

## Inevitability 111

Chapter 111: 111 Messenger

111 Messenger

Clutching the carbide lamp, Lumian climbed the stone steps.

Soon, light appeared ahead, accompanied by a cacophony of noise. Emerging from the silent underground, it felt as if the entire world had sprung to life.

Lumian quickened his pace, twisting the valve on the carbide lamp with his right hand, stopping the water droplets from dripping into the carbide pile below. As the acetylene gas burned out, the flames in the metal mouth gradually faded.

Just then, he caught a glimpse of the scene outside.

Tall and low buildings appeared to have solidified at the moment of collapse, either tilted or on the verge of tumbling down, but standing stubbornly.

Pedestrians wore old or tattered clothing, and arguments and curses filled the air, the noise never subsiding.

At the underground exit, Lumian spotted a five-story building called the Auberge du Coq Doré.

The top two floors of the brownish building seemed like later additions, contrasting with the Roselle-era pillar walls, arches, large windows, and patterns on the lower floors. It looked so simplistic it could've been transplanted from Cordu.

Lugging his suitcase and carbide lamp, Lumian navigated through children scavenging for orange peels and quarreling adults until he reached the entrance of the Auberge du Coq Doré.

He glanced at the hotel floor, littered with yellow phlegm, shredded paper, spilled ketchup, and alcohol stains. Occasionally, a horde of bedbugs would congregate on the ceiling and walls.

Had his hands been free, Lumian would have applauded the scene.

Cordu's Ol' Tavern was much cleaner than this!

He found a route devoid of filth and headed to the front desk at a moderate pace.

A plump, middle-aged woman sat there, her grayish-white dress stained with oil and her brown hair tied in a simple bun.

She looked up at Lumian with her blue eyes, unfazed by the disdain and resistance on his face.

“This is the best and cheapest inn on Rue Anarchie, in the market area. But the owner's a miser who can't bear to hire cleaning ladies. He only gets freelancers to clean it once a week.”

“Does he skimp on your salary too?” Lumian asked, feigning naivete.

This set the woman off.

“Do you want a room or not?”

“Yes.” Lumian quickly clarified his intent, looking frightened. “I'd like to know the price.”

The woman calmed down.

“It depends on the room. The top two floors are 3 verl d'or a week, and the bottom two are 5 verl d'or. If that's too much, you can knock on doors and ask who's willing to share their bed or rent out floor space for 1 to 1.5 verl d'or a week.”

“Give me a room on the lower two floors.” Lumian reasoned it'd be easier to escape, whether by jumping from a window or taking the stairs.

The plump woman sized him up.

“Pay 15 verl d'or upfront for the whole month, and it's yours.”

“Why the discount?” Lumian feigned the ignorance of a country bumpkin new to the city.

The woman sneered.

“Many people have no choice but to move or leave Trier after a week or two. This place is both heaven and hell.”

Lumian pulled out three light-blue 5 verl d'or notes and handed them over.

The currency was all in 5-verl d'or denominations, featuring the bust of Intis Republic's first president, Levanx, along with laboring farmers and herders on the front, and the Hornacis mountain range on the back.

Upon receiving the full month's rent, the plump woman's expression visibly relaxed. She produced two brass keys strung together and tossed them to Lumian.

“Room 207 on the second floor. There's a small diner downstairs and a tavern in the basement. You'll find sulfur in the room's table drawer to help chase away those damn bugs. My name's Fels. If you need anything, just come to me.”

“Thank you, Madame Fels.” Lumian took the keys, grabbed his suitcase and carbide lamp, and headed upstairs to the second floor.

As he ascended, he noticed newspapers and cheap pink paper plastered on the walls, though some had already peeled away, exposing the cracks they were meant to hide and an abundance of bedbugs.

The second floor contained eight rooms and two washrooms. Each room was cramped, with a bed to the right. A table nestled between the bed's edge and the wall sat beneath the window, a rickety chair positioned in front of it.

There was no other furniture, but rows of bedbugs crawled across the ceiling.

Having grown accustomed to Aurore's cleanliness, Lumian set down his suitcase and carbide lamp, opened the drawer, and took out some sulfur. He lit it with a match, and as the pungent smell filled the room, the bedbugs fled.

Within seconds, Lumian detected the sulfuric scent from the room next door.

Almost simultaneously, some of the bedbugs returned, seeking refuge.

He quickly understood the situation: he had smoked the bedbugs into the adjacent room, and the tenant had used sulfur to chase them back.

Amused, Lumian bent down, opened his suitcase, and took out pen and paper.

Amidst the potent sulfur smell, he sat at the wooden table and began writing.

“Honorable Madam Magician,

“I've arrived in Trier as agreed. Please advise on my next steps, which organization to join, and how to contact them...

“Are the two psychologists available soon? When can I receive treatment?

“Do you have any new leads on Guillaume Bénét and Madame Pualis...”

After penning the letter, Lumian retrieved an orange candle from his sister's room.

Lighting it with his spirituality, the scent of citrus and lavender enveloped the air.

Instinctively, he closed his eyes, his expression calming.

After standing quietly for a minute or two, Lumian used the ritual silver dagger to sanctify the candle and create a wall of spirituality. He then dripped essential oil on the flame.

With the preparations complete, he placed the Magician card on the altar, a medium for summoning a messenger to pinpoint the incantation.

Lumian stepped back, observing the misty orange fire, and muttered in ancient Hermes, “I!”

An invisible wind swirled within the spiritual wall, dimming the room.

Switching to Hermes, he continued, “I summon in my name: The spirit that wanders about the unfounded, an upper world creature that is friendly to humans, a messenger that belongs solely to Magician.”

As the wind howled, the candle flame turned deep blue, casting a sinister, cold atmosphere.

Lumian focused on the candle, awaiting Madam Magician's messenger.

After a few seconds of silence, the letter on the altar floated into the air. Surprised, Lumian glanced up to find a “doll” the size of a man's forearm perched atop the carved window.

With long blond hair, light-blue eyes, pale-white skin, and an exquisite pale-gold dress, the “doll” bore strikingly realistic yet bizarre features.

In the next second, the letter landed in the “doll's” smooth, shiny hand that lacked any skin-like texture.

“Are you Madam Magician's messenger?” Lumian asked.

The “doll” slowly lowered its head, Lumian's figure reflecting in its unfocused, light-blue eyes.

Its voice, ethereal and angry, replied, “Choose a cleaner environment next time!”

With that, the “doll” vanished along with the letter.

Lumian was stunned for a moment before murmuring, “Didn't Aurore say the altar just needed to be clean and tidy?”

As he glanced around, he noticed numerous bedbug corpses on the floor.

The room was now insect-free.

This is better than sulfur... Lumian stroked his chin and ended the summoning ritual.

Lumian habitually cleaned the room before squatting beside his suitcase to retrieve his toiletries.

Aurore's dark-colored witchcraft notebooks lay undisturbed at the bottom.

During his journey to Trier, Lumian had already skimmed through them without finding anything suspicious. Aurore wasn't one for recording her personal thoughts or daily minutiae; her witchcraft notebook was purely dedicated to mystical knowledge, filled with incantations, symbols, and principles for selecting ingredients.

Likely due to Aurore's penchant for keeping detailed accounts, most spells included information about when and where they were obtained, their cost, or the items exchanged for them.

Lumian realized the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society likely had numerous interest groups. Aurore frequently attended 'Academy' gatherings, where many spells were traded among members. She also participated in exchanges with other groups, occasionally acquiring mystical knowledge and spells from events like April Fool's Day.

Finding nothing amiss in the notebooks, Lumian resolved to continue his investigation after consulting the psychologists and locating Padre and Madame Pualis.

He knew his sister wouldn't have mentioned the notebook without reason at that critical juncture. There must have been an important message she wished to convey.

Gazing at the dark-covered notebooks, Lumian determined to study his sister's recorded knowledge in reverse order, starting that night.

Although using spells in combat was nearly impossible for a Hunter, understanding them could help him identify any issues with the corresponding mystical knowledge or detect abnormalities.

With his belongings packed, Lumian's stomach growled in hunger.

He stood up and glanced at the window. The dimming light of dusk allowed him to vaguely see his reflection in the glass.

His hair, now dyed blond and grown out, barely disguised his features. Dressed in a white shirt, black vest, and dark suit, his cold, indifferent expression made him appear years older. Even Guillaume Bénét would find him only vaguely familiar.

Lumian patted his face, coaxing a smile, before opening the door and stepping out.

## Chapter 112 Charlie

In the dimly-lit cellar of the Auberge du Coq Dor, a cozy bar had just enough space for 20 to 30 patrons.

The moment Lumian stepped in, he saw a man leap onto a small round table, beer in hand, and address the handful of customers around him,

“Ladies and gentlemen, lend me your ears! I experienced something unbelievable two days ago!”

By the scant light from the steam lamps on the wall, Lumian discerned that the man was quite young, around 22 or 23 years old. He had short, light-brown hair and a clean-shaven face, which was flushed, likely from the alcohol.

Wearing a flaxen-colored shirt, black trousers, and leather slip-ons, the man stood just over 1.7 meters tall. However, his unusually short limbs made him appear closer to 1.6 meters.

Waving his stubby arms and slurring his words, he continued, “How incredible was it? I'll tell you, it's changed my entire perspective on faith. As a believer in the God of Steam and Machinery, I'm now ready to convert to the Eternal Blazing Sun!

“Listen up, isn't that astonishing?”

“Can you imagine how famished I was after five days? I'd lost my job and been fired by that good-for-nothing manager. I couldn't find work even after exhausting my savings.

“For five days, I starved, barely able to leave my bed. I was on the verge of death. Do you know how that feels? Oh, may God bless you and never let you find out.

“In that moment, I couldn't bear the thought of dying like this. I came to Trier to make my fortune, and I had to do something. That's when I noticed the portrait of Saint Vive on the wall.

“Yes, with great effort, I managed to get up, kneel before Her, and pray for Her help. I was still a believer in the God of Steam and Machinery then, but what wouldn't a starving man do? Besides, it couldn't hurt, right?”

“Five minutes after I finished praying, an old friend dropped by and saw my dire state. He didn't have much himself, but he reminded me that I'd rented a kerosene lamp for use at night. The deposit was 35 coppetsa whole seven licks!

“God, I'd completely forgotten. With my friend's help, I returned the lamp and used the refund to buy bread and half a liter of cheap booze. The bread was cold and damp, like it'd been doused in putty. The alcohol was a bit off and weak, but it was the most delicious meal I've ever had. Ladies and gentlemen, I was reborn!

“I found a new job today, and tomorrow, during my break, I'll light a candle at the nearest Saint Vive Cathedral!”

Saint Vive was a female angel mentioned in the Eternal Blazing Sun Church's Bible. She was one of the city's guardian angels in Trier. The other two were prominent figures from the God of Steam and Machinery Church and the annals of Intis.

Lumian observed the young man's blue eyes sparkling with enthusiasm as he ambled towards the bar.

The bartender, who was polishing a glass with a cloth, glanced at the orator on the round table and chuckled.

“Charlie never could keep quiet. Always talking.”

In his mid-thirties, the bartender sported a thin, dark brown beard circling his mouth, and his hair of the same color was tied back in an artistically casual ponytail.

Lumian took a seat at the bar and asked with a grin, “Is he telling the truth?”

