

The World Is Mine For The Taking #Chapter 1161 - 177 - The Forest Of Doom (3) - Read The World Is Mine For The Taking Chapter 1161 - 177 - The Forest Of Doom (3)

Chapter 1161: Chapter 177 - The Forest Of Doom (3)

I dreamed of the past.

Whether it was truly the past or just something my mind chose to frame that way doesn't really matter now. What mattered was how real it felt—how vivid every word and expression was, as if I had been dropped right back into that moment.

The conversation itself had happened only two days before Tsubasa-kun's death.

Back then, I was just talking to him like usual. He was someone I genuinely enjoyed spending time with. We shared the same hobbies, the same little interests that made conversations stretch longer than they were supposed to. Talking to him never felt forced. It flowed naturally, like we were already used to each other's presence.

"Tsubasa-kun," I said back then, trying to sound casual even though my heart wasn't cooperating, "I've heard that you and Chihara-san have been hanging out a lot lately. Are you dating her?"

"We're not," he replied.

His voice was firm—too firm, almost rehearsed—but despite that, I couldn't shake the doubt creeping into my chest. He continued, as if to clarify, "We just basically live next to each other."

"I see..." I answered.

That was all I said out loud, but inside, my thoughts were anything but calm. I'd asked out of curiosity, sure, but if I was being honest with myself, jealousy had been the real reason. I wanted to know where I stood, even if I pretended otherwise.

The truth was, I had always had my eyes on him. Tsubasa-kun. Most of the time, he came off as aloof—quiet, distant, like he existed slightly apart from everyone else. But instead of pushing people away, that distance pulled them in. It certainly pulled me in. There was something about him that felt mysterious, and a lot of girls in our class noticed it too. I was just one of many, but my interest ran deeper than idle attraction.

What truly caught my attention was his kindness.

If someone needed help, he didn't hesitate. If he saw someone struggling, even quietly, he stepped in without making a big deal out of it. He never asked for thanks or recognition. He just did what he thought was right. That kind of quiet compassion was rare, and it made him stand out far more than his silence ever did.

Because of that, I couldn't understand why Kaori wasn't dating him already. It seemed so obvious to me. But then again, maybe it wasn't that simple. Maybe they had been together for so long—side by side, day after day—that romance never had the chance to bloom. Maybe they saw each other as siblings instead of potential lovers. That was the conclusion I'd eventually settled on, even if it felt more like something I told myself to feel better.

No matter how I tried to rationalize it, the point remained the same.

Tsubasa-kun was attractive.

At least, to me he was. And I wasn't alone in thinking that. Plenty of girls liked him, which was exactly why people were so interested in what kind of relationship he really had with Chihara Akane. Whispers and quiet questions floated around, never spoken too loudly, but always present.

Looking back, it made sense that they got along so well. They were alike in many ways. Both of them were aloof, reserved, and selective about who they spoke to. Neither of them opened up easily, which only made their closeness stand out even more.

"Well," I told him that day, forcing myself to smile, "I think you two suit each other."

Even though jealousy twisted inside me, I couldn't deny what I saw. There was chemistry there, something subtle but undeniable.

"And I think Chihara-san has feelings for you," I added. "I mean, you're the only person she really talks to."

When I said that, he smiled.

It caught me completely off guard. I had seen him smile before, but not like that. Not so openly. It felt genuine, unguarded, like something he hadn't meant to show.

"I don't know about that," he said quietly.

But that smile lingered in my mind long after. It felt like confirmation—like he already knew something was there between them, even if he didn't want to say it out loud. Maybe he was pretending it wasn't important. Maybe he was just letting things be.

I woke up with a strange sensation against my face.

Someone's bare stomach was pressed softly against my cheek, warm and unmoving. The heat seeped into my skin, grounding me in reality far more abruptly than I would have liked.

"Mmm... Mama... I don't want to wake up yet," she murmured sleepily.

One of my classmates was sleeping peacefully beside me, completely unaware, her stomach resting against my face as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

Carefully, slowly, I pried myself away from her without waking her up. I didn't know when I'd gotten so good at slipping out of situations like that, but my movements were quiet and practiced now. Years ago, I might've panicked. Now, it was almost routine.

Once free, I stepped outside the tent and breathed in the crisp morning air. The world felt calm in that moment, suspended between night and day. That's when I saw Kaori.

She was already training.

Her sword moved through the air again and again, cutting invisible arcs with precision. Every swing was deliberate. There was no wasted motion, no hesitation. It wasn't wild or reckless—it was disciplined, controlled, almost beautiful in its own way.

"You're really going all out this early," I said, a hint of teasing in my voice. "At this rate, I should start calling you Kaori the Hero."

"Hero?" she replied, glancing over with a small smile. "Please. I don't remember doing anything heroic enough to deserve that." She rested her sword on her shoulder. "Besides, being heroes from another world isn't exactly something to be proud of."

With the sword resting there, she looked intimidating—strong, composed, and dangerous in a way that demanded respect.

"Mind if I join your training?" I asked.

"Of course," she said easily. "This field is way too big for just one person, don't you think?"

I nodded and went to ready my gear. Soon enough, the two of us were swinging our weapons side by side, the sound of steel slicing through the air echoing softly around us. After warming up, sweat beginning to form, I turned to look at her.

"Hey," I said, catching my breath, "why don't we spar?"

"Spar?" she repeated, raising an eyebrow.

"Yeah," I replied. "I don't think we've ever sparred against each other, right? We've only trained with the instructors back at the castle. And they said we've grown so much stronger that they don't even feel qualified to teach us anymore."

I tightened my grip on my weapon.

"So don't you think this is the perfect chance to see how strong we really are now?"

She looked at me for a moment, then smiled. It was sharp, confident, and full of quiet excitement.

"Well," she said, lifting her sword again, "I guess you're right."

Chapter 1162: Chapter 177 - The Forest Of Doom (4)

After we finally wrapped up our training session, I found myself hesitating instead of immediately sitting down or stretching like usual. My entire body was slick with sweat, my shirt clinging uncomfortably to my skin, and my breathing was still slightly uneven from the exertion. My hair stuck to my neck, and sweat dripped down my temples, but despite all of that, there was something nagging at the back of my mind.

Something I'd been wanting to ask for a while now.

Before I could overthink it any further, I turned toward her.

"Hey, Kaori," I said, my voice a little hoarse from the dry air and exhaustion. "Can I ask you something?"

She glanced at me, wiping her forehead with the back of her hand. "What is it?"

I paused. Just for a second. The words didn't come out immediately because I knew exactly how sensitive this topic was. Even though days had already passed since everything happened, that didn't mean it was any less delicate.

"Well... this might be kind of insensitive," I started slowly, choosing my words carefully. "Especially since you just went through a breakup. But I still want to ask because I realized I never really asked you about it back then."

I didn't want it to sound sudden or careless. It wasn't something I could just casually throw out there. Even now, my chest felt a little tight just thinking about it. I'd been curious for a while—about what she really felt, not what she showed on the surface.

"The way you're dancing around the question is making me nervous, Ayaka," she said, giving me a suspicious look. "What do you actually want to ask?"

I swallowed, feeling my throat tighten.

"I was wondering... if there really weren't any feelings you had for Tsubasa-kun back then."

The moment the question left my mouth, Kaori stopped moving entirely.

The air felt heavier somehow, like everything went quiet all at once. She didn't respond immediately, and I could tell I'd hit exactly the kind of topic I'd been afraid of. Just as I thought, it was a taboo subject for her—raw, sensitive, and still lingering beneath the surface.

