

The World 121

Chapter 121: Preparation For The King's Game (5)

"H-Huh?" Zeruel's eyes widened in shock as she beheld the sudden manifestation of the Guardian. She knew I had no such skill, so witnessing this display left her utterly dumbfounded. "Why are you...?"

"Zeruel," I interjected, my tone firm. "I want to propose a compromise."

"A compromise?"

"Yes," I affirmed. "I can assist you with your issues concerning your mother. I can even provide aid in searching for a cure for her illness. I have skilled individuals under my command whom I can direct to aid in the search."

Zeruel stared at me in shock, her disbelief evident. It was understandable; there was no way I should have known about her mother's illness or her financial struggles. She must have been thinking I was some kind of stalker, especially after my confession to her and admitting my feelings.

"Don't be so surprised, or defensive," I reassured her. "As I mentioned, I have a team of skilled individuals working for me. I'm not prying into your personal life because I'm infatuated with you or anything like that. My interest lies solely in your abilities and talents. But let's focus on the matter at hand.

I want to propose a compromise, and as part of the deal, I'll cover your mother's medical bills at the sanatorium and arrange for her to receive treatment at a facility with advanced medical technology to further research her illness."

At my words, Zeruel swallowed hard. Humans tended to grasp at any lifeline offered when they found themselves in dire straits. When faced with despair, they sought solace and support wherever they could find it. Though it wasn't always so simple, humans were driven by such instincts.

Confronted with an opportunity to cling to hope amidst her despair, Zeruel wouldn't be able to think clearly; her only instinct would be to seize it.

But humans were also naturally suspicious creatures. They would inevitably question the motives of those offering them help.

"What's in it for you?" she asked, her voice tinged with skepticism.

A natural inquiry. What was in it for me? Truth be told, there was nothing in it for me. Or perhaps it was more accurate to say that my only motivation was necessity. In order for her to believe that I was truly going to cover her mother's sanatorium bills, I needed to first push her to the brink of despair.

Additionally, I needed to provide a reason for my actions beyond simply stating that it was a requirement to assert dominance over her. It was as simple as that.

"Simple," I replied. "I want you to sell the ticket to me."

She blinked, confusion evident in her expression. "The ticket?"

"That's correct. All you need to do is sell it to me, and I can ensure your mother's sanatorium bill is covered, along with assistance for her illness. I understand that you may not trust me entirely, but I assure you, my intentions are genuine in wanting to help you. Just stop considering participating in the King's game and sell me the ticket."

The King's Game commenced as soon as the tickets were randomly distributed to the one hundred participants. This initial phase resembled a mental chess match, where those who didn't receive a ticket but desired to participate in the King's Game had to negotiate or resort to coercion to obtain one from the ticket holders.

The King's Game wasn't solely about physical prowess; it also tested one's cunning and intellect.

Right now, what I was doing could be seen as a form of coercion, albeit with good intentions. In reality, it was more of a compromise, a way to persuade her to give me what I wanted by offering her incentives in return.

"Why... do you want it?" she inquired.

Fair question. Why did I want a ticket? After all, I already had one, so what was the purpose? It must have been because of Shredica. For some reason, I wanted her to succeed. More specifically, I wanted to witness a skillless individual rise to the top and see how far she could go.

Lately, she had been capturing my interest more and more. It wasn't far-fetched to think that, for some reason, I felt Shredica was destined for greatness.

I didn't want to disclose the true reason to Zeruel, though. "For personal amusement," I replied. It was intentionally vague, but not entirely untrue. It was amusing to see how far Shredica would go to achieve her desires, after all.

The next day...

I asked Shredica to meet me after school at the bench near the fountain. I waited for her for an hour after school, and finally, she arrived, looking as sullen as ever.

"What is it?" she asked.

Even though she was the one who arrived late, she seemed more irritated than I did.

"Would you mind coming with me somewhere?" I asked.

"I don't mind, but I have a feeling you're going to try something shady, so I'll pass," she replied, turning to leave.

I watched in shock as she began to walk away, momentarily stunned. But then I quickly snapped out of it and called out to her, "Wait. This is about your ticket," I said. "I want you to come with me to retrieve it."

At that, she halted, appearing ready to listen to me. She turned to face me, raising an eyebrow, her purplish eyes glaring at me, as if sizing me up.

"How did you manage to get a ticket?" she inquired, placing a hand on her hip. Shredica wasn't particularly busty, so her gesture didn't captivate me in any sensual way.

"Let's just say I used a bit of coercion," I replied. "After all, the King's Game is as much about mental manipulation as it is about physical prowess. It's about finding ways to persuade the ticket holder to relinquish it to you. That's all there is to it. Now, shall we proceed?"

"Alright," she agreed.

As we walked, I sensed someone trailing behind me. I didn't bother turning to look; it was someone from our class, half-hidden behind a tree. Shredica must have noticed them too, but she remained silent, not acknowledging their presence. Were they planning to follow us like this? If they kept it up, they'd only raise suspicions. But whatever.

Having them around like this might actually be useful.

While we continued walking, I couldn't help but ask Shredica, without turning to look at her, "How's it going with the King's game?"

"Well, I asked an administrator, but he said I need to get a ticket first before I can talk to him. I'm betting even if I do, they won't let me participate," she replied.

That's true. Administrators can be stubborn assholes who believe your worth is solely based on your skills. Without them, you're nothing in their eyes. You're not even considered a person.

"Try asking Administrator Galdea. She's the most understanding out of all the administrators," I suggested to her.

"From someone who supposedly is normal, you sure seem to know a lot of stuff even I haven't heard," she replied suspiciously.

"I read newspapers, so obviously, I'd know. Did you know she was the one who processed our admission to the academy? Well, obviously not, I guess. I figured you're not into that kind of stuff," I explained.

"I guess you're right," she conceded.

Hmm? Was she actually admitting it? Did I imagine things?

I resisted the urge to touch her forehead to check for a fever because it was unusual for her to admit fault.

After walking for a while, we finally arrived at the location where I was supposed to meet Zeruel. She would sell me the ticket in exchange for covering the bills that had piled up and that she couldn't pay anymore. Additionally, I promised to find a way to help her mother recover from her mysterious illness. However, when we got there, we were met with a catastrophic scene.

The sanatorium was ablaze, engulfed in a massive fire. Dark smoke billowed into the sky, resembling a looming storm cloud ready to burst. Despite the efforts of many mages, the fire raged on, too large for water magic to extinguish. Onlookers watched in horror as the structure was consumed by flames.

In the midst of the crowd, I spotted someone familiar: Zeruel's younger sister. She was screaming frantically, her voice carrying across the chaos.

"My mother...! My mother is in there...! And my sister...! Help, please! Someone...! Ahhh, s-save them please...!"

"My sister is trapped too! Help them, please!" She struggled against the people restraining her, her desperation evident. If they hadn't been holding her back, she might have leaped into the fire herself.

From her words, it was clear that Zeruel and her mother were still trapped inside the sanatorium. How did this fire even start, though? Was it an accident? Or natural? No, this wasn't natural; it was most likely man-made. An arson.

The fire was too massive for it to be anything else. If that was the case, then someone had done this. But why? I came to a conclusion almost immediately.

"...The ticket," I muttered to myself.

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A ticket could be obtained from a ticket holder through negotiation or coercion. Coercion wasn't just about using words to manipulate; it could involve physical threats or psychological manipulation. Zeruel was the kind of woman who wouldn't back down easily, so physical threats were unlikely.

Since the incident occurred in the sanatorium, where Zeruel was most vulnerable, it was likely a psychological tactic. Whoever did this knew Zeruel had the ticket and had researched her weaknesses thoroughly. I had done my own research too, but instead of coercing her, I negotiated with her. I offered to help with her issues in exchange for the ticket.

Whoever these assholes were trying to snatch Zeruel's ticket like this. Since Zeruel's mother was in a coma there, she'd do everything to get out of that burning sanatorium with her. But it seemed whoever did this was blocking her way out.

I could've intervened, but... I glanced subtly behind me. There she was, finally revealing herself from her not-so-secret hiding spot. Isiliraiellyn, her left eye covered with an eyepatch, the other gleaming with excitement as she watched the flames engulfing the building, perhaps thinking this was her chance to play hero.

With theatrical flair, Isiliraiellyn dramatically removed her eyepatch, revealing her golden eye, and struck a chuunibyo pose. While her actions seemed dramatic to some, they only elicited cringes from me. After her pose, she declared, "With the power of my Eye, I will save those trapped inside!" before pointing dramatically at the burning building and sprinting toward it at full speed.

As she charged forward, those blocking the path of people trying to enter the building attempted to stop her. Ignoring their attempts, Isiliraiellyn charged straight ahead, leaping over them with a nimble

backflip in midair. Landing gracefully on both feet with her arms outstretched, she turned to face them, mockingly sticking out her tongue and putting a finger near her eye.

"Stupid!" she taunted before turning back and sprinting toward the building.

After a while, Isiliraiellyn managed to enter the building. She was certainly something. If not for her antics and behavior, she could have been seen as someone destined for great power, appreciated by many.

While I observed this, I noticed that Shredica had vanished from beside me. It seemed she wanted to join the action too. Well, perhaps I'll just watch how things unfold from a safe distance.

Shredica's POV

I stealthily crept toward the flaming building and slipped inside. The interior was scorching hot, the heat searing my skin. However, I paid it little mind. While I wouldn't say I was accustomed to such intense heat, I had endured plenty of pain in the past, making this bearable to some extent.

As I made my way through the interior, the cries of children echoed in the halls. I hurried toward the source of the cries, but amidst the thick smoke and engulfing heat, pinpointing their exact location proved challenging. I strained my senses, but the smoke and crackling flames drowned out everything else.

