

Inevitability 101

Chapter 101 Different Powers

The sound of tinkling bells sent a shiver down Leah's spine. Unable to pinpoint the danger, she instinctively used her Paper Figurine Substitutes.

Her body rapidly shrank and thinned, morphing into a carefully trimmed paper figurine.

The paper figure darkened, turning yellow and brittle as if it had aged a decade in an instant.

Silently, the withered yellow paper disintegrated into countless tiny fragments.

Leah reappeared at the top of the stairs, clutching the kerosene lamp. But in the next moment, she felt the chill on her shoulders.

Her thoughts raced as she raised her right hand and pinched the bridge of her nose.

Activating her Spirit Vision, she glanced at the room across from her and the glass window.

In the dim light of the kerosene lamp, the washroom's glass reflected Leah's upper body.

Transparent, ghostly infants perched on each of her shoulders!

Their faces were round and chubby, their skin a ghastly blue-white. Their expressions twisted in malevolence.

The spectral infants leaned down, pressing their mouths to Leah's neck as if feeding on her essence.

Rather than panic, Leah breathed a sigh of relief.

Identifying the source of the threat was far better than being in the dark!

Now she could assess the situation and make informed decisions.

Just like this!

Leah drew her exquisite silver revolver, aimed at the eerie infant on her left shoulder, and pulled the trigger.

Bang!

A golden bullet, wreathed in illusory flames, burst from the barrel.

The infant wailed as it was flung from Leah's shoulder, consumed by the golden fire.

Bang! Leah fired again, this time at the infant above her other shoulder.

The second ghostly child, ablaze with the same intense fire, cried out as it followed its companion down the corridor.

A woman's figure materialized. Her eyes were a piercing blue, her features delicate; her round face framed by disheveled black hair. She was the padre's mistress, Sybil Berry, sister to Shepherd Pierre Berry.

Her skin was coated in a sickly blue hue, and on both sides of her neck, grotesque growths protruded.

The spectral infants returned to her, latching onto the corresponding growths to feed.

As they nursed, the golden flames that engulfed them gradually dissipated.

But Leah would not stand idly by. She aimed at Sybil Berry and pulled the trigger.

With a bang, the golden bullet traversed mere meters before striking Sybil squarely in the forehead.

For some reason, Sybil made no attempt to dodge. A bloody hole bore through her skull.

Within the wound, white and red mixed as illusory golden flames devoured them both.

Clang! Sybil fell lifeless to the floor. The ghostly infants, their pale faces contorted in anguish, vanished.

That's it? Leah couldn't believe it.

The silver bells on her veil and boots continued to tinkle, growing more intense by the second.

In the blink of an eye, Leah felt a cold, malevolent force growing within her.

Frantically, she glanced at the washroom and the glass window. Her skin had taken on a bluish hue at some point.

In the next instant, her body reverted to a paper figurine.

The paper figure crumpled into a ball, hitting the floor with a thud.

Leah reappeared in the bathroom, the icy sensation still growing inside her.

Almost simultaneously, a gentle voice whispered in her ear.

“I made a pact with a strange spirit world creature and gained one of its abilities.

“Whoever kills me, I can be reborn within their body and take control.

“You're very beautiful. I like it very much. The padre should like you very much too...”

Without hesitation, Leah bolted from the bathroom, silver revolver and kerosene lamp in hand.

She had to find Valentine.

Exorcism was one of the Sun domain's specialties. They were particularly effective against such threats!

Valentine found himself cornered near the balcony.

The area was choked by pitch-black, thorn-covered vines hanging from the ceiling. Blood-red, putrid-smelling flowers bloomed all around.

Valentine spread his arms, summoning golden flames from thin air to incinerate the monstrous flora.

Just then, a figure materialized in midair.

He wore a white robe adorned with golden threads. His black hair was short, his blue eyes solemn, and his nose slightly hooked. He was Guillaume Bénét, the padre of Cordu.

No longer invisible, he floated in the air and gazed down at Valentine. In ancient Hermes, he bellowed,

“Valentine!”

Dark energy flickered within the padre's robes.

This was an ability Guillaume Bénét had obtained through a contract with a spirit world creature.

By invoking the target's true name, he could affect their Soul Body, causing disorientation.

The closer the language was to nature and the spirit world, and the better the understanding of the target, the stronger the effect.

If his Spirit Body was far superior to the target's, he could even extract their spirit, leaving them disoriented and defenseless.

Valentine's head spun as he heard the padre's shout. He suddenly felt dizzy and couldn't think straight.

However, he quickly regained control and shook off the disorientation.

Ever since entering Cordu, he had never revealed his full name. The padre's ability had limited effect on him.

Guillaume Bénét hadn't expected success either. Before Valentine could completely shake off the dizziness, the padre hurled a human bone he had prepared earlier.

As the bone hit the ground, the airborne padre rapidly recited in Hermes, “Blind, deaf, unwakeable.”

It was a curse and an ability Guillaume Bénét had gained through a contract.

He cast bones symbolizing death to render the target like the dead—blind and deaf, with unresponsive eyes.

Valentine wasn't asleep, so the curse couldn't render him unconscious. However, the lingering dizziness intensified, blurring his vision and causing his ears to ring. He struggled to see beyond three meters or hear anything further away.

Seizing the opportunity, the padre extended his right palm.

His blue eyes took on a hazy, almost ethereal quality.

Complex mercury symbols, reminiscent of tiny rivers, swirled around Valentine. They formed a grand illusory river shimmering with light.

Countless tributaries branched off downstream. As the main river surged forward, most were swallowed up, leaving only one.

Guillaume Bénét observed for a few seconds and snatched one of the mercury symbols just before Valentine broke free from the cursed blindness and deafness.

He intended to amplify the corresponding tributary and make Valentine's fate of being paralyzed by the Abyssal Demon Flowers a reality.

Ryan barely managed to dodge the shadow's axe as it slashed down towards him. He quickly discarded the kerosene lamp he had been carrying and donned his silver-white armor. In his hand, a broadsword condensed from light appeared.

Clang! Clang! Clang!

Ryan slashed continuously, forcing the shadow back against the wall. The specks of Sunrise Gleam he released covered the surroundings, exorcizing the shadows in the area.

The pitch-black, pale-white, evil, or terrifying arms that were about to reach out from behind the shadow were pushed away, making it hard for them to grab Ryan's body.

With a clang, the shadow shrank back into the wall and reverted to normal.

It disappeared under the illumination of Sunrise Gleam.

Not far away, a remnant shadow enlarged, and Shepherd Pierre Berry, dressed in a long hooded coat, walked out.

He bent down slightly and charged at Ryan with his axe, accumulating powers in his body with every step. After a few steps, Pierre Berry seemed to have the posture and strength of a giant.

Ryan loomed over his opponent, gripping the Sword of Dawn with both hands as he prepared to strike the enemy charging at him like a rampaging bull.

Clang!

The broadsword and axe clashed, sending a shower of sparks in every direction.

Both Pierre Berry and Ryan recoiled simultaneously. One stumbled back three steps to regain balance, while the other only needed one.

Ryan halted his retreat, one leg stretched back, and seized the moment before Pierre Berry could steady himself. He lunged forward, slashing at his adversary.

Just then, Pierre Berry's mouth gaped open.

His tongue bizarrely morphed into a peculiar chameleon.

The chameleon's head was tucked between its legs, a front foot stuffed into its mouth.

The instant Ryan's gaze fell upon the chameleon, he was wracked by a searing pain in his head, so intense that his attack faltered, failing to land.

Headache curse!

Shepherd Pierre Berry had gained this ability through a pact with an enigmatic Spirit Body that had reveled in studying all manner of curses during its life.

Capitalizing on the opportunity to inflict a debilitating headache on Ryan, Pierre Berry summoned the receding shadow back and unleashed a ferocious assault.

Amid the cacophony of clanging metal, Ryan found himself forced to retreat.

Amid the chaos outside, Lumian bolted upright and urgently told Aurore, "Something's not right! We have to regroup with Ryan and the others!"

Ryan had drilled this principle into their heads time and time again: In the face of an attack, they had to strive to stay together. A united team was far more effective than five individuals battling solo!

“Okay!” Aurore leaped out of bed and sprinted for the door, reaching into the concealed pocket of her flowing gown.

As Lumian neared the open doorway, he caught sight of a figure—Deputy Padre Michel Garrigue stood before him, garbed in a white robe adorned with gold thread.

The striking, curly-haired youth's eyes were eerily vacant as he offered Lumian a smile.

“Do you want to pray?”

With a swift motion, Lumian yanked his axe free and aimed for Michel's neck.

Michel's head lolled, but only a trickle of blood escaped.

Glancing at Lumian from the corner of his eye, he inquired with a radiant smile, as if nothing had transpired, “Do you want to pray?”

As Lumian prepared to raise his axe and sever the man's neck, an overwhelming sense of danger washed over him.

Relying on his Dancer's uncanny agility, he abruptly spun around and swung the axe behind his back.

In the next second, his gaze froze.

He saw Aurore.

Aurore's light-blue eyes had inexplicably grown vacant. She hurled a handful of powder, ground from some kind of tree, at Lumian.

Gazing upon his sister's familiar visage, Lumian's axe strike decelerated until it came to a halt.

He even forgot to evade.

A crackling noise erupted as a sphere of silver lightning struck Lumian's head.

He fainted.

Darkness swallowed his vision.

Chapter 102 Transfer

Clang! Clang! Clang!

Ryan retreated, barely managing to parry Shepherd Pierre Berry's relentless onslaught.

Pierre Berry's eyes were bloodshot, the gentleness gone, replaced by a ferocious rage.

As sinister arms, either pitch-black or ghostly white, reached from the shadows to ensnare Ryan, Pierre Berry swung his axe at Ryan's head.

This time, Ryan didn't parry or retreat. He didn't even raise the Sword of Dawn.

Instead, he twisted his body, allowing the eerie arms to grasp his legs and Pierre Berry's axe to strike his shoulder.

Clang!

Spiderweb-like cracks spread across the silver pauldron, light flaking off and dissipating.

Grimacing in pain, Ryan genuflected, plunging the Sword of Dawn into the floor.

He knew he'd been separated from his allies for too long. He needed to regroup at any cost.

The strength of a team surpassed that of any individual!

In a split second, the light-infused two-handed broadsword detonated.

It shattered into countless light fragments, morphing into a hurricane that barreled towards Pierre Berry.

Panic flickered in Pierre Berry's eyes at the devastating blow.

Ignoring the malevolent arms, he retreated into his own shadow.

A fierce storm of pure light engulfed the area, slicing shadows and evil into shreds.

As an areof-effect attack, Hurricane of Light inevitably impacted Ryan's surroundings, despite his best efforts to direct it towards his enemy.

Silently, the walls of Lumian's and Aurore's bedrooms crumbled, reduced to tiny fragments in the terrifying storm.

Near the balcony, pitch-black vines hanging from the roof writhed like tortured weeds. Even Padre Guillaume Bénét, suspended in midair, had no choice but to hastily dodge.

Bloodied scratches marred his body as he fled Aurore's house.

Rumble!

Half the roof had been obliterated, the second floor pockmarked with gaping holes. In many places, the stove below was visible.

Leah was also caught in the storm of light, her figure rapidly withering and shrinking, transforming into a paper figurine.

When the tempest subsided, she reappeared in the study, barely intact.

Ryan knew she had Paper Figurine Substitutes, allowing him to unleash such a brutal attack on Pierre Berry in a confined space.

As for Aurore, Lumian, and Valentine, their positions offered some protection from the attack. Ryan had tried to control the storm's direction, with limited success.

After assessing the situation, he decided to use this decisive attack.

Crimson moonlight and faint starlight streamed through the ruined roof. Ryan scanned the area but saw no sign of Aurore or Lumian. Leah, pale-faced, was rushing towards him. Valentine lay unconscious on the balcony, numerous wounds from the Hurricane of Light, but none lethal.