“Who knows?” The bartender shrugged. “You must've heard the proverb: It's better to trust a snake than a Reemian. Charlie is from Reem.”

Reem and Riston Provinces both hailed from the south. Their accents were similar, but they were mountainous provinces more akin to Lenburg.

Lumian mused aloud, “I don't think that's the whole proverb. I feel like there's more to it.”

The bartender's azure eyes sparkled with amusement as he replied, “You're right. That proverb is longer than you'd think.”

“Trust a Loenese over a Reemian. Trust a snake over a Reemian, but never trust the Islanders.”

The islands referred to the Fog Sea archipelago west of Intis. This was one of the Republic's overseas colonies. The Islanders often played the roles of thugs and con artists in Trier.

Without waiting for Lumian to inquire further, the bartender cast a mocking glance at Charlie, still droning on, and whispered, “If he really experienced that, he certainly doesn't know that the portrait of Saint Vive isn't in his room.”

“Then whose is it?” Lumian asked, amused.

The bartender struggled to suppress his laughter.

“Charlie lives in Room 504. The previous tenant frequented the Quartier de la Princesse Rouge's Rue de la Muraille. The image in the room was of one of Trier's most famous prostitutes a few years back, Susanna Matisse.

“Just think. Charlie believes he's praying to an angel for help, but he's actually praying to a prostitute. He even feels lucky to have escaped hunger and landed a new job. How ironic!”

“Indeed,” Lumian concurred.

It was a scene beyond his wildest imagination. Reality was sometimes stranger than fiction.

He then added, “As long as it works.”

“A glass of fennel absinthe.” Lumian tapped the bar counter with his finger, signaling he was deep in thought. “What kind of food do you have here?”

“How about DuVar broth? Three licks for a ladle,” the bartender suggested.

Three licks equaled 15 coppers. 0.15 verl d'or.

Lumian appeared intrigued.

“What's DuVar broth?”

The bartender casually explained, “A restaurant owner, DuVar, invented it. He simmered meat, sauerkraut, and turnips together to create a hearty broth. Finally, he added cheese and bread crumbs. Just one serving can fill your stomach, and it tastes pretty good. As a result, DuVar is now wealthy and has relocated to Quartier de la Maison d'Opra.”

Lumian was currently in Le March du Quartier du Gentleman, also known as the market district, situated on the south bank of the Srenzo River, home to numerous slums. Quartier de la Maison d'Opra was on the north bank of the Srenzo River, near Avenue du Boulevard, one of the Republic's core areas.

Trier's city walls encompassed a total of 20 quartiers.

“Sounds good.” Lumian nodded with a smile. “I'll have one.”

Though he could restore his physical state by 6 a.m. and not worry about hunger, eating was one of the few things that made him feel alive.

The bartender nodded and asked, “Little Mummy or Somersault?”

“What?” Lumian didn't hide his confusion.

Unfazed, the bartender calmly explained, “That's common slang in Trier bars, cafs, and beer houses. Little Mummy means a small shot of fennel absinthe. Somersault is a double shot. Red Tomato has pomegranate juice added, and with mint, it's called Parrot. There are plenty more like that. Friend, you still have much to learn in Trier.”

“Little Mummy it is.” Lumian sensed the bartender's subtle disdain for foreigners, but he didn't mind.

“Seven licks,” the bartender announced as he flipped open a small goblet.

This was pricier than the absinthe at Cordu's Ol' Tavern, but it was typical in places subject to city taxes.

Soon, a glass of pale green absinthe, glowing hypnotically, appeared before Lumian.

He picked it up and sipped. The faint, lingering bitterness of the refreshing taste spread and burrowed into his brain.

As Lumian waited for the waitress to bring DuVar's broth, he noticed glass jars, hoses, valves, gears, and other items piled beside the bar counter.

“What's this?” He glanced inquisitively at the bartender.

As the bartender wiped a glass, he casually replied, “Left by a previous tenant. He's a believer in the God of Steam and Machinery. He always thinks he has a knack for mechanics and has accumulated many similar items.”

“Where is he now?” Lumian asked, playing along even though he knew the answer wouldn't be pleasant.

The bartender paused for a couple of seconds before answering, “He went to the factory, and word is he got distracted while working and was pulled into the machinery. Half of him was crushed.”

Lumian didn't pry further. He turned to examine the half-assembled parts and fell into deep thought.

A few seconds later, he left the bar stool and squatted beside the counter, tinkering with the pile.

The bartender glanced at him but didn't interfere. He only notified Lumian when DuVar's broth arrived from the kitchen.

After busying himself for a while, Lumian returned to the bar stool and sampled the hearty broth with a spoon.

The rich aroma of meat, the taste of cheese, the tangy sauerkraut, and the sweetness of the turnip melded to create an unforgettable flavor. The bread crumbs soaked in juice were the crowning gem of the dish.

Lumian didn't expect that a soup costing three licks would include several pieces of meat. It could genuinely fill an adult's stomach.

Once the plate was empty, Lumian pulled out a handkerchief and wiped his mouth. He squatted back beside the half-assembled parts and resumed his work.

Ten minutes later, he placed a machine on the bar counter.

Above the machine was a glass jar, and beneath it were intricate components connected to two rubber hoses.

Lumian then asked for a glass of clear water and poured in the remaining fennel absinthe, tinting the colorless liquid a pale green.

Finally, he inserted one of the rubber hoses into the cup.

The fashionable bartender, his hair tied back in a ponytail, watched intently and asked, puzzled, “What's this?”

“My invention,” Lumian declared, tracing a triangular Sacred Emblem on his chest. “I'm also a believer in the God of Steam and Machinery, with a few impressive achievements in the mechanical field.”

He then extended his black-gloved left hand and gestured toward the machine.

“This is a groundbreaking machine. Its effects are beyond your wildest dreams!”



“What can it do?” Charlie, suspected of having prayed to a prostitute, approached the bar counter with a beer bottle and a curious expression.

Lumian explained, both solemn and excited, “It's called the Idiot Instrument. It tests a person's stupidity and intelligence.”

“Really?” Charlie and the bartender looked skeptical.

Lumian detailed his idea, “It's easy to use. Blow into the tube until the liquid in the cup rises into the glass jar and forms bubbles.

“By observing these bubbles, we can determine the corresponding stupidity or intelligence index.”

Intrigued, Charlie said after observing Lumian, “Fascinating. Just as I'd expect from a believer in the God of Steam and Machinery.”

He picked up the exposed rubber hose and blew into it.

The light green liquid in the cup flowed through the interconnected gears, valves, and other components, rising into the glass jar above and forming a small bubble.

“What does it say?” Charlie asked, eager for the result.

Lumian's mouth curved into a sly smile.

“My friend, the principles of this machine are quite simple. When you believe me enough to actually produce a bubble with it, that's when you prove you're a 'dumb idiot.'”

Charlie's expression froze, his eyes burning with anger.

The bartender beside him laughed.

“Excellent prank!” he exclaimed, genuinely impressed.

Lumian grinned at Charlie, waiting for the explosion.

After a few tense seconds, Charlie swallowed his anger and turned to the patrons who had been listening to his story.

“Ladies and gentlemen, behold what I've discovered: a groundbreaking machine! It can test your intelligence index!”

## Chapter 113 Tenants

“You're such an interesting person!”

A drunk Charlie slung his arm around Lumian's shoulder as they stumbled out of the raucous bar.

Inside, nearly 20 people sang, gambled, and yelled, releasing pent-up emotions.

At moments like these, they didn't seem like paupers on meager wages but rather kings and queens.

“I thought you'd play Billy B with them.” Lumian draped his arm over Charlie's back and grinned as they headed for the stairs leading upstairs.

Billy B was a popular gambling game in Trier, one Lumian had just recently learned.

Unlike Trieriens' favorite Fighting Evil, Billy B only required a piece of paper. Depending on the number of players, the dealer drew a grid of squares, ranging from 9 to 64. Each square was assigned a number, allowing participants to place their bets.

The dealer then determined a lucky number by drawing lots, tossing coins, or throwing dice. The winner took the entire pot.

If no one won, the money went to the dealer.

The patrons of the Auberge du Coq Doré's underground bar were either locals or impoverished folks from nearby. Their wallets were thin, so they mainly wagered alcohol instead of cash. For instance, a game of Billy B might only reward the winner with a glass of booze bought by everyone's pooled money.

Charlie released a long burp.

“I haven't gotten my salary for this week. Can't be too indulgent!”

He turned to Lumian, excitement in his voice, “Did you know? I'm now an apprentice attendant at Hôtel du Cygne Blanc, the one on Rue Neuve in Quartier des Thermes.

“What does that mean? It means I get to wear a white shirt, red vest, and black suit. I'll tie an elegant bow and earn 65 verl d'or a month! When I become a full attendant, I hear that during peak season, I can make 7 verl d'or a day just in tips!

“When I strike it rich, I'll open my own motel—no, a hotel. When the time comes, I'll hire you as an attendant foreman. That jerk just walks around in his tailcoat, nitpicking, and earns 150 verl d'or a month!”

Apprentice attendants earn slightly more than manual laborers... Lumian reeked of alcohol, but his eyes remained clear. He nodded almost imperceptibly.

He recalled reading a newspaper in his study earlier in the year, boasting that Trier's laborers earned about 700 verl d'or annually.

At the time, Lumian didn't have a clear concept of that figure. He didn't know if it was too much or too little. As a vagrant, he'd only worried about how much food he could get each day and whether kind people might offer him a few licks. The income of Cordu villagers was mainly in goods, so he understood specific prices and the value of various banknotes, but he lacked a broader understanding.

Of course, this was also because Aurore's income was very high, so he hardly fretted about family finances.

As far as Lumian knew, Aurore's fame brought her a significant income through book sales and contracts. Last year's royalties had neared 130,000 verl d'or.

However, Aurore spent as much as she earned. Spells, materials, and arcane knowledge accounted for most of her expenses. She might also be supporting struggling members of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society or donating to government- or church-run charities.

Yet what puzzled Lumian was the absence of a deposit slip at home when he left Cordu.

He knew all too well that Aurore was a saver. Spending big was only possible because she had stashed away plenty of cash at Suchit Bank and other institutions.

For a moment, Lumian suspected that Guillaume Bénét's crew had snatched it while he and his sister were being used as sacrifices or vessels.

As Lumian and Charlie made their way to the second floor, arms slung around each other's shoulders, a mournful cry pierced the air.

“You bastard!”

Bang! A door slammed, muffling the wail and leaving only echoes in the hallway.

A figure in a crisp black tailcoat approached the stairs from the far end of the hall.

He was a young man, roughly Charlie's age. His brownish-yellow hair was styled in a 30-70 parting, and his dark brown eyes were devoid of expression. His thin lips were pressed tightly together.

Quite handsome, he held a black top hat in his hand, looking more like he belonged at a high-society soirée than the Auberge du Coq Doré.

Following the man's cries was a woman's voice, heavy with pain and despair.

As Charlie watched the man vanish down the stairs, his flushed face contorted.

“What a bastard!”

“You know him?” Lumian was still rather 'concerned' about his neighbors. After all, he might be staying here for a while. The more he knew about his surroundings, the safer he'd be.

Charlie scoffed, “That's Laurent, Mrs. Lakazan's son from Room 201.