Unable to rely on my senses, I resorted to kicking down the doors of each room in search of the children.

As I focused on my task, a voice startled me from behind.

"Allow me to help!" she exclaimed, her urgency evident as she gestured toward another room. "There are children trapped behind that door!"

Recognizing her as the woman with the eye skill, though her name escaped me, I nodded in agreement. Her ability to sense the location of the trapped children hinted at the impressive range of her eye skill. Though I felt capable on my own, her assistance could prove invaluable in such dire circumstances. Following her lead, I kicked down the door with a swift, determined motion.

The flames licked at my skin, sending searing heat coursing through my veins, but I gritted my teeth and pressed forward. Inside, the scene unfolded before me. Two girls, their faces contorted with fear and exhaustion, huddled together in the room. The older one, her expression strained with anguish, held the younger girl close, shielding her from harm.

But even in her valiant efforts, the older girl had succumbed to the smoke-filled air, her body limp and unconscious against the infernal backdrop.

"Carry them up!" I instructed the woman. "And tell me the locations of those still trapped!"

She nodded, a strange excitement gleaming in her eyes. Despite the imminent danger and potential loss of life, her demeanor struck me as oddly enthusiastic. After divulging the locations of the remaining

trapped individuals, she sprang into action, swiftly gathering up the two girls in her arms. As the youngest one tearfully expressed her gratitude, the woman dashed off.

While her actions had undoubtedly been helpful, I couldn't shake the feeling that her heroics were a bit exaggerated and theatrical...

With resolve, I set out to search for those still trapped inside. Along the way, I encountered numerous bodies scattered on the ground, charred beyond recognition. It was difficult to discern whether they could still be identified, given the extent of their charring. In my world, witnessing such scenes was a grim reality of everyday life. One misstep, and you could be reduced to ashes.

Despite expecting this world to be comparatively peaceful, witnessing the carnage stirred up a strange sense of nostalgia within me. It was an unconventional trigger for nostalgia, but my world had been unforgivingly brutal, and strangely enough, I found solace in its harshness.

I kicked down doors left and right, guiding the trapped people to safety outside. The woman returned and joined me in the rescue efforts. After a while, as we nearly finished rescuing everyone, she set down a crying child and turned to me.

"There are two others on the last floor," she informed me. "Be careful though. They're strong. And one of them looks like they're the culprit behind this."

So she knew the identity and strength of the perpetrator, huh? "Your skill must be pretty powerful to know all that," I remarked.

"Hmm? Oh no. My skill doesn't see that far," she clarified. "It only allows me to see a person's status, nothing more. My Eye just happens to be that powerful."

I was somewhat taken aback by her revelation, albeit mildly. So her skill didn't have long-range vision capabilities? That meant her insight was just natural talent. This woman might prove to be quite useful to me in the future.

After contemplating, I returned to the burning establishment, now engulfed in flames with its structure beginning to crumble. It was astonishing how the building still stood despite the relentless inferno; perhaps they had exceptional engineering in this world too.

Eventually, I reached the top floor, where two figures stood—a woman with brown hair and a man with golden locks, a smirk playing on his lips.

"Hand it over, and I'll let you pass," the man demanded. "Otherwise, you'll just perish in these flames like the worthless person you are. And your dear mother? Well, she'll meet the same fate. The smart move is to give me the ticket. Then you can go free."

Though I can't promise your mother will survive without that magical implement keeping her alive. You can't exactly carry her out with that with you, can you?"

"You bastard..." the woman snarled, her voice dripping with venom. I recognized her immediately; she was the one currently holding the second-highest rank in the gold class. Clasped in her arms was another woman with matching brown hair, connected to a large green gem by a network of tubes. The gem remained inside the room, while the tubes stretched just far enough to reach where she stood.

Any sudden movement risked disconnecting the tubes.

I knew this woman's mother was gravely ill, but the specifics of her condition eluded me. From their conversation, it was clear that the woman couldn't afford to move too much, lest the tubes linking the green gem, a magical device keeping her mother alive, to her mother be severed. Even the slightest shift could mean her mother's demise.

That meant she couldn't fight this man, even though she badly wanted to.

The man's gaze bore into her with amusement, his eyes gleaming with a twisted sense of pleasure. "Ha ha ha! I like the fire in your eyes! It's rather exhilarating!" he exclaimed, his voice laced with a dark amusement. "You know, I've been a fixture in this kingdom my whole life, always addressed with the title of Prince before my name.

So, hearing the word 'bastard' directed at me, especially from a commoner like you, is quite the unexpected delight. If circumstances were different, I might have had you dispatched on the spot for such insolence." Chuckling to himself, he continued, his tone turning dark and cold as he fixed his gaze on the woman once more.

"My father, the King, he's a man of grand gestures and empty promises, but he's also a coward. That's why, when I dared to request a ticket, he denied me. Perhaps fearing for my safety. But I'm desperate to partake in his game, and I'll resort to any means necessary to obtain a ticket. Even if it means employing tactics as deplorable as this. You needn't forgive me.

You're simply unlucky to be the most vulnerable target, for I know your weakness all too well. So, how about you hand it over already?"

As he spoke, the fire intensified around them, casting flickering shadows that danced across the scorched walls and floor.

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The man began conjuring flames in the palms of his hands, but it wasn't ordinary fire magic. No, it was intensified, doubled in power. Even I could sense the potency of it.

"And what about you, how can I help you?" he suddenly asked. Though he was facing the woman, I knew instantly that he wasn't addressing her. His question was directed at me.

I stepped forward, finally revealing myself.

"I've been waiting for the right moment to approach you," I replied. "Seems like you're quite occupied. Sorry for the interruption."

When he laid eyes on me, a derisive click of his tongue echoed through the air, followed by a sharp pivot of his head to face me. "Another uncouth woman, huh?" he sneered, his voice dripping with disdain. "What's with these women nowadays? They're all uncouth and stupid," he growled, his scowl casting dark shadows over his face.

"They latch onto a man they love, oblivious to those who've stood by them through thick and thin, as if they were nothing more than fleeting distractions. Ungrateful bitches, the lot of them, deserving of nothing but to burn to dust..."

The flames surrounding us surged, mirroring the intensity of the man's emotions. With each wave of anger that washed over him, the fire roared fiercer, as if his fury itself fueled the inferno.

I brandished a gun and leveled it at him.

"I don't know what you're rambling about, but your actions are costing lives. Put an end to this madness," I demanded.

"I have no intention of stopping. I want something that woman possesses, and I won't rest until I have it. Not even if you try to stand in my way," he retorted defiantly. "And what's with that pitiful weapon? Do you honestly believe something like that can defeat me?"

"These bullets are aimed straight at you and will track you no matter how much you try to dodge," I warned, my tone firm. "You can evade all you want, but you won't escape them. One pull of this trigger and you're as good as dead. Consider yourself warned."

I didn't want to resort to killing this man, despite the gravity of the situation. In the world I came from, killing people were made without a second thought, consequences be damned. In the past, I wouldn't have hesitated to eliminate him without a second thought; that was just the brutal reality of the world I lived in. I wouldn't have bothered with a warning.

But this man held importance, and if I were to take his life, my aspiration of becoming a magic knight would be dashed, perhaps irreparably. I couldn't afford to jeopardize my plan to return to my world by taking such a drastic step.

When I issued my warning, the man erupted into a torrent of maniacal laughter, each echo ricocheting off the flaming walls of the hall. The flames themselves seemed to swell in response, twisting and gyrating as if caught in the grip of the man's unhinged amusement.

"One pull, and I'm dead? Ha ha ha! Why should I fear death? Do you think I'm a coward like my father? I'm not the same person I once was. Don't you dare underestimate me!" he bellowed, his laughter morphing into a ferocious roar that reverberated through the fiery halls.

As he spoke, crimson mana swirled around him, pulsating with malevolent energy and igniting the flames to a furious blaze.

"You may have known me as the cowardly prince overshadowed by my half sister, but that version of me is long gone," he declared, his voice resolute and unwavering amidst the inferno. "I've shed my identity as a prince of Milham. I will become the king, not just of this kingdom, but of the entire world. I will conquer it, holding it in the palm of my hand."

He conjured a blazing inferno, flames dancing in his wake, before finally wheeling around to face me.

"I'm Julius, the conqueror! Remember me as the man who'll stake his claim on every nation, the one destined to be king of this entire world! Now, drop to your knees and behold the power of the man who's gonna rule it all!"

"Gh...!"

In an instant, the very air transformed, crackling with an intensity that was palpable. The atmosphere pulsated around us, thick with an arcane energy. This was no ordinary magic; it was something primal, commanding. It pressed upon me, a forceful weight urging me to submit.

I gritted my teeth, defiance mingling with pain as the sheer magnitude of his mana drew blood, a crimson trail tracing down my chin.

When he observed my resilience against his overwhelming magical pressure, a flicker of surprise crossed his face. "Impressive. You're the first to ever stand firm against my power," he mused, casting a glance over his shoulder. The woman behind him was on her knees. "Even Zeruel lacks your fortitude. I recognize you.

You're that woman with no prowess, aren't you? Yet here you stand while Zeruel falters. You're intriguing."

As he advanced towards me, I readied myself in a defensive stance amidst the suffocating pressure. A smirk played on his lips at the sight.

"Nevertheless, your efforts are in vain," he declared. "You may stand your ground, but under this crushing weight, can you truly move?"

As he towered over me, his gaze descended upon me with a mix of curiosity and disdain, like he was observing some exotic specimen for the first time. It grated on my nerves, so I unleashed my frustration by slamming my forehead into his face.