"I'm sorry," I said quickly, panic creeping into my voice. "I shouldn't have asked like that. It must still be a fresh wound, right?"

She exhaled slowly, then looked away.

"Well... it doesn't really bother me that much anymore," she said after a moment. "And honestly, I think I already know why you're asking something like this." She turned back to me, her gaze sharp but not hostile. "Ayaka, you like Tsubasa, don't you?"

"W-Wait, how did you know?!" I practically shouted, my voice jumping an octave.

My face instantly felt like it was on fire.

She laughed softly, clearly amused by my reaction. "It wasn't exactly a secret to me," she said. "I pretty much know everyone in our class who has a crush on Tsubasa."

She let out a small chuckle. "I mean, whenever you're near him, you're always blushing. You get flustered so easily. There's no way I wouldn't notice."

My heart pounded loudly in my chest.

W-Was I really that obvious? I'd thought I was being careful. There was no way I'd been showing my feelings that openly... right?

"D-Do you think... Tsubasa-kun knows?" I asked quietly, my voice trembling despite my attempt to sound calm.

"I don't think so," Kaori replied without hesitation. "He's ridiculously dense. Like, unbelievably dense. He can't tell if someone loves him or not." She sighed, though there was a faint smile on her lips. "Honestly, it irritated me sometimes. How clueless he could be."

Her smile lingered, but it wasn't carefree. It felt nostalgic, almost bittersweet—like she was remembering moments she could never go back to.

"Well," she added softly, almost to herself, "I guess that applies to both of us."

She said that last part so quietly that I might've missed it entirely if my senses hadn't been heightened. The words barely carried, but they landed heavily.

"To answer your question," she continued, her tone more serious now, "I did have feelings for him."

My chest tightened.

"I just realized it far too late."

There was something somber in her voice when she said that. Not regret exactly—more like quiet acceptance. The kind that came from understanding you couldn't change what had already passed.

Ten days.

We had been here for ten days already, and as of now, it didn't feel like we'd made any meaningful progress at all.

Day after day, it was the same routine. The same scenery. The same enemies.

All this time, we'd been fighting demon rabbits.

Apparently, this area was their natural habitat, which explained why they were everywhere. They were far more common here than anything else, and no matter how many we killed, it felt like more just kept appearing.

Because of that, the boys were the ones doing most of the fighting.

They killed the demon rabbits quickly and efficiently—almost mechanically. There was no hesitation, no wasted movement. It was unsettling in its own way.

Leading the charge was Amakawa-kun.

He moved with frightening speed, his movements sharp and decisive. Even when the demon rabbits stopped fighting back—when they were clearly terrified and scrambling to escape—he didn't slow down.

He kept killing them.

"Ugh, boring. This is getting really boring," he muttered after finishing off the last demon rabbit.

He looked down at the creature he'd just stabbed, then kicked it with little effort. The demon rabbit's body flew through the air, slamming into a nearby tree and splattering against it. Blood sprayed outward, staining the bark and ground.

"Amakawa-kun, could you please take this more seriously?" Kashiwagi-kun said, his voice firm.

Amakawa-kun turned sharply. "What do you mean?" he snapped. "I'm taking this as seriously as it gets. Do you think I'm just messing around here?"

"To me, it looks like you are," Kashiwagi-kun replied calmly.

He wasn't wrong.

From where I stood, it was obvious. Amakawa-kun looked like he was enjoying himself. Like he was treating everything as a game—like our situation didn't matter at all.

"You know what?" Amakawa-kun said, glaring at him now. "I really don't appreciate you saying that, Kashiwagi. Don't tell me you're trying to show off, especially since the girls have been ignoring us lately."

His tone grew sharper, more hostile.

"You've always been like this," he continued. "Come to think of it, I've heard about you before. You're the type who wants a harem, right? Acting all nice so you can brainwash girls into falling for you. You really think that's going to work?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Kashiwagi-kun replied coldly, glaring back at him. "I'm just telling you that you can't treat this like some joke. The rest of us are taking this seriously. We all want to go back to our world."

"Screw that," Amakawa-kun said without hesitation. "I like this world."

He spread his arms slightly, as if gesturing to everything around us. "I'm getting everything I ever wanted without even trying. Why would I give this up when everything here is better?"

His eyes narrowed.

"Don't you feel the same?" he added. "I mean, you've fucked one or two maids in the castle already, haven't you?"

The reaction was immediate.

The girls froze, shock written clearly across their faces. A few gasped. Others stiffened, their expressions pale. None of us had any idea what he was talking about.

"W-What... are you talking about, Amakawa-kun?" Yamamoto Sakura asked, her voice trembling.

She was one of our classmates—and it was no secret she had a huge crush on Kashiwagi-kun.

Amakawa-kun didn't answer right away.

He simply smirked.

Chapter 1163: Chapter 177 - The Forest Of Doom (5)

"That's right. You heard me correctly." Amakawa-kun's voice cut through the air, calm yet strangely energized, like he had already accepted whatever chaos would follow.
"Well, I guess some of you already had an idea by now. During our stay in the castle, we were provided with... services."

A pause followed. It wasn't the kind that invited interruption—it was deliberate, heavy, as if he wanted everyone to sit with the implication before he continued.

"And when I say services, I mean all kinds of services." His lips curled slightly, not quite a smile, but not far from it either. "I don't think I really need to make it any clearer than that. You already know what I'm talking about."

A faint murmur rippled through the group. No one laughed. No one joked. The meaning behind his words was too obvious to pretend otherwise.

"And Kashiwagi here..." Amakawa-kun went on, turning slightly and gesturing toward him with a casual flick of his hand, "...he wasn't immune to it either. Come on, Kashiwagi. Why don't you tell the girls yourself? Tell them that you fucked a maid back in the castle too."

Kashiwagi-kun didn't respond.

He didn't even look up.

He just stood there, shoulders stiff, gaze fixed somewhere on the ground as if staring long enough might make the moment pass. It felt less like hesitation and more like surrender. Like someone who already knew there was no escaping the outcome, so resisting would only make it worse.

With Amakawa-kun openly admitting everything, it no longer mattered whether Kashiwagi-kun spoke or not. The implication was already there, loud and unavoidable. If one of them had been given those services, then it meant all of them had. The silence itself was a confession.

"So that's why you've all changed," I said, my voice colder than I intended.

My eyes locked onto Kashiwagi-kun. I didn't look away. I couldn't. The fact that he had kept something like this from me—kept it hidden so carefully—hurt more than I expected. It wasn't just the act itself. It was the secrecy. The acceptance. The way he had gone along with it as if it were normal.

It felt like betrayal.

"You, of all people..." I said, my jaw tightening. "I never thought you'd fall that deep into the rabbit hole. To let yourself be seduced like that."

My gaze shifted, sweeping over the others one by one.

"And that goes for all of you."

No one interrupted me.

"You've fallen far enough to do something like this," I continued. "I honestly can't believe it."

One of the girls let out a shaky breath. Another crossed her arms tightly, as if trying to shield herself from the situation.

"I knew you boys were keeping something from us," someone said, her voice sharp with disappointment. "But I didn't think it was something this bad. You guys are seriously the worst."

"Falling for such an obvious trap," another added, shaking her head. "Even in a situation like this... boys really will be boys, huh?"

