnnn!!!"

Her knee was buried deep between his legs.

The sound—*that sound*

—made my blood run cold. It wasn't just pain. It was destruction. Something had cracked, and I was absolutely certain whatever was down there was shattered beyond repair.

Even though I wasn't the one hit, my body reacted anyway. I flinched hard, my legs tensing. Around me, other boys instinctively clutched their own balls, faces pale, like they'd felt it too.

"D-Damn you...!" Amakawa-kun hissed, his voice breaking. Tears spilled freely now, his glare weak and unfocused.

"Know your place?" Miss Shredica said, her voice low and sharp. "You're the one who should know yours."

His knees buckled.

Before he could collapse, she grabbed him by the hair and yanked his head up.

"I heard what you said earlier," she continued, her expression empty. Completely void of emotion. "Just so you know, I have no interest in doing anything with you heroes."

Her grip tightened.

"Your so-called privilege means nothing to me. I would let all of you die if I wanted to. I could kill you myself."

Her hand moved.

She grabbed his crotch and squeezed—harder than before, merciless and deliberate.

"To me," she finished calmly, "you're all nothing."

"Nghhh—! Aaaahhh! S-Stop it! Knock it off!" he screamed, his voice cracking into something pitiful.

"If you don't want me to cut it off from between your legs," she said, "learn some manners."

Her gaze flicked toward the rest of us.

"And that goes for all of you."

Amakawa-kun's eyes rolled back. His body went limp, collapsing to the ground with a dull thud. Foam bubbled at his lips, and a dark stain spread beneath him as he pissed himself.

Miss Shredica released him and stepped back, brushing off her hand as if she'd touched something filthy.

Then she turned back to us.

"Now then," she said, her voice perfectly calm once more, as if nothing had happened at all. "With that out of the way, understand this clearly."

She looked over everyone.

"Death is guaranteed out there. Your safety is not."

Chapter 1156: Chapter 176 - The First Expedition (5)

Kaori's POV

We had finally arrived at the place where we were supposed to hunt monsters.

At least, that was what it was called.

Standing there and actually looking around, it didn't really *feel* like a proper "monster hunt." The atmosphere was strange—tense, heavy, like the air itself was aware that something was wrong in this region. It felt less like an adventure and more like a problem that had been left to rot for too long, until someone finally decided to deal with it.

Apparently, this whole area had become notorious. Monsters kept showing up again and again, almost as if the land itself was inviting them in. That was the reason there

were so many people clad in armor wandering around. Everywhere I looked, there were leather straps, metal plates, worn cloaks, and weapons hanging from belts or resting on shoulders. Swords, spears, bows—tools meant for killing, all moving casually through what was once probably a peaceful road.

I remembered Tsubasa talking about things like this back then, when he used to bury his nose in web novels all day. He'd excitedly explain how dangerous zones worked, how adventurers gathered where monsters spawned frequently, and how entire villages survived off requests like these. Looking at it now, those words felt less fictional and more... uncomfortably real. These people were likely adventurers. Or mercenaries. Maybe there wasn't much difference between the two here.

As I walked forward, my sword resting against my side, the weight of it was a quiet reminder of why I was here. The grip was familiar beneath my fingers, solid and reassuring. I wasn't exactly relaxed, but I wasn't panicking either. It was a strange in-between state—alert, but numb.

That was when someone approached me from the side.

I recognized her immediately, even before she spoke.

It had been a while since we'd actually talked properly.

"Ayaka?" I called out, slowing my steps.

Ayaka Sakai turned toward me. For a moment, she just looked at me, her expression unreadable, like she was deciding whether or not to say something. Then she stepped closer, close enough that her shoulder brushed against mine as we walked. She leaned in, her mouth hovering near my ear, and lowered her voice.

"Don't you think your boyfriend's been acting really strange?" she whispered. "I mean, I know he's changed, but this much? And seriously... how are you staying so calm when he's openly flirting with other women?"

I let out a quiet breath, one that felt heavier than I expected. My lips curved into a small, wry smile before I answered.