"Guh...!" he staggered backward, clutching his bleeding lip. "You bitch!" he snarled, conjuring a colossal fireball and hurling it at me.

I attempted to evade, but the suffocating pressure hindered my movements, rendering me unable to dodge the impending inferno. With a surge of desperation, I mustered all the mana I could to form a protective barrier, bracing for impact. When the searing flames engulfed me, it felt as though my very flesh was being seared from my bones, my senses overwhelmed by the intense heat.

It was an excruciating ordeal, akin to being slowly roasted alive.

After the flames finally subsided, I stood for a moment before my body gave out, though I remained conscious. The man looked at me, "I'm surprised you didn't even scream when that fireball hit you. And I'm equally surprised you're still breathing. But I guess that's the extent of your worth. In the end, all you women are nothing but garbage. I regret even wasting my time on you."

Turning his attention to the woman, he continued with a chilling tone. "Now, do you want to suffer the same fate as her, roasted alive, or will you willingly hand over the ticket and spare yourself? I'm feeling generous today. I'll let you off the hook and overlook your insults, like calling me a bastard. But don't expect forgiveness if you try it again. And as for your mother?

Well, I doubt she'll survive. So why don't you just leave her to her fate?"

"Grrr...!" the woman snarled, her defiance palpable in the air.

"You're still clinging to hope, aren't you? But face the truth. Your mother is already gone; you just refuse to acknowledge it. No one has ever unearthed a remedy for her affliction. Those who claim otherwise,

offering magical solutions, are merely preying on desperate souls, squeezing them dry of their hard-earned coin. There's no redemption from that illness.

So release her and grant her the peace she deserves."

"I don't care," the woman declared adamantly. "Even if I have to harness every ounce of my power, I refuse to watch my mother perish!"

"What a stubborn fool," the man scoffed, shaking his head. "Well, I guess that's women for you."

With a resigned sigh, he conjured yet another colossal fireball in his hand. "It's time for you to meet your end."

As he prepared to unleash the fiery projectile, a sudden interruption shattered the tension. A figure crashed through the window, their arrival accompanied by the abrupt disappearance of the surrounding flames. The newcomer was a woman with midnight-black hair and eyes ablaze with crimson intensity. She held a curved, single-edged blade in a menacing grip.

"...Your highness. It's past time you returned home," she declared with authority, her voice cutting through the tension. She resheathed her blade with a fluid motion. "Your father has grown tired of this senseless charade."

"...Who are you?" the man inquired, his confusion evident in his voice. His gaze traveled up and down the woman's form, studying her intently. Suddenly, realization dawned on him. "Ah... So it's you. The youngest magic knight, who achieved the rank at the tender age of seventeen.

You've returned from the mission my father assigned to you, I presume."

He paused, his expression shifting from confusion to acknowledgement. "I've never had the pleasure of meeting you in person, so I assumed the rumors of a woman attaining the status of magic knight at such a young age were nothing but nonsense. But seeing you before me now, Veronica Eclair, I suppose it's true."

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"What am I going to do..." the man mused, his voice tinged with uncertainty. "I don't really have a reason to go toe-to-toe with someone like you, Veronica. And let's face it, I'd be outmatched considering the skill you've got up your sleeve. It's like all other skills are just... worthless in comparison. Maybe throwing in the towel is the smart play here."

My skill is all I've got left to rely on. But damn, that ticket... I really want it."

His gaze flicked to Zeruel, still glaring daggers at him. Though the fiery aura had faded, the oppressive heat of the room still lingered, searing into our skin.

"I'm sorry, Your Highness, but you've got to let it go. Your father's made it clear," Veronica interjected with authority.

"Really? Well, if my father, the King, insists, then I guess I'll have to wave goodbye to the ticket," the man conceded. It all seemed too easy, though. Was he scheming something? As he spoke, the woman's attention shifted to me, and with a swift motion, she retrieved a small vial from her pocket. Inside glimmered a crimson liquid—a healing potion.

"Drink this, and your wounds will close up in no time," she said, holding the bottle close to my lips. I followed her instructions and took a sip, feeling the effects almost instantly. The healing potion she'd given me was as potent as a saint's miraculous touch.

Extending her hand, she helped me to my feet. But the moment I stood upright, she shoved me back against the wall, her elbow pressing firmly against my neck.

"W-What the hell are you doing?" I demanded, glaring at her.

"I'm giving you a choice," she stated coldly, her gaze icy. "Keep quiet about what happened here, or face the consequences."

Her threat didn't faze me. With a steely gaze of my own, I met her cold stare. "So the royals don't want their dirty laundry aired, huh? Killing people and torching buildings. Seems like royalty is cut from the same cloth in every damn realm."

The woman's demeanor remained stoic, her eyes piercing me with an icy stare.

"Fine. I'll keep my lips sealed. But I'm not doing it for free. I want something in return... Can you grant me a ticket to the King's Game?" I pressed, hoping to strike a deal.

But she didn't flinch. Instead, she responded in the same emotionless tone, "Do you think my words were some kind of request that needed compensation for compliance?" With each word, her grip

tightened, pressing down on my throat until I couldn't utter a sound. Her strength was astonishing, given her seemingly frail appearance. I couldn't even attempt to shake her off.

"I doubt you will," I managed to rasp out, despite the pressure on my neck. "But will you indulge me with another question?"

She remained silent and unmoving, but her lack of objection spurred me on. "I overheard your conversation earlier, mentioning that you became a magic knight at the tender age of seventeen. How did you manage such a feat?"

A flicker of surprise danced across her features at my bold inquiry, the first sign of emotion I'd seen from her. "And what do you intend to do with that information? Are you aspiring to become a magic knight at a young age yourself? But judging by your attire," she glanced down at my uniform, "you're hardly even worthy of such aspirations.

If you're stuck in the bronze class, dreaming of becoming a magic knight is nothing but a pathetic fantasy."

"I can make it," I declared with determination. "If you doubt me, then why not see for yourself?"

With a swift, decisive motion, I broke free from her grip, my hand chopping away hers that had pinned me against the wall. Stepping back swiftly, I kept a wary distance, ensuring she couldn't trap me again. In response, she launched a backhanded strike at my face, but I agilely dodged aside, narrowly avoiding the blow.

Swift as lightning, she followed up with a vicious kick aimed at my vulnerable spot.

Her raw power was evident; a single blow from her could easily render me unconscious. It was clear she possessed a strength unlike any other I had encountered in this world. However, I was determined not to let her land a hit on me.

Slightly taken aback by my evasion, she exhaled deeply and extended her arm, palm open, likely intending to throw me to the ground. Anticipating her move, I swatted her hand away, refusing to be easily overpowered.

"Impressive reflexes," she commended, her voice tinged with a hint of surprise. "I didn't expect you to evade my attacks so adeptly. It seems your claim of rising from the bronze class to become a magic knight holds some merit."

Despite her words of praise, her expression remained inscrutable, betraying no hint of emotion.

"You've sparked my curiosity," she continued, her tone steady. "What's your name?"

I remained silent, my guard still firmly in place.

"Fair enough, you're guarded," she acknowledged. "But since you've caught my attention, I'll share how I became a magic knight at such a young age. You might not achieve it as early as I did, so I suggest focusing on climbing up to the gold class yourself. Judging by your appearance, you're likely in your first or second year. I'll await the day you join the esteemed ranks of the magic knights."

I anticipate our future collaboration."

"You didn't answer my question," I pressed.

"As I mentioned, you can't replicate what I did. Graduating from the academy is a prerequisite. I'm simply an exception, which allowed me to attain the rank at a young age," she explained.

Exceptional case, huh? I wondered what made her so unique. Before I could dwell on it further, the man interjected.

"Enough idle chatter. Let's conclude this and return to the castle, Veronica. I've no time to waste," he interjected.

"Yes, Your Highness," she replied briskly, her demeanor cold and authoritative. Her gaze bore into the brown-haired woman. "You understand the repercussions should you utter a single word of what transpired here. Any indiscretion, and you'll face dire consequences," she warned with a chilling edge to her voice.

"You... You think you can just sweep this under the rug because I'm a commoner?" the brown-haired woman exploded, her voice quivering with righteous fury. "Do you honestly believe I'll stay silent while countless others suffer?!"

"I understand your reluctance, but you must also consider your sick mother and your little sister, don't you?" the black-haired woman countered, her tone measured yet firm. "Think of their safety before you act rashly. Do you grasp the gravity of the situation now?"

Clutching her fists in frustration, the brown-haired woman wrestled with her emotions, her resolve visibly wavering. It was a harsh reminder that even in this world, justice was often elusive.

"If you truly comprehend the consequences, then I trust you'll heed my counsel," the black-haired woman concluded, her voice steady. With deliberate movements, she retrieved a smartphone and a paper from her pocket. Dialing a number, she pressed the phone to her ear. "Therese," she spoke into the device. "It's time. Activate the teleportation spell."

Following her instructions, she carefully spread out the paper on the ground, revealing a large circle with intricate runes inscribed within. The symbols seemed to pulsate with an otherworldly glow, casting an eerie light in the surroundings.

"Your highness, step forth into the circle," she beckoned, her voice carrying an air of authority. "It will serve as your conduit, transporting you directly to the safety of the castle."

"Sure thing~!" the man chirped, his tone oddly jovial. As he set foot onto the paper, a brilliant azure light erupted from its surface, engulfing him in its radiant glow. With a mischievous glance in my direction, he playfully stuck out his tongue before succumbing to the dazzling radiance and disappearing from sight.

Following his lead, the black-haired woman gracefully leapt from the building's aperture, vanishing into the darkness with a swift and silent grace. With the flames quenched and the oppressive heat dissipating, the aftermath of the cataclysm left an eerie calm in its wake.