The atmosphere shifted completely. The looks directed at the boys were no longer confused or uncertain. They were filled with disgust—raw and unfiltered. It was written plainly on every face.

"I don't trust you anymore," I said. "I don't even think I'd feel safe being around you all now."

For a brief moment, there was silence.

Then Amakawa-kun laughed softly.

"You don't have to trust us," he said. "We don't really care about you."

The way his eyes widened as he spoke sent a chill down my spine. There was something wrong there—something broken. He didn't look like the person I

remembered anymore. He looked unhinged, like someone who had tasted something forbidden and no longer cared about the consequences.

"When this world gives us everything we want," he continued, his tone growing more animated, "why the hell would we choose people like you? I'd rather stay here and enjoy myself than go back to that place."

There was no hesitation in his voice. No doubt.

And from the way the others stood behind him—silent but unmoving—it was clear they felt the same.

"Is that so?" I said quietly.

I didn't wait for an answer.

I turned around and walked away.

Behind me, Sakura hadn't moved.

She stood there, frozen, as if her body refused to follow her thoughts.

"It's a lie, right?" she asked, her voice trembling. "Kashiwagi-kun... it's not true, right?"

But there was no response.

The silence answered her question far more cruelly than words ever could.

"I'm sorry, Yamamoto-san," Amakawa-kun muttered, his tone suddenly bitter, almost dismissive.

That was when Sakura finally turned around. As she began walking toward us, tears spilled freely from her eyes. She didn't bother wiping them away.

"You don't need to look for him anymore, Sakura," I said gently but firmly. "That person isn't Kashiwagi-kun anymore. Whoever he is now... he's a stranger to us."

As painful as it was to admit, it had to be said.

This had to be a trap. Something deliberately prepared to make them stay in this world. A temptation designed to sink its claws into them and never let go.

And if they had traps like that prepared for the boys...

Then it was only logical to assume they had traps prepared for us too.

Which meant one thing.

We couldn't afford to let our guard down.

Hasegawa Chiaki's POV

I couldn't sit still after hearing what the boys had done. The information weighed heavily on my chest, twisting my stomach into knots. No matter how much I tried to rationalize it, the unease wouldn't go away.

So I went straight to Miss Shredica.

The moment I reached her office, I slammed my hands down on her desk, the sharp sound echoing through the room.

"What are you doing, Miss Chiaki?" she said, her voice calm but edged with irritation. "I told you already. If you wake up late and miss the others heading into the forest, you're supposed to go by yourself. Or is this another one of your tirades about how we're doing something 'inhuman' to all of you?"

She looked almost identical to one of my students—someone who should never have been part of something like this. But that was where the similarity ended. Her eyes were cold, lifeless, and there was a heaviness about her presence that made my skin crawl.

She looked like someone who had taken lives before.

She scared me.

Still, I forced myself to stand tall, even as my legs trembled beneath me.

"I heard from my students that the boys were given 'services' by the maids in the castle," I said, meeting her gaze. "What exactly do they mean by that?"

I wasn't naive. I knew what kind of service it referred to. Anyone would.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Miss Shredica replied smoothly. "Isn't it natural for those in higher positions to be rewarded? To receive services from those beneath them?"

Her tone didn't change. Not even slightly.

"I don't see why you're so upset," she continued. "The maids were simply doing their jobs—ensuring that the heroes were comfortable during their stay."

She said it so casually, so matter-of-factly, that my mind went blank.

For a moment, I couldn't even find the words to respond.

Chapter 1164: Chapter 177 - The Forest Of Doom (6)

"You people are horrible," I said, my voice low and bitter.

The words tasted strange as they left my mouth. It was the first time in my life I had ever called another person *horrible*. Not in my head. Not in passing. Out loud, directly, with intent. And the moment I said it, I realized just how heavy that word was. How final it sounded.

"Not only did you put us in this situation and force us to fight," I continued, my fingers curling into fists at my sides, "you also did something unbelievably inhumane to my students." My voice shook, but I didn't stop. "Do you seriously have no shame as a human being?"

Miss Shredica didn't flinch. Not even a little.

"If you want to blame someone," she replied coolly, her tone sharp but controlled, "then bark at the right tree—not me, Miss Chiaki." She looked at me like I was nothing more than a mild inconvenience. "I'm just doing my job. I'm doing everything necessary to reach my own goal. And if I have to step on people to get there, then that's exactly what I'll do."

She exhaled, clearly done with the conversation. "Now, Miss Chiaki, if you would be so kind, please step outside for a moment."

That was it. No remorse. No hesitation. No cracks in her composure.

I stared at her, searching—hoping—for *something*. Any sign that there was still a human being behind those eyes. Some emotion. Some trace of guilt. But there was nothing. It didn't even feel like she was talking to someone who could be pitied or understood. It was like I wasn't even worth acknowledging beyond procedure.

I finally understood.

There was no getting through to someone like Miss Shredica.

"I'll take my leave, then," I said quietly. "Thank you for your time."

The words felt empty, but they were all I had left.

I turned and walked out of the tent.

The air outside felt heavier than before. The noise of the camp buzzed faintly around me, but none of it registered. I already knew the truth before I even fully processed it—no one here was going to help us. Not willingly. Not sincerely.

There would be no support from this place.

The only remaining hope we had was the person Princess Myrcella mentioned. I didn't know how capable they were. I didn't know how fast they could act. But I trusted the Princess. If she said this person would help us, then I believed her.

I just didn't know when I'd get the chance to meet them.

And time was something we didn't have much of.

Because right now—more than anything else—I just wanted to bring all of my students home.

Amakawa Yuuto's POV

After the girls left, we didn't stop.

We kept moving forward, deeper into the forest, continuing our hunt for the demon tiger. No one spoke much. I stayed quiet, letting the sound of our footsteps and rustling leaves fill the space between us.

The forest was dense—almost suffocating. Thick trees towered overhead, their branches tangling together so tightly that sunlight barely slipped through. Everywhere I looked, it was the same endless pattern of bark, shadow, and greenery. It felt like the forest was closing in on us the further we went.

"It looks like we've entered a different site," Shirakawa-kun said, slowing down as he checked the map in his hands. He glanced up, scanning the surroundings, then back down again.

He was right. This area still counted as part of the forest, but it felt different. The air was heavier. The ground felt rougher underfoot. It wasn't the same place we had been traveling through earlier.

Which meant this had to be progress.

"Well, at least tell me we're gonna fight something bigger here," Amakawa-kun said, stretching his arms casually. "I'm tired of dealing with those rabbits. Seriously, it's starting to piss me off."

"I—I'm not sure," Shirakawa-kun replied honestly. "But since we're much deeper in the woods now, I think it's safe to assume there'll be something stronger than rabbits."

"I see," Amakawa-kun said, grinning. "That's way more exciting."

He didn't sound worried. Not even slightly.

Actually, none of the boys did.

Amakawa-kun didn't seem bothered at all by how the girls felt about him anymore. Or maybe he never cared to begin with. The others were the same. Even after being openly hated, they acted like it didn't matter in the slightest.

That bothered me.

It frustrated me how unfazed they were—how easily they brushed it all aside like it meant nothing. But at the same time, I knew I didn't have the right to say anything. We had brought this on ourselves. The situation we were in now was the result of our own actions.

All we could do was accept the hatred and move forward.

Suddenly, a strange sensation crawled over my skin.

It felt wrong.

We stopped at the same time, every one of us instinctively freezing in place. The air felt tense, almost electric, like something unseen was watching us.