"Well," I said softly, "he's not my boyfriend anymore."

Ayaka stiffened.

"We broke up."

She stopped walking entirely. I took a few steps forward before realizing she wasn't beside me anymore. When I turned back, she was standing there, eyes slightly widened, like her brain hadn't caught up with her ears yet.

I couldn't really blame her.

I had told her so many times before—too many times, probably—about how Amakawa-kun felt like my perfect soulmate. How everything about him felt right. How I loved him so much that it scared me sometimes. Those words had come so easily back then. They'd felt true.

But feelings change.

I didn't know exactly when it started happening. Maybe it was gradual. Maybe it was sudden. All I knew was that the warmth I used to feel had thinned out, like a fading echo. Holding onto the relationship when neither of us truly felt the same anymore wouldn't have been fair—to him or to me. Continuing would've meant pretending. Lying. And I was tired of lying to myself.

"I see..." Ayaka finally muttered, her voice quieter now.

It sounded like she'd just received the shock of the day.

I nodded once and kept walking, not letting myself linger on it. There was no bitterness in my chest, no regret sharp enough to hurt. Just a calm acceptance. If anything, that realization surprised me more than the breakup itself.

As we continued down the road, I became more aware of the stares around us. People glanced at us openly—some curious, some cautious, some outright wary. A group of unfamiliar faces walking through a troubled area always attracted attention. I ignored most of it, my eyes drifting instead toward one particular figure walking ahead of us.

Miss Shredica.

No matter how many times I looked at her, the resemblance struck me all over again.

She looked just like Chihara.

Same face. Same features. Same presence.

And yet... not really.

Chihara had always been cold, yes. Distant, sharp-edged, difficult to approach. But she'd never been cruel. There was a quiet restraint to her, an unspoken line she never crossed. Miss Shredica didn't seem to have that line at all. Her expression was indifferent, her movements efficient, and there was something unsettling in the way she spoke—like human lives were just numbers to her.

It felt wrong. Like seeing a reflection that moved differently than it should.

I shook the thought away. Comparing them wasn't doing me any good. She wasn't Chihara. She was Miss Shredica. A different person entirely. That was how it was supposed to be, and that was how I needed to think about it.

Eventually, we reached our destination.

The village appeared almost deceptively peaceful. Simple houses lined the dirt paths, smoke rising lazily from chimneys, and the faint sounds of daily life carried through the air. If I didn't know better, I might have thought this place was untouched by danger.

"This is the place," Miss Shredica said, stopping at the edge of the village. "Beyond this route, there's a Demon Tiger. It's killed several villagers already."

Her voice was flat. Empty of emotion.

No sorrow. No anger. Just information.

Well, I guess that sounded just like us. When we heard about deaths in the news back home, we barely reacted unless it affected us personally. In that sense, the people of this world and us weren't all that different. Or maybe we'd just grown numb.

"You'll be staying here overnight," she continued. "We hunt the tiger during the day. It searches for food then, which makes tracking it difficult. There are other monsters in the forest, so stay alert, watch your backs, and remain in groups."

She paused briefly, then added, "If you die, that's on you. My advice is to avoid dying. If someone does get killed, leave the body behind and let the monsters tear it apart."

The words landed heavily.

"Hey," Ayaka snapped, raising her hand sharply. Her expression was tight, clearly angry. "I get that you're trying to make us cautious, but saying things like that isn't helpful. Talking about us dying and abandoning bodies isn't advice."

"That's right," Miss Shredica replied immediately, her tone calm but cutting. Ayaka fell silent under her gaze. "I'm not giving advice."

She turned fully toward us, her eyes sweeping across the group.

"This is a warning," she said. "A warning that you *will* die if you're careless."

Every single one of us swallowed.

The certainty in her voice was terrifying. I couldn't tell whether she was trying to scare us into backing out or simply stating reality as she saw it. Either way, it worked.

"Now then," she said, turning away as if the conversation was over. "Rest up. You'll be busy tomorrow."

And just like that, we were left standing there, the weight of her words settling heavily over the peaceful-looking village as night slowly crept in.