Seeing his battered allies, Ryan stopped searching. He grabbed Leah's shoulder and leaped to the balcony.

With one hand, the Warrior hoisted Valentine and jumped from the Lumian residence.

Relying on his not-yet-shattered Dawn Armor to withstand further ambushes, he raced towards the edge of Cordu Village, fleeing to the nearest mountain pasture.

They had a plan: if they couldn't defend Aurore and Lumian's homes, they'd retreat to the pasture.

There, they could use the terrain to their advantage, escape by leaping off the cliff, and trigger the cycle.

Padre Guillaume Bénét hovered above, unable to match the Dawn Paladin's top speed.

Beneath him, Shepherd Pierre Berry emerged from the shadows at the edge of the house.

His dark robe was shredded, the hood long gone. His face, chest, and legs bore deep gashes, blood oozing relentlessly. It was a chilling sight.

Had he not swapped his shadow with that of a villager at the crucial moment, he'd be dead with his body torn to shreds!

The villager who had served as his pawn was now undoubtedly a mangled heap of flesh and blood.

As Ryan obliterated the Abyss Demon Flower with his Hurricane of Light, Valentine's paralysis waned. He regained consciousness before they left Cordu Village.

"What's the situation?" he inquired, his voice muffled by the wind.

Ryan, running at full speed, couldn't elaborate. He replied tersely, "Help Leah first!"

Valentine glanced at Leah, cradled in Ryan's other arm, and noticed her pallid, ashen face.

Without a moment's hesitation, he stretched out his hand with great effort and placed his palm on Leah's shoulder.

"Sun!"

He cried out in ancient Hermes.

Glistening golden droplets materialized out of nowhere, raining down on Leah.

Her expression contorted, and steam rose from her body.

Within seconds, Sybil's ethereal figure was expelled, her face filled with shock and terror.

She couldn't fathom how she'd been ejected from Leah's body.

Immediately after, ghostly golden flames erupted from the void, engulfing the bizarre spirit like a candle, reducing it to liquid droplets.

Sybil shrieked and cursed, but couldn't evade her fate of being purified.

This time, she failed to reincarnate in Valentine's body.

"Vile creature!" Valentine muttered under his breath.

Shepherd Pierre Berry looked up at Guillaume Bénét, who hovered above, and asked, "Should we chase them?"

Despite his injuries, he refused to surrender.

Guillaume Bénét pondered for a moment and responded, "No need. Our priority lies here.

“They won't make any moves in the short term. They'll only observe and assess the situation. That's enough for us.”

As he finished speaking, he furrowed his brow and whispered, “Sybil's dead.”

“Can't she be 'reborn'?” Pierre Berry asked, surprised.

He wasn't particularly distraught over his sister's demise.

Guillaume Bénét couldn't help but curse, “I warned her not to use Rebirth in front of the three official Beyonders. Rebirth at this level is inherently countered by the power of the Sun pathway, but she didn't listen.

“Imbecile! What a waste of the Lord's gift!”

Lumian's eyes snapped open, taking in the wispy gray fog and the familiar ceiling above.

He had awoken within the dream ruins after losing consciousness.

Gaspng for breath, Lumian struggled to sit up straight.

As Aurore's attack struck him, he had been filled with despair, thinking it was better to just surrender.

She could reclaim the beautiful life she had granted him, along with the five years she had given him.

Phew... Lumian exhaled sharply as two realizations pierced his thoughts.

That wasn't Aurore. She was possessed by a monster!

To give up now would be to abandon her to the creature and snuff out her last hope!

Lumian rose to his feet, his resolve steeling within him.

He glanced toward the window and spotted a bottle of liquor, a honeysuckle flower, some grapevines, and fern powder.

Had that woman sent these materials? Had she witnessed the attack? Why hadn't she... Lumian shook his head, dispelling his intrusive thoughts.

In this dire circumstance, he could only rely on himself and his allies. No matter how powerful others may be, they were useless to him now!

Wasting no more time, Lumian retrieved the instruments he'd used to brew the Hunter potion and poured 50 milliliters of liquor into a beer mug.

He added the honeysuckle flower, grapevine powder, and fern powder, one after the other. Lastly, the repulsive “stone” with its dark, flowing liquid surface.

A sizzling sound accompanied the dissolution of the Provoker Beyonder characteristic, and the honeysuckle flower vanished.

The colorless liquor in the mug turned a deep black, becoming viscous. The mere sight of the potion made Lumian want to hurl it away and stomp it into oblivion.

He steadied himself, using shallow Cogitation to calm his nerves and focus.

Moments later, Lumian snatched up the beer mug without hesitation, gulping down the foul, pungent Provoker potion.

Setting the mug down, he immediately felt his insides grow heavy, as if plummeting.

Drawing on his experience, Lumian sat cross-legged on the floor, eyes closed, bracing for the next transformation.

His breaths became heated, his emotions veering wildly between anger, sorrow, frustration, and exhilaration.

Simultaneously, a voice—infinately distant yet intimately close—assailed his ears, drilling into his temples like an iron spike.

Familiar, searing pain engulfed Lumian's mind, but he couldn't shake certain thoughts.

I must succeed!

I must unlock the secret of the dream!

I must save Aurore!

I must shatter the loop in Cordu!

Enduring the scorching, tearing sensation and the illusion of losing control, Lumian didn't open his eyes or alter his posture.

He felt like a tiny vessel in a tempest, battered by waves and gales. Powerless, but not yet submerged.

After what felt like an eternity, the pain began to ebb as the bloodthirsty, insane thoughts receded from Lumian's consciousness.

He opened his eyes, knowing he had ascended to a Sequence 8 Provoker.

Chapter 103 The Padre's Plan

A dense white fog hung heavy in the sky, swallowing most of the light and casting the dream ruins into a perpetual twilight.

Lumian stood, stretching his limbs and surveying the blood-streaked mountain peak as he assessed his condition.

In comparison to Hunter, the Provoker's strength, reflexes, speed, and agility had improved, albeit modestly.

Lumian identified three primary changes:

First, his body had grown more robust and his recuperative abilities had seemingly improved.

Second, his spirituality had increased to a certain extent. He could now maintain his possession state for four minutes, up from just three.

Lastly, he had gained a Beyonder power called Provocation.

This ability induced a permanent state change while also requiring active activation to achieve its desired effect.

Lumian's observation skills had experienced a qualitative transformation, far surpassing those of an ordinary person. He could now effectively discern which words, actions, and situations would most easily trigger his target's sensitivities and provoke agitation.

When Provocation was employed, it merged insults and humiliation, causing the target to lose their composure.

The more tailored the taunts and humiliation, the more effective the Provocation. However, even a single word like “dogshit” could still incite anger to some degree.

Against an uncommunicative opponent, Provocation allowed Lumian to exude a repugnant aura.

This ability was well-suited to the traps and ambushes Hunters excelled in, but it held little meaning for Lumian in his present state.

He no longer had time for hunting. His sole focus was exploring the “wall” surrounding the blood-stained “peak” and uncovering the secret of the dream ruins.

In contrast, the enhancements to his spirituality and physical resilience pleased him. At the very least, he could now delve further into the dark area that once lulled him to sleep.

With the potion's boost, Lumian massaged his temples.

This time, activating his Spirit Vision was seamless.

He finally had the capacity to easily invoke his Spirit Vision.

Without hesitation, Lumian changed his clothes and gathered his gear: Fallen Mercury, the iron-black axe, a cloth bag of cheese and biscuits. He slung his shotgun over his back and exited the two-story semi-subterranean building. Amidst the muted gray fog, he traversed the wilderness and entered the ruins.

He followed a familiar path, avoiding areas where monsters might lurk, and proceeded cautiously.

Upon reaching the area where he had encountered the three-faced monster, Lumian danced, partially triggering the black thorn symbol.

With the “amulet,” he navigated increasingly treacherous terrain and repelled several horrifying creatures.

At last, he arrived at the thorny “wall” formed by an array of houses.

After a moment's consideration, Lumian chose a direction.

He resolved to enter the area that seemed to be shrouded in night, a place that instantly plunged him into a drowsy haze.

His intuition suggested that something significant lay beyond the towering wall of twisted trees. However, the area resembling the onset of night held a greater likelihood of harboring the secret of the dream ruins.

After all, “night,” “slumber,” and “dream” were often related terms.

In due course, Lumian, having performed another ritual dance, found himself in a place noticeably dimmer than its surroundings.

He exhaled slowly and stepped forward with determination.

Clutching Fallen Mercury, he yawned and pressed on.

I can't sleep. I can't sleep! Lumian urged himself forward.

As he proceeded, Lumian remained vigilant, scrutinizing the buildings that formed the city wall. Yet, the secrets of the dream ruins eluded him.

Gold coins and other trinkets held no interest for him.

Delving deeper, he trudged dozens of meters, his willpower alone keeping his eyes open against the overwhelming drowsiness that engulfed his mind.

After a moment's contemplation, he opted for retreat. He would investigate the area behind the wooden wall and enter this sleep-inducing zone from another angle.

Perhaps that would grant him access to previously unreachable locations.

Lumian pivoted and retraced his steps, but the drowsiness persisted, growing in intensity with each passing moment.

At last, his resolve crumbled. His eyes slid shut, and he slumped to the ground.

Darkness consumed his vision once more.

Lumian was suddenly gripped by a sharp pain in his abdomen, causing him to curl up and open his eyes.

I've been captured and brought to the cathedral? Lumian recognized the scene overhead and instinctively scanned his surroundings.

He saw Reimund's father, Pierre Greg, Ava's father, Guillaume Lizier, his neighbor Louis Bedeau, and nearly all the villagers.

The altar had transformed beyond recognition, now adorned with lilacs, tulips, and other symbols of that hidden entity instead of sunflowers.

The Sun Sacred Emblem had vanished, replaced by an unnaturally twisted thorn ring, seemingly oozing black liquid.

Spotting the familiar symbol, Lumian felt a wave of dizziness as heat surged in his chest.

He knew this was a sign that the corruption within him had been stirred but remained trapped within the bluish-black symbol.

The padre and his followers have turned the cathedral into an altar for the hidden entity? Poor St. Sith Lumian imagined Valentine would go berserk upon seeing this.

Bound tightly, he surveyed his surroundings, relieved to find the stained glass and murals depicting the great Eternal Blazing Sun and St. Sith's preaching unscathed.

It seems the alterations were hastily made Lumian deduced the cathedral's current state.

The villagers stood eerily silent, like wax figures.

After observing Lumian for a moment, the padre scolded Pons Bnet.

“How could you let him sleep? You should have woken him up as soon as you brought him back to the cathedral!”

“Understood,” Pons Bnet replied, his gaze unusually deferential, as if the padre were his deity or ruler.

Leaning against a pillar, Lumian glanced up at Guillaume Bnet. “Where's Aurore?”

The padre smiled cryptically. “You'll find out soon enough.”

“What about the three foreigners?” Lumian frantically devised an escape plan while trying to maintain the conversation.

Guillaume Bnet gazed through the stained glass, his expression relaxed. “They've escaped. They should be at the nearest alpine pasture by now. But don't expect them to rescue you and Aurore tonight. Knowing the officials, they'll stall and merely observe. They'll only act after confirming the situation. Sometimes, they'd rather do nothing than make a mistake. That's how they wasted a decade of mine.”

Lumian conceded the padre's point, but he knew that wasn't why Ryan and the others were waiting.

Lumian's silence caused the padre's grin to widen.

In a matter-of-fact tone, he announced, “I plan to complete the ritual tonight.”

What? Lumian was baffled.

In high spirits, Guillaume Bnet patiently elaborated, “I intend to move the April 9th ritual to tonight. The three foreigners won't have a chance to interfere.”

What? The twelfth night can be moved up? Lumian was shocked, speechless, and inexplicably terrified.

At that moment, Guillaume Bnet turned to Pons Bnet and instructed, “Before taking him to the altar, ensure he stays awake. You may use any method, just don't kill him.”