“Mrs. Lakazan slaves away, mending socks and crafting all sorts for 16 hours a day just to support that bastard. He always dresses nicely and spends her money at fancy cafés, claiming he's mingling with high society to find opportunities to make it big!

“Heh, he thinks he's so talented...”

Before Charlie could finish, another heated argument erupted between a man and a woman nearby. They hurled insults at each other.

“Third floor's a couple who eloped. They're like this every day when they're almost broke.” Charlie clicked his tongue and grinned. “My friend, you'll have to get used to it. This is the market district, Rue Anarchie, the Auberge du Coq Doré. We've got the seriously ill, the bankrupt, swindling peddlers, foreigners who never leave the inn

and only drink downstairs, broke street girls, lunatics who wake up in a frenzy, jobless stonemasons, veterans, miserly old men, and wanted criminals...

“They should all thank Monsieur Ive for being so lenient. As long as they don't default on rent, he's pretty forgiving.”

“Monsieur Ive... The innkeeper? The miser Madame Fels mentioned?” Lumian inquired.

Charlie grinned and replied, “That's him, a kind but stingy fellow. He even provides everyone with free sulfur!

“Burp, I haven't seen Monsieur Ive in a few days. I'm really worried he'll try to save a few coppers by visiting some random woman on Rue Anarchie and catch some nasty disease instead of patronizing Rue de la Muraille or Quartier de la Princesse Rouge...”

As he spoke, Charlie waved his hand.

“Ciel, burp. I'm off to bed. I've got to leave at six tomorrow morning and get to the hotel by seven.

“Burp, if you can't find a job, let me know. I'll introduce you to a handyman at our hotel. You can earn 50 verl d'or a month. Stick around long enough, and you might make 75. Plus, there's free food. We even get a liter of wine every night!”

“Alright.” Lumian smiled as he watched Charlie climb the stairs.

At the same time, he muttered to himself, Simple provocation isn't doing much for the potion's digestion...

He had assembled the Idiot Instrument in the bar to rile everyone up. The result was successful, but it didn't further the potion's digestion.

During his journey from Dariège to Trier, Lumian frequently provoked others. Sometimes he felt the potion digest, but most times, he gained nothing.

If he couldn't find a better way to act, he suspected it would take at least a year to fully digest the Provoker potion.

Heading back to Room 207, Lumian heard a bout of coughing from upstairs. He heard a woman berating her lover, calling him “lazy” and “trash.” Gunshots rang out, followed by the sound of a group chasing someone outside.

This was life at the Auberge du Coq Doré and on Rue Anarchie.

Charlie had said that even the police wouldn't dare walk here alone at night. They needed a partner to bolster their courage.

Taking out the brass key, Lumian opened the door and stepped back into his room.

The bedbugs seemed to have sensed something and stayed away.

Lumian sniffed the sulfur and glanced up. A letter lay silently on the wooden table beside the window.

He took a few steps forward and picked up the folded piece of paper.

Madam Magician's reply? Lumian mused, unfolding the letter and reading it under the crimson moonlight streaming through the window.

“I'm glad you arrived in Trier without issue. This shows you've mastered the basic technique of evading capture and regained your experience navigating the dark underbelly of society.

“At 3:30 p.m. this Sunday, a psychologist will treat you at Booth D in Mason Café, located in Quartier du Jardin Botanique.

“For the next few days, your mission is to venture near the catacombs in Quartier de l'Observatoire and locate a man named Osta Trul. He often masquerades as a warlock to con tourists and locals alike.

“By any means necessary, earn Osta Trul's trust and reveal your powers when the time is right.”

Quartier du Jardin Botanique and Quartier de l'Observatoire were west of Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman, adjacent to one another. The former lay further south, while the latter was closer to the north, right by the Srenzo River.

Lumian read Madam Magician's reply over and over, committing the relevant locations, times, and names to memory. Then he struck a match and burned the Intisian-scripted paper.

Having done all this, he headed to the nearest washroom to freshen up. Afterward, he took out Fallen Mercury, wrapped in black cloth, removed his coat, and lay on the bed.

The bedbug-infested ceiling met his gaze, and the faint sounds of coughing, crying, and arguing filled the room.

Soon after, the eloped couple announced their reconciliation through a passionate and vigorous exercise, accompanied by uninhibited moans.

Outside on the street, a few coarse voices sang vulgar songs, punctuated by gunshots, followed by curses, the clashing of poles, and the sound of sharp weapons piercing flesh.

Compared to Cordu, the nights here were far from quiet.

## Chapter 114 Life Experience

At the break of dawn in early May, the sky remained cloaked in darkness. The setting crimson moon and the scattered stars cast a faint glow, thinning the darkness just enough to reveal nearby silhouettes.

Lumian awoke early and freshened up. He donned his formal attire from the previous day and a wide-brimmed top hat. He tried his best to smile at his reflection in the glass window that served as a mirror.

As he descended the stairs, hurried footsteps echoed from above.

Soon, Charlie came into view.

He was still dressed in a linen shirt, black trousers, and strapless leather shoes. His flushed complexion had turned a shade paler, and his small blue eyes betrayed unmistakable fatigue.

“Good morning, Ciel,” Charlie greeted Lumian with enthusiasm.

He seemed quite pumped.

“Shouldn't you have left long ago?” Lumian asked, smiling.

He had only awoken to freshen up when he heard the cathedral clock chime six o'clock. Charlie should have departed by then.

Charlie lowered his head, adjusting his clothes as he muttered, “I drank too much last night and had a wonderful dream. I didn't want to wake up”

As they conversed, the pair reached the ground floor. They traversed the dingy, dimly lit hall towards the door reflecting starlight.

An elderly couple, grizzled and slightly stooped, opened the door. In their sixties, they were both short, the man barely 1.65 meters tall and the woman even shorter. Their dark jackets and yellowish cloth dresses were tattered and oil-stained.

“Who are they?” Lumian had expected Madame Fels or the miserly motel owner, Monsieur Ive, to be in charge of opening the door in the morning.

Charlie didn't slow down, casually explaining, “Monsieur Ruhr and Madame Michel, they're the swindlers I mentioned yesterday. They scam tourists into buying things.

“They rise early every day, and Madame Fels has them open the inn's door. In return, she turns a blind eye to the mess and stench they create in their room.

“Can you believe it? They haven't changed their clothes since I moved in. It's been seven months. Seven months!”

No wonder it's so filthy Lumian could recall his own grimy days as a vagabond, but Aurore's penchant for cleanliness still made him frown.

Charlie strode quickly out of Auberge du Coq Dor, puzzledly asking, “Ciel, why are you up so early too?”

As they stepped onto the street, a bustling scene unfolded before them.

Countless workers, clerks, and laborers hurried along in their gray, blue, black, and brown clothes, occasionally stopping to purchase food from street vendors.

Some women carrying wooden baskets moved more leisurely. They meandered between various vendors, comparing prices and quality.

The peddlers lined both sides of Rue Anarchie, occupying half the street and leaving just enough room for a carriage to pass.

They bellowed loudly, vying for customers' attention.

“Whiskey Sour, Apple Whiskey Sour. Two licks a liter!”

“Freshwater fish from Bondi's fish pond!”

“Fresh cod and herring, come and take a look!”

“Onion bread, one lick, just one lick!”

“Salted meat, delicious salted meat!”

“Soap and wigs imported from Loen!”

“Buy the kids a bottle of refreshing soda!”

“Hot sauce, soybean paste, scallions, water celery!”

Absorbing the sounds and energy of Rue Anarchie, Lumian turned to Charlie and smiled.

“I just arrived in Trier and couldn't sleep. I thought I'd walk around and see if I could find a suitable job.”

As a Hunter, it was essential for him to familiarize himself with the area he frequented and understand its intricacies.

It would be too late to adapt if something were to happen.

Charlie nodded knowingly.

He said with enthusiasm, “You could try your luck at Rue des Blouses Blanches. It's between Le March du Gentleman and the steam locomotive station.

“Many motel, hotel, and restaurant managers like to chat at the caf there. They use the opportunity to hire dishwashers, floor cleaners, washroom attendants, and apprentice attendants.

“If you have money on you, remember to buy the caf waiters a drink. They'll introduce you to the right person and give you a shot at a better job.”

Without waiting for Lumian's reply, Charlie shared his wisdom.

“You must pay attention to your appearance. Do as I do.”

As he spoke, he raised his hands and slapped his face, mimicking an actual slap, but with less force.

Soon, Charlie's pallid complexion regained its “rosiness.”

“Look, look.” He pointed at himself smugly and said, “Don't I appear more energetic? Those managers don't want to hire someone who looks particularly destitute and sickly. They think it'll bring trouble. They're either unwilling to give you a decent job

or will slash your salary. If you do this before entering the caf like me, it'll make you seem like someone who has a place to sleep and breakfast to eat. But doing it too early won't work, as this 'rosiness' will gradually fade."

This clever job-hunting technique was new to Lumian, a former vagabond. He found it fascinating. He smiled and nodded.

"I still have enough money to rent a place and fill my stomach. I don't need to do this for now, but who knows if I'll need it in the future?"

He deliberately didn't conceal the fact that he still had a fair amount of verl d'or.

What if a generous soul was willing to "donate" another sum?

Charlie expressed his understanding and took out 5 coppet worth of copper coins to buy onion bread from a nearby vendor.

Lumian felt a pang of familiarity.

During his time on the streets, if he could acquire money, his first choice was onion bread.

It was cheap, and the aroma of onions lingered, creating the illusion of having just eaten a satisfying meal.

Lumian also purchased onion bread for breakfast. Alongside Charlie, they navigated through the numerous vendors and exited Rue Anarchie.

"I love the mornings here!" Charlie glanced back and sighed with his signature zeal. "Those gangsters who deserve to rot in hell can't get up this early. They can't destroy this captivating vitality."

He then waved at Lumian.

"I've got to take the subway. Otherwise, I'll be late today. That damned foreman will surely dock my pay!"

After saying goodbye to Charlie, Lumian wandered around Rue Anarchie, exploring the area like a curious tourist.

Le March du Quartier du Gentleman was situated on the south bank of the Srenzo River, in the southeast corner of Trier, officially known as "Quartier 13." Trier boasted various quarters named by numbers, each with its own historical and characteristic monikers. Even officials sometimes used these colloquial names.

The district earned its name from Le March du Gentleman. Proximity to the Srenzo River allowed for a Suhit steam locomotive station, which catered to travelers from southern Intis.

Encircled by the market and the steam locomotive station, many of its streets were notoriously dangerous and teeming with impoverished inhabitants. It was one of Trier's slums.

To the north of the market district, on the south bank of the Srenzo River, lay Quartier 5, the Quartier de la Cathdrale Commmorative or Quartier Universitaire. Trier Normal College, Trier Higher Mining College, and Intis Academy of Fine Arts were all located here.



To the northeast of the city, on the north bank of the Srenzo River, stood Quartier 12, known as the Noel Quartier. It housed the Veterans' Home, Wounded Soldiers' Hospital, and several large medical facilities.

To the northwest of the market district was Quartier 6 Quartier de l'Observatoire where Lumian planned to visit later. It contained the primary entrance to the catacombs.