Chapter 1157: Chapter 176 - The First Expedition (6)

We decided to rest by building tents.

That decision came directly from Miss Shredica. She advised us that building tents was far better than sleeping inside one of the nearby cabins. According to her, doing so would eventually sharpen our awareness. It wasn't just about having a place to sleep for her, I guess, and it was about how we slept, and what kind of danger we allowed ourselves to be exposed to.

Sleeping in a tent meant vulnerability. There were no solid walls, no doors to lock, no illusion of safety. If something attacked us while we were asleep, we would feel it immediately. The cold air, the rustling of fabric, the faintest disturbance—everything would force us to react. It felt intentional, like she wanted to push us into discomfort so our senses wouldn't dull.

Since sleeping in tents meant we had a real chance of getting attacked while unconscious, it seemed pretty obvious that she was trying to train our awareness and instincts. If we could survive like this, then maybe we wouldn't end up dead the moment we let our guard down.

To be honest, the way she handled things was actually beneficial.

Harsh, sure. Uncomfortable? Definitely. But useful.

And honestly, I wasn't really going to complain about how she did things.

As long as there was some kind of benefit to it—some lesson as well as some improvement—I was willing to try. That had been my mindset ever since we were dragged into this world. Complaining didn't keep you alive. Adapting did.

I was still eating my breakfast when Hasegawa-sensei came over to me.

"Ah~..." she let out a long, tired yawn.

Her posture was loose, shoulders slumped, and her eyes looked like they were barely staying open. She looked exhausted, like she might just collapse if she stopped moving for more than a few seconds. Honestly, I couldn't blame her at all.

We were all tired.

Walking from the castle all the way to this place had been no joke. Even though it felt like our stamina and endurance had improved ever since we became heroes in this world, it was still a long trek. Heavy armor weighed down on our bodies the entire time, grinding against our muscles with every step. No matter how much stronger we had become, distance was still distance.

"Oh, hello there, Asada-san," she said sleepily. "You're still not done eating?"

I glanced down at my bowl.

Most of the others were already finished, some cleaning their gear, others quietly chatting or resting. Meanwhile, my food sat there, barely touched. It had been sitting in front of me for a while now.

I smiled faintly and answered her honestly.

"I didn't really have much of an appetite," I said.

"You have to eat," she said immediately, her voice sharpening just a bit. "Just look at your bowl. You barely touched it. You need to eat properly and store up energy. Especially since those people are going to make you fight scary monsters tomorrow!"

There was frustration in her voice, mixed with worry. It wasn't directed at me—it was aimed at the situation itself.

"You don't have to worry, Sensei," I replied, offering her a calm smile. "I think I can handle myself pretty well."

"But you're still a child!" she snapped back. "Even if you say that, you're still a child, and they're making you fight! All of you shouldn't have to shoulder this kind of responsibility! No one would blame you if you ran away, you know?!"

Her voice rose sharply near the end. She sounded almost hysterical, like she had been holding all of this in for far too long and it was finally spilling out.

She had always been like this.

Out of everyone here, she was the most vocal about how wrong this entire situation was. She openly criticized the people of this world for yanking us out of our own lives and forcing us to fight their battles. To her, it wasn't heroic—it was cruel. Inhumane.

She tried everything she could to make her voice heard.

I had heard her.

I think many of us had.

But unfortunately, none of the people in charge seemed willing to listen. To them, we were resources. Weapons. Tools meant to solve their problems.

It was a little ironic hearing her call me a child.

I was already eighteen. By this world's and our world's standards, that made me an adult. More than that, I was already expected to fight, kill, and survive like one.

And honestly, it was even more ironic when you considered her appearance.

She looked more like a child than I did, mostly because of her height. She was short, with a small frame, and the wizard's robe she wore only emphasized it. At least, I thought it was a wizard's robe. It flowed loosely around her body, sleeves hanging low, fabric brushing against the ground.

Her role was a healer, but she was also a magician.

In this world, magicians were split into three general categories. They were healer, attacker, and mana master.