Pons Bnet asked eagerly, “What if I kill him?”

“We'll die together!” The padre glared at his dim-witted brother.

Send me to the altar and start the ritual again? Could the bluish-black symbol on me be useful again? Lumian's nerves steadied as he listened to the Bnet brothers' conversation.

The padre redirected his gaze to Lumian and leaned down. “Don't worry, you're not the vessel. We have a better choice.”

A better choice? Lumian's alarm grew as he followed the padre's gaze to the original altar.

Aurore had appeared there at some point in time, dressed in a plain white robe, her golden hair unadorned and her light-blue eyes vacant.

“Aurore!” Lumian cried out.

Aurore remained statue-like, unresponsive.

The padre smiled and nodded.

“Yes, your sister is the superior vessel. Your role in the ritual is to help us expedite the timeline. We needn't wait for that exact moment or the shift in the constellations.”

Lumian was terrified and bewildered.

Why can I help bring forward the twelfth night's ritual?

The padre leaned in once more, a smile of anticipation on his face.

“Because most of the boons we'd prayed for are within you.”

What? How does he know? Lumian's eyes widened, straining to scrutinize Guillaume Bnet's face more closely.

Guillaume Bnet leaned in and whispered into Lumian's ear, “Did you really think you and Pualis were the only ones able to retain memories in the loop?”

Chapter 104 Resolute Decision

Upon seeing Lumian's blatant shock, Guillaume Bénét straightened up with satisfaction and said to Pons Bénét, “Keep an eye on him!”

With that, the padre strode towards the altar.

As he left, the villagers around them seemed to come alive, engaging in animated conversations.

“The horoscope is about to change.”

“Our good fortune is coming!”

“It won't be long before we're wealthy!”

“When the time comes, I'll drink a bottle of wine every day and eat a pound of meat every meal!”

“I want to find a beautiful woman.”

“I'm going to watch a play.”

“...”

Lumian's mind was a whirlwind, and he barely noticed when Guillaume Bénét departed.

The padre's words were like a boulder tossed into a placid lake, sending ripples through Lumian's thoughts.

How is that possible?

In the previous cycle, I killed him because he didn't understand what made me special!

Back then, I didn't even know what was so special about myself. It was natural for him not to know... After that battle, he didn't have any conflicts with me in the subsequent cycles until Aurore began acting strangely...

But he didn't seem to know about the loop at all. The cursing he did when I led the rest to catch him in the adulterous act, him being knocked out by Leah after we infiltrated the cathedral, and being spied upon by Aurore using White Paper didn't seem fake at all!

If he was putting on an act, his level of restraint would be bone-chilling...

Moreover, he knows that Madame Pualis retains her memories in the loop and might know something about the abnormalities in the castle. Yet he still had an affair with Madame Pualis at the beginning of each loop, allowing no one to suspect him.

If it were me, I wouldn't even have desires after finding out what Madame Pualis had done, let alone sleep with her!

The more Lumian pondered, the more he found the padre terrifying. This fear was unlike the terror he felt from Madame Pualis.

Questions swarmed his mind:

Why didn't the padre with his memories sacrifice the three sheep from the beginning and obtain the corresponding boon to take full control of Cordu? Why didn't he complete the twelfth night ritual on the first day?

This could have prevented any accidents!

What was he waiting for? The sacrificial ritual only takes place near Lent every time...

Does that ritual have a date and time requirement?

The Lent celebration is an integral part of the twelfth night's ritual. So, the padre will only have a chance to advance the subsequent ritual after Lent is over?

But he could just control everyone from the beginning and wait for Lent to arrive...

Also, didn't the hidden existence find it odd that they prayed for a boon twice across three cycles? Yes, He might have done something, like helping the padre recover his memories!

No, if their sacrificial ritual had truly been completed, the three sheep wouldn't have entered the loop again. Their spirits and Beyonder characteristics should have gone to the hidden existence.

Could it be that, like Reimund, the spirits gathered around the altar and didn't escape the loop?

Who were the padre and the others praying to, and who bestowed their power...

As Lumian considered this, he suddenly felt a sharp pain in his lower body.

He instinctively curled up, but the ropes binding him prevented the motion.

Pons Bénet pulled his foot back from between Lumian's legs, smirking as beads of cold sweat formed on the young man's forehead. Lumian couldn't even make a sound.

He squatted down, raised his right hand, and slapped Lumian.

"Did you enjoy zat? Tell me, did you enjoy it?"

Without waiting for Lumian's response, he swung his arm and slapped the right side of his face, causing his ears to ring. Lumian felt like his head might fly off.

Seeing Lumian being beaten by Pons Bénet, Reimund's father, Pierre Greg, approached and squatted down. He sighed and said, "Bear with it. Just endure it for a while. Our fortunes are about to change. Good luck is on its way. If you leave now, you'll miss the opportunity!"

Ignoring Lumian's reaction, he repeated the same words, trying to persuade and console him.

Lumian paid no attention to Pierre Greg. He gazed at Pons Bénet without anger, as if he were looking at empty air.

He completely disregarded him, ignoring the pain and humiliation this villain had inflicted upon him.

Only one thought occupied his mind:

The situation is dire!

Ryan, Leah, and Valentine are unlikely to trigger the loop and restart everything prematurely before confirming the padre's intentions. Besides, they just fought; who knows when they'll recover. They probably won't sneak back to the village until tomorrow or the day after.

This way, no one can stop the padre from conducting the ritual in advance tonight...

Slap, slap, slap. Pons Bénet continued slapping Lumian's face and kicking his lower body, intensifying the pain he endured.

Lumian's thoughts were repeatedly interrupted by pain as he stubbornly tried to focus, refusing to waste even a second on Pons Bénet.

This only infuriated Pons Bénet further, causing him to strike even harder.

My specialness has already been discovered and targeted. They won't give me a chance to disrupt the ritual...

What should I do...

What can I do?

Lumian endured the pain and searched for a way to escape his current predicament.

Pons grew tired from beating him up. He stopped and panted.

"If ze padre hadn't forbidden me from killing you, I would've sliced off your flesh piece by piece, including what's down below!"

Hearing this, Lumian was taken aback as an idea flashed through his mind.

Kill me?

Kill me!

He suddenly raised his head and glared at Pons Bénet, his face contorted into a twisted smile born of pain.

"Is that all you've got? Are you using that pathetic little knife of yours to pick lice for me?"

He fully embraced his role as a Sequence 8 Provoker.

In the alpine meadow nearest to Cordu.

Ryan, clad in tattered armor, stood guard at the entrance and asked Valentine and Leah, “How do you feel?”

“I'm fine,” Valentine responded immediately.

Leah added, “My spirituality has almost recovered.”

Ryan nodded and dissolved the Dawn Armor.

“After I rest and recover a bit, we'll return to Cordu.”

“Now?” Leah sounded surprised.

They hadn't been gone from Cordu for long.

Ryan exhaled slowly and said, “We need to find out as soon as possible why Guillaume Bénet's group attacked us tonight and not on the twelfth night. Besides, they captured Lumian and Aurore, but they didn't pursue us. Experience tell me that something's off.”

Leah nodded slowly. “But we're not in the best shape.”

After all, they had just fought a massive battle.

“That's why Guillaume Bénet doesn't expect us to return to Cordu tonight,” Ryan explained. “Also, we left that item at Lumian and Aurore's house. We have to retrieve it as soon as possible. We can't let Guillaume Bénet and the others get their hands on it.”

Valentine and Leah's expressions turned grave at the mention of that item.

They agreed to Ryan's plan.

Pa!

Pons Bénet slapped Lumian's face again, making his nose throb. Two streams of bright red blood flowed down to his mouth, bringing with them a foul and salty taste.

“How about zis?” Pons Bénet asked with a smile.

Lumian studied his expression and actions, realizing that his words hadn't had the desired effect.

He sniffed his blood-filled nose and replied with a smile, “Any other woman could hurt me more than you!”

“Is zat so?” Pons Bénet's expression darkened.

With a slap, he struck Lumian's mouth, sending two of his teeth flying with blood.

Relying on Provoker's insight and his experience at pranking, Lumian acutely sensed that Pons Bénet's reaction was different this time.

Familiar with all sorts of scandals and rumors in Cordu, Lumian vaguely thought of something and grinned.

“You don't seem to have a mistress.”

His mouth was swollen from the slap, and two of his teeth were missing. His words came out slightly muffled.

Hearing the word “mistress,” Pons Bénet's expression shifted subtly as he kicked Lumian's groin.

Lumian nearly blacked out from the pain. He couldn't speak for a few seconds.

Forcing a smile, he said with a boisterous laugh, “And the padre's mistresses are all over the village. Can't get it up?”

Pons Bénet's expression instantly darkened.

Lumian knew he had guessed right.

He endured the pain, his eyes narrowing.

He hadn't dared use Provocation earlier, fearing that he would be discovered if he used it too often. Now was the time!

Lumian laughed out loud.

“Did the padre sleep with your wife too? Are all your children his?”

Pons Bénet's eyes turned bloodshot.

He suddenly reached out and grabbed Lumian's neck, yelling with all his might, “Why don't you just die!”

Lumian heard a cracking sound from his neck and found it difficult to breathe.

Yet, he wasn't afraid. Instead, the corners of his mouth curled up as he calmly awaited the excruciating pain and inevitable death.

He had done his best to enrage Pons Bénet so that he would kill him.

Once he died, the loop would be triggered, and everything would restart immediately. Everything would return to the beginning, leaving room for recovery!

Not only had Lumian considered provoking Valentine to commit suicide to verify the nature of the loop, but he had also thought of sacrificing his own life in an emergency!

Compared to the current situation, what was there to fear?

He gazed at Pons Bénet, whose expression was vicious, and his purple lips quivered as if to say: “Please, kill me quickly.”

Chapter 105 - Novel Cool

105 That Person

Pons Bénet's grip tightened relentlessly, his eyes bloodshot and bulging.

If it hadn't been for the fact that Lumian couldn't speak or that his vision had started to fade to black, he would have thanked him.

Suddenly, a hand appeared from nowhere, grasping Pons Bénet's hair at the back of his head, trying to forcibly pry him off Lumian.

“What the hell are you doing? Are you trying to kill him? Have you lost your damn mind?”

Pierre Berry growled in a deep voice as he intervened, stopping Pons Bénet.

But Pons Bénet wouldn't listen. His crimson eyes locked onto Lumian, his mind consumed by fury and murderous intent. All he could think of was killing this bastard.

Whack!

Pierre Berry swung his right leg up, striking Pons Bénet's groin with his brand-new leather shoe.

Pons Bénet reflexively let go, clutching his crotch, squeezing his thighs together, and collapsing to the ground.

He whimpered involuntarily, his face contorted in agony, like a rooster being strangled by the neck.

Pierre Berry glanced at him coolly and said, “Once you've recovered, bring Lumian to the altar. The ritual is about to begin.”

He shifted his gaze, bending down to assess Lumian's condition.

As Lumian's senses returned and he slowly opened his eyes, he straightened up and nodded.

His darkening vision restored to clarity, the pain in his neck became more apparent. Lumian was disheartened to find that his view was not of the familiar ceiling of his bedroom but of Pierre Berry's bloodied face.

Am I still alive? He wondered subconsciously as he turned his head and spotted Pons Bénet curled up on the ground.

“Pathetic!” Lumian spat contemptuously. “If you can't satisfy women and can't even kill a man, what's the point of living?”

Pons Bénet felt a wave of rage surge through his head. If it weren't for the lingering pain in his groin and Pierre Berry's watchful eye, he would have snapped once more.

Lumian and Aurore's house lay in ruins, more than half its roof missing.

Ryan, Leah, and Valentine crept back under the moon and starlight.

Once they confirmed the area was clear, Ryan turned to Leah and said, “Tonight's situation is worse than we thought. Perform divination.”

As they traveled from Cordu Village to Lumian's house, they noticed that every house was empty. They had no idea where everyone had gone.