To the southwest of the market district was Quartier 14, known as Quartier du Jardin Botanique. On Sunday, Lumian was scheduled for treatment with a psychologist at the Mason caf there. This area was also called Quartier du Sans-Culottes due to the large factories located south of the botanical garden.

And so, Lumian spent nearly the entire morning traversing the streets of Le March du Quartier du Gentleman.

As noon approached, Lumian returned to the vicinity of Suhit's train station, intending to find a spot for lunch before heading to the catacombs in search of the phony warlock, Osta Trul.

Walking along, Lumian spotted the couple Ruhr and Michel who also resided at Auberge du Coq Dor.

They were hawking parcels of items wrapped in paper bags to groups that appeared to be foreigners.

As Lumian drew near, the gray-haired, ragged, and wrinkled Ruhr leaned towards him and lowered his voice. "Do you want photos of a street matresse d'atelier?"

"What's a street matresse d'atelier?" Lumian didn't conceal his confusion or his revulsion at Ruer's stench.

Ruhr waved the thin paper bag in his hand and whispered, "In Trier, beautiful girls who model for painters are called 'matresse d'atelier.'"

"With the advent of cameras and photographers, they also began taking photo subjects. As you might imagine, some of these photos were sold to painters as reference material, while others"

Ruhr flashed a sly grin and shook the paper bag in his hand again.

"Four licks per bag, with two photos inside!

"Others sell them for over 10 licks!"

Lumian laughed.

"Monsieur Ruhr, Madame Michel, is this the souvenir you peddle to tourists?"

Hearing Lumian address them by name, Ruhr and Michel's expressions shifted dramatically.

They spun around, trying to escape, but Lumian was quicker and clamped down on Ruhr's shoulder.

Michel, who had weaved her way through the crowd, noticed her husband couldn't keep pace and returned, her face etched with bitterness.

"I also live at Auberge du Coq Dor. My name is Ciel," Lumian introduced himself.

“What kind of photos are you selling?” Lumian inquired curiously.

Ruhr responded timidly, “Scenic photos of the Srenzo River, as well as images of Trier's castles and palaces.”

“No one is causing trouble for you?” Lumian asked, grinning.

Ruhr swallowed and said, “The people who buy them don't dare to open them on the spot or confront us later. They feel guilty.”

“Besides, no police will bother you if you sell landscape photos.” Lumian nodded.

“Does anyone really sell street matresse d'atelier?”

“Yes,” Ruhr confirmed. “Last month, the police arrested a group of photographers and art dealers. They said they confiscated over 10,000 photos. If only they could give them to us. Who knows how much we could sell them for!”

Madame Michel, also sporting a wrinkled face and hunched figure, mumbled, “There was a model staying at our inn previously, but she hasn't been around lately. Perhaps she became the mistress of some painter, or maybe she was captured to be a street matresse d'atelier”

Auberge du Coq Dor has quite a variety of guests Lumian asked with interest, “How much can you earn in a week by tricking foreigners into buying photos?”

“We sell them very cheaply. About 10 verl d'or,” Ruhr replied, his gaze slightly evasive.

From the looks of it, it's more than 10 verl d'or, but not much more. I'll count it as 12 verl d'or, which is 1,200 coppet or 240 licks 60 fools fall for it every week? Lumian surveyed the square and expressed his disdain for the average intelligence of the people there.

As for Ruhr and Michel, they took a significant risk to deceive others; yet, they only earned about 50 verl d'or a month, far less than the apprentice attendants or even laborers.

Observing their slightly hunched backs, slender frames, and wrinkled faces, Lumian understood that it wasn't that they didn't want to do more legitimate work for better pay, but rather that they couldn't handle those jobs.

With a wave of his hand, he left Suhit's steam locomotive station and headed northwest towards Quartier de l'Observatoire.

## Chapter 115 Legend

The catacombs' main entrance was tucked away in Place du Purgatoire, close to the Intisian observatory. The structure enclosing the entrance was supported by grand pillars, crowned by a dome adorned with intricate stone carvings, reminiscent of a miniature memorial hall or the base of an immense mausoleum.

As Lumian approached, he noted a crowd of 20 to 30 people already assembled near the stairs leading down. Their attire varied, but most were dressed formally, both men and women alike.

A man in his thirties, sporting a blue vest, yellow pants, and a thick beard, stood before the crowd. His brown curls framed upturned eyes, and he held an unlit iron-black carbide lamp.

Addressing the gathered group, he announced loudly, "I'm Kendall, one of the catacombs' administrators. I'll be guiding you through the ossuary today.

"Does everyone have a white candle? If not, please let me know immediately."

Tourists? Lumian's eyes swept over the stone staircase behind Kendall.

It plunged down into impenetrable darkness, its end hidden from view.

Beside Kendall stood a massive wooden door, half of it emblazoned with the Sun Sacred Emblem in gold, while the other half was adorned with an intricate triangle filled with symbols of steam, levers, gears, and more.

Upon receiving confirmation, Kendall ignited his carbide lamp and led the group into the depths below. The tourists trailed behind him, some bearing lanterns.

Lumian followed, keeping a four to five-meter distance. Clutching the carbide lamp he had obtained from Ramayes, he descended the staircase at a steady pace.

Thanks to his Beyonder-enhanced hearing, Lumian easily heard Kendall's informative spiel at the front.

"After 138 steps, you'll find yourselves 26 meters below Trier's streets, surrounded by the remains of nearly 50 generations of Trieriens.

"That's a conservative estimate. In truth, the history of some of these ossuaries can be traced back to the previous epoch...

"Forty-seven years ago, there was no more space for the dead in Cimetière des Innocents or Cimetière des Prêtres. White bones lay scattered, and the stench drove nearby residents to protest daily, demanding the relocation of the cemetery...

"Ultimately, City Hall opted to go underground. They repurposed graves from the Fourth Epoch and adjacent underground quarries, creating a vast tomb... Today, you'll be visiting but a mere fraction of it..."

Kendall's voice echoed through the silent, never-ending staircase, imbuing the atmosphere with an eerie sense of foreboding.

As Lumian continued downward, a path lined with stone pillars and walls came into view. This passage, unlike other subterranean areas, was well-maintained and frequently repaired. It was smooth, wide, and unnervingly sinister. An icy breeze occasionally swept through the corridor.

Gas lamps were strategically placed along the path, casting a dim, yellowish light that allowed shadows to mingle with the illumination, stretching into the darkness.

Kendall, clad in his blue vest, warned the visitors once more, "Stay close and don't wander off!

"There are countless underground areas we know little about. If you get lost, it'll be nearly impossible to find you.

“Do not stray from the path once inside the tomb. There are passages that lead to deeper, more sinister chambers. The Fourth Epoch's malevolent spirits lurk within that darkness. Praise the Sun and the Light. By adhering to the routes endorsed by the padres, we can avoid all perils.”

Some visitors outstretched their arms in praise of the Sun, while others traced a triangle over their chests.

After trailing Kendall and the others for nearly 200 meters, Lumian caught sight of the subterranean tomb.

Before him lay a natural boulder cave, modified over time. Its walls were adorned with intricate reliefs of skulls, skeletal arms, sunflowers, and steam symbols.

Above the entrance, two Intisian inscriptions commanded: “Halt!

“The Death Empire lies ahead!”

Kendall, the catacomb administrator, turned to address the visitors once more, “Extinguish your lanterns and light the white candles. Everyone must do this!

“If you'd rather not enter the catacomb, feel free to explore this area, but don't stray too far. It's all too easy to lose your bearings, and that would be a problem.

“Should you find yourself separated from the group inside the catacomb, don't panic. Locate a road sign. If there isn't one, look above and follow the black line drawn on the tomb's ceiling. It will guide you back to the main entrance...” Soon, the lanterns were snuffed out, replaced by the flickering glow of orange candlelight.

The visitors hoisted their white candles and trailed Kendall into the catacombs. Lumian observed from a distance, watching as the yellowish flames merged into a stream that meandered into the darkness.

He refrained from entering. Grasping his carbide lamp, he circled the tomb's entrance, intent on locating the phony warlock, Osta Trul.

A few minutes later, Lumian discovered a small bonfire.

Beside a pillar, damp moss clung to the stone wall above.

A man was seated on a rock behind the fire, garbed in a hooded black robe. His high-bridged nose and dark brown eyes were framed by a flaxen beard that obscured his chin. He stared intently at the dancing flames.

Lumian approached and inquired, “Are you Osta Trul?”

The hooded man raised his gaze to meet Lumian's and replied in a deliberately subdued, magnetic voice, “Lost soul, why have you sought me out?”

Flames and shadows danced across Osta Trul's face, obscuring his age. He appeared to be somewhere between just below 30 and 40. Lumian spoke earnestly, “I've heard whispers about you.

They say you're a mystical Warlock who can help me resolve my dilemma." Osta Trul responded in a low, magnetic tone, "Witchcraft is taboo. Witchcraft is a curse. I won't render aid without cause."

"What must I do?" Lumian pressed, anxiety evident in his voice.

Osta replied softly, "The essence of witchcraft lies in equivalent exchange. Reveal the nature of the help you seek first."

Equivalent exchange. Have you been reading too many novels? Lumian suppressed the urge to ridicule and antagonize him, instead adopting a pained expression. "I've lost everyone I cared for. I feel forsaken by the world. Sleep eludes me each night. I want to forget these burdens and begin anew."

Osta Trul scrutinized Lumian's countenance, finding no trace of deception. He nodded slightly. "I, too, have suffered great losses. It's a curse borne of witchcraft. I can empathize with your sentiments and thoughts. Yet forgetting pain is no simple task."

"Very well..." Lumian exhaled a long sigh and turned to depart.

Osta hastily called out, "Wait. Just because it's difficult doesn't mean it's impossible."

"Really?" Lumian whipped his head back, excitement flooding his features.

Osta nodded subtly and continued, "Have you ever heard of the Samaritan Women's Spring?"

"No." Lumian shook his head. Osta glanced at the burning bonfire and explained simply, "In one of the ossuaries within the catacombs, there's a murky spring known as the Samaritan Women's Spring, or the Fountain of Oblivion. Drink from it, and all your pain will be erased from memory. "Of course, it's a fabrication. The spring is merely a puddle left by a construction error during the catacombs' creation. The administrators spun it into legend." As Lumian's eyes sparkled with hope, Osta Trul carried on, "However, as a Warlock, I can reveal that deep within this subterranean realm lies a genuine Samaritan Women's Spring, hidden in a tomb believed to be a relic of the Fourth Epoch.

"Many corpses there chant: 'Drink the blissful waters of forgetfulness and be purged of primordial pain.'" "I can help you recover it, but the principle of equivalent exchange must be honored. It will cost you 100 verl d'or."

100 verl d'or? Isn't your asking price a bit too low? How can anyone believe that procuring a legendary item as perilous as this could be genuine without demanding a few thousand verl d'or? Lumian had been listening closely, but the absurdly undervalued service left him amused.

How could such priceless spring water be worth no more than an apprentice attendant's two months' wages?

He had read about the legend of the Samaritan Women's Spring in *Psychic*. Aurore had murmured a word he didn't understand. Its pronunciation likely resembled 'Granny Meng.' *Psychic* also asserted that the Samaritan Women's Spring was a legend fabricated by the catacomb administrators, but they were convinced the tale had its origins. The Fountain of Oblivion might genuinely exist

somewhere on the Northern Continent. Lumian's eyes widened as he hastened to Osta's side. Clasp ing his shoulder, he exclaimed, "Really?"