I fell under the mana master category. I used mana alongside my swordsmanship, weaving magic directly into my movements and techniques. That alone technically made me an attacker as well. And in certain situations, I could even act as a healer.

In the end, those categories didn't really matter all that much. Being called a magician just meant you had some level of control over mana. You could be one, two, or all three types at once.

I specialized in mana control.

Hasegawa-sensei, on the other hand, was far more proficient in healing. That suited her perfectly. She would stay in the backline, supporting everyone else. It made sense—not just strategically, but personally.

She was someone who genuinely didn't want anyone to get hurt.

"I'll be careful," I told her gently. "By the way, Sensei... you look really tired. Aren't you going to sleep?"

She lifted her hand and pinched her own skin, hard.

It looked painful.

"I'm not going to sleep," she said. "They want you all sleeping out here, exposed to danger. I can't allow that."

She pinched herself again, forcing her eyes to stay open. Her determination was almost frightening. I felt a mix of surprise and admiration, but also concern.

She was pushing herself too hard.

By refusing to rest, she was only putting herself in more danger. Fatigue dulled judgment. Slowed reactions. In a situation like this, that could be deadly.

"As the only adult here, I have to take responsibility," she said, her voice quieter now. "I have to bring you all home."

Those words stuck with me.

Honestly, it felt like she was the only person here we could truly trust.

She wasn't doing this for glory. She wasn't doing it because she believed in some prophecy or destiny. She was doing it because she cared.

She was someone who truly wanted the best for us.

And in a world that treated us like disposable heroes, that meant everything.

Chapter 1158: Chapter 176 - The First Expedition (7)

I decided to leave her to her own accord after that. I lingered for a moment, just standing there, watching her back as she sat stiffly in place, refusing to rest. I wanted her to go to sleep—genuinely wanted her to—but it was painfully obvious that she wasn't going to allow herself that luxury. Her posture alone screamed resistance, as if closing her eyes would somehow be a betrayal of her duty. In the end, I realized there was nothing more I could do. Words wouldn't reach her right now, and forcing the issue would only make things worse. So I left her there.

At this point, I really didn't have anything left that I could do for her. She had already made up her mind. She was practically hell-bent on doing whatever she could to protect us, even if that meant grinding herself down until there was nothing left. That kind of resolve was admirable—but it was also terrifying.

As I made my way back toward our tent, the camp was quiet in that strange, uneasy way that only came after long exhaustion. The air felt heavy, like it was holding its breath. My footsteps were slow, dragging slightly against the ground, my body moving on habit more than intent. That was when Ayaka suddenly appeared right in front of me.

I stopped short.

"Can you please stop appearing out of nowhere?" I asked, letting out a tired sigh as my hand instinctively moved, half-expecting danger before my brain caught up.

"I'm not really doing it on purpose," she replied calmly. "But, well... I think my presence has been getting weaker lately." She tilted her head slightly, thoughtful. "I feel like I could even hide it completely now, if I tried. Maybe it's because of my hero status. What do you think?"

The way she said it—casual, almost proud—made it clear she was at least a little pleased with herself.

"You changing like that doesn't really matter," I told her honestly. "I mean, all of us have been changing anyway. More than that, I think we've already changed enough that we don't even care about stuff like this anymore."

She didn't respond right away.

"Do you think..." Ayaka suddenly began, then stopped. Her voice trailed off as she looked at me, hesitation clear in her eyes. She opened her mouth again, then closed it, like she was testing the words before letting them out. "Do you think..." she tried once more, swallowing slightly. "Do you think we're still going to be the same when we return?"

Her question settled heavily between us.

The area around us fell completely silent, like the world itself was waiting for an answer. Honestly, it was a good question. A terrifyingly good one. If we somehow managed to return home—if that even became an option—would we really be the same? Or would we come back as something else entirely?

And it wasn't just about our bodies.