This was a shocking anomaly!

“Alright.” Leah nodded.

Before she could take out a pen and paper to write a divination statement, Ryan reminded her, “Be cautious. Choose the direction of the divination carefully. Don't attempt it if it feels too risky.”

“Understood.” Leah was well-versed in this area. She knew that Cordu was a place filled with danger and abnormalities. A minor error in the divination direction could lead to severe injuries or loss of control.

After a few moments of contemplation, she entered Aurore's bedroom, which now lacked a wall along the corridor, and found a manuscript to use as a medium.

As Leah wrote the divination statement, Ryan and Valentine entered Lumian's room where they had been sleeping.

Ryan's brownish-yellow suitcase sat beside the desk near the window, concealed by the curtain.

Seeing that the item was still there, Ryan breathed a sigh of relief and said to Valentine, “Make the preparations.”

As he spoke, he pulled the suitcase out, placed it on the ground, and undid the brass-like metal buckle.

Valentine opened his arms slightly, and illusory golden flames emerged from the void, illuminating the room.

With Sunlight, Ryan finally dared to open his suitcase with a grave expression.

Inside, there were no clothes, books, or coins—just a strange, folded scarecrow lying quietly.

The scarecrow's eyes were covered with thick black cloth strips. Its face, neck, palms, feet, and calves were made of brownish-green straw, but its arms, chest, and thighs were covered in real, slightly pale-white skin.

This was a mystical item that the joint investigation team had acquired from the Eternal Blazing Sun Church's Riston diocese before their departure.

Teams at their level could request Sealed Artifacts to handle abnormalities.

Ryan closed his eyes, and information about the mystical item before him naturally surfaced in his mind.

“Number: 217

“Name: Tanago Scarecrow.

“Danger Grade: 2. Dangerous. Use with care and moderation. It can only be applied for operations that require three or more people. Security clearance requires a diocesan bishop.

“Security classification: Bishop, Team Captain, or above.

“Description: This scarecrow was first discovered in the Tanago region of Riston Province, near the remnants of a village annihilated by a cult's worship ritual.

“Two Purifiers, ten police officers, and 76 farmers vanished after passing by the farm where the scarecrow was placed, never to be seen again.

“Research suggests that those who enter a 30-meter radius of the scarecrow and lock eyes with it will lose self-awareness and be drawn towards it uncontrollably. Within moments, they disappear, leaving behind only their possessions and garments.

“At the zenith of sunlight, the scarecrow loses its power; touching it or meeting its gaze has no effect.

“A farmer from a neighboring village claims the scarecrow was once ordinary, indistinguishable from others until the village farmland it protected was decimated.

“With each disappearance, flesh and skin appear on a small portion of the scarecrow.

“Its ultimate transformation remains a mystery, but revival seems a likely outcome.

“The scarecrow already displays signs of life, moving at night and attempting to break free from its containment.

“Sealing Method: Blindfold it with a thick, black cloth and enclose it in a confined, dark space.

“Usage Process: Remove the scarecrow only under sunlight, and unbind the black cloth from its eyes.

“Appendix: 1. Avoid its gaze at all costs. Even under the protection of sunlight, you risk enduring lasting nightmares and mental debilitation.

“2. Limit interaction with the scarecrow to no more than two minutes per session. Excessive use intensifies its determination to escape and resist.

“3. Warning: Permanently seal the scarecrow before it acquires enough flesh.”

As Ryan and Valentine investigated the Sealed Artifact's possible loss or escape, Leah entered a dream divination state.

Whispering the divination incantation to locate Aurore, she sat at her desk, reclined in her chair, closed her eyes, and quickly drifted into slumber.

Guided by her four silver bells, Leah glimpsed Aurore, clad in a simple white robe, in a surreal, distorted world. She recognized an altar, nearby villagers, and the distant stained glass and golden walls of a cathedral...

Leah's eyes flew open, and she bolted from the room. Breathlessly, she informed Ryan and Valentine, “They're all at the cathedral! Performing a ritual!”

Inside the cathedral of the Eternal Blazing Sun.

Pons Bénet carried the disappointed Lumian toward the altar adorned with lilacs and tulips. Pierre Berry, keeping a watchful eye, accompanied them.

Glancing at his sister Aurore, her eyes vacant, Lumian turned to Pierre Berry and sneered.

“You're nothing but a coward and a piece of trash!”

The shepherd shot him a glance but remained silent, his expression unchanging.

Undeterred, Lumian continued, grinning, “Your woman died of illness, yet you did nothing. You just put your faith in a malevolent god. Didn't she die because the factory owner overworked her and paid her next to nothing? If I were you, I'd have hunted down that boss and hung his whole family from the factory chimney! But you didn't! You were too scared. Scared you'd die too. Trash, coward!”

As Lumian studied Pierre Berry's subtle reactions, he slyly added Provocation to his final words.

Pierre Berry's expression contorted; his gentle gaze slowly morphed into a menacing glare, as if a hidden seal had been broken, unleashing the demon within.

Padre Guillaume Bénét, at the altar, barked sternly, “Control yourself!”

Pierre Berry shuddered and came to his senses.

In retaliation, he ripped a piece of cloth from his ragged attire, crumpled it into a ball, and shoved it into Lumian's mouth.

F*ck! Lumian struggled fiercely, but to no avail.

He kept cursing and adding Provocation, but time was against him. His mouth was fully gagged by the cloth, and he could no longer speak.

Panic and despair welled up in Lumian's heart, threatening to overwhelm him.

He desperately reined in his emotions, warding off any thoughts of surrender.

Carried to the altar, Lumian's mind raced, searching for alternative ways to end his life.

Soon, he was presented before the padre, the massive black thorn symbol separating him from Aurore.

Guillaume Bénét motioned for Pierre Berry to help Lumian to his feet, then scrutinized the young man's face and smiled.

“You're tougher than I thought, but you're still lacking. The world is so hard a man must have two fathers to look after him, yet you have none. No one to teach you the ways of life.”

“The world is so hard a man must have two fathers to look after him” was a popular saying in Intis. It referred to both a biological father and a societal father—often known as a godfather.

This was why the people of Intis often acknowledged godfathers and godmothers.

The padre taunted Lumian for being an orphan, with neither a godfather nor a father.

In response, Lumian wished he could retort, mocking the padre about his own child having three, no, four fathers—the padre himself, his godfather, his mother's lover... If the gag hadn't held tight, Lumian would definitely have taunted the padre enough to make him lose his mind, killing him on the spot.

Unfortunately, he couldn't say anything.

“Should we begin the ritual now?” Pierre Berry inquired of Guillaume Bénét.

The padre shook his head.

“Let's wait a bit longer.”

“What for?” Pierre Berry asked, puzzled.

The padre offered no answer, but Lumian was already devising a new suicide plan.

Suddenly, inspiration struck.

Enter a deep Cogitation state and submit to the scrutiny of the two entities. Eagerly, he sought the enigmatic and horrifying voice, hoping to provoke his own breakdown and loss of control.

Lumian glanced at Aurore, her face blank and her eyes empty, but otherwise unchanged. He closed his eyes.

First, he envisioned the crimson sun. Once calm, he transformed it into the orb adorned with eyes and a cross.

Silently, Lumian “saw” the faint gray fog once more. He “saw” the chaos of overlapping colors and indescribable, non-existent things.

Yet this time, he didn't sense the gaze of an entity lurking within the fog or looming high above.

Why is it different? Lumian's eyes snapped open in surprise.

Just then, a figure entered through the cathedral doors.

Clad in a black robe and a wide hood, the man's face was obscured by shadows. He stood tall, around 1.8 meters in height.

As the mysterious figure approached the altar, the padre stepped aside deferentially, his demeanor humble and reverent.

Who is that? The one behind the padre? Lumian puzzled, peering closer.

The more he studied the man, the more familiar he seemed, as though Lumian had encountered him before.

Suddenly, it clicked.

This was the figure lurking in the corner of the Warlock's tomb!

The black-robed man ascended the altar and stood before Lumian. Leaning forward slightly, he stifled a chuckle.

“Did you realize that Cogitation is useless?”

What? How does he know? Lumian stared at him, shocked and bewildered.

At this proximity, even with the hood concealing his features, Lumian could discern the black-robed man's face.

He was a young man in his late teens, his limbs long and lean, his hair short and jet-black, his eyes a light blue, and his features sharply chiseled. He was strikingly handsome.

What... Lumian's gaze locked onto the man.

He knew this face all too well. He saw it every day when he looked in the mirror.

It was himself!

Chapter 106 The Ritual Begins

Lumian noticed that the black-robed man's face was nearly identical to his own, save for a few subtle differences.

The depths of the stranger's light-blue eyes held a faint silver-black hue. It was unclear whether the shadow of the hood affected the man's complexion or if his skin was naturally a shade darker.

“Who are you?!” Lumian blurted out in shock, his words muffled by the cloth in his mouth, leaving only indistinct movements.

The black-robed man smiled without introducing himself, turning and walking towards the padre.

Lumian strained to follow, desperate to learn the man's identity, his purpose, and why he had appeared in the dead Warlock's tomb.

This was crucial to him.

Although the padre's ability to retain memories within the loop was surprising, it wasn't inexplicable. Lumian's theories about the nature of the loop could account for such an anomaly. After all, Madame Pualis was a prime example.

However, the black-robed man's sudden appearance was entirely unexpected. It wasn't his presence that was startling; Lumian had always suspected another individual, apart from the owl and the occupant of the coffin, to be the mastermind behind Cordu's abnormalities.

What truly shocked him was the striking resemblance between the black-robed man and himself. It suggested the man could be another version of Lumian.

His theories about the loop's nature failed to explain this baffling revelation!

Something's not right! Lumian struggled to lean forward, but the ropes held him fast, causing him to crash onto the altar with a thud.

His nose, which had ceased bleeding, began to flow anew, and the red, swollen wounds grew more prominent.

Undeterred, Lumian pressed on. Unable to use his limbs, he relied on Dancer's incredible flexibility, slithering towards the black-robed man with great difficulty.

His mind raced with thoughts.

I have to find out who this black-robed man is and why he's here!

This must be a manifestation of the loop's essence. Unraveling this secret could provide hope of using the loop to escape the current predicament and ultimately resolve the anomalies plaguing Cordu!

Drip, drip. Blood from Lumian's face stained the ground a vibrant red. His body smeared the crimson hue in all directions as he writhed in his struggle. The scene was chaotic and reeked of blood.

He strained to reach the black-robed man, but couldn't utter a sound. His face, contorted by pain and anxiety, was a horrifying sight.

The black-robed man, bearing an uncanny resemblance to Lumian, glanced down and instructed the padre, Guillaume Bnet, "Begin the ritual."

"Alright," Guillaume Bnet told Pierre Berry at the edge of the altar. "Bring Lumian to the altar."

Pierre Berry strode over, gripped Lumian under his arm, and hoisted him up.

No! Lumian thrashed with all his might, like a fish freshly yanked from the water.

Pierre Berry nearly lost his grip due to Lumian's "slipperiness."

The gentleness in Pierre's eyes quickly vanished, replaced by a ferocious and brutal glint.

His strength surged as he forcefully restrained Lumian and flung him onto the altar.

Afterward, Pierre Berry glanced at Lumian and chuckled.

"You better hope you die during the ritual rather than live through it. You'll regret it, I promise."

Is this a response to my earlier Provocation? Just as this thought crossed Lumian's mind, he saw Aurore, clad in a simple white robe, approach his side.

She leaned against the altar adorned with lilacs and tulips, her gaze vacant as she stared at her brother.

The cathedral's villagers swarmed forward, forming a semi-circle around the altar.

The padre retrieved two grayish-white candles, positioning them at the corresponding locations of Aurore and Lumian.

Next, he placed a candle beneath his feet, creating a pattern on the altar with two candles above and one below.

After a few moments, the padre ignited the three candles in sequence, from top to bottom and left to right, using his spirituality.