Osta brushed his hand away and nodded composedly.

"This is a Warlock's vow."

"Alright, alright!" Lumian responded, thrilled.

"But I didn't bring that much money. I'll head back now and return here to find you tomorrow?"

Osta nodded approvingly.

"No problem."

Lumian expressed his gratitude profusely, seized the carbide lamp, and departed with excitement.

Once out of Osta's view, Lumian's smile vanished. He raised his right palm and sniffed the faint fragrance. Before reaching the Quartier de l'Observatoire, he had deliberately sprayed an inferior cologne on his right hand and touched Osta's body.

Back on the surface, Lumian took cover behind a pillar, concealed himself, and waited patiently.

The sky gradually darkened. As twilight descended, he detected the faint and familiar scent of cologne.

Lumian didn't rush to pursue Osta. After a trailed while, he emerged from his hiding spot and the lingering fragrance, maintaining a distance so great he was nearly invisible. Carriages whizzed past him, and extravagant mechanical contraptions appeared sporadically.

## Chapter 116 City of Fashion

In the morning, while "shopping" at Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman, Lumian noticed that Trier's citizens dressed rather casually, or perhaps boldly. This was evident in the women wearing short sleeves that bared their forearms or garments with cut-out shoulders that displayed their collarbones. On the other hand, there was no shortage of peculiar attire.

In the Dariège region, a warlock like Osta, donning a black robe and hood, resembled an ancient legend. It was impossible for him to walk the streets openly without being stopped by the police. In Trier, however, passersby paid him no mind.

Such appearances were all too common. People dressed in a variety of antiquated garments.

Osta Trul was undoubtedly more cautious. Periodically, he would glance over his shoulder to spot anyone suspicious, but Lumian maintained such a great distance that neither of them were within the other's line of sight. Lumian trailed Osta from one street to the next, following the faint scent of the inferior cologne.

As gas lamps illuminated the surroundings, Osta turned into a street sheltered by glass domes and steel frames.

This place was brightly lit and lined with upscale shops. Smooth marble paved the ground, and the area bustled with pedestrians -a stark contrast to the ramshackle alleys of Marché du Quartier du Gentleman.

This is the arcade Aurore mentioned? Lumian observed Osta pausing in front of a store to admire the window display. He too slowed down, scanning the area.

He quickly spotted people engaging in “unusual” behavior.

Dressed in formal attire, both men and women walked turtles of varying sizes.

The turtles inched forward, and their owners, holding a rope, trailed leisurely behind.

Upon seeing a man dressed in a black formal suit and silk top hat walking a turtle, Lumian couldn't help but inquire, “My friend, what are you doing?”

The man turned his head, revealing a powdered face.

He responded with a smile, “Foreigner, I'm simply taking a stroll, walking my turtle.”

“Why a turtle?” Lumian didn't conceal his puzzlement.

The impeccably groomed gentleman appeared pleased to share his fashion philosophy. He grinned and explained, “Most Trieriens enjoy walking around leisurely, but they fail to grasp the essence of leisure and elegance. They always walk briskly and seem rushed.

“A true stroll is slower than a turtle. Thus, we walk turtles and let them lead to emphasize our leisurely pace.

“It's a gauge to measure walking speed and a device to quantify elegance.”

Lumian had to concede that Trieriens consistently expanded his perspective as a country bumpkin from Cordu.

Aurore couldn't have even written a story about walking a turtle!

“A true Trierien!” Lumian applauded, his tone dripping with sarcasm.

Regrettably, the gentleman failed to grasp his underlying message. He smiled modestly and continued to follow the turtle at a leisurely pace.

Before long, Osta reached the other end of the arcade.

Lumian waited for a moment before cautiously following.

After exiting the arcade, Osta positioned himself by the nearby public carriage stop.

Within minutes, a massive carriage, drawn by two horses, arrived.

The carriage was divided into two levels. The yellow-painted exterior bore words like “Line 7” written in Intisian. The driver donned a short green coat and a wide-brimmed hat to fend off the rain.

As the carriage came to a stop, a conductor sporting a small hat, striped shirt, and unattractive pants appeared at the open door, scrutinizing each passenger boarding the carriage as if they were criminals.

Osta was the third person to climb aboard. He chose a window seat, observing the passersby and the men and women taking their seats.

Lumian watched from a distance without approaching.

It was only when the Line 7 carriage had pulled away that he quickened his pace, practically jogging to catch up.

Given the relatively slow speed of public transportation and the rule of stopping at every station, Lumian wasn't concerned about being left behind.

As he ran, some pedestrians eyed him curiously, while a few even jogged alongside, seemingly believing this to be the latest trend.

Is there something wrong with your brains? Lumian didn't know whether to laugh or cry. After three stops, he saw Osta Trul disembark from the public carriage. This area was already part of Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman. Osta crossed two streets and turned onto Rue des Blouses Blanches, which Charlie had mentioned. He entered an old beige apartment building numbered 20.

Lumian halted in front of a street-side newspaper stand, picked up a paper, and casually flipped through it.

Simultaneously, he observed the entrance to the apartment building from the corner of his eye. "It's 11 coppers for one," the newsstand owner reminded Lumian when he noticed that he was only reading and not buying.

Lumian was holding a copy of *Le Petit Trierien*, and without minding, he took out two 5-copper and one 1-copper coins and tossed them onto the other newspapers.

The newsstand owner fell silent. Lumian continued reading the newspaper.

"City Hall discussing new price plans with the water supply company..."

"Valéry slams consumerism as a fetish..."

"Greatest project in human history seeks collaboration..."

The final advertisement caught Lumian's attention as he reminded him of something: It reeked of a prankster or a swindler's ploy! As Lumian kept an eye on the apartment, he read the corresponding content with growing interest.

"The future of humanity lies in the stars. The history of mankind was forged by the brave to explore.

"In this era of rapid technological progress, we lack civilization pioneers, visionaries with exceptional insight and foresight, and adventurers with courage. "Last time, we were trapped in the Berserk Sea.

This time, we're trapped within the atmosphere. However, human civilization and technology will undoubtedly overcome all obstacles and dangers to forge a true future. "We seek to collaborate with all dreamers to construct a space bridge that will enable us to walk from the surface to the crimson moon. "Point of Contact: Bulle Patil. "Contact Method: 9th Rue Saint-Martin, 5th floor, Quartier 2."



The more Lumian read, the more amused he became. He found himself in deep contemplation.

As Cordu's Prankster King and one influenced by Aurore's eccentric ideas, he had never conceived such an outrageous, ludicrous, and absurd notion. Yet, these individuals had brazenly advertised it, as though certain they could fool a crowd.

Am I still underestimating the average human IQ? Lumian stroked his chin with his gloved left hand.

At that moment, he saw a group of people approaching the old apartment at 20 Rue des Blouses Blanches.

The leader was a distinguished-looking gentleman in a silk top hat and black suit. He had a chiseled profile, a mahogany-colored pipe in his mouth, and a diamond ring on his left hand that sparkled under the light. The burly men surrounding the gentleman appeared menacing. They wore either canvas shirts or dark jackets, giving off a gang-like vibe.

After they vanished into the apartment's entrance, Lumian walked over with the newspaper.

At the base of the stairs, he detected several colognes simultaneously. One was faint and familiar—the inferior cologne he had applied to Osta. The other was more aromatic, sweet, and slightly cloying. Musk cologne? From the man with the pipe? Lumian followed the scent all the way up to the apartment's fifth floor.

There, he saw Osta Trul. The imposter dressed as a warlock found himself encircled by the same group of individuals. The gentleman with the diamond ring tapped his forehead with his mahogany-colored pipe, smiling politely. “Don't think you can shake us off just because you've moved. Until you repay all the debt, I'll follow you endlessly, like a shadow.” Osta stammered fearfully, “I'll have money soon. I can return a portion to you tomorrow!”

“Very good,” the 'gentleman' nodded with a smile.

He then turned the pipe and jabbed Osta's face with the still-smoldering end.

Osta recoiled in pain but dared not make a sound.

The 'gentleman' withdrew his pipe and said gently, yet firmly, “This is a little interest. If you don't pay me back tomorrow, I'll take one of your fingers.”

With that, he placed his hand on his chest and bowed politely.

“See you tomorrow, my friend.” At the staircase, Lumian pursed his lips and muttered to himself, Are people and dogs learning from Gehrman now?

As Fors Wall's “The Adventurer” series gained popularity, Gehrman Sparrow impersonators cropped up across the Northern and Southern Continents. Phrases like “this is basic courtesy” and “a bestowment or a curse” spread far and wide.

As the group approached, Lumian lowered his head and stepped aside, acting like an ordinary tenant encountering gangsters.

Chaotic footsteps echoed as they descended floor by floor, soon giving way to silence. Lumian glanced in Osta Trul's direction, noting that he had already retreated to his room and closed the wooden door.

After some contemplation, Lumian flexed his gloved left hand and adjusted his hat. He walked out of the staircase and approached Osta's door.

Bang! Bang! Bang! He raised his hand and knocked on the door.

After a moment, Osta opened the door, his face a mix of shock and fear. He stammered shakily, "I really can't get that money until tomorrow..."

Before he could finish, Lumian's figure came sharply into focus in his eyes.

Lumian spread his arms and asked with a beaming smile, "Surprised?"

"You, you, you..." Osta backed away as if he'd seen a ghost.

Lumian followed him into the room and smiled at Osta Trul.

"I truly wish to forget the pain of the past, but I'm also a cautious person. I'm afraid of being swindled and, worse, being mocked as a fool."

## Chapter 117 Remuneration

Osta forced a smile.

"I'm not lying. There really is a Samaritan Women's Spring!"

"Is that so?" Lumian approached Osta with a grin and said, "When the time comes, take a sip first. If it's useful, you'll forget that I haven't paid you. If it's useless, why should I pay you?"

For a moment, Osta was at a loss for words. He could only smile and nod.

"Trust me, trust me..."

Suddenly, he looked past Lumian, his eyes widening in terror.

Lumian 'instinctively' turned to look at the door, but there was no one there.

Seizing the opportunity, Osta ducked and made a break for the open door.

Thud!

Osta tripped over Lumian's right foot, which had swiftly extended, and crashed to the ground. His nose bridge turned blue, and his gaunt face swelled.

Lumian slowly closed the door, pulled up a chair, and sat down. He looked down at Osta, who was feigning death on the floor, and said, "Don't tell me you have high spiritual perception and 'saw' a bizarre creature behind me. Did you rush to the door to help me deal with it?"

Osta was dumbstruck for a moment before rising to his feet and nodding repeatedly.

"That's right, that's right!"

Lumian smiled and glanced at the rectangular wooden table against the wall.

Silver dagger, white candles, a few small bottles filled with different liquids or empty, two imitation goatskins, and a paper box emitting the fragrance of plants were strewn across it.

He has a certain amount of mysticism knowledge... Lumian shifted his gaze back to the uneasy Osta and asked, "Who was that guy with the pipe just now?"

"Baron Brignais!" Osta replied hastily. "He's the leader of the Savoie Mob in the market district."