"Was that the tiger?" Shirakawa-kun asked quietly.

It made sense to think so. This presence was far stronger than anything we had encountered before. It wasn't subtle. It was overwhelming.

We waited, barely breathing, as the presence grew closer—slow, deliberate, unavoidable.

Then it showed itself.

"Roooooooooarrr...!"

The sound alone sent a chill down my spine.

What emerged from the trees wasn't a tiger.

It was a massive lizard-like creature with an enormous mouth, its body towering over us. Up close, it looked like something straight out of prehistory—similar to a dinosaur, but not quite. Its teeth were jagged and sharp, and its thick scales looked capable of deflecting most attacks.

And it wasn't alone.

More shapes moved behind it.

One.

Two.

Too many.

Dozens of them—maybe even twenty.

"Well," Amakawa-kun said, cracking his knuckles, "looks like we've finally found some worthy opponents."

He sounded excited. Almost thrilled.

I wasn't.

There was no way these things would be as easy as the rabbits we fought earlier. I wasn't even confident I could handle one of them on my own.

But the boys didn't hesitate.

They stood tall, weapons ready, eyes sharp. At this point, they truly believed they were untouchable.

Unbeatable.

And somehow—

They proved it.

Because less than an hour later, every single one of those lizards lay utterly defeated.

Chapter 1165: Chapter 178 - The Bandit Ambush (1)

Hasegawa Chiaki's POV

It happened on our twenty-eighth day in this place.

Twenty-eight days since we were thrown into a world that didn't care who we were before. Twenty-eight days of fear, exhaustion, and pretending we were stronger than we actually were. And on that day—

One of our own was kidnapped.

It happened the day before the day I was supposed to begin.

Looking back now, the signs were already there. The cracks had been forming for a while, spreading quietly, slowly, like fractures in glass that you don't notice until everything finally shatters.

The tension between the boys and the girls had been unbearable lately. It wasn't just awkward silence or the usual discomfort—you could feel it in the air, thick and heavy, like a storm waiting to break. The girls had completely stopped acknowledging the boys. No greetings. No small talk. Not even a glance. And the boys noticed. Of course they did.

It felt like they had already drawn invisible lines on the ground, dividing themselves into separate camps. Us versus them. Boys versus girls. Former classmates turned wary strangers.

As their teacher, as someone who was supposed to guide them, I wanted to scream at them to stop. I wanted to tell them that fighting each other was the worst possible thing they could do right now. That in a world like this, where everyone else saw them as tools or entertainment, they only had each other.

But I couldn't ignore the truth either.

The boys had already destroyed that trust. They had betrayed the girls in ways that couldn't simply be brushed aside with apologies or excuses. I understood why the girls were angry. I understood why they were afraid. Still, watching everything fall apart like this made my chest ache.

This wasn't right.

The people of this world had twisted them, manipulated them, pushed them into situations no one their age should ever experience. And what disturbed me most wasn't just what happened—it was how little anyone here seemed to care about the aftermath. The way the class was unraveling, the way bonds were snapping one by one, as if friendships were disposable.

When I thought back to how they used to be during my lessons on Earth—laughing, teasing each other, working together—it felt unreal. Back then, they were just students.

Kids who complained about homework and exams. Friends who trusted each other without hesitation.

Now?

Now they barely existed in the same space.

It was depressing. Painfully so. Just a few months ago, they were inseparable. Now, they passed each other like strangers on the street. Worse, I could clearly see hatred beginning to replace familiarity.

If this continued, they wouldn't just be strangers anymore.

They'd be enemies.

I wanted to stop it. I truly did. I wanted to pull them together and force them to talk things out, to remember who they were before this place broke them.

But before I could—

"Hey, Sensei..."

Amakawa-kun's voice cut through my thoughts. He was standing too close, his posture relaxed in a way that made my skin crawl. There was a grin on his face, one that didn't reach his eyes.

"It's honestly kind of cute, you know?" he said. "Seeing you hang around with us like this."

"Cute?" I frowned slightly.

"You do know we haven't been with a woman for quite a while, right?" he added, tone light, almost playful.

"Don't joke about that, Amakawa-kun," I said immediately, my voice firm.

"We're not joking," he replied without missing a beat. "I think I've been pretty clear about that." His lips curled into a smirk. "You really have no idea what we're thinking right now, do you? Do you seriously think we're just messing around?"

He leaned back slightly, eyes gleaming.

"Because we're not."

"Stop it, Amakawa-kun," Kashiwagi-kun snapped, stepping in between us. "You're already talking to the girls like that, and now you're doing it to Chiaki-sensei too? What the hell happened to you? Where did your humanity go?"

Amakawa's expression darkened instantly.

"Shut up, Kashiwagi," he said flatly. "You don't get it. You really don't." His voice dropped. "I'm serious. You've cockblocked me more times than I can count."

Kashiwagi-kun looked at him calmly.

"Do you really think I wouldn't kill you over something like that?" Amakawa continued, eyes locked onto him. "Dying over something stupid like this wouldn't be fun, would it?"

This wasn't banter. This wasn't frustration.

This was real.

My heart pounded as I realized how far things had gone.

"S-Stop it!" I shouted, my voice breaking through the tension before I could stop myself. "You can't fight each other like this! We don't even have allies anymore! Why—why can't you all just get along?!"

The words burst out of me, raw and unfiltered. I had reached my limit. Weeks of stress, fear, and helplessness exploded all at once. I didn't care anymore how it sounded.

"Sensei!"

The girls rushed toward me, panic written all over their faces.

"We told you not to come to the boys' side again!" one of them said urgently. "We don't know what they might do to you if you stay here!"

"Hey!" one of the boys shot back immediately. "Don't you think that's a pretty fucked-up thing to say?"

"Yeah," another added, his voice sharp. "You're lumping all of us together like we're trash. Don't you think you're partly to blame for this too?"

"What do you mean?" one of the girls snapped.

"I mean," the boy continued, frustration spilling over, "if you girls would just put out, everything would be fine. All of us would be happy. Isn't that obvious?"

My stomach twisted.

"And you're suspicious of us?" another boy chimed in bitterly. "How do we know you girls didn't do the same thing? For all we know, you fucked some of the male knights in the castle."

"It's not impossible, right?" one of them pressed on. "Maybe you got the same treatment we did. So why are you ignoring us like this? Why are you putting up walls?"

That was it.

The girls snapped.

"How dare you blame us for this when you're the ones who destroyed our trust first!" one of them screamed. "After all the trashy things you did in the castle, you still have the nerve to talk like that?!"

"And don't you dare say we went through the same things you did!" another shouted, eyes blazing. "We didn't! We stayed together the entire time! We didn't have the time or the mental capacity to even think about that shit! Don't lump us in with you!"

The argument erupted into chaos. Voices overlapped, anger feeding anger, words turning sharper with every second. The air felt suffocating, as if the space between them was tearing apart something that could never be repaired.

"You human pieces of trash."

Sakai-san's voice cut through the noise, cold and steady. She stepped forward, her glare sharp enough to make even the boys hesitate.

"Touch Sensei, and it's war," she said. "Don't get arrogant just because you've been through expeditions. Don't forget—we're heroes too."

"Oh yeah?" Amakawa-kun replied, turning to her with that same twisted smile. "Then why don't we settle it right now?"

His eyes roamed over the girls.

"Boys versus girls. Let's see who's actually stronger."

The smile he wore now was nothing like the one he had back on Earth. That kind, harmless grin was gone. In its place was something ugly. Something that made my skin crawl.