It was as though the chaos had materialized and dissipated in the blink of an eye, leaving me feeling bewildered by the sudden turn of events.

As I fixated on the spot where the woman vanished, a piercing cry shattered the eerie silence. My attention snapped to the distraught figure of the woman still cradling her mother in her arms.

"M-Mom!" her anguished voice echoed, tears cascading down her cheeks. The woman's grip on her mother tightened, her fingers trembling with desperation. Yet, her mother lay motionless, the tubes that once sustained her now severed and charred by the inferno.

"M-Mom...! Please, don't leave me...! Please...!" the woman pleaded, her voice choked with sorrow as she clung to her mother, her entire being consumed by despair.

But then, her mother's breath grew shallow.

In that moment, I watched as her mother took her final breath, her life slipping away.

Chapter 125: Preparation For The King's Game, Part 2 (1)

Zeruel's POV

It had been three days since the incident, and I found myself standing amidst the ruins of the sanatorium, or what remained of it—a charred, blackened structure stood as the only testament to the devastation that had occurred. The fire had claimed many victims, leaving behind a trail of death and destruction.

Yet, the truth behind the fire remained shrouded in mystery, with no one able to ascertain its origins.

I knew exactly what had transpired, but the fear of repercussions against my family kept me silent. I refused to speak or cooperate with the investigation, fearing the consequences.

As I wandered through the park surrounding the sanatorium, I spotted Doctor Natasha attending to the survivors still in need of care. Beneath a large canopy, the injured and sick were gathered, their beds arranged in rows, each filled with people in various states of recovery.

As she approached me, I could see the sorrow etched on her face. "I see you're doing better," she remarked with a sad smile.

"Yes, thanks to your help," I replied gratefully.

Her tone turned melancholic as she offered her condolences. "I'm sorry for your loss."

Oh right. I hadn't told anyone yet that my mother was still alive. Her life support had been terminated during the incident. I hadn't confided in anyone, but it seemed Doctor Natasha assumed my mother was among the deceased.

I forced a smile, though it held little warmth. "Thank you," I murmured. Then, extending a small sack I'd been carrying, I added, "Before I forget..."

Curious, she accepted the sack and peered inside. "What's this?"

"It's the total amount owed to the sanatorium for the fees we incurred, along with the 30 gold coins you provided," I explained.

"What...? But we gave you those coins to help, not to burden you with debt," Doctor Natasha protested, concern evident in her voice. "You didn't have to repay me."

"It's okay," I insisted. "I'd feel guilty if I didn't try to repay the kindness somehow."

She met my gaze, searching for any signs of wrongdoing. "You didn't obtain this money through... questionable means, did you? Like selling yourself or stealing?"

I shook my head adamantly. "No, Doctor. I would never do anything like that. These coins were earned honestly."

"Alright..." she relented, her expression softening. "Regardless, I'm relieved that you made it through."

"Thank you," I murmured gratefully.

After our conversation, I cast one last glance at the charred remains of the sanatorium before making my way back to where my mother was currently being cared for.

Three days earlier...

As my mother's breathing ceased and her heart fell silent, a group of five women clad in black attire and Tragedy masks materialized before me. Their solemn masks seemed to mirror the grief I felt over my mother's passing.

Lost in despair, I paid little attention to their arrival until they approached my mother's lifeless form. With swift movements, they placed a plastic mask over her mouth, prompting a surge of confusion and disbelief within me.

"Wh-Who...?!" I attempted to demand answers, but my voice faltered as I felt my mother's breath return, her chest rising and falling once more. "Eh...?"

"You needn't worry, Miss Zeruel. Your mother will be alright," one of the women assured me.

I regarded them with surprise and suspicion. "Who are you?" I inquired, unable to discern their identities behind the masks. Even if they were to reveal their faces, their true identities would remain shrouded in mystery.

"We are His shadow," they said in unison.

In that instant, a recollection flooded my mind—my conversation with Leon from the previous day.

"For personal enjoyment," Leon said in with a strangely jovial tone that left me incredulous. He claimed he wanted a ticket for the King's Game solely for amusement, disregarding the vast array of rewards that could be obtained from winning. It seemed too absurd to be true.

"You don't seem convinced," he noted, observing my skepticism.

"To be honest, I'm not. Do you honestly expect me to believe such a flimsy excuse? If you were straightforward about wanting to have a good time, I might have found that more believable," I retorted.

"Well, believe what you will, but I'm being honest. I just want to have fun. But enough about that. Will you accept my offer or not?" he pressed.

His proposition was undeniably tempting. In fact, it was so enticing that it almost overwhelmed me with excitement. Not only could I settle the debt at the sanatorium, but he also pledged to assist in finding a cure for my mother's illness. It was an opportunity too good to pass up.

However, suspicions lingered in my mind. The offer seemed too good to be true; there had to be a catch.

"You're not... implying you want my body, are you?" I asked cautiously, voicing the concern that had been gnawing at me. We were, after all, in a brothel, and it wouldn't be surprising if such requests were commonplace.

"Well, I might have considered it, especially since you're dressed so provocatively and all dolled up," he replied casually.

My heart raced with indignation. "What...! No way!" I exclaimed, instinctively shielding myself with my hands and turning away, the weight of his words adding to the palpable tension in the room.

"Don't turn around like that. You're giving me quite the view," he remarked, his tone laced with amusement.

Flushed with embarrassment, I hastily covered my exposed areas, feeling exposed and vulnerable. "You're despicable!" I spat, shooting him a venomous glare.

"Your expressions are quite presumptuous," he remarked with a slight smile. "It's rather hard to reconcile this with the face of the person who coldly rejected my confession. Surprising, but also quite sexy, if I may say so."

I continued to glare at him, disbelief mingling with indignation. What was this man implying? Was he nothing more than a lecherous pervert? I had initially believed him to be a decent guy, but now it seemed that all men were cut from the same cloth as my father.

"Relax," he interjected, sensing my growing anger. "I'm not the type to coerce a woman into bed. Sex should be a mutually enjoyable experience between two consenting people. I have no interest in forcing anyone into anything. While I do enjoy the idea of dominance, it's not something I'd impose forcefully."

"Dominance, you say...? So, you're just like every other man! Treating women as mere possessions to be conquered, aren't you?!"

"I don't see them at all," I replied firmly, redirecting the conversation back to its original topic. "Let's focus on the matter at hand before we venture further into unknown territory. So, let me ask you again: will you accept my offer or not? If you suspect there's a catch, feel free to think whatever you like, but I assure you, I won't do anything untoward to you."

I couldn't say for certain whether this man was trustworthy or if his words held any truth, but at this point, I had few options other than to extend my hand, even if it meant grasping for a knife. Compared to the alternative of becoming a prostitute with a meager salary of two to three silver coins per night, the prospect of staying with him seemed far more appealing. So, I made my decision.

"Okay... I accept your help," I declared.

Leon's smile widened at my acceptance. "Good," he said. "I'll come to you tomorrow with Miss Shredica to retrieve it. However, if for some reason Miss Shredica isn't available, I'll send my Shadows to collect it."

"...Shadows?"

I couldn't help but inquire, my head tilted in confusion. Was he referring to literal shadows? But Leon chuckled softly at my question. "They are my personal bodyguards," he clarified.

As the women began to carry my mother away from me, I couldn't help but wonder if they were the Shadows Leon had mentioned. Perhaps I could entrust my mother to them. But as Shredica eyed them suspiciously, she voiced her doubts.

"Shadow?" she questioned. "What does that mean? Is it some kind of organization?"

"We are not obligated to tell you anything," one of them retorted.

The other woman then sniffed the air around Shredica. "I smell the scent of our master on her."

"Shh! Don't say such things!"

"Oh... Sorry," the woman who had sniffed the air apologized, backing off a little. Her admission confirmed my suspicion that their master was indeed Leon.

Since Leon had mentioned that both he and Shredica would come to retrieve the ticket, and seeing Shredica present, I assumed Leon must be nearby. Circumstances must have led him to delegate the task to his "shadows" or whatever he called them.

The atmosphere grew tense as Shredica, oblivious to the connection between the term "master" and Leon, shot a puzzled glance at the women. She then gave herself a quick sniff, her expression turning incredulous as she found no scent to justify their claim.

"I don't smell at all, so what are you talking about?" she retorted, her voice laced with skepticism.

As she spoke, her glare intensified, her eyes narrowing as if daring the women to challenge her further. Sensing her hostility, the women exchanged weary glances before one of them suddenly vanished into thin air.

"...?!"

Both Shredica and I were gobsmacked at that. Then, in a flash, the woman reappeared behind Shredica. She tried to spin around to block the attack, but it was too late. With a swift chop to the back of her nape, Shredica slumped to the ground, unconscious.

I watched in awe as the woman effortlessly caught Shredica and gently placed her on the floor. The entire sequence unfolded in the blink of an eye, showcasing a level of skill and precision that surpassed anything I had ever witnessed. These were the "shadows" Leon had mentioned. They were formidable, far stronger than myself.

In that moment, a realization dawned on me. Perhaps Leon was more than just another student at our school.

Chapter 126: Preparation For The King's Game, Part 2 (2)

Leonamon Company.

The company had risen to prominence as the primary economic powerhouse of the Milham Kingdom, producing a variety of new, high-priced, and top-rated products. They manufactured smartphones, brewed high-quality wine, created renowned tapestries known as "cake," and were venturing into engineering and constructing buildings, highways, and more.

Thanks to this company, Milham was flourishing. Merchants flocked to the kingdom to buy and trade goods, enriching both themselves and the kingdom. As a result, Milham became known as the Kingdom of Progress, the only realm to make significant strides in technology, economics, and engineering since the advent of modern weapons like guns fifty years ago.