Physically speaking, there was a real possibility that we'd still have the powers we gained here once we returned. That idea didn't feel unrealistic anymore. If anything, it felt inevitable. We had trained nonstop. Our bodies had changed, hardened, and adapted. The strength, the reflexes, the instincts—they were no longer borrowed. They were ours. Our experiences here were real, carved into muscle and memory alike. Because of that, it only made sense that we'd retain our abilities and powers as well. At this point, it didn't feel like a matter of *if*, but *when*.

Psychologically, though... that was a completely different story.

We had seen or might see things no normal person should ever have to witness. Fear. Desperation. And possibly death. The kind of horrors that don't fade just because you leave the place where they happened. Those things change you. They reshape how you think, how you react, how you see the world. Trauma doesn't ask for permission—it just settles in and makes itself at home. Right now, there was no way to tell if we'd still recognize ourselves if we ever made it back to Earth.

"I don't know," I finally said.

Even though I already had my own answer forming in my head, that was still the truth. "I don't really care right now," I continued, my voice steady but tired. "Don't you think we should just worry about it when it actually happens? If it happens?"

When I said that, Ayaka smiled. It wasn't a bright smile—more subdued, almost bittersweet—but it felt genuine. She probably already knew, deep down, that there was no way we'd remain the same after all of this.

"Are you going to sleep now?" I asked her, trying to steer the conversation somewhere lighter.

"I don't think I can sleep in a situation like this," she replied quietly.

"Yeah," I said with a small shrug. "Guess we're the same."

I didn't have any concrete plan. I figured I'd just keep walking until exhaustion finally dragged me down on its own. Let sleep claim me whenever it decided I'd had enough.

"Oh..." Ayaka suddenly said.

She was staring off in the direction I'd come from.

"It's Hasegawa-sensei," she continued. "She's fallen asleep."

I followed her gaze, and sure enough, there she was. Hasegawa-sensei was slumped over the table, her head resting awkwardly against it, completely out cold. A thin line of drool trailed from the corner of her mouth. I wasn't sure how I could even tell that from this distance, but somehow I knew. Maybe that, too, was one of the changes we'd gone through.

"Let's carry her to her tent," I said, a faint smile tugging at my lips.

Together, we moved carefully, lifting Hasegawa-sensei as gently as we could. She stirred slightly but didn't wake, mumbling something incoherent under her breath. We carried her to her tent and laid her down properly, making sure she was comfortable before quietly stepping away and letting her rest.

James's POV

I was seated in a town within Milham, idly swirling wine in a glass as I observed my surroundings. The place I was in was absurdly luxurious. Calling it a restaurant almost

felt like an understatement—it was Leonamon's, after all. Every detail, from the furniture to the air itself, screamed refinement.

I took a slow sip of the wine. The flavor spread across my tongue, rich and complex, something I hadn't even known could exist until now.

That was when Claire appeared.

She was wearing clothes for once, which alone made the moment notable. As usual, she had that familiar grin plastered on her face, the kind that suggested she already knew something interesting.

"It seems Shredica successfully managed to summon the heroes," she said casually. "Well, that's no surprise. That woman... even though she irritates me sometimes, she's quite capable."

"That just proves we chose the right woman to handle the portion of the spell needed for the summoning," I replied, setting my glass down. "From here on out, things are going to get much more interesting. Don't you think?"

"Well, obviously," Claire said with a shrug. "With people from another world acting as heroes, the board's definitely gotten more exciting. So?" She leaned forward slightly. "What's your next move?"

"We'll make sure those hatchlings grow properly," I said calmly. "And just before the kingdom gets to reap the benefits of their growth, I'll snatch them right out from under its nose. That was the reason I wanted them summoned in the first place."

That was the truth of it.

The heroes were pawns—but they weren't ordinary pawns. They were high-value pieces, ones worth waiting for. Once the kingdom finished nurturing them, once they believed they had everything under control, I would take them at their peak.

After all, ripe pieces were always the easiest to claim.

Chapter 1159: Chapter 177 - The Forest Of Doom (1)

Ayaka's POV

Today was the first real day here—excluding yesterday, which barely felt real at all. Yesterday was confusion, panic, and half-formed thoughts crashing into each other. Today, though, was different. Today was the first day we consciously stepped into this place, fully aware that it wasn't a dream we could wake up from.