"And if I win," he added casually, "you'll be my plaything for the rest of the expedition."

"What's going on here?"

A woman's voice sliced through the tension like a blade.

We all turned.

Miss Shredica stood there, her expression dark, her scowl so intense that the entire area seemed to freeze in place.

Chapter 1166: Chapter 178 - The Bandit Ambush (2)

We all turned toward Miss Shredica at the same time, almost like it was instinctive. She was staring straight at us, her gaze heavy and sharp, like we'd just crossed some invisible line we weren't supposed to even know existed. It wasn't loud or dramatic, but it carried weight. The kind that made your spine stiffen without you realizing it.

Thinking back on it now, I can admit it—maybe it was only natural for her to look at us like that.

After all, from her perspective, we probably looked like a bunch of kids who had let something ugly crawl out of us.

"It's none of your business, isn't it?" Amakawa-kun snapped, his voice dripping with irritation. He looked at her the same way someone would look at a person who had just stepped in front of the screen right before the best part of a movie. "Don't you think it'd be better if you just got out of our heroes' way? And don't even try to do something stupid like coming after us. You should go back to where you belong."

The words came out sharp and careless, like he didn't even consider the possibility that they might come back to bite him.

Miss Shredica's eyes narrowed. "It's you again," she said coolly. "You've been causing trouble nonstop lately. What, are you planning to make even more trouble than necessary?" She sighed, rubbing her temple slightly. "My head is already aching from having to babysit all of you. Why can't you behave the way you're supposed to?"

There was frustration in her voice, raw and unfiltered. She didn't sound angry in the explosive sense—she sounded tired. Deeply, painfully tired. Like someone who had been holding everything together with sheer willpower and was starting to feel it slip.

I didn't really know what her job entailed in full detail, but I knew she'd been staying up late almost every night. Reading documents, reports, things I didn't recognize or understand. Whatever it was, it had to be important—important enough to steal sleep from someone like her.

"You're really pissing me off," Amakawa-kun said, his glare hardening. There was no humor in his eyes now, no teasing edge. Just naked hostility, like she was an enemy that had existed in his head for a long time.

"I think you've already made that obvious," Miss Shredica replied, unimpressed. "You haven't exactly been shy about it. And I heard what you said earlier." Her lips pressed into a thin line. "Don't you think your idea of wooing a woman is completely skewed? It's honestly unpleasant how you believe any woman would fall into your lap just because you've gained power."

Amakawa-kun let out a short laugh, more scoff than humor. "Well, isn't that how it works? When you have power, it's only natural that you stand at the top of the world. That's how it's supposed to be, right?" He shrugged slightly. "When men have power, the only thing they can do is use it. And since I have it, I'll use it however the fuck I want. That's the nature of men. That's the only natural thing to do."

The air felt heavier after that. Like something rotten had been exposed and no one knew how to cover it up again.

"I see..." Miss Shredica said quietly. There was no anger in her tone now. Just distance. "Then how about you try your luck with me?"

"Huh?"

The confusion on his face was almost comical, if the situation hadn't been so tense.

"You heard me," she said, her voice steady, almost deliberately provocative. "If you manage to defeat me, I'll let you do me. You can do whatever you want, enjoy it however you please. Though I doubt you'd even manage to get me off."

For a split second, the world seemed to freeze.

Then Amakawa-kun burst out laughing. "Ha! If that's the deal, I guess I'll accept." His grin was ugly, full of confidence that hadn't been earned. "I've been pretty pissed about not getting to fuck any juicy pussy lately. No maid around for me to fuck, so it's nice of you to offer yourself."

He turned his head slightly, eyes flicking toward me. "I was honestly thinking about fucking Hasegawa-sensei too, but since you stepped up, I don't have to anymore. Be grateful, sensei. Looks like you won't get eaten by us today."

The way he looked at me made my skin crawl. Like he was imagining things I didn't want to exist. A shiver ran through my body before I could stop it. I didn't even know what I was feeling anymore—fear, disgust, disbelief. Probably all of it mixed together.

It was unbearable.

And the worst part was that this feeling came from someone I knew. Someone I used to recognize. I didn't know what to believe in anymore.

"M-Miss Shredica..." Kashiwagi-kun spoke up hesitantly.

He looked genuinely worried, his eyes fixed on her back. Out of all of us, he seemed like the only one who hadn't completely lost himself yet. He had tasted temptation, sure, but he hadn't drowned in it.

Miss Shredica didn't look back at him. Not even for a second. Her entire focus was locked onto Amakawa-kun, unshaken.

"Come," she said. "Don't hold back."

That was all it took.

Amakawa-kun's smirk widened, stretching across his face like a crack in glass. He unsheathed his sword, the metal singing softly as it left the scabbard.

"I'll make you regret this and fuck you while that scowl is still on your face!"

He lunged forward in an instant.

The speed was unreal. One moment he was standing there, the next he was a blur tearing through the space between them. Just from that single movement, it was obvious how much stronger he'd become. His body moved like it belonged to someone else entirely—someone dangerous.

For a brief, terrifying moment, I really thought he was going to win.

There was no hesitation in him. No doubt. Just pure, ruthless intent. We'd been told over and over that our power was something even magic knights couldn't compare to.

I had seen Miss Shredica show her strength during training before, but never like this. Never against someone who was clearly trying to kill—or worse.

I wondered, just for a second, if she could really stop him.

That doubt didn't even have time to settle.

Miss Shredica didn't move.

She didn't step back. She didn't raise her hand.

And Amakawa-kun was suddenly on the ground.

"Huh?"

The sound came out of him dumb and confused. Like his brain hadn't caught up to his body yet. He blinked, staring up at the sky, clearly struggling to understand why things weren't the way they were supposed to be.

Then realization hit.

I followed his gaze downward.

Where his foot should have been... there was nothing. Just a bleeding stump, blood spilling onto the ground in a sickening rush.

His feet—no, one of them—had been left behind. Still standing there. Still planted exactly where he'd been before he even moved.

Chapter 1167: Chapter 178 - The Bandit Ambush (3)

"Waaah?! Whattt?! W-What the fuckkkk?! What did you do to me?!"

The scream tore through the air, sharp and panicked, cracking in the middle like something fragile being snapped in half. It took a moment for it to fully sink in, even for him. Amakawa-kun's gaze slowly dropped downward, his breathing hitching as his eyes finally locked onto where his foot used to be.

Or rather—where it no longer was.

The cut was clean. Too clean. There was no mangled flesh, no jagged bone sticking out like something from a horror movie. It was almost surgical, as if someone had simply decided that his foot didn't belong there anymore and removed it with absolute certainty.

"W-What have you done, Miss Shredica?" I asked, my voice coming out thinner than I expected.

She turned to look at me, her expression genuinely puzzled. Not annoyed. Not offended. Just... confused, as if my question itself was strange.

"A simple cut like that can be reattached in no time at all," she said, brushing it off like she'd merely knocked over a cup of water. "So there's no need to worry."

She continued speaking as if this was all perfectly normal, as if she hadn't just sliced off a student's foot without hesitation.

"Obviously, I can't have a hero being incapacitated. Much less by me," she added. "Though it will still take some time before he can walk properly again."

Her voice wasn't sharp. It wasn't cruel. If anything, it was disturbingly calm. That calmness made it worse.

I felt a knot tighten in my stomach. No matter how rational she made it sound, no matter how casually she explained it, I couldn't shake the feeling that she shouldn't have done something like this. Not like that. Not so easily.