However, this company remained shrouded in mystery. It had only been established this year, likely not even reaching half a year, yet it was already making significant strides. It was hard to believe they could achieve so much in such a short span of time. Adding to the intrigue was the unknown identity of the owner. They kept themselves hidden, never stepping into the limelight.

Some even speculated that the owner was a demon.

I had no idea who the owner was, at least not until now. The mastermind behind Leonamon was none other than Leon himself, with his servant Amon managing affairs on his behalf. Learning this left me in shock. It was astonishing to discover that someone from the academy had orchestrated the kingdom's economic boom.

It had been three days since my sister and I arrived here. Our mother was under the care of the staff. Seeing the state-of-the-art equipment and advanced facilities, I felt reassured that my mother would receive the best possible care.

When I walked into the room where my mother lay, I found my sister already there. A beautiful woman was attending to my mother, while Leon and my sister engaged in conversation.

After the woman finished examining my mother, she turned to Leon and spoke.

"Everything appears normal with her. Her breathing, heart rate, and all her bodily systems are functioning properly. The only issue seems to be her meridians. They're not allowing her mana to flow naturally; they're blocked somehow. I've never encountered such a condition before, but I'll do my best to find a cure and awaken her. I'll also consult with Miss Marie to see if she has any insights."

"Marie is quite old, so she may have some knowledge," Leon remarked. "Regardless, we appreciate your assistance, Trisha."

The woman's cheeks flushed with color as she spoke, "No need for gratitude. It's my humble way of showing appreciation for saving me, saving us all. Now then, Master, I'll take my leave to find Miss Marie."

"Very well," Leon acknowledged.

With a lingering blush on her cheeks, the woman gracefully passed me and exited the room. Leon then directed his attention towards me.

"Ah, you're already here," he noted.

"Yes," I affirmed.

"Well, you heard Trisha," he said, his tone calm yet decisive. "Your mother's condition is stable for now, but she'll remain in a coma until we find a cure. In the meantime, she'll be connected to magical apparatus to sustain her life. You're more than welcome to stay here and keep vigil by her side. I don't mind."

"Really?!" Selene's eyes lit up with excitement, reflecting the sparkle of her enthusiasm. She seemed positively thrilled at the prospect of staying longer in this establishment.

"Selene," I interjected, a note of reprimand in my tone. "We can't overburden Leon any further."

"But he said he doesn't mind!" Selene countered, her eagerness palpable.

"Even so, it would still place undue strain on him if we prolong our stay," I reasoned, attempting to temper her enthusiasm. "We should be appreciative of the assistance he's already providing for our mother's situation. At this moment, there's little more we can do. Please, try to understand."

"Fine..." With a reluctant sigh, Selene relented, muttering under her breath. "How did my sister become such a cockblock..." I silently hoped I had misheard her.

"Well, if you're not keen on staying, you can at least visit your mother here from time to time. I'll grant you permission to do so," Leon offered, his tone accommodating.

"Th-Thank you for that," I stammered, grateful for his understanding. "Oh, and before I forget, here's the ticket you wanted from me." Retrieving the ticket from my pocket, I handed it to him.

"Ah, thank you for that," Leon replied, his relief evident as he accepted the ticket. "Someone has been bombarding me with texts, demanding her ticket. I was starting to worry she might come after me with a knife if I didn't hand it over soon."

"I apologize for the delay," I confessed, feeling a pang of guilt for keeping him waiting. "I've been preoccupied with the recent incident."

"That must have been traumatizing. I sympathize," Leon expressed, his tone filled with genuine concern. "But I'm glad to see you're coping now."

"Yes, and I have you to thank for that," I acknowledged gratefully, meeting his understanding gaze.

"Don't thank me. Thank Amon instead. She's the one who's been helping you through your trauma," Leon redirected the credit, his words carrying a sense of respect for his trusted servant.

As we conversed, Selene interjected with curiosity, "Uh, Mr. Leon. Can I ask who you're giving the ticket to? It's not for your lover, is it?"

When Selene made that comment, Leon's expression twisted into one of disgust. "Lover? Shredica? No way," he retorted, his tone firm and dismissive.

Despite their apparent animosity towards each other, Leon and Shredica seemed to share a peculiar closeness. It was difficult to gauge the nature of their relationship; they appeared to harbor mutual disdain yet remained connected in some way. For some reason, I couldn't shake the feeling of jealousy towards Shredica...

But why was I feeling jealous?

"Anyway, we're leaving now. And once again, thank you for your help with our mother," I expressed my gratitude to Leon.

"Thank you, Mr. Leon," Selene added, echoing my sentiments.

With our thanks conveyed, we bid Leon farewell and exited the establishment, heading back home. During our journey, I couldn't shake off a nagging thought.

"Selene... Do you, perhaps, find yourself drawn to Leon?" I inquired tentatively, unable to suppress my curiosity.

"That's a ridiculous question, sister," she scoffed, her tone carrying a hint of incredulity. "Who wouldn't fall for a handsome, hunk, and wealthy man, who is kind, gentle, and aiding us in our time of need with our mother? I'm honestly surprised you turned him down when he confessed to you. If it were me, I'd have leaped at the chance to date him."

"How did you find out about his confession to me?"

"I could sense your awkwardness around him, so I decided to ask Mr. Leon directly," she explained, her words dripping with smugness. "He admitted that he once harbored feelings for you and made his feelings known, but you didn't reciprocate. It's a shame, really. You missed out on the opportunity to be with a great man. That's why, since my big sister has failed, I'm going to try to win his affection.

I even considered staying in the establishment and sneaking into his bed at night."

"Please don't even think about doing that..." I pleaded.

"Well, since you stopped me, then that ship has sunk," Selene sighed, her voice carrying a tinge of disappointment.

As we strolled along, my mind wandered, conjuring scenarios of what might have transpired if I hadn't rejected Leon's confession. The thought gnawed at me, teasing with possibilities that would forever remain unknown. Yet, dwelling on it was akin to chasing shadows in the night—a futile endeavor. There was no use lamenting over spilled milk, for time marched on, heedless of our regrets.

What had occurred was etched in stone, irreversible and unchangeable.

Leon's POV

After Zeruel departed, I traversed the corridors until I reached Amon's office. The room lay vacant, Amon engrossed in her duties elsewhere. Settling onto the plush sofa, I tilted my head back, my gaze drifting upward to the ornate ceiling.

Recollections flooded my mind—reports from Gabrielle, unofficial news veiled by royal decree, detailing the events of the past three days following the Milham's Sanatorium arson incident.

The news implicated that the Prince of Milham, Julius Hovan Milham II, was responsible for the arson at the sanatorium three days prior. Naturally, this information remained concealed from the public eye, shielded by the veil of royalty.

Yet, I couldn't shake the nagging thought of what could have driven Julius, who just a month ago suffered heartbreak from his failed pursuit of Charlotte's affection, to commit such heinous acts. It seemed unfathomable that unrequited love could spiral into murder. I suspected that someone was manipulating him, but the question lingered: who?

And then there was the woman with the black hair, bearing the surname Eclair. Was she somehow connected to me? The thought raced through my mind, especially considering Elise's cryptic requirement for me to find the "third." Could it be referring to a third of us? It seemed plausible.

"Well, I suppose I can delve into that matter later. Tomorrow promises a rewarding ceremony for us."

After saving numerous individuals, we were slated to receive commendations for our efforts. Yes, even I was to be recognized, having assisted Isiliraiellyn in evacuating those trapped within the sanatorium.

While I could have declined the reward, there was a specific reason driving me to attend. One of the administrators would be presenting the awards.

Chapter 127: Preparation For The King's Game, Part 2 (3)

"In recognition of the bravery displayed by these three students, who saved numerous lives during the arson incident, they will be rewarded with a fitting commendation," declared Gaspard Cordelius Argus, a golden-haired and bespectacled elder, one of the administrators.

It was evident that he harbored some internal conflict regarding the reward, especially considering that Shredica, Isiliraiellyn, and I hailed from the bronze class. Moreover, both Shredica and I were regarded as skillless—a fact that didn't sit well with the old man, who harbored disdain for those lacking in prowess. However, he had little choice in the matter.

Our heroic actions demanded recognition, lest the academy face scrutiny.

Today marked the day of the rewarding ceremony. The three of us stood on the stage, facing the entirety of the academy's student body. Their scrutinizing gazes made me feel somewhat uneasy.

"The academy does not advocate for reckless behavior such as what you three displayed," said Gaspard, addressing the gathered students. "We hope that this won't set a precedent and that those with the necessary skills will handle such situations in the future. However, thanks to your actions, the loss of life was minimized to some extent."

"To all the students witnessing this ceremony," Gaspard continued, "I want to make it clear that we do not encourage you to engage in reckless behavior either. However, if you find yourself in a situation

where intervention is deemed necessary, we will exercise a degree of leniency. But please, refrain from exceeding the responsibilities of a student and leave matters to the capable elders."

After receiving three boxes, presumably containing medals, Gaspard turned to the crowd once more. "With that said, the students who bravely rescued and evacuated the victims of the arson incident have exemplified the qualities of a true magic knight. Today, they will be honored for their valor. Let's give them a round of applause."

The students applauded, though it lacked genuine enthusiasm. Their applause was rather monotonous. I could discern a few who genuinely clapped, such as Titania, Zeruel, Johanne, and surprisingly, even Princess Myrcella Odette Milham of Milham. I hadn't expected her to applaud, especially considering her brother was responsible for the arson. Perhaps she was unaware of the truth. Hm?