This was officially our first day.

All of us were heading into the forest to hunt a demon tiger.

Before this mission, I had tried to prepare myself the only way I knew how—by reading. Books, records, fragments of knowledge left behind by people who had survived long enough to write things down. From those texts, demon tigers were described as creatures that were, at their core, still tigers. But "still" felt like the wrong word. They were larger, their bodies swollen with unnatural strength, their fangs and claws evolved into weapons meant solely for killing. Faster. Smarter. Much, much deadlier.

According to the records, the number of people who died to demon tigers every year reached roughly seventy thousand.

Seventy thousand.

That number alone made my chest feel tight. Entire cities could disappear with casualties like that. And yet, what truly unsettled me was the next line I remembered reading—the part that said this wasn't even considered the most dangerous threat in this world.

How twisted did this place have to be if seventy thousand deaths a year wasn't the worst it had to offer?

The highest recorded death tolls were attributed to natural catastrophes. Floods. Earthquakes. Magical disasters that wiped entire regions off the map. And then there were bandit attacks, monster swarms, wars sparked over resources and power. Death here wasn't an anomaly. It was routine.

That realization clung to me as we walked, refusing to let go.

"It's better if we stick together," I said to Kaori, keeping my voice low. The forest felt alive in a way I wasn't used to, like it was watching us just as closely as we were watching it.

"You're right," she replied without hesitation.

She held her sword loosely at her side, but there was nothing relaxed about her posture. Her grip was firm, practiced. Ready. One sudden movement, and she could react instantly. Seeing that made me feel a little more at ease—and a little more aware of how serious this all was.

All the girls stayed close together, our steps naturally syncing as if we were afraid to create even the smallest gap. The boys, on the other hand, walked ahead of us, scanning the path, shoulders squared, expressions focused.

They looked fearless.

Or maybe they were just pretending.

Boys will be boys, I thought. It felt almost comforting, in a strange way. Even here, even now, that part of them hadn't changed. They still tried to look reliable, still tried to act like shields standing between us and danger.

Back then, before all of this, it used to annoy me. The way they showed off, the way they tried too hard sometimes. But now... I missed it. I missed the normalcy of it. I missed how easy things used to be, how we could joke, argue, and laugh without worrying about whether the next moment would be our last.

I missed my classmates.

Now, it felt like all of us were balanced on a thin, fragile line, stretched tight beneath our feet. One wrong step, one unexpected push, and everything we had—our trust, our bonds, our shared past—could collapse all at once.

I really hoped that wouldn't happen.

We hadn't known each other for three years for nothing. Those years meant something. I cherished them. Every stupid moment, every shared secret, every ordinary day that I'd taken for granted back then.

As we walked deeper into the forest, we suddenly stopped.

No one gave a signal. No one spoke. We all just froze at the same time.

Our senses had sharpened so much that even the smallest disturbance felt amplified. A single sound—just one—had cut through the air, sharp enough to grab hold of our instincts and squeeze.

That was all it took.

Weapons were raised. Muscles tensed. Breathing slowed.

We didn't know what it was, but if our bodies reacted this strongly, it couldn't be ignored.

Then, from the brush ahead, something moved.

What stepped into view wasn't a monster, or a bandit, or anything remotely close to what we had imagined.

It was a rabbit.

For a brief moment, there was silence. Then, almost in unison, we lowered our weapons.

"It's nothing more than a fuckin' rabbit," Amakawa-kun said with a click of his tongue. "And here I thought it was something I finally got to fight with my power. What a boredom."

"Don't say it like that," I replied, frowning slightly. "I'm sure it just came here because it's lost."

The rabbit stood there, still and quiet. Too quiet, maybe—but at the time, I brushed that thought aside.

I stepped forward and reached down, gently grabbing it with both hands.

The moment my fingers closed around its fur, my entire body screamed.

Every hair on my body stood on end, an overwhelming sense of danger crashing into me without warning.

"Look out!" Kaori shouted.

The rabbit's eyes snapped toward me, glowing red, its body moving with a speed that didn't match its size. It lunged.