I didn't say it out loud. I couldn't. With the tension in the air, with everyone watching, with the fight still looming over us, speaking up felt like pouring gasoline on a fire.

"Y-You bitch! What have you done?!" Amakawa-kun screamed, his voice breaking as panic finally turned into rage.

"You still don't understand," Miss Shredica replied immediately.

She didn't raise her voice. She didn't even look angry.

"Do you want me to cut off your other foot," she continued, tilting her head slightly, "so it finally gets through to you?"

"Ngh..."

The sound that left his mouth wasn't a word. It was a reflex. His body flinched before his mind could even process it, shoulders tensing, breath catching as fear finally punched through his fury.

"Good," she said. "At least you understand how to behave."

Her eyes swept across him, cold and assessing, before widening to include the rest of the group.

"I hope this becomes a lesson. All of you are still trash," she said bluntly. "Some people might call you diamonds in the rough. I don't. Not until you prove your true potential with your own hands."

Her gaze sharpened, cutting deeper than her blade had.

"Trying to squeeze something out of a situation through coercion? That's nothing but trash behavior."

Then she straightened, her presence alone pressing down on the boys like an invisible weight.

"Now then," she said. "All of you. If you don't want to fight me—then come at me."

The silence that followed was heavy.

She was clearly inviting them. No—challenging them.

But not a single one of the boys moved.

Their faces were pale. Some looked away. Others clenched their fists but stayed rooted to the ground. None of them wanted to be the next example. None of them wanted to find out how "simple" another cut might be.

Miss Shredica turned away from them, clearly losing interest.

"Miss Chiaki," she said, looking directly at me now. "Since you are a healer hero, you will reattach the foot yourself using your magic."

"...Huh?"

"You haven't been able to train properly lately," she continued. "This will be good practice."

My ears rang. For a second, I wasn't sure I'd heard her correctly.

"There's no need to worry about infection. Healing magic acts as detoxification as well," she said, still far too calm. "Just place it back on the stump and make sure it's aligned perfectly."

My brain stalled.

No—more than that. It felt like something inside me had outright short-circuited.

Me?

I had never healed anyone before. Not like this. Not something so severe. Healing cuts, bruises, fatigue—that was one thing. This was an entirely different level.

But Amakawa-kun was bleeding. A lot.

There was no time to hesitate.

"O-Okay," I said, forcing the words out. "C-Calm down, Amakawa-kun."

My hands were shaking as I picked up his severed foot. It was heavier than I expected. Warm. Real. Horribly real.

"I'm going to kill that bitch," he muttered through clenched teeth. "I fucking swear, I'm going to kill her."

His eyes were unfocused, wild, teetering on the edge of madness. But right now, that didn't matter. What mattered was the blood soaking into the ground beneath him.

I pressed the stump against the foot, my heart hammering so loudly it felt like it might drown out my thoughts. I took a breath, focused, and activated my healing magic.

Almost instantly, something changed.

The flesh began to knit together, threads of light weaving skin back into skin as if guided by invisible hands. Muscles reconnected, nerves realigned. Bone followed, sealing itself together with a dull, unsettling solidity.

In moments, it was as if nothing had ever happened.

No scar. No seam. No sign of damage.

"Nghh... haa..." Amakawa-kun panted, his body sagging as the adrenaline drained from him. His mouth opened like he wanted to say something else, but the blood loss had taken its toll.

For now, rest was all he could manage.

"Kashiwagi-kun," I said, turning to him. "Can you help Amakawa-kun and let him rest for a bit?"

He was the only one I trusted to handle this without making things worse.

"Alright, Sensei," Kashiwagi-kun replied.

He carefully lifted Amakawa-kun and paused for just a moment, glancing back at us before heading toward the tent.

Watching him go, I couldn't help thinking that Kashiwagi-kun was the only one who genuinely wanted the class to move forward. Even so, differences kept dragging him back. He couldn't become a leader—not after losing the girls' trust.

At that moment, the only thing holding the class together was morality itself.

If that snapped, everything else would follow.

I told myself I had to keep things stable. I had to make sure nothing happened. That everyone stayed in line.

That belief was naïve.

Even as the only adult among these heroes, I was still painfully naïve.

Thinking I could hold everything together was nothing but foolishness.

I knew it had already fallen apart from the very beginning.

There was no fixing it.

It was finally the morning of the incident.

Or at least, that's what I thought.

I jolted awake to the sound of metal clanging violently against metal, the noise echoing from every direction.

"Huh...?"

My head was still foggy as I sat up, confused. Something felt wrong.

Then it hit me—it wasn't morning.

The sky was still dark. The sun hadn't risen. Dawn was nowhere near.

The light spilling into my tent wasn't sunlight.

It was fire.

"Huh...?"

I stepped outside, and my mind went completely blank.

The village was burning.

Flames licked at wooden structures, smoke curling thickly into the sky. Magic knights were engaged in combat—but not against monsters.

Against people.

And those people were holding guns.

Real guns.

Some of them wielded flamethrowers, fire roaring from their nozzles, adding to the chaos. The sight was so surreal, so violently out of place, that my body forgot how to react.

I couldn't even blink.

"Sensei!"

A voice snapped me back into reality.

"Come with us. Quick!"

It was Asada-san.

Chapter 1168: Chapter 178 - The Bandit Ambush (4)

"Tsk. And this has to happen when most of the magic knights aren't here to report back to the castle. What timing..." Asada-san muttered, clicking her tongue in irritation.

Her voice was tight, strained. It was not panicked, but it was far from calm as well. The kind of tone that came from someone who understood exactly how bad the situation was, even if they refused to say it out loud.

She wasn't wrong.

Miss Shredica, along with a number of the magic knights, had returned to the castle earlier to formally report on our progress. It was routine, necessary even. She was expected to return by morning, and because of that, none of us had felt the need to worry. The village had guards. It had defenses. It wasn't completely helpless.

Or at least, that was what we believed.

What none of us anticipated—what no one had prepared for—was that someone would exploit that brief window of vulnerability. That they would strike precisely when the village's strongest line of defense was temporarily absent.

It wasn't just unfortunate.

It was calculated.

Was this planned?

The more I thought about it, the harder it was to believe otherwise. The timing was too perfect. Too clean. Too deliberate to be coincidence. Whoever did this wasn't acting on impulse—they were waiting. Watching. Measuring their moment.

"Sensei," Asada-san said, snapping me out of my thoughts, "do you think you can use your healing ability on some of the injured villagers?"

She gestured vaguely toward the edge of the square, where several figures were being helped along by others. Some were limping. Some were barely conscious. A few were

covered in soot and blood, their expressions vacant, like their minds hadn't caught up with what their bodies had already endured.

"I managed to save some of them," she continued, her tone steady but firm, "but they're badly injured."

"R-Right," I said quickly, nodding. Then, before I could stop myself, the words slipped out. "But... what about you?"

She paused, only for a moment.

"I'm going back," she said simply. "There are more people out there."

My breath caught. "W-What?"

The tremor in my voice betrayed me. I didn't even try to hide it. The image of her disappearing into the chaos, alone, armed with nothing but determination and a sword, made my chest tighten.

"You don't have to worry, sensei," she said, turning back to me. Her expression was calm—too calm, almost. "I think I can handle myself pretty well now."

There was no arrogance in her voice. No reckless bravado. Just quiet confidence.