I should definitely look into the affairs of the royal family...

While the applause filled the air, Gaspard proceeded to place the medal on each of us, one by one. Once finished, he turned to the audience once more. "Now then, everyone, let's give them another round of applause."

With a lackluster applause from the student body, the rewarding ceremony came to a close.

After the ceremony, Shredica approached me. "Come with me."

I raised an eyebrow. "Where are we going?"

"I'm going to have a word with Administrator Gaspard about granting me permission to join the King's Game."

"Is that really wise?" I questioned. "Lord Gaspard is the most stubborn of all the administrators, you know?"

"I understand that," she acknowledged.

"But why take the risk?" I pressed.

"Because I have to give it a shot," she insisted.

"I've already told you, haven't I? Your best bet is to approach Administrator Galdea. She's the most understanding of the bunch," I reiterated.

"Administrator Galdea may be understanding, but she lacks the influence of someone like Administrator Gaspard," she countered. "If I can secure permission from Administrator Gaspard, the most influential administrator, it might improve my chances of catching the king's attention as a prospective magic knight."

"I don't think that's necessary," I interjected.

It's not like the king is the one creating magic knights in the first place. While he holds considerable power in the kingdom, his authority doesn't extend to every aspect, particularly the selection of magic knights. That falls under the jurisdiction of the Commander of Magic Knights, and the Academy.

"Enough arguing, Mr. Leon," Shredica interrupted. "Here comes Administrator Gaspard."

True to her words, Gaspard approached us with an air of authority. It was evident that his power and influence lent him an aura of superiority. As he drew closer, his gaze behind his glasses held a hidden disdain, perceptible to both Shredica and me. Unfazed, Shredica met his gaze head-on.

"I assume you two have a reason for accosting me," Gaspard remarked, his tone dripping with disdain.
"What do a pair of skillless individuals like yourselves want from someone like me?"

Of all the administrators, Gaspard was notorious for his stubbornness. His disdain for the skillless ran deeper than his aversion to childhood baths. So intense was his hatred for the skillless that when he discovered his own granddaughter was among them, he disowned her, forbidding her from even bearing the prestigious Argus name—a name synonymous with power and influence in the Kingdom of Milham.

Currently, his granddaughter was enrolled at Milham's University for Women, an institution dedicated to educating noblewomen in proper etiquette and basic swordsmanship.

"Let's get straight to the point," Shredica declared. "I want you to grant both me and Mr. Leon here permission to participate in the King's Game."

Gaspard scoffed derisively upon hearing her request. "Do you truly believe I would entertain such a ludicrous notion? For skillless individuals like yourselves? I've already gone out of my way to personally reward you, yet you still have the audacity to make such demands? Skillless individuals like you are utterly shameless. The rightful participants are those with skills alone.

Don't delude yourselves into thinking that skillless individuals like you are on the same level as those with abilities. You're nothing but rejects."

Gaspard's disdain for the skillless was palpable, bordering on outright discrimination. It was akin to ableism, a concept familiar to me from my former world.

"How about we make things interesting with a little wager?" Shredica suggested.

Gaspard arched an eyebrow, intrigued by her proposal.

"A bet?" he inquired.

Shredica nodded, her gaze unwavering. "Grant me permission to join the King's Game. If I fail to clinch first place, I'll withdraw from school. And naturally, Mr. Leon here will withdraw as well if I don't succeed."

I shot her a bewildered look, feeling the weight of her decision pressing down on me. "Miss Shredica, do you realize the gravity of what you're proposing? I have aspirations to graduate from this academy."

"Silence, Mr. Leon," Shredica retorted sharply, her tone laced with warning. "Unless you want me to reveal that picture to your girlfriend."

It seemed she was resorting to blackmail once again to get her way.

"How about it, Lord Gaspard?" Shredica inquired.

Gaspard pondered for a moment before responding, "Alright. If you don't win first place, you'll withdraw from this school."

"Additionally," Shredica added, "I'd like to increase my rank in the bronze class. Just giving me permission to withdraw isn't enough of a stake for this bet, Lord Gaspard. Allowing me to advance from the bronze class would be a more fitting wager."

Gaspard looked down at her, his laugh cold. "I'm sorry," he said, though his tone belied his apology. "I can't grant you that. The stakes are limited to your withdrawal from the academy if you lose. Anything beyond that, I must decline. And as for climbing the ranks, do you truly believe you can rise?"

You're a reject, and rejects don't ascend the ranks. That's always been the rule."

"I'll break that rule," Shredica declared with unwavering determination.

Gaspard observed her resolute gaze before responding, "You can struggle all you want, but you won't change anything. No matter how skilled you are, we'll prevent you from advancing."

It seemed like he acknowledged that he, or rather, the administrators, were actively hindering her advancement from the bronze class to higher ranks. Well, I suppose that's to be expected. Administrators can be prejudiced, after all. As for Galdea's involvement, I'll have to assess that when I encounter her.

"Alright, where are your tickets so I can sign them?" Gaspard asked.

We both handed him our tickets. He retrieved a pen from his chest pocket and proceeded to sign them. After signing, he returned the tickets to us.

"With this, you are granted permission to join the King's Game," Gaspard declared with an air of finality, his voice echoing through the hall. "This is unprecedented, the first time three first-years from the bronze class are stepping into the fray. I hope all three of you tread cautiously," he added, his gaze piercing. "But don't forget the bet, Miss and Mister Skillless."

If you lose, you'll willingly withdraw from the academy, and I hope I never have to set eyes on you again."

His words hung heavy in the air, casting a somber shadow over Shredica and me. The weight of the bet settled on our shoulders like a leaden burden, reminding us of the stakes involved. As Gaspard turned to leave, his footsteps echoed ominously, signaling the gravity of the situation.

I couldn't believe that even my withdrawal was part of this bet.

"There's a third participant from the bronze class," Shredica remarked, her tone laced with determination. "Do you have any idea who it could be?"

I already knew who, of course. Gabrielle had given me a list yesterday of who would be those who were going to join the King's Game, so I saw who, among the students of the academy who would be going to join.

On the fourth year, there was one. Third year, there was one. Second year, there were four. I know the three of them. It was Johanne, Princess Myrcella, and another woman, who seemed to be close to those two. Also, Prince Julius was said to be joining as well.

And then, in the first year, there were three participants. All three of them were from the bronze class. It was me, Shredica, and another...

"It's Hereon," I said to her.

Chapter 128: Preparation For The King's Game, Part 2 (4)

Hereon, the student endowed with the Speed Boost skill, had suffered a humiliating defeat at the hands of Shredica just two months into the academic year. If we were to classify him based on anime cliches, he'd fit the typical bully archetype—a rough exterior matched by a coarse personality, almost resembling a delinquent.

However, ever since his defeat at Shredica's hands, he had oddly adopted a more subdued demeanor.

I couldn't help but notice that Hereon seemed to be developing feelings for Shredica. While I had no concrete evidence to support this theory, it was evident that his gaze frequently lingered on her. Perhaps the beatdown he received from Shredica had stirred something within him, leading him to develop an unexpected attraction to her.

I couldn't shake the suspicion that he might even have masochistic tendencies.

When I mentioned that Hereon was the one going, Shredica paused for a moment before turning to me. "Can you help me with something?"

"What do you need?" I inquired.

"In order to improve our chances of winning, I want to gather allies. I want to recruit... uh, what's-his-name, to join our team. Actually, I'm considering adding more allies to further increase our odds of success," she explained.

I blinked several times in confusion. "Wait, what?" I didn't even bother to be surprised that she couldn't recall Hereon's name. That was just typical of Shredica. If she wasn't interested in me, she wouldn't bother remembering my name either. What caught me off guard, however, was her sudden request.

"I've already told you once, haven't I? I don't want to repeat myself, so clean out your ears and listen carefully," Shredica retorted sharply.

"I heard you," I replied. "I'm just taken aback by your request. I thought I might have misheard."

"You heard me correctly, Mr. Leon," she affirmed. "I'm determined to win, no matter what. I refuse to withdraw from this school."

If that were truly the case, she shouldn't have agreed to the bet in the first place. And she certainly shouldn't have put my own withdrawal on the line as well. Frankly, I still didn't understand why Shredica aspired to become a magic knight. I couldn't discern if it was her genuine desire or not.

What puzzled me even more was how a woman who displayed no emotions on her face could harbor such a goal. I suspected there was more to her motives than met the eye. At this point, I had no idea what that might be, but I was determined to uncover the truth.

Despite her abrasive personality, among all the individuals I had encountered in this world, Shredica seemed to embody the essence of a protagonist. It felt as though she was destined for a special journey, one fraught with challenges that she would have to overcome from scratch to achieve her goals. It wasn't difficult to imagine Shredica as the protagonist of her own story.

And every protagonist needs a villain. It wouldn't be a compelling story without an antagonist to challenge the hero. After all, every fairy tale requires a classic villain, and I was prepared to fill that role.

Shredica undoubtedly faced numerous obstacles along her path, and while I may not be the final adversary in her narrative, I was determined to become one of her significant challenges.

In our dynamic, I would adopt the role of the fool, pretending to be fooled by Shredica when, in reality, it was I who was orchestrating the deception. My motivation stemmed from a desire to witness how far

she could progress in a world where skillessness was frowned upon, and those with superior abilities reigned supreme.

So, I just sighed and acquiesced to her request, or rather, command. "Fine," I conceded. "I'll help you recruit Hereon."

I remained skeptical about Hereon's willingness to join our cause. However, given his infatuation with Shredica, there was a slim chance of success. It might not be high, but it wasn't entirely impossible either.

"Let's catch him off guard on his way back to the dorms once school hours are over."