Savoie was the name of an inland province in the Intis Republic, bordering the provinces of Haut-Hornacis and Bas-Hornacis. It was rich in mineral resources and had a valiant folk culture.

"A baron? There are still barons?" Lumian asked, amused.

Ever since Emperor Roselle's death and the establishment of the Republic, aristocratic titles had vanished from daily life.

Osta said fearfully, "That's a nickname he gave himself. Perhaps his ancestors held such an aristocratic title."

Lumian leaned back in his chair and asked casually, "Why did he come to you? Do you owe them money?"

Seeing Lumian's harmless demeanor, as though he was chatting with a friend, Osta relaxed a little despite his fear.

He said bitterly, "In order to buy an item, borrowed 3,000 verl d'or from a loan shark.

Later, that man sold the debt to Brignais.

I "I paid back at least 3,000 verl d'or, but he told me there was still 2,000 in interest!"

"If you drag on for another two or three months, you won't owe 2,000, but 4,000."

Lumian watched Osta's expression crumble, the air of mystery gone.

He then lowered his voice and said in a beguiling tone, "If I were you, I'd find a way to draw Brignais and his crew into a quarry pit. Then, I'd bring down the stone layer above, burying them for eternity.

"No creditors, no debts."

The more Osta listened, the more panic-stricken he became. He stared at Lumian as if he were a demon.

He had a suspicion that Lumian had already plotted such a scheme, but with Osta Trul as the intended target, not Brignais!

"That's murder! A crime!" Osta exclaimed in terror.

"Keep it down. You wouldn't want to lose your voice permanently, would you?"

Lumian warned him with a smile. "So you do realize that's a crime? Did anyone ever tell you that fraud is a crime too?"

Osta was at a loss for words.

Lumian stood up and dusted off his gloves.

“I'm just kidding. I was testing your character.”

“What?” Osta was baffled.

Lumian wouldn't reveal that his true motive was to establish an ice-cold, ruthless persona in Osta's mind. It would come in handy during future “negotiations.”

Forced trust was still trust! “Congratulations on passing my test. This proves you're not completely without scruples.” Lumian grinned and spread his arms.

He quickly steered the conversation back on course.

“What did you borrow so much money for?”

He glanced around, adding, “Doesn't seem like there's anything valuable here...”

Osta instinctively wanted to spout a lie but remembered Lumian's warning.

He trembled and said, “Do... do you know about potions?”

“You're really a Beyonder?” Lumian chuckled.

Seeing that Lumian knew about Beyonders and potions, Osta breathed a sigh of relief. He was glad he hadn't lied.

Any fabricated story would be riddled with holes in front of a true Beyonder, easily exposed. If caught, Osta might end up “sleeping forever” in some Underground Trier hideout tonight.

Taking two deep breaths, Osta continued, “A few months ago, I borrowed 3,000 verl d'or from a loan shark to purchase the main ingredient for a potion. Combined with the 4,000 verl d'or I'd saved, I successfully transformed from an ordinary person into a Beyonder.”

“Which Sequence do you belong to? You can't even handle a few thugs?” Lumian asked with feigned suspicion.

Osta looked defeated.

“I'm a Sequence 9 Secrets Suppliant.”

“It doesn't sound weak.” Lumian could only gauge by the potion's name.

Osta lamented in frustration, “I thought Secrets Suppliants were powerful too. The seller even claimed it would allow me to see the world's truth.

“In the end, aside from heightened spiritual perception, all I got was some impractical sacrificial knowledge and ritual magic. I can occasionally sense the presence of mysterious entities, scaring myself witless, but I can't even defeat a thug!”

“The ritual magic should come in handy,” Lumian remarked knowingly. Osta looked close to tears.

“I'm well-versed in mysticism. I'm a follower of the Eternal Blazing Sun. How can I pray to an unknown entity? That's too risky! “Sigh, there are some honorific names in the potion's knowledge, but they're all concealed entities. Just hearing them is terrifying. I wouldn't dare invoke depravity, true kin, or the gaze of fate!”

He glanced at Lumian and feigned determination.

“But I've considered it. If Baron Brignais and his goons corner me again, I'll pray to the hidden existence and gain strength!” He was ostensibly talking about Baron Brignais, but his true intent was to caution Lumian against forcing him into a corner. Lumian studied Osta's uneasy face and agreed, “That's a wise decision. Baron Brignais and his crew underestimate a Beyonder. If I were in their shoes, I wouldn't give you the chance to reach a dead end.”

He then smiled at Osta. “You'd be dead before that happens.” Osta opened his mouth but closed it again, his expression more pained than crying.

Lumian walked over to the wooden table and toyed with the empty bottles. “You've moved several times, but Baron Brignais keeps finding you. I suspect he or the Savoie Mob have Beyonders on their side.” Osta gasped in shock.

Lumian picked up the silver dagger from the table, twirling it as he said to Osta, “I can offer you 100 verl d'or as a reward.”

“Huh?” Osta was baffled once more. He realized he couldn't keep up with Lumian's thought process.

“You, you still want the spring water from the Samaritan Women's Spring?” he ventured. Lumian grinned and replied, “Tell me, does it really exist?”

Eyeing Lumian's amused gaze, Osta hesitated for a moment before admitting, “I'm not sure.” Lumian nodded in satisfaction.

“What I want is for you to take me to the gathering you mentioned, the one where you bought the potion's main ingredient. The reward is 100 verl d'or.”

Lumian made this request partly because Madam Magician's mission might be connected to the gathering involving Beyonder materials, and partly because he needed a similar event to acquire weapons, materials, Sealed Artifacts, and arcane knowledge.

Osta swallowed hard.

“I-I can try, but I'll need the gathering organizer's approval.”

“No problem.” Lumian took out a gold coin and beckoned Osta over. “This Louis d'or is your reward for asking. I'll give you the remaining 80 verl d'or when I can attend the gathering.” Osta hadn't anticipated that his beating would turn into a job offer. He was momentarily dumbstruck.

After a few seconds, he cautiously approached the wooden table and took the 20 verl Louis d'or. He told Lumian, "I'm not sure when I'll get an answer, but no later than next Wednesday. I spend the day near the catacombs and sleep here at night. You can find me anytime."

Lumian nodded, smiling as he raised the silver dagger in his hand and plunged it into Osta's shoulder.

Blood spurted out, and Osta staggered back in terror. He leaned against the wall and cried out anxiously, "Don't kill me! I'm not lying!" Lumian picked up a glass bottle from the wooden table and approached Osta with a smile.

"Don't worry. If I wanted you dead, I would've done it by now.

"This is called a blood oath. I'm very wary of deception and betrayal."

As Lumian spoke, he held the empty glass bottle to Osta's wound, allowing the blood to trickle in. During this process, he smiled at Osta and said, "You have a strong grasp of mysticism. You should know what blood means in the hands of others. Don't lie to me."

"Curse..." For a moment, Osta couldn't decide whether to rejoice that he hadn't been killed on the spot or despair that his blood now belonged to a man more dangerous than Baron Brignais. Lumian said nothing more. He tightened the bottle cap, tore a strip of cloth from the room, and tossed it to Osta.

"Bandage your wound yourself."

He wasn't familiar with any Beyonder curses, but he could test if expired blood could activate Fallen Mercury's fate-exchanging ability. Even if it didn't work, all he needed to do was convince Osta that he knew how to cast curses. Lumian glanced at Osta, who was desperately trying to staunch the bleeding, and casually asked, "What's your plan for dealing with Baron Brignais?"

"With this Louis d'or and some money I've saved, I should be able to appease them for a week," Osta said with a bitter smile. "They won't get a single coppet if they push their debtors to death."

## Chapter 118 Summoning

Lumian nodded, asking, "You mentioned that your spiritual perception is quite advanced?"

Osta briefly fell into a trance before a lingering fear spread across his face.

He took a moment to compose himself, then said, "That seems to be a trait of the Secrets Suppliant. I can sense hidden creatures lurking in the dark depths, and I can also feel the real world wrapped in a thick veil. Beyond that veil, emotionless eyes watch us..."

As he finished, Osta panted heavily. Lumian patiently waited for the impostor warlock to catch his breath. Nearly a minute later, Osta exhaled, saying, "In the market district and Quartier de l'Observatoire, it's fine, but in Underground Trier, I can often sense the end of certain paths. In places I can't see, some creature beckons me to come closer.

"I wonder what would happen to me if I truly stepped into that darkness.

A fine mystical sensor indeed... Lumian silently mocked his Hunter's Spirit Vision while also feeling that a Secrets Suppliant wasn't as useless as Osta claimed.

Osta continued, "Sometimes, when I see tourists entering the catacombs with white candles, I get these delusions. I think it's a ritual that forms a magical bond with some hidden entity, protecting the tourists from being devoured by the darkness or spirited away by the dead."

Lumian was taken aback, inwardly sighing.

In terms of mysticism, a Secrets Suppliant is quite potent... It's just that they're not skilled in combat...

From Osta's account, Lumian suspected that carrying a lit white candle into the catacombs was indeed a ritual that allowed visitors to evade the hidden perils there.

The tomb administrators likely knew this, but in pursuit of profit, they not only kept silent but also encouraged higher-ups to promote the catacombs as a tourist attraction.

Lumian remembered his sister Aurore's frequent lament: "Money changes people."

I wonder, at a lower level, which one can bring about a person's change more effectively: potions, boons, or money... Lumian muttered silently with a teasing attitude.

He then asked Osta, "Have you sensed any danger lurking in the market district's darkness?"

Osta's face shifted as he replied in a grave tone, "I dare not approach the burned-out house in Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman."

At the edge of Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman, near Rue des Blouses Blanches, stood a scorched, uninhabited house. The district's Members of Parliament had long demanded its demolition and conversion into a commercial building, but for some reason, the proposal never reached City Hall's agenda. Even after a decade, the six-story eyesore still stood.

I didn't feel anything when I passed by this morning... Lumian turned and headed for the door.

"I'll visit you again. I hope you won't disappoint me."

Osta, his shoulder wound now bandaged, flashed an ingratiating smile.

"Rest assured, I'll provide you with an answer."

After leaving Osta's room, Lumian suddenly quickened his pace. In a blink, he crouched in the shadows of the stairs leading to the rooftop, silently eyeing the tightly shut wooden door.

Nearly half an hour later, having confirmed that nothing was amiss, he slowly descended the stairs with Le Petit Trierien.

It was then that he finally heard his stomach growl.

Gazing at the makeshift barricade of rocks, logs, mud slabs, and assorted items with a narrow opening as a passage, Lumian spotted a nearby bakery and spent three licks to buy half a kilogram of croissants.

He also sampled Trier's distinctive fruit juice soda.

The effervescent liquid swirled as the currant syrup dispersed like clouds within it. The concoction set him back 13 coppers.

If he returned the soda bottle, he could reclaim 3 coppers.

Rue Anarchie, Auberge du Coq Doré.

Before Lumian could enter the basement bar, the noise and chaos reached his ears.

Just past nine o'clock, nearly twenty people packed the intimate space. They either sat at the bar or huddled around a few small round tables, their attention riveted on the bartender. The stylish, ponytailed bartender explained the contraption on the bar to an unfamiliar male patron.

“This is called the Idiot Instrument. It tests your intelligence.

“Care to give it a shot?”

The man in the dark jacket seemed intrigued and asked, “How do I try?”