A faint sweetness wafted into Lumian's nostrils, leaving him disoriented. The scene felt inexplicably familiar.

Ryan, Leah, and Valentine stealthily approached the side of the Eternal Blazing Sun Cathedral, clutching a brownish-yellow suitcase.

Hidden in the shadows, they peered through the stained glass to see the Eternal Blazing Sun's altar transformed. They spotted Lumian bound on the left and Aurore standing on the right. They saw the padre facing the siblings, a lit grayish-white candle beneath his feet, flanked by the enigmatic black-robed man and Pierre Berry.

Valentine's fists clenched as a golden light flickered in his eyes.

Leah cast a sidelong glance at him, concerned her companion might be consumed by rage.

Fortunately, Valentine was a seasoned Purifier who had completed numerous missions. He understood what needed to be done and what to avoid.

Ryan averted his gaze and lowered his voice. "We'll move closer to the altar, shatter the glass, and launch a surprise attack. Our goal is to grab Lumian and Aurore and be out of the village within a minute.

"If we don't achieve our objective in that time, abort the mission and flee to the river. Trigger the loop proactively."

"Alright," Valentine and Leah murmured in hushed tones, each nodding in agreement.

Ryan added, "Valentine, ready Sunlight. We can't hold back any longer. We have to deploy 2-217 now."

"No problem," Valentine responded as Leah retrieved a box of matches.

This marked a predetermined escape route.

Magicians didn't perform unprepared.

Valentine peered inside and told Ryan, "The ritual is about to commence. We must act now."

Ryan, also observing the cathedral's interior, furrowed his brow and asked, "Did you notice anything off?"

Leah hastily replayed the scene she had just witnessed in her mind, replying with apprehension, "I can't hear anything from inside!"

They were a mere three meters from the closest villagers, yet they couldn't discern any sound emanating from within. The villagers were clearly engaged in animated conversation!

Ryan's eyes narrowed, and a suspicion instantly took shape in his mind.

He stood up and rammed into the stained-glass window before him, disregarding that the cultists inside the cathedral might discover his presence.

Clangs echoed as the delicate glass remained unbroken, but the villagers within the cathedral seemed oblivious to the chaos outside.

As Ryan summoned the Dawn Armor and Sword of Dawn, Leah sprinted in circles outside the window.

This time, not a single deliberately uncontrolled silver bell jingled.

From Leah's perspective, this implied there was no danger; yet, how could there be no threat emanating from the cathedral?

Thus, she concluded that the correct answer was: The situation was extremely dangerous!

It was so dangerous that the silver bell Sealed Artifacts were utterly disrupted or dared not react!

Bang!

The Sword of Dawn, forged from light, struck a pane of stained glass but failed to have any impact. It seemed as if the entire cathedral was shrouded by an invisible, terrifying force that barred outsiders from entry.

A brilliant pillar of light, encircled by flames, descended from the sky as Valentine spread his arms. However, it didn't appear inside the cathedral as he had anticipated. Instead, it landed outside the stained glass, causing ripples.

It appeared that the interior and exterior were entirely isolated.

Ryan made a quick decision and said to Valentine and Leah, "Let's try the Sealed Artifact. If it doesn't work, we'll leave the village to trigger the loop."

Ryan didn't suggest immediate retreat because he hoped to barge in and save Lumian and Aurore. He suspected that once the ritual truly began, the loop might be affected. In that case, they wouldn't be able to leave Cordu or restart everything there.

Wasting no time, Valentine summoned the illusory golden flames.

With two pops, Ryan opened the suitcase and retrieved the Tanago Scarecrow, its skin already half-covered.

He pressed the Scarecrow's front against the stained glass and untied the thick black cloth.

A pair of human-like eyes appeared on 2-217's face, devoid of emotion and embedded within the brownish-green straw.

The eyes swiveled and locked onto Pons Bnet, standing at the edge of the altar.

The villain froze, then bolted toward the window.

As he ran, his body vanished, leaving his clothes to flutter to the ground and cover his leather shoes.

A piece of skin-covered flesh emerged on the Tanago Scarecrow's neck, fusing with the stalk below.

"It works!" Ryan and the others exclaimed, elated.

This meant that breaking into the cathedral wasn't impossible, and the altar's protection was not impregnable!

"The horoscope is about to change!"

"It's finally happening!"

Amidst the villagers' uproar and the surrounding scent of gray amber, cloves, musk, and tulips, Lumian experienced an uncanny sense of *dj vu*. Relying on Dancer's flexibility, he forced his upper body up despite being bound.

The next second, he saw the padre open his mouth and shout in ancient Hermes, "The mighty Circle of Inevitability!"

The orange flames on the three candles were reduced to the size of pepper granules, now tainted silver and black.

Lumian's mind buzzed as the familiar burning sensation ignited in his chest.

His vision blurred, and the vacant-eyed Aurore, the solemn-looking padre, and the hooded black-robed man appeared before him in layers beneath the dazzling gold dome.

A sharp pain stabbed at his head, as if something was being yanked from the depths of his memory. It felt eerily similar to the scene unfolding before him.

The sense of familiarity and dj vu surged within Lumian's heart, dozens or even hundreds of times stronger than before.

Thump, thump!

He could hear his heart pounding.

Chapter 107 Shattering

Thump, thump!

Lumian felt his heartbeat pounding, as images were painstakingly dragged from the depths of his memories.

His head threatened to split open. He fought against it, unwilling to continue.

Outside the stained glass, Ryan observed the ritual beginning. He tossed the Tanago Scarecrow to Leah without hesitation, signaling her to use the Sealed Artifact against the padre. He hefted the Sword of Dawn.

Beneath the golden flames, Leah and Valentine moved to another stained glass window, a half-exposed cylindrical wall separating them from Ryan.

They did this to evade the damage from the Hurricane of Light without hindering their movements. With the cathedral's "defensive capability," they believed a barrier between them would suffice. After all, Ryan would do his best to control the attack's direction.

Leah embraced the Tanago Scarecrow from behind, pressing it against the stained glass depicting St. Sith's sermon. She aimed at the altar and Guillaume Bénet, the padre leading the ritual.

On the other side, Ryan gripped the handle with both hands, plunging the Sword of Dawn into the windowsill.

The two-handed broadsword, forged from pure light, shattered and transformed into a whirlwind of razor-sharp fragments and specks of light.

The Hurricane exploded and slammed into the stained glass before him.

With a cracking sound, the entire cathedral trembled. Hairline fractures spider-webbed across the glass surface.

But it held fast.

Seeing this, Ryan summoned the minuscule particles of Sunrise Gleam, forging a massive two-handed axe.

Unable to use Hurricane of Light for now, he switched weapons.

Leah and Valentine, shielded by the protruding wall, dodged the Hurricane of Light's remnants. At that moment, the Tanago Scarecrow's gaze locked onto the priest. Its eyes, set in the brownish-green straw, reflected the white-robed figure with golden threads.

Leah noticed a faint silver light tinged with black materialize around the altar where Guillaume Bénét stood.

With a snap, the Tanago Scarecrow's eyes burst open, weeping blood-red tears.

The padre glanced over before looking away.

As two sheep "willingly" entered the altar, he intoned the incantation with calm fanaticism.

"You are the eternal cycle, the predestined destiny, the cause, the effect, and the process!"

Suddenly, the two deity-representing candles on the altar elongated to the size of a human head.

A howling wind swept through the cathedral, turning the villagers to statues. But silver-black warts emerged from their exposed faces and hands.

The silver-black light enveloping the altar rapidly spread, engulfing the entire cathedral.

The mural-filled dome became transparent. Clouds dispersed, and the crimson moon darkened to the shade of blood.

The stars on the black velvet backdrop flickered into existence, one by one, glowing with the intensity of the sun.

In an instant, night became day. The villagers stirred and murmured dreamily.

"The horoscope has changed..."

"Fortune is here..."

With three thuds, Ryan, Leah, and Valentine, who hadn't heard but had witnessed the scene, crumpled to the ground. They writhed, wailed, and screamed in agony.

Ryan's skin turned grayish-blue, Leah's face appeared to teem with maggots and pulsing tendrils, and Valentine radiated a sun-like glow, from inside to out, from top to bottom.

They were on the brink of losing control.

The Tanago Scarecrow lay cast aside, trembling violently.

Lumian felt his chest burn as the terrifying voice, seemingly originating from an infinite distance and yet right beside him, echoed in his ears.

Invisible steel drills penetrated his skull, stirring his brain. Blood vessels bulged in pain, and silvery-black spots emerged beneath his skin.

An unseen force enveloped him, lifting him from the altar.

The ropes binding him and the cloth gagging him crumbled to dust and dispersed in the air.

Aurore, too, was hoisted by this invisible force, floating above the altar and facing Lumian.

His bloodshot eyes mirrored his sister's long blonde hair, vacant light-blue eyes, pristine and emotionless face, and the simple yet odd white robe she wore.

He recoiled, sensing a familiar déjà vu from the depths of his memories. The pain was as intense as the madness.

The surrounding scenes melded together in Lumian's mind:

The padre's solemn and fanatical expression;

The black-robed man advancing toward the altar;

Pierre Berry prostrate on the ground;

The transparent cathedral dome;

The crimson moon and constellations in the sky;

The villagers with stiff expressions, welcoming their fortune;

Aurore, her face contorted with pain...

Lumian's head spun as his body was torn apart by an invisible force, silver-black spots multiplying on his skin.

He was powerless to break free or resist effectively.

“Ah!”

Lumian screamed involuntarily as his chest was gradually pried open, casting a silvery-black light onto Aurore.

Aurore's eyes darted around, hearing the agonized cry.

Her empty gaze mirrored Lumian's swollen blood vessels, his twisted face with silver-black hues beneath the surface.

After a momentary pause, she instinctively reached out and pushed Lumian away from danger.

Grande Soeur... Lumian stared, dumbfounded, as Aurore shoved him out of the altar's reach.

Suddenly, the dreadful sound in his ears vanished, and the invisible restraints on his body disappeared. The burning sensation across his skin subsided.

Yet the pain in his head remained unchanged. Deep-rooted memories were forcibly dredged up.

It was as if someone had used a hook to slowly extract his brain from his skull.

Aurore's light-blue eyes tainted with silver-black, her blank stare, her lifeless face, and her resolute, forceful actions pushing him away flashed in Lumian's mind. It was nearly identical to what he'd witnessed moments ago, but the black-robed man was missing from the background.

This amplified déjà vu led Lumian to instinctively question if something similar had happened before. He screamed in pain once more.

Bam! He plummeted to the ground after leaving the altar.

Ignoring the excruciating pain in his head and his disorientation, Lumian sprang up, prepared to seize Aurore and flee the altar with his sister.

A figure obstructed his path. The black-robed man wearing his face struck him on the right cheek, sending him sprawling to the ground.

Lumian refused to give in. With desperate courage, he rose again and lunged at the black-robed man blocking his way.

Whack!

The black-robed man swung his fist, and Lumian instinctively evaded.

He stood stunned for a moment before a twisted smile crept across his face. He snarled, "Why are you so damn weak? As weak as me!"

Lumian dismissed thoughts of the padre and Pierre Berry as he lunged at the black-robed man.

The man sidestepped, raising his right foot to trip Lumian's calf. Lumian didn't evade. With the terrifying flexibility of a dancer, he forced a half-turn and extended his arm to grapple his foe.

Thud! He tumbled to the ground, taking the black-robed man down with him.

The man nimbly raised his right hand, gripping Lumian's throat and delivering a brutal knee to his groin.

Lumian didn't flinch. Bloodshot eyes locked on his opponent, he clawed at the man's eyes with his right hand.

"Ah!"

The black-robed man screamed as Lumian tore out his eyeballs, blood spurting forth. Lumian instinctively curled up, nearly passing out from the agony in his lower body.

Struggling to his feet, he shot the writhing man on the ground a sinister grin.

"Come on! Let's die together! You coward! Coward!"