The term "ambush" left a disturbing taste in my mouth. Come to think of it, hadn't she ambushed me in a similar fashion?

After enduring several hours of tedious lessons and enduring Professor Irene's disapproving glances, I breathed a sigh of relief as the school day came to an end. Shredica waited for me outside our room and practically dragged me along to our destination.

Finally, we spotted Hereon exiting the school building, his bag slung over his shoulder as he walked with a subdued demeanor, one hand in his pocket. It was a stark contrast to his previous demeanor, where he carried himself like the king of the class. Witnessing this change was quite surprising. Could a man truly change so drastically from being punched?

Well, if it was Shredica who delivered the blow that left his face bloodied, it wasn't entirely unbelievable that he'd become subdued. It seemed that Shredica had managed to tame Hereon.

"Now's our chance, Mr. Leon," Shredica remarked as she observed Hereon. "Ambush him, now."

"Me?" I questioned incredulously.

"Who else?" she replied matter-of-factly, as if it had been my duty all along.

"Fine..." I relented, stepping out of our hiding spot and positioning myself in front of Hereon, like a final boss determined to thwart his progress.

"Why the fuck are you blocking me?" he growled, his tone dripping with hostility as if I were his arch-nemesis.

"I just want to talk about something," I replied calmly.

"Not interested," he snapped back.

His response was cold, but not entirely unexpected. Like the administrators, Hereon harbored disdain for the skillless. He had taunted me in school for being skillless before, but now his demeanor suggested a certain level of submission. Perhaps his crush on Shredica, who was skillless, had softened his stance towards those without skill.

After he brushed past me, I quickly caught up and blocked his path again, my arms outstretched.

Hereon let out an irritated sigh. "What the fuck do you want now?"

"I need to talk to you, and you're going to listen," I insisted.

"What if I don't want to listen?" he retorted.

"Then I'll follow you until you're ready to hear me out," I replied firmly.

Hereon rolled his eyes. "This is fucking ridiculous," he muttered, scratching the back of his head. Suddenly, I felt mana coalescing around him, and then he disappeared from sight, moving with the speed of the wind. Though I could still see him, I didn't attempt to follow any further. My threat to follow him was just a bluff to get him to listen to me.

Since Hereon had made it clear he wanted nothing to do with me, resorting to his skill to evade me, convincing him to join us would be an uphill battle. After letting him slip away, I approached Shredica, who shot me a glare that could cut through steel.

"Why didn't you follow him?" she demanded.

"Because it would've been pointless," I replied calmly. "Forcing someone to collaborate when they're unwilling isn't true collaboration. It's coercion."

"I don't mind using force," she stated bluntly. It was typical of her to resort to such tactics. "In fact, I'd gladly use it to get what I want."

"Yeah, just like you did with me, huh?" I muttered under my breath, forcing a wry smile. "But you can't approach collaboration that way. If our intentions don't align, true collaboration is impossible. Do you really think Hereon will abandon his goal of winning the King's Game just because you say so? I may put up with your antics, but I doubt Hereon will."

He might be eyeing something in the King's Game. So, I don't think he'll team up with you. Humans tend to be like that."

"That's just stupid," she spat.

"Well, that's the nature of humans, I suppose," I responded. "The creator designed us as creatures of desire. If they don't see it benefiting them, they won't lift a finger."

People, regardless of who they are, will do anything to fulfill their desires. Shredica would resort to anything, even unsavory tactics like blackmail, to achieve her goals. Hereon was no different. And neither was I. The poor strive to be rich, while the wealthy crave even more wealth. Commoners yearn for status, and kings hunger for more power.

That's simply how the creator designed us. Creatures of desire.

"Anyway, I don't think anyone will want to team up with you if you want to win. Remember, only one person can triumph in the King's Game. It's okay to form alliances, but in the end, there can be only one victor. If you team up, they won't just surrender the game because you say so," I stated firmly.

Shredica regarded me with a puzzled expression. "What do you mean? I don't expect them to give up. I intend to win fairly and squarely. If it comes down to just us, I'll challenge them to face me. If I lose, then we'll both be out of school.

But if I emerge victorious, then we'll rise to the top of the class. Remember my words, Mr. Leon."

I was taken aback by Shredica's meticulous planning. I didn't think she possessed the mental acumen for it. Yet, it was a shrewd strategy. Collaborating early on enhances your chances of success. Then, after vanquishing all other competitors, alliances would dissolve, and they'd engage in a final showdown until a sole champion emerged.

Chapter 129: Three Days Before The King's Game, Day 1 (1)

It was already Friday, and the anticipation for the upcoming King's Game on Monday hung heavy in the air. The game typically lasted for three or maybe four days, depending on various factors. After the final class of the day, I made my way to Professor Irene's office. I couldn't fathom why she specifically requested to see me after class, but my guess was it had something to do with the King's Game.

Surely, she wouldn't summon me to discuss the night we shared together, right? She had made it clear that it was best forgotten. But forgetting wasn't an option, not after an experience like that.

As I stepped through the door into her office, my senses were assaulted by the rich fragrance of books. My eyes widened as I took in the sight of the room, overflowing with shelves upon shelves of books. I knew Professor Irene was a bookworm, but I had never imagined her collection would be this extensive.

While I considered myself a bookworm as well, the sheer volume of books in her office dwarfed anything I had back in my room on Earth.

Distracted by the plethora of books around the room, my gaze finally settled on the focal point—a desk positioned in the center of the room, with a woman seated behind it, engrossed in a book. I couldn't deny the captivating image before me: her silhouette framed against the backdrop of countless books, bathed in the warm sunlight streaming through the window.

It was a scene reminiscent of the moments when I coated Gabrielle with cum. Though, admittedly, not quite as stunning...

As the woman finally tore her gaze from the book in her hand, our eyes met, and she closed the tome with a deliberate motion. "You've arrived," she stated calmly.

As she said that, I looked at her domination requirements.

--

You've captured the interest of Irene Brightspear. You can now proceed to dominate her.

Name: Irene Brightspear

Race: Human

Requirements to dominate Irene:

1. Have Sex With Irene (Completed!)

2. Ignore Irene For A Month (Completed!)

3. Make Irene Angry At You (Completed!)

4. Make Irene Agree To Have A Secret Sexual Relationship With You

....

--

The third requirement had seemingly fulfilled itself on the day I encountered her at the theater, alongside Elise. It was as if the circumstances aligned to meet the condition without any conscious effort on my part.

"What's on your mind, Professor?" I cut straight to the chase, opting for directness.

"Before we proceed," she interjected, "take a seat."

Complying with her request, I settled into a chair, meeting her gaze as she folded her arms beneath her ample breasts, her eyes peering at me from behind her glasses. "I've heard you're gearing up for the King's Game," she began. "Do you have any particular desires you wish the King to fulfill by participating? Or is this merely a pursuit for entertainment?"

"I doubt anyone jumps into the King's Game just for kicks, Professor," I retorted.

Joining the King's Game posed considerable risks, including the possibility of death. No one would enter the game solely for amusement.

"That's a valid point," she acknowledged. "But here's the thing, Student Leon. Participation in the King's Game isn't open to just anyone. You need approval from at least one professor here at the academy."

Given your status as the lowest-ranked student in the bronze class, it's highly unlikely that any professor, including myself, would endorse your involvement in a game fraught with danger, potentially resulting in your death."

One of the prerequisites for entering the King's Game, especially for students, is obtaining a ticket signed by an administrator. These administrators aim to boost the academy's reputation, as your victory would reflect positively on them.

Additionally, you must seek permission from a professor to participate, as the game poses significant risks and requires evaluation to determine if you're capable of handling it. Professor Irene was essentially saying that without approval from a professor, she doubted any would endorse my participation, considering the perilous nature of the game.

If anything were to happen to me in the King's Game, it would ultimately be the academy's responsibility.

"I'm sorry, Student Leon," Irene stated with a firm gaze. "But your participation will be annulled since you are essentially at the lowest level of the bronze class. Though I doubt your weakness, we cannot permit a student from the lower echelons of the academy to join."

I hadn't expected such a straightforward refusal. Why had she allowed Shredica to participate, then? It seemed clear that Shredica and Irene had been discussing this matter, leading to Irene signing her ticket but not mine. It felt like a form of discrimination based on gender...

Professor Irene's decision was final, or so she thought. However, she hadn't anticipated that I already had permission from another source.

"I'm sorry, Professor Irene, but my participation has already been permitted," I asserted.

"Eh? R-Really?"

At this, her eyes widened in surprise.

I presented my ticket. "Yes," I affirmed. "It's already signed by Professor Gabrielle."

Irene scrutinized the ticket for a long moment, her expression thoughtful. Finally, she raised her gaze to meet mine. "I-It really is hers..."

I carefully returned the ticket to my pocket.

"I'll be joining the King's Game," I informed her. "Because I have a pressing need for it."

It was a lie, of course. My true motivation was simply to observe how events would unfold in the game, especially with someone like Julius participating.

Suddenly, Irene's cheeks flushed a deep shade of red.

"You... you're quite determined. Reminds me of what my ideal man would say," she murmured to herself, her cheeks flushing momentarily. Quickly regaining her composure, she shook her head, dispelling the blush. "If that's the case, then perhaps summoning you here was unnecessary. However, just because you've been granted permission to participate doesn't mean you can act recklessly during the game."

And remember, don't put yourself in harm's way, and refrain from killing others, understood?"

Her tone suddenly took on a maternal quality, reminiscent of my own mother. Memories of my parents from my previous life, who had tragically passed away when I was just sixteen, flooded my mind. It was just me and my sister after that. The sight of someone assuming a motherly role filled me with a sense of nostalgia and sentimentality.