The bartender gestured at the exposed rubber tube with a solemn expression.

“Blow here until bubbles form in the glass jar above.

“Your ability to produce bubbles and their size determine the final test results.”

Without hesitation, the man picked up the rubber hose and blew into it.

As light-green bubbles emerged from the glass jar atop the machine, everyone in the bar leaped to their feet, applauding wildly and exclaiming, “Welcome, idiot!” The man looked bewildered for a moment before grasping the joke. His face flushed crimson.

He shot a fierce glare at the bartender and the rowdy patrons before stifling his anger and muttering, “Interesting. This prank is really something. I'll bring a few friends to try it tomorrow.”

Is this what friends are for? Lumian sneered inwardly. He pulled a barstool over and sat down, telling the bartender, “Give me the usual a glass of fennel absinthe.”

The bartender grinned. “This one's on me.

Your machine's fantastic. Word of its mystical powers has spread, and people have come specifically to check it out. My business has doubled since then.

“By the way, I'm Pavard Neeson, the owner of this bar and an amateur painter. What should I call you?”

“Ciel,” Lumian replied, his smile unwavering.

He noticed the difference between Trieriens and the villagers of Cordu.

In Cordu, anyone who fell victim to such a prank would seek revenge. But Trieriens enjoyed finding new “victims” and watching them get caught, easing their own embarrassment.

“You've got a keen brain. You're better at pranks than many Trieriens.” To the native bartender, Pavard Neeson, this compliment was high praise.



He slid a slender glass filled with a light green, hallucinogenic liquid toward Lumian. Taking a sip of the absinthe, Lumian savored the faint bitterness that stirred his senses and made him feel alive.

He closed his eyes, soaking in the sensation before asking, "I have a few friends who arrived in Trier before me, but I don't have their contact information. Is there a way to find them?"

Pavard Neeson wiped a glass.

"If you're wealthy, advertise with the Journal de Trier. If you're not, hire a bounty hunter or information broker to see if they'll take the job. If you're broke, go back to your room and sleep. Maybe one day, you'll bump into your friends on the street."

"Any recommendations? A reliable bounty hunter or information broker?" Lumian wasn't short on cash for now and might receive a 'donation' from a generous benefactor at any moment, but advertising in newspapers was beyond his means. It'd cost at least 3,000 verl d'or. Smaller publications might be cheaper, but they were ineffective.

Moreover, he couldn't risk alarming Guillaume Bénét and Madame Pualis if they read the papers. Pavard nodded, saying, "Anthony Reid lives in Room 5 on the hotel's third floor. You can pay him a visit tomorrow.

"He's a retired military man turned information broker. Highly trustworthy." Lumian took note of the room number and name. He lifted the absinthe, swirling it gently before raising his glass to honor the bartender.

Upon returning to Room 207, Lumian didn't waste any time resting.

He drew the tattered curtains and performed the Summoning Dance in the cramped space. His goal was to see what strange creatures he could attract in Auberge du Coq Doré and Rue Anarchie, preparing for potential future attacks, pursuits, or ambushes.

wasn't According to Osta, aside from the burned-out building, there were no particularly dangerous locations in the market district. Moreover, it was quite a distance from Rue Anarchie, making it unlikely for it to be affected by a Sequence 9 equivalent-Dancer. After all, this the ruins of Cordu Village, where the power of inevitability was pervasive. Disregarding the more dangerous ones and those that Dancers couldn't attract, Lumian believed that even if the strange creatures that appeared later were stronger than him, it would be nearly impossible for them to force themselves on him. The bluish-black symbol representing the great existence and the black thorn pattern from inevitability would be enough to deter them from acting recklessly. In a dance that alternated between madness and distortion, Lumian's spirituality merged with the stirred power of nature, stealthily spreading in all directions.

Before long, he sensed watchful eyes upon him. Several translucent, blurry figures floated around the room.

Some resembled humans, seemingly residual obsessions lingering after death. Others were grotesque, appearing like bottles or stacked meatballs, possibly originating from the corresponding spirit world.

Lumian didn't recognize any of them and couldn't determine their traits or abilities.

At that moment, a figure emerged from the tattered curtains.

Slightly translucent, it was a woman with long turquoise hair interwoven with green leaves that enveloped its body and concealed vital areas. The rest of its fair, smooth skin was exposed, setting one's heart racing and imagination ablaze.

With emerald-green eyes, red lips, and an exquisite, alluring face, a single glance at Lumian stirred an inexplicable excitement within him.

## Chapter 119 Strange Creature

Almost simultaneously, Lumian felt his hair stand on end as a chill ran down his spine. He experienced a strong sense of impending danger.

Subconsciously, he pulled out Fallen Mercury from his waist, ready to rip off the black cloth wrapped around it at a moment's notice.

The translucent figure with turquoise hair and leafy coverings floated in midair, scrutinizing Lumian in the room. Its emerald-green eyes shifted between a misty and smiling expression, reminiscent of a deep vortex enticing the human soul to sink into it.

On one hand, Lumian experienced a familiar yet foreign urge that swept through his mind, disrupting most of his thoughts. On the other hand, he couldn't help but feel fear, akin to a flying insect encountering a spider spinning its web.

He slowed down his dance, prepared to stop at any moment.

The translucent female figure displayed an eager expression, but it instinctively sensed that something was amiss and hesitated to approach Lumian.

Sometimes it leaned forward, sometimes it retreated into the curtains, but ultimately, it did nothing.

After Lumian finished his Summoning Dance, he heard a faint sound in his ears. It was so close it seemed like it was right next door, causing the strange creatures lingering in the room to vanish one by one.

The last to leave was the female figure with turquoise hair and leafy coverings. It appeared both reluctant and perplexed.

Lumian heaved a sigh of relief and closed his eyes, quietly listening to the indistinct voices within him.

He couldn't make out a single word but yearned to hear each one clearly.

After a moment, Lumian opened his eyes and gazed at the window obscured by the tattered curtain. He muttered to himself, What was that?

His intuition told him that the translucent female figure was far more powerful than the other summoned strange creatures. It wasn't something Beyonders at his level could handle.

If not for the corruption sealed within his body and the bluish-black pattern on his chest deterring spiritual creatures from subconsciously approaching him even without activation, Lumian suspected something might have happened to him.

This piqued his curiosity.

How do other Dancers survive?

He had only dared to perform the Summoning Dance after confirming the area wasn't too dangerous, yet something nearly happened. How could other Dancers avoid such risks?

Is it because I obtained my boon through theft and lack some mystical knowledge, or is it because other Dancers can only attract strange creatures similar to themselves? Additionally, the Summoning Dance comes from a hidden existence, so there shouldn't be any problems under normal circumstances? Lumian pondered for a moment. The more he thought about it, the more he felt he was the anomaly.

He believed that the corruption in his body was on an extremely high level. Even sealed, it could occasionally attract strange and perilous entities.

Thankfully, the corruption also provides protection... Lumian exhaled, stowed away Fallen Mercury, and lit the iron-black carbide lamp. He sat at the wooden table and flipped through Aurore's notebook.

Reading the mysticism notebook from back to front was excruciating. Lacking the corresponding knowledge, he would occasionally feel illiterate. He had no choice but to take out Aurore's earliest notebook and memorize the corresponding symbols' symbolism and mystical meaning.

However, Lumian couldn't sit down and learn bit by bit from front to back. He believed that if Aurore's witchcraft notebook truly concealed crucial information, it would definitely be in the content from the past year or two when abnormalities gradually appeared in Cordu Village and the shepherds began their "hunt."

After nearly two hours of struggling with the knowledge known as Lightning, Lumian admitted defeat and decided to continue the next night.

He washed up briefly and lay on the bed.

Recalling the strange creature he had just summoned, Lumian placed Fallen Mercury beside the pillow, feeling apprehensive.

Before leaving Cordu, he had inspected the wicked pewter-black dirk and confirmed that the fate it had exchanged from the flaming monster was "pain from immolation." The darkness gradually deepened, but Rue Anarchie never experienced a moment of peace. Singing, shouting, cursing, fighting, chasing, coughing, crying, and exercising filled the air, composing a nocturnal symphony. Lumian had grown accustomed to the noise, which even made him feel alive. Unknowingly, he drifted off to sleep.

At 6 a.m., the distant cathedral chimed, reminiscent of Cordu.

Lumian woke up punctually but was reluctant to open his eyes.

After a few minutes, he sat up and fastened Fallen Mercury to his waist.

His dreams had been chaotic throughout the night, but nothing out of the ordinary occurred. “Am I overthinking it?” Lumian muttered.

He opened the door and walked into the nearest washroom. Using the morning light streaming through the window, he examined himself in the mirror.

Compared to the same moment the day before, he hadn't changed at all.

The color and length of his hair were external factors and wouldn't reset with his physical condition.

Lumian bent down and brushed his teeth.

As he rinsed his mouth, he caught sight of Charlie entering from the corner of his eye. “Don't you live on the fifth floor?” Lumian spat out the liquid and turned to ask Charlie. Charlie had changed into a yellowed white shirt with the cuffs rolled up to his elbows. He yawned and said, “Can you believe it? Those guys are already up before six. The washroom on the fifth floor is packed!” He then grinned.

“I still like this washroom on the second floor the most. Do you know why? It's clean! “Although that bastard Laurent has very high eyebrows and doesn't know how to help his mother at all, he has his strengths. He loves cleanliness. As long as he's in the apartment, he cleans the room every day and takes care of the washroom too. Haha, could it be that he can't use the toilet if it's dirty?” So he's the one cleaning... Lumian was surprised.

His impression of the young man named Laurent had been that he was cold, haughty, and impeccably dressed. He clearly thought highly of himself and seemed oblivious to his mother's plight. He didn't strike Lumian as someone who'd clean a bathroom. Previously, Lumian had assumed that the other tenants on the second floor had grown fed up with the landlord's penny-pinching ways and had taken it upon themselves to clean their shared spaces. Noticing Charlie's haggard face, as though he'd been up all night, Lumian grinned and asked, you hit up Rue de la Muraille last night?”

“Did Rue de la Muraille was Trier's infamous red-light district. “How can I afford to go to Rue de la Muraille?

But I'll definitely go there one of these days!” Charlie clenched his teeth and continued, “I got back to the hotel at 10 p.m. last night. Then I went to the underground bar and drank with the guys till midnight. In the wee hours, I even had a... shall we say, quite a vivid dream. Ciel, our names sound the same, but they're spelled differently. Can you imagine how ecstatic I was in that dream? And when I woke up, how crushed and how... uh, uh...”

“Empty?” Lumian supplied the adjective.

“Yes, yes, yes!” Charlie walked to the toilet and unfastened his belt.

His already narrow eyes crinkled with satisfaction.

Lumian pinched his nose and scoffed. “You had a wet dream?”

Charlie shivered, shook his right hand, and laughed.

“It was the most lifelike dream I've ever had.

The woman in it was far more beautiful than any on Rue de la Muraille. She was so tender and passionate. I never wanted to wake up.”

“Well, clearly you couldn't hold out for too long. Waking up was a mercy,” Lumian jested. Charlie didn't bother to argue, and instead said earnestly, “I'm planning to head to Rue du Rossignol on Sundays after I get paid and when I'm off work. There are a few dance halls there with some affordable pussies. A coworker told me that I only need 52 coppet to treat myself. “But right now, I've lost interest.” Suddenly, Charlie's excitement surged. Lowering his voice, he confided in Lumian, “You know what? A wealthy guest at the hotel has been treating me really well, asking me to deliver food and help tidy up the room.”