But my body reacted before my mind could.

My hand found my sword. The motion was smooth, instinctive, practiced in a way that scared me. I unsheathed my katana in a single motion and swung.

There was resistance—it was brief but sickening—and then nothing.

I didn't even realize what I'd done at first.

My thoughts were blank. The only thing in my head was the need to survive. That was it. No hesitation. No doubt.

Warm liquid splashed against the side of my face.

The rabbit's body fell beside me, split cleanly in two. It writhed on the ground for a moment, spasming weakly, before going completely still.

I stared down at it.

Blood dripped slowly, the metallic scent filling the air. The warmth on my cheek lingered, heavy and unmistakable.

I knew this world was dangerous. I understood that. But killing something—actually killing it—made my stomach twist violently. I hadn't expected my body to move like that, to act without permission.

And yet... if it hadn't, what would have happened to me?

"Kuh, I wish I was the one who killed it," Amakawa-kun muttered.

"Are you okay?" Kaori rushed over, her voice tight with concern. She looked at my face, my hands, the blood staining my skin. It was obvious to her—I wasn't okay.

I mean... I had just killed something.

All my life, I'd never killed anything bigger than an insect. Bugs were pests. This was different. This was flesh and blood, still warm. The sensation on my cheek felt like it was burning itself into my memory.

"It's fine, Ayaka," she said softly. "You did it to protect yourself. It's not your fault."

I understood that. Logically, I did.

Emotionally, it didn't matter.

She took out a handkerchief and gently wiped the blood from my face. Her movements were careful, almost tender, like she was afraid I'd shatter if she touched me too roughly.

"As expected..." I murmured, my voice barely above a whisper. "We're not going to return to normal, are we?"

She didn't answer.

Last night, she'd said she didn't know. But now, standing here, I realized the truth. She did know. We all did. We were just too afraid to say it out loud and were afraid that acknowledging it would make it irreversible.

We're not coming back normal.

That much was already clear.

Chapter 1160: Chapter 177 - The Forest Of Doom (2)

While my thoughts were still tangled up in everything that had just happened, something felt... off. The forest had gone quiet in that strange way that didn't feel peaceful at all. And then we noticed it.

It wasn't just one rabbit that had appeared.

Shapes moved between the trees. One, then two, then more—small figures slipping through the undergrowth, their red eyes catching the light as they stared at us. My chest tightened when I realized how many there were. They were surrounding us, slowly but surely, as if they had been waiting for this moment.

"Oh, looks like you're not the only one who gets to have fun, Sakai," Amakawa-kun said casually, almost like he was commenting on the weather. He reached for his sword, his fingers wrapping around the hilt without hesitation. "Come on, boys. Let's massacre these rabbits!"

The word *massacre* echoed unpleasantly in my head.

The way the boys reacted unsettled me. There was no hesitation. No pause. No second thought. They moved as if this was just another task, another enemy to cut down. Seeing that lack of hesitation, that eagerness even, made my stomach twist. It honestly sickened me.

And yet, despite how awful it felt, my body refused to move. My legs felt heavy, like they were rooted to the ground. My thoughts were scattered, colliding with each other, but none of them formed into anything useful. I couldn't even think of an alternative. I couldn't imagine myself stepping forward again.

"Come on, stand up," Kaori said softly beside me. She grabbed my arm, her grip firm but gentle, and helped pull me to my feet. I was still reeling from everything—the sensation of the blade cutting through flesh, the resistance, the warmth. The undeniable truth that I had killed something for the first time in my life.

My head felt light, my ears ringing faintly. But there was no time to stop and process it. No time to breathe. We were under attack.

The girls couldn't really do anything. All we could do was stand there, helpless, watching as the boys charged forward. Steel clashed, bodies fell, and the forest filled with the sounds of combat. There were so many rabbits—far more than I had expected—but the boys handled them with frightening efficiency. One by one, the rabbits fell, their small bodies hitting the ground with dull thuds.

Eventually, it was over.