And strangely enough, when she said that, something inside me eased.

I didn't know why. I should have still been worried. Anyone with a shred of common sense would have been. But for some reason, I wasn't. Not like before.

Maybe it was because of everything that had happened over the past few months.

Asada-san had changed. She had grown—more than I realized until now.

She was the one I had worried about the most when we were first transported to this world. Back then, she was still fragile in ways she tried to hide. Carrying wounds that hadn't healed, even if she smiled like they had.

Ichinose-kun.

He had been close to her. Closer than most people realized. When he died in that car accident, it shattered something. It shattered all of us, in different ways.

I had been hurt too. I remembered crying when I heard the news. I remembered the hollow feeling in my chest, the disbelief, the anger, the sadness all mixing together until it was hard to breathe.

But even then, I knew—what she felt must have been far worse.

Losing someone like that didn't just hurt. It left scars.

That was why, seeing her now—standing straight, eyes sharp, sword steady in her grip—I felt something close to relief.

She had survived that pain.

She had moved forward.

And so, all I could do was watch as she turned away from me and ran back toward the flames, her figure shrinking as she disappeared into the chaos, steel flashing briefly in the firelight.

James's POV

The village burned beautifully.

Flames climbed hungrily up wooden walls, licking rooftops and devouring everything in their path. Smoke rose into the sky in thick, choking columns, painting the night in shades of red and black.

From where I stood, far enough to remain untouched, I watched it all with a satisfied smile.

"Fufufu... what a sight," Claire said beside me, her voice almost dreamy. "I never thought I'd see a village burning right before my eyes. It's truly something special."

Her eyes reflected the firelight as she watched, utterly captivated by the destruction unfolding below. There was no hesitation in her expression. No trace of sympathy. Only glee.

Then she turned her head and looked at me.

"So," she said, tilting her head slightly, "what's the end game here? This is your plan?"

She didn't sound disappointed. If anything, she sounded curious. But I could tell—she had expected more. Something bigger. Something bloodier.

I understood that expectation.

But I had no intention of pushing things that far.

I didn't want to cause unnecessary casualties on the heroes' side. That was precisely why I orchestrated things this way. The damage would be enough to force them to act, to struggle, to grow—but not enough to break them.

I doubted any of the heroes would actually die from this. Still, caution had its place. Better safe than sorry.

"This is a test," I said calmly. "A test for the heroes—to see how much they've improved."

I kept my eyes on the burning village as I spoke.

"It would be a waste if they couldn't deal with something like this. That's why we allowed the Kingdom of Milham to summon them in the first place."

Everything was proceeding exactly as planned.

This attack wasn't meant to destroy—it was meant to measure.

To see whether they were developing the way I intended.

Because if they weren't, then everything up to this point would have been meaningless.

A literal waste.

They needed to become stronger. All of them. One hero alone probably wouldn't be enough to defeat the unstoppable being I intended for them to face in the future.

That was why I would allow them to struggle.

That was why I would let them grow.

"Now then," I said, turning away, "let's go."

Claire blinked. "Huh? You're not going to stay and watch?"

"I don't know why," I replied honestly, "but I have a feeling something unpredictable will show up here."

I frowned slightly. "I'd rather not face him this early."

He would come.

I didn't know how. I didn't know why. But the certainty settled deep in my gut.

And because of that, retreating now was the smartest move.

A tactical retreat.

Chapter 1169: Chapter 178 - The Bandit Ambush (5)

Kaori's POV

Everything was burning.

Fire roared on all sides, swallowing homes, streets, and memories alike. Heat pressed against my skin as I moved forward, step after step, eyes locked ahead.

The thought of how these attackers had flamethrowers and guns built into their arms should have shocked me.

It didn't.

The question barely crossed my mind before vanishing entirely, drowned out by urgency as I ran toward where I sensed someone—anyone—still alive.

Smoke filled the air, thick enough to choke, yet my vision was strangely clear.

Too clear.

Every movement stood out. Every sound felt sharp. My senses were heightened to an unnatural degree, as if the world itself had slowed just enough for me to react.

It had to be my increased perception.

A perk of being a hero.

My awareness was razor-sharp, my body moving almost on instinct alone.

And yet, beneath that clarity, something felt... off.

I felt like I was slowly losing pieces of myself.

It wasn't fear. It wasn't panic. My sense of self wasn't slipping away completely—but there was a distance forming. A strange detachment. Like the person running through the flames wasn't quite the same person I used to be.

But that didn't matter right now.

I didn't have the luxury to think about that.

Not now.

Not when people were still trapped out there.

Being a hero meant I could sense survivors.

And being a hero meant I would save them.

Right now, more than ever, this was the moment I had to become one.

That was when I heard it.

"Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhh!!!"

The sound cut through the roaring flames like a knife. It was raw. Desperate. I turned sharply and saw her. It was a girl crouched near the ruins of a shattered house, her face twisted in fear and pain, fat tears pouring endlessly from her eyes.

I didn't hesitate.

I sprinted toward her and dropped to my knees, pulling her into my arms.

"I'm here," I said quickly, firmly, as if the words themselves could shield her. "You're okay. I've got you."

She clung to me, her sobbing hitching violently. The crying eased for a second, but it didn't stop. Her body trembled, pain and shock running too deep. I could feel it through the contact.

I placed my hand against her and channeled healing mana.

It wasn't perfect. I wasn't skilled enough to fully mend her injuries. But warmth spread through her body, dulling the pain, easing the sharp edges of her suffering until she could at least breathe without flinching.

Her sobs softened.

"Do you know where your parents are?" I asked gently, keeping my voice low.

She looked up at me with glassy eyes, lips trembling. Slowly, she raised her arm and pointed.

Toward a house that had already collapsed, swallowed by fire.

My senses reached out instinctively.

Nothing.

There was no response. No presence.

My chest tightened. It was too late. The truth hovered at the edge of my thoughts, and it was heavy and cruel—

Then she grabbed my clothes tightly.

"P-Please... save my mother, hero," she begged.

Her eyes were wide, pure in a way that hurt to look at. Innocence untouched by the kind of darkness burning this city to the ground. Flames reflected in her pupils, painting her gaze with fire and shadow.

Something inside me snapped into place.

I didn't think.

My body moved.

I took off toward the burning house, wrapping mana around myself as I ran.

Princess Myrcella's words echoed in my mind. She said that mana wasn't just for weapons. It could protect the body too.

I burst into the flames.

Heat tore into me immediately, searing my skin, my lungs screaming in protest. Fire licked at my clothes, my hair, my flesh—but I pushed forward, teeth clenched, ignoring the pain.

Then I felt it.

A presence.

I turned sharply and saw a body buried beneath wreckage.

Alive.

And another one beside it.

That one... wasn't.

Understanding came instantly. The fallen debris. The positioning. The way the living body had been shielded.

The father.

He had protected the mother with his own body.

I didn't waste time.

I reached out and grabbed the burning debris with my bare hands. Pain exploded through my palms, skin blistering instantly, but I lifted anyway. The weight was nothing compared to the resolve burning inside me.

If the father had endured all of this to save his wife—even at the cost of his life—then this pain was nothing.

I threw the debris aside and pulled the woman free..

I lifted her carefully and carried her out, my body instinctively shielding her from the flames, from falling ash, and from everything.

"Mother!!"

The girl screamed as she ran toward us—

And then she was grabbed.

"Oops, sorry, young one," a man said casually, fingers digging into her arm. "Don't even try. You're coming with us."