He lunged once more, encircling the man's neck with his arms.

At that moment, Pierre Berry, at the edge of the altar, staggered to his feet. Brandishing his axe, he sprinted to Lumian's side.

Whack!

His axe descended, only to be halted by a faint gray mist that had materialized. It failed to harm Lumian.

Pierre Berry employed two different abilities, but couldn't penetrate the gray fog's defense.

Guillaume Bénét, the priest, didn't hesitate and began reciting a prayer.

"I implore you,

"I beseech your benediction.

"I plead with you to grant me..."

Before he could finish, the scene transformed.

The constellations in the sky shifted incrementally, deviating from their original positions.

Cordu trembled violently as every house and inch of soil surged toward the cathedral.

Silently, the villagers decomposed into organs. Eyeballs, mouths, noses, hearts, fingers, and flesh...

A scant few reassembled into different people. Some appeared normal, others malformed, some missing parts, and some with extra appendages.

The majority hurtled toward the altar and Aurore.

Cracks spread across Aurore's body, and she swiftly disintegrated into countless pieces of flesh.

Witnessing this, Lumian spiraled into despair.

Still, he refused to surrender. Seizing the black-robed man's head, he twisted it violently, snapping his neck under the man's horrified gaze.

Lumian rose and raced toward his sister.

But an invisible barrier surrounding Aurore obstructed his path.

Rumble!

Lumian screamed in agony as his surroundings crumbled.

He snapped his eyes open and found himself lying beneath the blood-red mountain peak. The encroaching darkness, signaling the onset of night, had nearly vanished.

Lumian instinctively sat up, leaning forward. He placed his hands on the ground and scanned his surroundings.

He saw a twisted, thorny “wall,” a barren landscape devoid of vegetation, and the dream ruins beyond. He spotted Ryan, Leah, and Valentine lying at the edge of a room not far away.

They were sound asleep.

Lumian abruptly bowed his head, raised his hands, grasped his hair, and whispered in anguish, “Is reality a dream, and the dream reality? Is this the present or the past? Aurore. Is Aurore beyond saving?”

“Yes.” A woman's voice echoed in the ruins.

Lumian looked up, bewildered, and faintly saw the enigmatic woman appear before him.

She approached, wearing the orange dress she'd donned at the beginning.

“That's why you were so desperate to obtain superpowers in your dream, regardless of the consequences. That's why you disregarded others' lives and even your own. You wanted to resolve the loop embodying the concept of a ‘problem’ as quickly as possible. That's why you couldn't control your instincts and uttered inappropriate words or performed inappropriate actions on certain occasions...”

Lumian gazed at the mysterious woman, dazed, realizing that the indescribable and inexplicable emotion in her eyes had resurfaced.

This time, he could finally decipher it.

It was pity.

Chapter108 Report

Several days later, an investigation report on Cordu Village was submitted to Intis Intelligence and Homeland Security Committee's Bureau 8, the Machinery Hivemind of the Church of the God of Steam and Machinery, and the Eternal Blazing Sun Church's Inquisition.

Upon receipt, the brass immediately reviewed the report.

Background: Over the past year, numerous disappearances have occurred in the Feynapotter Kingdom's Grabaka Province, near the Dariège region, and in the Lenburg Republic's Upper Hel state. Several Beyonders without official permission have mysteriously vanished, and these incidents seem to be connected to shepherds traveling across the three regions. Among them, those from Cordu Village became our primary focus.

Consequently, after receiving an unusual distress letter, we prioritized the mobilization of elite personnel and dispatched them as a joint investigation team.

The investigators' complete written statements are as follows:

The anomaly in Cordu Village can be categorized into two levels: reality and dreamscape.

Reality:

Cordu was ultimately destroyed by a large-scale but unsuccessful evil god sacrificial ritual. Only a small number of villagers survived.

Most villagers were utilized as nutrients for the failed creation of an evil god. The remaining individuals were reassembled in peculiar ways and transformed into various monsters.

The evil god sacrificial ritual altered the landscape. The river dried up and changed course. The village square and cathedral were elevated nearly 40 meters by a small-scale orogeny, forming a blood-colored pillar.

The failed evil god creation was located atop the pillar. However, when we discovered it, it had already been destroyed, potentially by self-destruction or interference from other factions.

Cordu's houses also underwent reassembly. Some formed a twisted, thorny city wall around the blood-colored pillar, while others were arranged in circular patterns...

In these severely damaged buildings, we found only a few coins and the most common livre bleu. We did not find any written information or anything that could clearly identify Cordu. The reason remains unknown.

Only the house of Lumian Lee—the target—contained books, newspapers, magazines, and other items that clearly identified it.

Within the ruins of Cordu, there are two abnormal areas surrounding the blood-colored pillar. One can induce a deep slumber, leading to a dreamscape, while the other is teeming with life, filled with flowers and trees, and features a self-rocking crib.

Our assumption regarding the latter area is that it is closely related to Madame Pualis of Cordu. (For a detailed explanation, refer to the Dreamscape section.)

At the other edge of the blood-colored pillar, we unearthed four relatively well-preserved corpses. The location likely corresponds to the original cathedral cemetery.

The first corpse was a woman, no more than twenty years old, who had been strangled to death.

The second corpse was a young man, also no more than twenty years old, who had drowned.

The third corpse was surrounded by coffin fragments. Female, over 60 years old, and died of mechanical asphyxiation. Based on other evidence, we speculate that she was suffocated with a pillow.

The fourth corpse was male and had not decomposed. His tongue had been severed while he was alive, and there were visible ligature marks on his neck.

Relevant speculations about the aforementioned corpses can be found in the Dreamscape section.

Upon entering the ruins of Cordu, we were likely affected by the power emanating from Lumian Lee's body. Our memories of the date became disordered, and the thought of leaving ceased to occur to us.

One by one, we fell asleep. While in the dream state, our bodies maintained a weak level of activity, eliminating the need for food replenishment for several days. Had we remained in this state for another half a month, it is uncertain whether we would have awoken from hunger or perished within the dream.

The entire ruin is locked in a loop capable of reverting to its original state at any moment. The trigger point is most likely tied to Lumian Lee's self-awareness and the restrictions he imposes. The former refers to the inevitable restart if Lumian Lee's subconscious anticipates it, while the latter stems from his desire to prevent anyone from disrupting Cordu's current state and the development of the dream. Any relevant event would immediately trigger a restart.

We inquired with villagers from surrounding areas, but they reported no abnormalities concerning Cordu.

Through their responses and previously gathered information, we confirmed three points:

First, there was never a legend of a deceased Warlock in Cordu (this refers to a story told by Lumian Lee in the dreamscape: Once, a Warlock lived in Cordu. After his death, an owl perched on his bed head for a time before flying away. The Warlock's corpse grew heavy, requiring nine bulls to transport it);

Second, no elves suspected of being in the form of lizards have appeared in the Dariège area.

Third, Lent is traditional folklore and had no issues originally.

Dreamscape:

The dreamscape originated from Lumian Lee and is so realistic that we couldn't discern that we were dreaming.

We consulted psychologists and dream experts and synthesized their opinions to form a hypothesis about this dream.

It is an amalgamation of Lumian Lee's personal experiences, all the novels he has read, and his assumptions and conjectures based on previous events. The dream exhibits obvious coincidences and characteristics of wish fulfillment at certain critical junctures.

Within this dreamscape, not all the situations we encountered were real, nor were they entirely fabricated.

Disorganized facts, the minutiae of daily interactions, and the illusory scenes that left a profound impact on Lumian Lee were reassembled in a chaotic and symbolic manner, presenting themselves to us.

This is both a characteristic of the dreamscape and a manifestation of Lumian Lee's subconscious avoidance or fear of certain issues.

Moving forward, we will provide a detailed account of every aspect of our experience:

We ought to have realized that we were in a dream earlier on. The most evident clue was that we did not recall needing to change our clothes until Lumian Lee reminded us that our garments were severely damaged.

Though this is quite unusual, humans tend not to think critically within dreams.

It has been confirmed that we did not send telegrams. The corresponding responses may have originated from Lumian Lee's subconscious and the knowledge he possesses.

By combining the events in the dream with the situation in reality, we have arrived at the following conjectures:

Our consciousness and knowledge, to some extent, enriched the dream, and we may have inadvertently exposed some of our secrets to Lumian Lee.

There are at least two distinct evil god faiths in Cordu. One represents a power akin to Earth Mother's, embodied by Administrator Béost's wife, Madame Pualis. The other is the one followed by Guillaume Bénét, the former padre, and the majority of the villagers. The latter faith ultimately led to Cordu's destruction.

During the Lent celebration, the Spring Elf's beheading and send-off symbolized driving the force representing Madame Pualis out of Cordu. There may have been a violent conflict between the two factions. Simultaneously, the decapitation of Ava Lizier, the personification of the Spring Elf, symbolized that this girl had discovered something amiss in reality. When she attempted to escape or inform others, she was clandestinely strangled to death by Guillaume Bénét's group.

Reimund Greg was thrown into the river. The appearance of his Spirit Body beneath the cathedral symbolizes that, like Ava, he was deemed a snitch and subsequently drowned.

Jean Maury discovered that his wife, Sybil, had an affair with the former padre. In a fit of rage, he became mute. This symbolized that as a devout follower of the Eternal Blazing Sun, his tongue was cut off when he tried to inform others about the village's abnormalities. His subsequent disappearance implied that he had been murdered.

Naroka's death shares the same potent symbolism as Ava, Reimund, and Jean. First, she must have covertly followed Madame Pualis, intending to allow her deceased husband's spirit to return home through the aid of the soul messenger. Thus, her post-death behavior was to enter Paramita. Second, it is highly likely that she was killed by her youngest son, Arnault André, likely because she had discovered the issue with Guillaume Bénét's group and wanted to inform Madame Pualis.

Based on our search of the ruins, the Lent celebration, and Madame Pualis's claim that she could depart at a specific moment, it is implied that she, her husband Béost, butler Louis Lund, and lady's maid Cathy left Cordu before the ritual on the twelfth night. They remain alive, and their whereabouts are unknown.

This is reflected in the dream by the lady's refusal to assist at critical moments.

However, considering the circumstances in the peculiar area teeming with vitality, we suspect that Madame Pualis left something behind before her departure and indirectly participated in the ritual on the twelfth night.

The black-robed man in the Warlock's tomb likely symbolizes Lumian Lee's mutated persona due to his corruption. However, for some reason, Lumian Lee did not appear to be deeply corrupted, enabling him to easily triumph during the skirmish, given his increased courage...

The bizarre lizard-like creature found in the mouths of Aurore Lee, Michel Garrigue, and others might symbolize their corruption and mutation, eventually transforming them into an alternate version of themselves.

Questions:

1. How is Lumian Lee aware of the abilities of Guillaume Bénét, Pierre Berry, and others? If he had secretly observed them in reality, it would be understandable if he remained undetected once or twice. There must be an inherent reason why he could obtain so much information without facing consequences.
2. Why did the villagers and Aurore Lee behave indistinguishably from real people, making it challenging for us to recognize that we were in a dream until Lumian Lee believed that something abnormal should have occurred to them?
3. What does Paramita symbolize?
4. What do Madame Pualis's numerous children in the castle and the crib with an invisible object represent?
5. Why did Lumian Lee use lizard-like elves to portray the villagers' corruption?
6. What do Lumian Lee and Aurore Lee's attempts to escape Cordu and enter Paramita signify?
7. Why did the ritual on the twelfth night fail?
8. How can Lumian Lee enable us to enter his dream? He evidently lacks the ability to do so.
9. Why did he suddenly acquire normal Beyonder powers?
10. How did he survive and cause the ruins of Cordu to enter a loop?
11. Aurore Lee's abnormalities occurred at entirely different times during the two cycles. What does this indicate?
12. What does the legend of the deceased Warlock symbolize?
13. What does the Warlock's corpse in the coffin in the underground tomb represent?
14. What does the owl symbolize?
15. What does the change in the horoscope signify?
16. What is the origin of the matter?