The forest grew quiet again, but this time it wasn't peaceful. It was heavy. The air felt thick, saturated with the metallic smell of blood.

Before I could fully register what had happened, time seemed to slip by. The sun shifted in the sky, and soon it was afternoon. We were instructed to head back to camp.

As we walked, I couldn't shake the hollow feeling in my chest. I felt like I hadn't really done anything. I fought one rabbit—that was it. Just one. After that, the boys took over and handled everything. It was like my role in the whole situation barely mattered.

Later, I heard someone mention their name.

Demon rabbits.

I almost laughed when I first heard it, but no sound came out. I couldn't believe that something that looked so harmless, so cute, could actually kill people. That those creatures were man-eating monsters. The realization hit me harder than I expected. They looked like something you'd see hopping around in a field, not something that would tear a person apart.

And yet... they had tried to kill me.

I told myself I should rationalize it. That it was just an unfortunate happenstance. That I had no choice. It was either I died, or I killed it. That was the reality of the situation. And I had chosen to live. I had killed it. Without mercy.

Still, knowing that didn't make it any easier.

The fact that I had taken a life—monster or not—clung to me like a weight pressing down on my chest. I had never killed anything before. Not an animal. And now I couldn't stop replaying it in my head.

The smell of blood was still there. It felt like it was smeared across my face, stuck to my skin no matter how much time passed. I could almost feel its warmth lingering, as if it refused to fade away. My stomach churned violently. My head spun. I felt like I was going to throw up at any moment.

And those rabbits... they were considered weak. Common monsters. Something even an ordinary villager could defeat.

Which meant only one thing.

It could get worse.

A lot worse.

What kind of monsters would I see next? What kind of things would I be forced to kill just to survive in this world? Would the next thing I come across be a mutilated corpse? Or worse—would it be one of my classmates lying there, motionless?

Fear crept into my chest, cold and suffocating. I wanted to go home. I really did. More than anything. But I couldn't. Not now. At this point, I had no choice but to keep going. If

I didn't, I would just become a burden. Dead weight. Someone who stood behind while everyone else fought desperately to survive and find a way back.

As if things weren't already bad enough, I soon learned that the rabbits we killed weren't going to be wasted.

They were going to be our dinner.

Seeing chunks of meat being carved and cooked made my stomach twist even tighter. The smell alone was enough to make my head spin. It filled the camp, rich and heavy with the smell and it was impossible to ignore. My mental state spiraled further and further downward.

When the food was finally done and served to us by the magic knights, all I could do was stare at it. The meat sat there on the plate, steaming softly, looking completely different from the creature it once was—and yet, I couldn't separate the two in my mind.

And then my body reacted before I could stop it.

"Mmghh...!"

I clamped a hand over my mouth and shot up from my seat, my chair scraping loudly against the ground. I barely made it behind one of the tents before everything came rushing out.

I vomited until there was nothing left. My stomach was already empty, which only made it worse—nothing but bitter liquid spilling out as my body shook. My head pounded, my vision blurring at the edges.

While I was still hunched over, trying to catch my breath, I felt someone behind me.

"Saika-san? Are you okay?" a familiar voice asked.

I turned slightly. It was Hasegawa-sensei.

"I'm fine, sensei," I said, forcing a weak smile. "I just... don't really have an appetite."

"W-Well, that's understandable," she replied hesitantly. "I don't... really feel like eating that either..."

I let out a quiet breath. It was oddly comforting to know I wasn't the only one feeling this way. Maybe it was strange that we couldn't bring ourselves to eat it. People in this world lived off meat. Hunting and eating monsters was normal for them. But for us, it still felt wrong.

As I was thinking that, a small, unmistakable growl came from sensei's stomach.

"Heheh...~" She smiled shyly, rubbing her cheek. "Even if I don't want to eat it, I don't really have the option of skipping meals for an entire day," she said softly. "I heard Miss Shredica has some fruit stored in her tent. Why don't we ask her if we can have those instead?"

I nodded slowly. That sounded like the best option right now.

"Alright," I said, smiling at her. "Lead the way, sensei."

And with that, we started walking.