“A man?” Lumian inquired with a hint of mischief. Charlie hurriedly shook his head. “No, it's a lady. I think she's taken a liking to me. I'm torn. If she makes a proposal, should I compromise my principles? You know these sorts of things are pretty common in Trier. If my ticket to my first big payday, I could soon own my own hotel.”

she's “I figured you wouldn't hesitate.” Though they'd only known each other for two days, Lumian was convinced that Charlie's moral compass was quite flexible.

Charlie sighed, visibly troubled, and admitted, “She's in her fifties.”

Lumian let out a long “oh” and his expression conveyed his thoughts.

Bidding Charlie goodbye, Lumian returned to his room to change into a jacket, pants, and other attire suited for Rue Anarchie. He spent 6 coppet on a scallion pancake and 1 lick on half a liter of Apple Whiskey Sour. Settling into a corner of the street, he leisurely ate his breakfast.

Shadows from the buildings on either side cloaked him as he relished the flavors of onions and flour, observing the hawkers, women shopping for groceries, hustling workers, children scavenging for trash, and a barricade in a nearby alley.

It was 9 a.m. when Lumian finally rose, dusted himself off, and returned to Auberge du Coq Doré. He climbed to the third floor and knocked on Room 5's door. The information broker, Anthony Reid, resided here.

After a sequence of knocks, a composed male voice with a West Midlands accent “Please come in.” Lumian turned the handle and pushed the door open. The first thing that hit him was a faintly acrid, minty odor, likely meant to repel insects.

Then, he saw a man in his forties seated by the bed.

The man wore a military-green shirt, matching pants, and laceless leather boots. His hair was cropped to a fine buzz cut.

He didn't possess the tidy, efficient air of a veteran. His light yellow hairline had receded considerably, leaving a vast expanse of forehead. His face had grown plump, his beard meticulously shaven. His skin was slightly oily and his nose pores clogged. He appeared somewhat guileless and

unsophisticated. As Anthony Reid turned to face Lumian, his dark brown eyes mirrored Lumian's figure. For some reason, Lumian suddenly felt a twinge of unease.

## Chapter 120 Lunatic's Ravings

Anthony Reid regarded Lumian coolly and inquired, "What's the problem?"

"I heard from Pavard that you're a reliable information broker." Lumian quickly disclosed his source to avoid wasting time on mutual probing.

With his plump face, Anthony Reid nodded knowingly and gestured towards a chair at the center of the room.

"What information do you need? Or rather, what information would you like me to uncover?"

Lumian felt a twinge of unease as he faced Anthony Reid, who exuded an air of honesty and dependability. He took a seat and stated succinctly, "I'm searching for two individuals."

"Names, appearances, and distinguishing features." Anthony Reid shot a glance at Lumian's left hip.

Lumian reflected for a moment before answering, "One is Guillaume Bénet, formerly a padre of the Eternal Blazing Sun Church. The other is Pualis de Roquefort. Over a month ago, she arrived in Trier with her husband, Béost, their butler Louis Lund, and her lady's maid, Cathy.

"I don't have any pictures of them. All I can tell you is that Guillaume Bénet has short black hair and blue eyes. He possesses a solemn demeanor and strong ambitions. His most notable feature is his aquiline nose. Pualis has long, brown hair and bright brown eyes. Her eyebrows are lighter and thinner, and she exudes an elegant yet alluring aura..."

Anthony Reid listened intently before rising from his chair. He crossed the room to a wooden table near the window, opened a drawer, and retrieved a stack of white paper and a sharpened pencil.

In no time, he sketched two portraits.

"See if these resemble them." Anthony Reid handed the sketches to Lumian.

Lumian inspected the drawings and was struck by their vivid, lifelike quality. Aside from the absence of color, they were nearly indistinguishable from photographs.

He looked up at Anthony Reid in astonishment, remarking, "Uncanny. How can you reproduce their likeness so accurately based on my brief description?"

He had assumed Anthony Reid would draft several sketches for him to review before finalizing the portraits.

Anthony Reid cracked a rare smile.

"I recreated the images from the official wanted posters.

“The authorities are searching for them as well.”

No wonder... Suddenly, it all made sense to Lumian.

Both Padre Guillaume Bénét and Madame Pualis were devotees of evil gods who had been granted boons. Once Ryan and his companions reported the situation, it was bound to attract the necessary attention!

With this realization, Lumian's disquiet grew.

I must be wanted too... Did Anthony Reid see my portrait? Does he recognize me? Trying to maintain his composure, Lumian queried the information broker, “I'm not surprised. I want to know the value of their bounties.”

“Guillaume Bénét has a bounty of 20,000 verl d'or. Each piece of information is worth 500 verl d'or. The same goes for Pualis,” Anthony Reid replied nonchalantly.

Lumian smirked. “If you uncover any useful information, you can cash in on the bounty twice.”

He was implying that Anthony could claim one share from the authorities and another from him.

Anthony nodded in agreement.

“I'll take your assignment. 500 verl d'or, with 100 upfront.

“These are my terms. If you can't accept them, find another information broker or bounty hunter.”

Lumian knew there was no room for negotiation. He could only nod slightly and concede, “No problem.”

Just as he was about to hand over the money, a gunshot suddenly erupted from outside the window.

Anthony Reid's entire body shuddered as if confronted with his mortal nemesis. He instinctively ducked beneath the wooden table for cover.

Lumian was taken aback.

Wasn't this reaction a bit extreme? Wasn't this typical of life in Rue Anarchie?

Gunshots, brawls, and large-scale skirmishes were commonplace here. Those who lived in this area should have adapted by now, only needing to steer clear of the windows to avoid stray bullets.

Before long, the commotion died down. Anthony Reid took a few seconds to regain his composure before emerging from under the table.

He offered Lumian a sheepish grin and explained, “I apologize. A few years back during the war, I suffered from post-traumatic stress on the battlefield and had no choice but to retire and return to Trier.”

Then why choose to live in Rue Anarchie, where gunfire was a regular occurrence? Lumian didn't press further. He had no interest in Anthony Reid's psychological issues. He withdrew a 50-verl d'or note and gently traced his finger over the image of Levanx, the bustling commercial streets, and the silhouettes of passing merchants.

Feeling the remaining texture, Lumian handed the grayish-blue banknote, two Louis d'or, and two five-verl coins engraved with the Sunbird to Anthony Reid.

His wallet felt a third lighter, and he couldn't shake the sense of money slipping through his fingers.

As he examined the Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman behind the banknotes, Anthony Reid bent his finger and flicked the surface to verify its authenticity under the sunlight. Satisfied, he pocketed the money and inquired, "Do you want to check in with me periodically for updates, or should I have an address? If I come across any information, I can drop it off at your place."

"I'm in room 207." Lumian knew he couldn't conceal his stay at the Auberge du Coq Doré from Anthony Reid, so he provided his room number.

Upon leaving Room 305, Lumian's expression grew increasingly solemn as he muttered to himself, I need to be extra cautious in the coming days to prevent Anthony Reid from betraying me... Perhaps I should find an opportunity to demonstrate my strength in front of him, convincing him that I won't let any transgressions go unpunished.

As Lumian mulled over his thoughts, he made his way towards the stairs. Suddenly, he heard someone exclaiming, laughing, and sobbing, "I'm dying, I'm dying!"

Lumian glanced in the direction of the voice and spotted a man squatting by the door of Room 310.

The man wore a filthy linen shirt and yellow pants. His unkempt black hair cascaded down to his shoulders.

At that moment, he clutched his head with both hands and stared at the ground, repeatedly muttering, "I'm dying, I'm dying!"

His voice oscillated between fear and insanity.

The occasionally lucid madman that Charlie mentioned? Lumian sized him up for a few seconds, leaned in, and asked curiously, "Why do you think you're about to die? Do you have a terminal illness?"

Without raising his head, the man continued to yell, "I'm dying, I'm dying!" Lumian smirked and strode past him into Room 310, its wooden door flung wide open.

The room's layout mirrored his own in 207. It was relatively tidy, save for the inevitable bugs that couldn't be evicted.

Lumian's gaze swept over the kerosene lamp, a multitude of books, fountain pens, suitcases, and other belongings. The madman stood up and declared in a daze, "This is my territory."

"I know," Lumian replied with a grin. "But if you're about to die and you don't have any children or relatives, why not use your inheritance to help poor neighbors like us?"

He observed that the madman was only in his late twenties. His bushy, black beard had been left unshaven for who knows how long, causing his blue eyes to appear as if they were buried deep within a forest.



The madman stared blankly for a few moments before clutching his hair and screaming in anguish, “They're all dead. They're all dead! I saw the Montsouris ghost. They're all dead. I'm about to die too!”

The Montsouris ghost? Lumian finally heard something distinct from the madman.

He had deliberately provoked the other man to see if he could elicit a different reaction. The positive feedback made him feel as if he were making progress with digesting the potion.

One of the acting principles of a Provoker is that provocation is only a means and not an end? Lumian studied the madman thoughtfully and inquired, “Why would the Montsouris ghost cause them to die and push you to death's door?”

The madman lowered his head and mumbled, “Anyone who sees the Montsouris ghost will die. Their family will die too. They'll die within a year!”

Is this the madman's delusion, or did something like this actually happen? If so, was it a curse? Lumian prodded, “Where did you encounter the Montsouris ghost?”

“Underground, underground! It's beneath the market district!” The madman crouched down again, his back pressed against the wall as he hugged his trembling body. The underworld beneath the market district? Couldn't he just report it to the two Churches and have them send people to eradicate the unclean beings? Lumian mused silently. Seeing that the madman had reverted to his “I'm dying, I'm dying” state, he abandoned his pursuit of the matter, exited Room 310, and descended the stairs.

Tomorrow was Sunday. Lumian planned to visit the Mason café in Quartier du Jardin Botanique at noon to familiarize himself with the area. In the afternoon, he'd head to the underground cemetery to see if Osta had received a “reply” from the gathering's organizer.

The alleys around Rue Anarchie were cluttered with obstacles made of rocks, wood, branches, and assorted debris. Even on the main road, one could stumble upon them from time to time. However, there was already a path wide enough for two carriages to pass through. These were called street barricades, and they could be found in many districts. Some bore the marks of smoke and fire, while others still had remnants of dried blood. They were a unique feature of Trier, contrasting starkly with the pedestrian streets of the arcade.

Lumian stepped over a low point at the edge of emerged from the dim alley, and a barricade, entered the street.

He then made his way towards the public carriage sign, intending to take such transportation to Quartier du Jardin Botanique. As he walked, Lumian spotted numerous vagrants lying in corners, basking in the sun and picking at lice. All were filthy, gaunt, and devoid of energy. This brought back memories of his own days as a vagrant.

Unlike the Loen Kingdom, which prohibited vagrants from sleeping on streets and in parks, the Intis Republic had no such rules in place.

However, they were forbidden from entering fee-paying establishments or private venues. They often mocked Loen for its lack of culture.

Lost in thought, Lumian's eyes narrowed.

He sensed someone was tailing him!