Conclusions and Recommendations:

This is a quintessential disaster resulting from the worship of an evil god. Currently, six known survivors exist:

Lumian Lee, former padre Guillaume Bénét, Pualis de Roquefort, Béost, Louis Lund, and Cathy.

The latter five are adherents of evil gods. We must locate and eliminate them as soon as possible.

Directly killing Lumian Lee is not advised. Until his issues are understood and resolved, his death might trigger an even more severe anomaly. The optimal solution is to capture and securely contain him.

Reporters: Ryan Vitia of Machinery Hivemind; Major Leah Bellot of Bureau 8; and Purifier Valentine de Lacourt of the Inquisition.

Chapter 109 Minute Hope

Days earlier, beneath the crimson “peak,” adjacent to the warped “city wall.”

Lumian knelt on the ground, gazing up at the enigmatic woman as she approached.

Her words echoed in his ears, only to gradually grow muffled.

Lumian's hands pressed against the ground, clenching the soil as if attempting to crush it into liquid.

As the mysterious woman halted about a meter away, he scrambled to his feet, anxiety gripping his voice, “Didn't you say there's still hope? Didn't you claim Aurore and the others could be saved if I broke out of the loop myself?”

His voice grew hoarser with each word.

The enigmatic woman remained silent, her eyes filled with pity as she gazed at him.

Lumian hesitated before asking, hope lacing his words, “There's still hope, right?”

“That's not just a fleeting dream. During my discussion with Aurore, she spoke of things I had never heard of—like how the description of an honorific name can hint at two separate entities!”

His eyes locked onto the woman, fear and hope battling as he scrutinized her every move.

At last, she nodded.

“There is indeed hope.”

Lumian's eyes brightened, waiting for her to elaborate.

In a gentle voice, the woman explained, “In truth, Aurore has already died, but mystically, she's not entirely gone.

“Do you recall the soft, faint sounds you hear from within your body each time you perform the Summoning Dance? Do you remember the light fragments from Aurore and the others that flew into your chest on the twelfth night ritual?”

“Are those their Spirit Bodies, their voices?” Lumian interrupted, eagerness filling his voice.

The woman responded, a mix of calm and pity, “They can only be considered soul fragments.

“At the end of the twelfth night, you became a conduit for the hidden entity to unleash its horrifying power. The surrounding believers, including the soul fragments of the sacrifice, were absorbed by you. Guillaume Bénét, who led the ritual, was the sole exception.

“Later, those soul fragments and the potent corruptive power were sealed in the left side of your chest by my lord.

“That's why, as you became increasingly 'awake' in your dreams and sensed the date and loop more clearly, Aurore and the other villagers seem more and more lifelike. They even displayed a degree of self-awareness and cognition.

“To truly awaken from the dream and restrain the looping power consuming the ruins, you had to rely on yourself. You had to find the courage to confront the pain, face the truth, and chase after the elusive hope.

“If I were to resolve it, there's only one option: to completely annihilate you and the ruins of Cordu. Otherwise, the corruption within you will seep out uncontrollably, and Aurore and the others will truly perish in the realm of mysticism.”

As the mysterious woman mentioned the twelfth-night ritual, Lumian couldn't help but remember. A sharp pain stabbed his head, and only a few images surfaced.

Aurore, with vacant eyes, shoved him away from the altar.

Beams of light burst from Aurore and the villagers, spiraling into the vortex on his chest.

Guillaume Bénét, the padre, revealed a shocked expression as he fled the altar.

Beyond that, Lumian couldn't recall anything else. Only the events within the dream were clear, as if some force prevented him from remembering the rest.

His face contorted, his body trembling.

“I-I can't remember much...”

The woman nodded.

“That's normal. Firstly, it's a subconscious self-protection to prevent an overload of painful memories and intense scenes from causing you to collapse and lose control. Secondly, there are things you haven't witnessed and don't know the truth about. I don't know either.

“Yes, I'll need you to do something in Trier eventually. There are one, no, two exceptional psychologists I know there. I can arrange an appointment for you and see who's available to treat you. They can help you remember more and reconstruct the events in Cordu as much as possible.”

Lumian's emotions roiled as he listened, but all he could muster was a soft, “Thank you...”

Fists clenched, he asked anxiously, “Then what can I do to bring Aurore and the others back?”

The woman sighed, admitting, “I don't know either.”

Seeing Lumian's eyes darken, she added, “But you have to believe that true miracles exist in this world.

“And the great existence I mentioned earlier is synonymous with Miracle.”

Despair and hope swelled in Lumian's heart.

Though he knew the mysterious woman before him was likely offering comfort and hope, he couldn't help but say, "You said that once I unlocked the secret of the dream, you'd tell me the honorific name of that great existence."

Her expression grew solemn, her tone serious.

"I'll tell you now. Remember it well.

"His honorific name is: The Fool that doesn't belong to this era, the mysterious ruler above the gray fog; the King of Yellow and Black who wields good luck."

As she spoke, Lumian felt his consciousness slipping, as if he could see a thin gray fog and a looming castle above it.

A gaze weighed upon him.

Simultaneously, the entire village of Cordu shuddered as the thin fog engulfing the area receded rapidly.

By the time Lumian regained clarity, sunlight had already filtered through the sky, casting golden specks upon the crimson mountain peak and desolate earth.

Lumian recalled the three lines of the honorific name and his conversation with Aurore in his dream.

He winced, a bitter smile forming as he said, "I thought there'd be a description of the past, present, and future."

The enigmatic woman in the orange dress tersely acknowledged his remark.

"There should be another one in the future, but if I use a description other than the three lines to pray to Him now, I can't guarantee the response will be from Him.

"You should know that such a situation is very dangerous."

Silent for a few seconds, Lumian then asked, a glint of hope in his eyes, "If I work diligently for you, can I eventually summon that great being to resurrect Aurore?"

"That's one way," the woman said softly. "You can also explore other methods. I won't stop you. I'm merely reminding you that many resurrection techniques have grave flaws."

Lumian nodded, signaling his understanding.

He didn't dare to inquire, yet couldn't help but ask, "Is there a significant chance of resurrection?"

The enigmatic woman glanced at him and sighed.

"It's very, very slim, but I know you'll still pursue it."

Lumian pressed his lips together, remaining silent.

It wasn't that he didn't want to assure her he'd do everything in his power to find a way to bring Aurore back, but he feared that speaking would reveal the sorrow surging within his heart.

After a few seconds, he asked in a raspy voice, "What do you need me to do in Trier?"

"Join a covert organization and help me gather some intel," the woman replied simply. "I'll tell you how to contact them once you're in Trier."

She added, "Besides uncovering the truth from your memories, you can also look into the 'survivors' of this catastrophe."

"Survivors?" Lumian's eyes narrowed.

The woman nodded.

"Besides you, there are five others: Madame Pualis, Béost, Louis Lund, Cathy, who left Cordu before the twelfth night, and Guillaume Bénet, who was protected by the ritual as its host. They escaped before this place was completely destroyed."

"The padre is still alive?" Lumian's lips curled up.

The enigmatic lady locked eyes with him and said, "If my divination is accurate, they should be hiding somewhere in Trier."

"Very good." Lumian smiled, wiping the corners of his eyes.

The woman then looked at Ryan, Leah, and Valentine, who slept near the room's edge on the thorny city wall, and asked Lumian, "What do you plan to do with them?"

"If they leave alive, you'll undoubtedly be hunted by Bureau 8, Machinery Hivemind, and the Inquisition.

"From now on, you can only hide. You'll never live openly under the sun. You'll be forever accompanied by darkness, filth, and danger."

Lumian glanced at Ryan and the others, chuckling hoarsely.

"Will killing them bring Aurore back?"

The woman shook her head.

"No."

Lumian scoffed, bowing his head with his eyes closed.

Soon, he looked up and asked, "What's the name of the organization I'm about to join? How should I contact you once I'm in Trier?"

The woman sighed faintly.

"I'll tell you when the time comes.

"I'll give you my messenger's summoning method and the corresponding medium later. Contact me through that."

Lumian fell quiet for a moment before posing another question. "Did I possess the power to trap Cordu in a loop?"

“Strictly speaking, you didn't. At least not before receiving the Circle Inhabitant boon,” the woman explained casually. “This place is corrupted by that hidden being everywhere, and the power level sealed in your left chest is quite high. Therefore, when your emotions fluctuate and you're in a subconscious state, you can mobilize the corresponding specialness to reset this place.” She paused, adding, “However, you've always been physically in a loop.

“The corruption sealed within your body allows you to reset your form at 6 a.m. every day and return to 6 a.m. on the twelfth night. Only changes brought about by Beyonder characteristics and boons are retained.”

Is this the real reason why I recover every time I wake up from injuries in the ruins? No wonder I didn't starve to death... Lumian immediately understood.

He glanced at his body, a self-deprecating smile forming.

“It'll always be that day...”

That nightmarish day.

Without waiting for the woman's response, he looked up and asked, “How should I address you?”

She smiled, beginning to reply, “You can call me...”

Before she could finish, cards suddenly danced in the air.

Each card bore a unique pattern, fluttering towards Lumian.

Instinctively, Lumian extended his right hand, attempting to catch some of the cards.

At that moment, most of the cards vanished, leaving just one.

The card gently settled in Lumian's palm, face-up. It depicted a figure extending their scepter into the sky and pointing at the ground with their left hand.

Tarot card—Magician!

Lumian glanced up in shock, realizing the enigmatic woman had disappeared.

Should I call her Madam Magician? Lumian subconsciously flipped the tarot card in his hand, revealing rows of minute Intis script:

“The spirit that wanders about the unfounded, an upper world creature that is friendly to humans, a messenger that belongs solely to Magician.”

Lumian studied the words for a moment before tucking the tarot card away.

He glanced at Ryan and the others, then turned around and staggered away from the area.

As he walked, Lumian couldn't help but look back at the blood-stained mountain peak and the twisted, thorny city wall.

The Cordu in his memory had already morphed into this. It bore no resemblance to what it once was, but Lumian still tried his best to observe and search, hoping to overlap the scene in his mind with reality.

He wanted to take another look at the giant atop the mountain, but he knew that it would cause him grave harm.

Unwittingly, Lumian slowly circled the blood-stained mountain peak and thorny city wall, his gaze constantly scanning the distorted and chaotic objects.

He knew what he was looking for, and he knew he would never find it.

Just like that, Lumian arrived at the spot where the wooden wall had blocked him.

Most of the area had collapsed, revealing the garden behind it.

The garden was lush and vibrant, a stark contrast to the blood-stained “peak,” the warped “city wall,” and the ruins on the other side.

In the center was a brown wooden crib, reminiscent of the one Lumian had seen in Madame Pualis's castle.

He subconsciously leaned over and realized that there was a small human-shaped indentation on the slightly aged white cotton swaddling cloth in the crib. It was as if a baby had once lain here, but its whereabouts were now unknown.

What does this mean? Just as this thought crossed Lumian's mind, he felt the sunlight shining down from the sky grow much brighter.

He instinctively looked up and saw golden flames completely engulfing the mountaintop.

The three-headed, six-armed giant loomed in the inferno, seemingly melting.

Lumian stared blankly for a few seconds before suddenly raising his hands to shield his face.

The “sunlight” was too intense.

In the semi-subterranean two-story building at the edge of the ruins.

Lumian trudged to his sister's bedroom with the 237 verl d'or and 46 coppet he had collected. He grabbed a brown suitcase filled with clothes and memorabilia and pushed open the door.

He was here to say goodbye.

As soon as he stepped in and saw the desk with the manuscripts, his head throbbed as an image surfaced.

Aurore's eyes darted around, no longer vacant. She looked at Lumian, who had been pushed away, and said with difficulty,

“My notebook...”

Grande Soeur's witchcraft notebook? Is there important information in it? Lumian pressed his forehead, walked to the desk, and opened the drawer below.