I turned sharply.

He was one of them. One of the attackers.

"Seriously," he continued with a laugh, "what's with these people? Way too skilled for young'uns. But hey, we'll still profit from it."

More figures emerged from the smoke, surrounding me slowly and confidently.

"Hey, woman," the man said, eyes flicking to my sword. "You're a hero, right? Why don't you put that thing down and come with us quietly? Otherwise, I'll slit this girl's throat right here."

He pressed the blade against her neck.

"Hiik!" she shrieked.

"You've got power," he went on calmly, "but we've got numbers. Even heroes and magic knights are struggling tonight. You're troublesome, sure and the others heroes are as well, and we couldn't even get close to capture them but look at that. You're clearly weakened. Makes things convenient for us."

"Are you the one behind this attack?" I asked, my grip tightening.

"No," he replied easily. "But that doesn't matter now, does it?"

The blade pressed closer.

"What I want is simple," he said. "A hero. A female one, preferably. A male hero would sell better, sure—but we can't exactly use him as a plaything on the way back to the market."

He smiled at me.

"So," he continued, voice smooth and mocking, "why don't you be a good girl, lower that sword... and let us take you?"

Chapter 1170: Chapter 178 - The Bandit Ambush (6)

Chiaki's POV

It was early morning—so early that the sun hadn't fully risen yet. Only a faint, pale light clung to the horizon, barely pushing back the darkness that still lingered over the village. The sky was caught in that uneasy in-between state, where night hadn't fully let go and day hadn't quite claimed its place.

That was when it finally became clear.

The attackers were retreating.

Not charging anymore. Not shouting. Not burning. Just... leaving. Fading back into wherever they had crawled out from.

Even so, no one felt relieved.

Fortunately—if that word could even be used—the remaining magic knights and the students had managed to hold their ground. Bruised, exhausted, shaking, but alive. They had defended themselves through the night, through fear and confusion and sheer desperation.

Still, not everyone had made it.

There were reports coming in—quiet, heavy reports—that some villagers had died during the attack.

Hearing it out loud made my stomach twist.

It was awful. There was no better word for it.

The destruction left behind wasn't something a human could do. Not like this. Whoever attacked the village didn't just want to hurt people—they wanted to erase them. Burn them. Tear them apart. There was no hesitation, no mercy, no trace of sympathy for the suffering they caused.

"Sakai-san, are you okay?" I asked softly.

She was standing a short distance away, one hand clamped tightly over her mouth. Her face was pale, eyes unfocused, like she was trying desperately not to see something that had already carved itself into her mind.

"I don't think..." her voice trembled, barely holding together, "...I can take this world anymore, sensei."

She swallowed hard.

"I-I just saw... bodies," she continued. "They were everywhere. All over the place. Burned. Mutilated. I can't... I can't take it anymore..."

Her shoulders shook.

I felt my chest tighten painfully.

This had to be the first time she had ever seen a dead body. Not just death—but death in its ugliest, cruellest form. And she wasn't the only one. Most of us had never been exposed to something like this before.

Seeing corpses twisted and destroyed so badly... it didn't matter how strong you were. How prepared you thought you were. That kind of sight crawled under your skin and refused to leave.

"I still want to help people," Sakai-san said, her voice cracking, "but after seeing something like that... I don't think I can. Not right now..."

"It's okay," I said gently. I placed a hand on her shoulder, careful not to startle her. "It's fine, Sakai-san. Just rest for a bit."

She nodded weakly, though I wasn't sure my words really reached her.

The truth was—I wasn't fine either.

But I didn't have the luxury to stop.

I had to make sure every student was accounted for.

I looked around the area. Some students were sitting against broken walls or collapsed fences, others lying on the ground, staring up at the sky with blank expressions. They were recovering as best as they could—catching their breath, nursing wounds, trying to process the night they had just survived.

Most of their injuries weren't lethal. Cuts, bruises, burns, exhaustion. Painful, yes—but survivable. Still, fighting through the entire night had drained them completely. Their bodies were running on fumes.

I had already healed them all.

Every single one.

There were so many that by the time I finished, my mana reserves were almost completely gone. My limbs felt heavy, like lead. My vision blurred at the edges, and my body screamed for rest.

It honestly felt like I was about to collapse right there.

But I couldn't.

Not yet.

I forced myself to keep moving, checking faces, scanning the area, making sure no one had been missed. That was when I noticed her.

A young girl.

She looked badly injured at first glance—but when I focused, I realized something was off. Her wounds had already been treated. Healed... partially. The damage was still there, but it had clearly been mended by someone before I found her.

"Are you okay, little girl?" I asked, kneeling down in front of her.

Her eyes were wide, filled with fear that hadn't faded yet.

"C-Can you help us?" she asked.

My heart sank.

"What happened?" I asked.

She raised her trembling hand and pointed.

I followed the direction of her finger—and my breath caught.

A woman lay there, barely conscious, her body covered in burns. The smell of scorched fabric and flesh still clung to her.

I rushed to her side immediately and cast healing magic without hesitation.

But the spell felt weak.

Thin.

My mana was almost completely depleted, and I could feel it. The magic responded, but sluggishly, like it was being dragged out of me.

"I'm... completely healed..." the woman whispered.

"What—?" I froze, staring at her.

Her injuries were still there. Badly burned skin, raw and damaged. At least second-degree burns, maybe worse. It was the kind of injury that made you afraid to even touch it.

"But...!" I started.

"Don't worry about me," she said, her voice faint but steady. "Please... save the one who saved me instead..."

I blinked.

"Huh?"

"A woman," she continued slowly. "A hero. Like you."

My blood ran cold.

"She was captured... so she could save us."

The words echoed in my head.

Captured.

Hero.

Saved us.

My thoughts went completely blank.

Myrcella's POV

My phone rang.

The moment I saw Miss Chiaki's name on the screen, a terrible feeling settled in my chest.

I answered—and immediately stood up.

It was still early morning. The castle was quiet, the halls barely awake. But the moment I heard her voice, I didn't even think about preparing myself.

I got out of bed at once, still wearing my sleepwear, and rushed outside without changing.

As I stepped out, I saw Miss Shredica already there—climbing onto her wyvern, movements sharp and urgent.

"Miss Shredica! Are you heading to the village?!" I called out.

"Yes, Your Majesty," she replied calmly. "It seems you woke up quite early. You haven't even changed out of your sleepwear."

Her gaze lingered on me for a second longer than necessary.

Then she noticed my expression.

I wasn't just a little panicked.

I was shaking.

Her eyes narrowed. "What happened?"

I told her everything Miss Chiaki had told me.

That the village had been attacked last night. That bandits were responsible. That one of the heroes had been taken.

Miss Kaori.

Miss Chiaki said she had saved a woman from the burning village. But the bandits had captured the woman's child and used her as leverage.

They told Miss Kaori that if she didn't come with them, they would kill the girl.

She didn't hesitate.

Not even for a second.

She went with them.

The uneasy feeling I had before only grew worse. That heavy dread I felt when they left the castle—it hadn't been nothing.

"I haven't received any report about this from the others," Miss Shredica said quietly.
"The magic knights stationed there haven't contacted me."

She climbed higher onto the wyvern.

"I'll leave immediately."

"Can I come with you?" I asked.

Miss Kaori was my student.

My disciple.

If something happened to her—if she suffered because we were too slow—it would haunt me forever.

I had no idea what those bandits would do to her.

And that uncertainty terrified me more than anything else.