Hmm, if I have siblings in this world, does that mean there's a mother too? Well, at this point, it hardly mattered.

"I understand," I replied.

"Good," she said, offering a smile.

With our conversation concluded, I exited her office.

Later, I visited Leonamon. The company had been steadily growing, introducing innovative products like smartphones, tablets, laptops, and even computers. While still in its early stages, I could envision a world where computers and the internet would become commonplace within three years.

Furthermore, with the construction of roads underway, it seemed inefficient for them to be solely used for carriages. That's why I enlisted the help of Elva, who possessed knowledge of mechanics and could serve as a mechanical engineer, and Beatrice, skilled in blacksmithing, to begin developing the first version of cars.

They had already drafted blueprints and were now gathering the necessary materials for construction. In five years' time, the world would embrace a more modern era.

In the realm of medicine, our advancements were notable. Trisha, a woman skilled in botany, apothecary, and medicinal practices, spearheaded our growth in this field. Entertainment flourished as well. Ayane, now a prominent model for the Leonamon brand, gained global recognition for her stunning beauty.

Additionally, our Idol Group was poised to take the spotlight soon, with their songs gaining popularity among academy students. Our food products, including cakes and wines, swiftly gained traction in the market. It seemed as though Leonamon was gradually engulfing not just the kingdom, but the entire world.

And while the empire expanded, so did my wealth, even though I wasn't actively involved in the day-to-day operations.

As of today, I had amassed a staggering 61 billion gold coins, roughly equivalent to 1 trillion dollars on Earth. Suffice it to say, I was swimming in wealth.

It was high time to expand our business further and establish branches across the globe. While reviewing the daily financial report, Maya, a beast woman with goat-like characteristics—horns spiraling

atop her head, goat ears, and a tail protruding from the hole in her maid uniform skirt—entered my office carrying a bottle of wine.

Without a word, Maya approached me with grace, delivering a letter she had received. "Master, a letter has arrived for you," she announced.

Taking the letter from her, I nodded in acknowledgment. As soon as I had it in my hands, she bowed and gracefully exited the office. Examining the envelope, I noticed the familiar handwriting that read 'To Leon.' It was from a childhood friend of mine.

Opening the envelope eagerly, I began to read the letter.

"To Leon,

I hope this letter finds you well. Congratulations on your enrollment at the academy. I wish I could visit you, but my studies to become the next priestess keep me occupied. Nevertheless, my desire to see you again remains strong. Sister Lily also wishes to see you. If you have the time, please come visit us.

From Alice."

Chapter 130: Three Days Before The King's Game, Day 1 (2)

After reading the letter, which wasn't very long, a wave of nostalgia washed over me. It transported me back to my days in the orphanage, where Sister Lily and the other nuns cared for me. Among the orphans was Alice, my childhood friend whom I grew close to. When I left the village at 16, it had been two years since then.

I vividly recalled our parting; Alice's tear-streaked face as she begged me not to leave. I promised to return whenever possible, though she hesitated to let me go. Eventually, she relented, expressing her hope that after I graduated from the academy and became a magic knight, she would also pursue her dream of becoming a full-fledged priestess.

I made sporadic visits to the orphanage, as promised, but as time went on, these became less frequent. It had been nearly four months since my last visit, prompting Alice to reach out to me with this letter.

"I suppose it's about time I paid them a visit," I mused. "I should bring along some souvenirs."

The village I grew up in was Flui Village, situated on the outskirts of the Holy City. It would take a three-day trek from here, the Capital City, to reach there. Thankfully, I could make the journey in just an hour by harnessing the wind and utilizing Levitation Magic to speed through the air.

After a while, a knock sounded at my door. It was Maya. "Master, have you finished reading the letter?"

"Yes," I replied. "You may come in."

Maya entered, still clutching the bottle of wine. "M-Master..." she stammered, her cheeks flushed. "I-I want to serve you."

Raising an eyebrow, I was taken aback by Maya's unexpected confession. While she had expressed her desire to work as my maid, I hadn't anticipated such a direct proposition. But then again, she had willingly taken on the role, along with Amon, making them my two maids in total.

Still, I hadn't explicitly informed her that being my maid equated to servicing me. Sure, Amon fulfilled that role, but Maya was different.

"Maya, are you certain about this?" I inquired, my tone laced with concern. "You're not obligated to do anything like this, you know?"

"I... I am," she replied, though her voice lacked conviction.

"Why do you want to do this?" I pressed gently, wanting to understand her motivations.

"It's because..." Maya hesitated, chewing on her lip before continuing. "Because... I want to express my gratitude somehow. You saved me from a fate worse than death, and while I know I'm asking for a lot, considering you've already rescued me from a life of prostitution, I have one more favor to ask. I want to return to the Khrysómallon clan and assure them of my safety.

I promise to come back to you afterward. And... I don't mind being your sex slave for life, but I hope you'll grant me some measure of freedom in return."

The Khrysómallon clan. If my memory served me right, they were a clan of ram-like beast people. Unfortunately, many individuals hunted them for sport, relishing in the prospect of cooking their meat afterward. Among the beast races, the Khrysómallon were considered the most appetizing, or so I had heard in the Black Market.

It was understandable why Maya wanted to return to inform her family of her safety. After all, she had been abruptly taken by a kidnapper, primarily Norman, and hadn't been able to contact her family since then.

"You don't need to do anything for me to allow you to visit your family, Maya," I assured her. "I've said it before, haven't I? I won't mistreat you, and I'll grant you the freedom you desire. It's perfectly okay if you choose not to return."

But Maya shook her head, her silver hair resembling a white sheep's wool swaying with her movement. "I don't want to leave you, Master," she insisted. "I promise to repay you with everything I have until the day I die. My body and soul are yours."

Her unwavering devotion was surprising to witness. After a month under my care, it seemed they had finally warmed up to me.

"Even so," I reiterated firmly, "you're under no obligation to engage in sexual activities with me. It should only happen when you're truly ready and your mind has fully accepted it. I don't want to engage in intimacy with someone who feels obligated due to a sense of gratitude. Do you understand?"

Maya nodded, her head bowed. "I understand," she murmured softly. Then, gathering her courage, she met my gaze again. "Um, I think some of the others may approach you as well, asking for the same. I'll advise them to take their time and come to terms with their feelings, just as you advised me. And then..."

uh, if we all come to that decision together, I, along with them, will request intimacy with you," she confessed, her cheeks flushing with embarrassment.

"All of you, at the same time?" I queried, surprised by her proposal.

"Y-Yes," she stammered, her blush deepening. "There are five of us, but depending on the circumstances, the number might increase."

"I think sleeping with five women at the same time would be quite enjoyable. For me, at least," I remarked, though I doubted it would be as pleasurable for them, given their lack of experience in such matters.

"Are you truly sure about this?" I asked Maya, needing confirmation. "I'm concerned that your first time might not be as romantic, given that you'll all be sharing me."

"I'm positive," she affirmed with determination. "Besides, we've come to terms with the fact that our idea of romance may not align with reality. Our minds have been exposed to various experiences, making it difficult to envision a conventional romance. But even so, we don't mind. As long as it's with you, I believe it'll be just as romantic as any dream we could imagine."

"Why do you think that?" I inquired, curious about her perspective.

"It's a bit embarrassing to admit," she confessed, her cheeks flushing pink, "but... we love you, Master."

I had no idea when it happened, but it seemed that along with warming up to me, they were also beginning to develop feelings for me.

"Thank you for that," I said to her with a smile, causing her blush to deepen even more. If that was the case, then it seemed imperative to reciprocate their affection. While pondering this, I couldn't help but notice Maya still holding the bottle of wine. "By the way, Maya."

"Yes, Master?"

"Why are you holding that bottle of wine? Do you plan to drink, or something?" I inquired.

"Ah! Uh, um, I was planning to pour it on my body as you taste it, Master," she confessed.

That sounded a bit messy, but also somewhat kinky. I supposed this girl was a bit of a pervert too, huh?

When I emerged from the office and entered the main lounge, I found Marie there, with Filia massaging her. Filia, a young half-dwarf, wasn't short despite the typical stature of dwarves. Marie, on the other hand, bore the appearance of a dwarf, despite being a regular human. Despite her childlike appearance, Marie was actually 99 years old—a loli hag, as some might jest.

Marie had been living here since she helped me revive Martha from the dead.

Even though she was petite, I couldn't deny her appeal. I suppose I have a soft spot for legal lolis, although now that she's 99, it's no longer considered legal, right? Still, I think I appreciate lolis more than I let on.

Her bare shoulders, exposed by the pulled-down strap of her kimono, were tantalizing to behold. That smug loli look on her face stirred a desire within me to wipe it away, perhaps by intoxicating her in some way.

The reason for her youthful appearance was attributed to her skill, which allowed her to summon souls. However, it turned out that she could also gather life essences. Similar to mana, life essences were abundant in the atmosphere but couldn't be naturally collected. Thanks to her skill, she could gather them, which in turn stunted her growth to adulthood.

Despite being 99 years old, her appearance and physique remained that of a child.

However, that doesn't mean her mentality was still that of a child. Her mind was mature, and perhaps even beyond that. She now possessed a wisdom akin to that of someone who might one day become a legend.

That's why sometimes when she seduced me, it was honestly hard to resist. Looking at her now, with her bare shoulders being massaged and her body covered by a kimono so thin that you could practically see through it from this distance, I couldn't help but feel a little... tempted to peek. There might be nothing but thin cloth covering her devilishly squishy, loli body.

As I stood there practically gawking at her, she looked up and caught my gaze, a smug expression on her face. "Oh, Leon boy," she teased, "is my beauty finally tempting you?"