Familiar dark notebooks greeted his eyes.

He suddenly remembered that Aurore had taught him a great deal of mysticism knowledge before Cordu was destroyed.

In Dariège, at the steam locomotive station.

The ticket agent eyed Lumian and asked, "Where are your identification documents?"

"I forgot," replied Lumian, clad in a linen shirt, a dark jacket, and a round-rimmed black hat, as he held a brown suitcase.

He then turned and walked away from the window.

A short man in a half-top hat and black suit approached Lumian, whispering, "Do you want to take the courier carriage? It's headed for Bigorre."

"Does it require identification?" Lumian inquired.

The short man chuckled, responding, "No need. Our business is about to be crushed by the steam locomotive. Why would we need identification documents?"

"So, are you taking it or not? This is the last remnant of romance from the classical era!"

Lumian gave a slight nod and asked, "How much?"

The short man's enthusiasm flared.

"20 verl d'or to Bigorre, takes about a day. There are five stops in between. Each stop allows for a rest, changing carriage drivers and horses. Two of the stops also provide free food."

Without further questions, Lumian followed the short man to a deserted street nearby.

A large carriage drawn by four horses was parked at the roadside.

Upon boarding, Lumian discovered the interior was rather spacious. Like the public carriage, it had two rows separated by an aisle, as well as space for larger luggage.

He found a seat by the window, placed his suitcase down, and pulled out a book with a dark red cover.

As the horses neighed outside, Lumian flipped through the book, illuminated by sunlight streaming through the window.

Beside him sat a man in his thirties with a well-groomed mustache, brown hair, blue eyes, and smart attire.

He glanced at the book in Lumian's hand, asking with interest, "Eternal Love? Aurore Lee's book? The one featuring the female lead named Kingsley and the male lead named Ciel?"

"Yes." Lumian nodded.

The mustached man became chatty.

"This book is Aurore Lee's earliest work. The writing was quite amateurish, particularly the dialogue between characters. It doesn't sound like something people would say in real life at all. It's so emotional, it's uncomfortable."

"Indeed." Lumian nodded again.

He bowed his head and flipped to the last few pages of the book, his gaze resting on the relevant passage.

“On her deathbed, Kingsley clutched Ciel's outstretched hand and gazed at his anguished expression. She forced a smile and said with difficulty, ‘Stupid, live well.’”

(End of Part 1—Nightmare)

Chapter 110 Foreigner

For you are dust, and to dust you shall return—From the Bible, Genesis 3:19

The imposing grayish-white city wall, rising to a height of three meters, loomed before Lumian, stretching as far as the eye could see.

A multitude of private carriages, four-seaters, open tops, tandems, and cargo carriers queued, awaiting entry through the city gate.

Blue-uniformed tax collectors and white-shirted, black-vested police officers inspected each carriage methodically. Occasionally, they would demand identification or order pedestrians to open their suitcases.

Lumian, clutching his brown suitcase, scanned the scene, casting furtive glances as he sought a way to bypass the checkpoint.

Before long, a man who had observed his behavior approached.

“What's the matter, friend? You look a bit uneasy.” The man was somewhat shorter than Lumian but twice as broad. His cheeks were plump, causing his blue eyes to appear minuscule.

As he neared, Lumian caught a whiff of sweat mingled with cheap cologne, prompting him to wrinkle his nose in distaste.

Lumian gestured toward the gates, puzzled, and inquired, “What's all this for? Are they searching for criminals? Why screen those entering Trier and not the ones leaving?”

The disheveled, blond-haired man in a billowy blue shirt appraised Lumian.

“My friend, are you from some small city or village?”

Upon seeing Lumian nod, the man sighed and explained, “They're collecting taxes! Tariffs!”

“Tariffs for entering Trier?” Lumian asked.

The man nodded.

“Exactly. This city wall encircles Trier. There are 54 gates, each manned by tax collectors and police. They also apprehend wanted criminals.”

“Are all goods taxed?” Lumian inquired, curiosity piqued.

The man touched his blue canvas shirt and replied, "Almost everything; only grains and flour are exempt."

"Once upon a time they were, but after the war a few years back, the price of bread in Trier skyrocketed, inciting riots and protests. Eventually, the government abolished tariffs on all food."

"Ah, if only drinkers were as bold! Liquor, wine, and champagne are taxed the most. Many people venture to the suburbs on weekends to drink tax-free alcohol at small taverns. They call it 'town-hopping.'"

"Interesting..." Lumian nodded thoughtfully.

The man glanced around and lowered his voice.

"If you want to avoid the tariffs, I can help you into the city. All you have to do is pay me a small fee."

"You mean bribe them?" Lumian gestured with his chin at the tax collector and police near the city gate.

The man snorted.

"Their greed is greater than an elephant's appetite. I'll show you a path into the city without checkpoints."

"But isn't Trier completely surrounded by walls?" Lumian didn't conceal his bafflement.

The man grinned.

"You'll see soon enough." Then he teased, "Noble sir, do you require my assistance?"

Lumian considered for a moment before asking, "How much will it cost?"

"Three verl d'or," the man replied with a congenial smile. "If you agree, we can depart immediately. You can pay once we're inside the city."

"Deal." Lumian adjusted his dark wide-brimmed hat, picked up his brown suitcase, and followed the rotund man away from the city gate.

Fifteen minutes later, they arrived at a hill blanketed in vegetation and soil, with grayish-white stones peeking through.

Scaffolding, decaying pillowwood, and numerous pits were scattered about. It appeared to be an abandoned mine.

The rotund man guided Lumian through heaps of jumbled rocks to the entrance of a mine.

"Is this the shortcut?" Lumian asked cautiously.

The portly man in the blue shirt chuckled.

“You really don't know much about Trier.

“Ever heard the saying that Underground Trier is even larger than the Trier above ground?!”

“No.” Lumian shook his head.

The man elucidated, “Trier used to be much smaller. It was surrounded by quarries that supplied stone for building the city. As the population swelled, the city had to expand outward, enveloping these quarries. As a result, the ground became riddled with holes and mine tunnels.

“Add to that the portion of Trier that sank underground in the Fourth Epoch, plus the sewers, subways, and gas pipes installed by the government—aren't these more extensive than what's on the surface?”

Lumian's eyes widened in understanding.

“Are you taking me into the city through Underground Trier?”

“Yes.” The man turned, stooped, and entered the mine. He casually inquired, “What should I call you?”

“Ciel.” Lumian brushed back the golden hair at his temples. “And you?”

“Just call me Ramayes.” The burly man rummaged through a pile of stones in the mine's corner and unearthed an iron-black lantern.

Clearly made of metal, the rusted lantern was cylindrical, with the upper section slightly narrower than the lower. A black rubber lining encircled its base.

At the junction of the narrow and wide cylinders, a polished trumpet-shaped metal piece was embedded, though a few rust spots remained.

Ramayes produced a matchbox, fiddled with it briefly, and an orange flame tinged with blue erupted from the metal trumpet, illuminating the mine's depths.

“What's this?” Lumian asked, puzzled.

Holding the iron-black lamp, Ramayes ventured underground, chattering.

“Carbide lamp.

“Invented by the Cave Association. Many miners use it. I don't know why it glows, but I just need to put some rocks and water in, attach them top and bottom, and when needed, press here and ignite the mouth with flames.”

Carbide and water react to form acetylene, which burns and emits light? Lumian recalled the chemistry he'd studied a few months prior.

He remained silent for a time as he followed Ramayes underground along a disused mine tunnel. Then he inquired, “The Cave Association?”

“Trier Cave Association. Formed by a group of spelunking enthusiasts. Nowadays, they seem to be involved with the mines.” Ramayes turned to Lumian, walking beside him, and asked with a grin, “Why didn't you just take the steam locomotive into Trier? The train station checkpoints aren't that strict. They just do spot checks.”

Lumian reminisced and replied, “I wanted to experience the last vestiges of romance from the classical era.”

“A courier carriage?” Ramayes chortled. “That's far pricier than a steam locomotive. Your accent gives you away as from the Reem or Riston region. The journey from the south to Trier runs about 120 verl d'or, doesn't it? And it takes four and a half days! On a steam locomotive, you'd pay less than 50 verl d'or for a third-class seat and arrive in under 20 hours. So, the last bit of romance from the classical era, you say? Sounds more like a con job for folks like you. You must've shelled out a pretty penny, huh?”

Lumian responded candidly, “A fair amount. I've only got 267 verl d'or left.”

Ramayes glanced at him once more and averted his eyes.

What a waste...

Clutching the carbide lamp, he traversed an archway and veered into another passage bathed in the orange-yellow glow cast by the lamp's flame.

Lumian glanced up and noticed rocks nestled in the darkness overhead, adorned with moss that wept droplets of water.

The path underfoot was pockmarked with holes, and stone pillars flanked both sides, supporting the cave's ceiling.

Stones and various objects were heaped between the pillars, creating a “street” wide enough for six or seven people to walk abreast.

Under the carbide lamp's illumination, a steel nameplate affixed to a stone pillar came into view. Inscribed on it in Intis: “Rue à Droite.”

“There's a street name down here?” Lumian queried, puzzled.

Gripping the carbide lamp, Ramayes chuckled and replied, “Didn't I tell you? This is Underground Trier.

“In fact, it was constructed decades ago during city renovations. The brass deemed the underground too chaotic, a veritable labyrinth. Rioters, murderers, smugglers, and cultists all found refuge here, and something had to be done. Additionally, numerous houses had crumbled and sunk due to the underground quarries. Reinforcement was necessary. So, City Hall spent nearly a decade repairing pillars, constructing foundations, and connecting the previously isolated quarries, subterranean ruins, catacombs, and sewers.

“To prevent workers from getting lost, the underground streets were named to correspond with those above during the renovations. Roads, squares, and alleys were recreated down here, and nameplates were hung, marking the streets. If future repairs were needed, the names could just be referenced.”

“In other words,” Lumian gestured overhead with his free hand. “The real Rue à Droite is just above us?”

“Yes.” Ramayes pressed on. “This is Underground Trier. There's an anti-smuggling wall up ahead. Quarry police often patrol the area, but don't fret. I'll guide you through a small tunnel. Heh, the brass, with their phony collars and lies, believe they can manage Underground Trier like they do above ground, but they're only aware of half the entrances and modified routes...”

As he spoke, he led Lumian to a dead end and located a narrow crevice to crawl through. Lumian trailed closely.

Two or three minutes later, they emerged from the small tunnel. Before them stood a “wall” composed of stone pillars and a “street” wedged between.

Just then, a burly figure appeared beside the stone pillar, holding a carbide lamp, and addressed Ramayes, “Is this our customer?”

Ramayes spun around and grinned at Lumian.

“Foreigner, I've changed my mind. The price is 265 verl d'or. Wasn't I generous to leave you enough for bread and a hotel tonight?”

“What if I refuse?” Lumian's face displayed a mix of fear and defiance.

Ramayes's chubby face quivered with laughter.

“What do you think will happen? Didn't your mother warn you not to trust strangers too easily when you're away from home?”

He and the burly man closed in on Lumian from opposite directions.

Lumian smiled, set down the suitcase, and advanced towards Ramayes and his accomplice.

In the flickering firelight, over ten seconds swiftly ticked by, and the carbide lamp ended up in Lumian's possession.

Lumian crouched beside the trembling Ramayes, his face battered and swollen, and pulled all the banknotes from his wallet. In the dim orange and blue light, he counted them with grave intent.

Gently patting Ramayes's right cheek with the wad of cash, Lumian grinned.

“Now there's only 319 verl d'or left.”

With that, he pocketed the banknotes and strolled toward a path that appeared to lead up to the surface.

A nameplate dangled from a stone pillar, inscribed with two lines of Intisian script: “Rue du Pot de Chambre, Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman.”

Someone had scratched out ‘Rue du Pot de Chambre’ with a stone and scrawled a new name beside it: “Rue Anarchie.”