

Inevitability 151

Chapter 151 Temptation

Termiboros' thunderous voice resonated in Lumian's mind.

“Yes.”

A snort of laughter broke free from Lumian.

His words oozed sarcasm as he retorted, “So, Aurore and the entire village were snuffed out just so you could set foot on this soil?”

“Why the hell should I help you shatter your shackles? If you morphed into an Angel with a boon, I could've swiped your abilities over and over with the ritual I just performed, under the watchful eyes of the mighty existence. Until, of course, I too bask in the angelic status of the Inevitability pathway. Then, I could breathe life back into Aurore and restore everyone to the pre-Cordu destruction era. How pathetic would you look then?”

“If you hold the right Beyonder characteristic, I can bide my time until I ascend as an Angel of the Hunter pathway, seizing power on par with your Inevitability skills. Once my army is vast enough, I'll free you, crush you, subjugate you, and make you resurrect Aurore. Hell, I might be able to pull it off myself. I'll subject you to an eternity of torment till the end of time.”

“I never had the hots for the Inevitability pathway's boon, but now that I know the ritual was meant for your descent, I'm salivating at the thought of siphoning off all your might and pride.”

The more Lumian rambled, the higher his adrenaline spiked. His Provoker potion seemed to digest a notch.

Termiboros' voice was eerily steady, unfazed by Lumian's rant.

“I've encountered my fair share of Beyonders in the cosmos, and I've seen legions of races graced by the Lord's touch. Most of them can't cross the threshold into divinity because that one extra step would obliterate their physical and mental existence.”

“The quest for godhood is rife with peril. Are you so sure you can truly evolve into an Angel?”

“You should be aware that we're not talking about slim odds here. Saying it's a one-in-million or one-in-ten-million chance doesn't even begin to capture the enormous task of ascending to the Angel level.”

“If you perish on the Beyonder path, Aurore Lee will follow suit. The seal binding you will naturally dissolve, freeing me from my predicament.”

Lumian threw his head back and laughed.

His laughter bounced off the quarry's cavernous walls, heightening the eerie quiet and heaviness underground.

“So, why aren't you sitting tight, waiting for me to kick the bucket?” Lumian picked up the carbide lamp and strode out of the quarry cave. A cryptic smile played on his lips. “I don't give a damn what you're plotting or what your endgame is. I couldn't care less whether you're a saint or a sinner. All I know is that Aurore and everyone in Cordu Village are dead because of you.”

He paused for a beat, his face contorted into a maniacal grin.

“Someone's gotta pay the piper for this. Guillaume Bénet, you, and even your so-called lord!”

Termiboros fell silent. The booming voice that had filled Lumian's mind, heart, bloodstream, bone marrow, and cavities disappeared entirely.

Phew... Lumian heaved a sigh, clutching the carbide lamp as he navigated the pitch-black underground.

Despite the conversation's brevity, it had drained him.

In Lumian's previous world-view, corruption was merely that—corruption. At its extreme, it was comparable to power granted by an evil god. The concept of an Angel being shackled within him was beyond his wildest dreams!

Amidst the wreckage of Cordu Village, atop the crimson-hued mountain, stood the body of a three-headed, six-armed behemoth—a vessel designed for an incoming Angel. It was a mystery how much it deviated from a bona fide Angel, but it already filled Lumian with a sense of invincibility.

Had he not remembered their vile deeds, he might have been swayed to give it a shot.

From where he stood, pledging allegiance to the Eternal Blazing Sun and the God of Steam and Machinery seemed no different than submitting to the hidden existence known as Inevitability. At worst, he'd lose himself.

Regaining his composure, Lumian's senses suddenly tingled. He darted into a side alcove, using loose gravel to snuff out the carbide lamp.

Moments later, the hurried footfalls of three people echoed from the adjacent tunnel, soon swallowed by the inky darkness.

Underground Trier is a hive of activity too... Lumian bided his time for a couple of minutes before digging out the carbide lamp and rejoining the upward path.

The interruption allowed him to collect his thoughts and consider a conundrum.

Given that the corruption inside him was a living entity, the Angel of the Inevitability domain, Termiboros, why had his plea for a boon been successful?

Termiboros wasn't just raw power lacking consciousness, responding automatically to the "correct" ritual. He could deny granting the boon.

Could it be that His imprisonment is so severe that He can't even choose to resist the ritual? The thought made Lumian realize why Termiboros was so desperate to flee.

According to Madam Magician, with every boon He granted, Termiboros would weaken marginally, and the corresponding corruption would dwindle.

Simultaneously, the seal imposed by the great existence wouldn't slacken. As Termiboros's power faded, He would be shackled to the brink of extinction. Eventually, even His consciousness might be expunged.

Lumian steadied himself and began to replay Termiboros's utterances.

Great Old Ones, Above the Sequences, he'd said Great Old Ones and Above the Sequences... Lumian's head pounded, as if something was attempting to burrow out of his skull, the instant he dredged up these topics.

He stopped his recollection abruptly and murmured to himself, a residual sense of dread lingering, Merely possessing certain knowledge can inflict serious harm? Had I not been safeguarded by the seal of the great existence, would I be dead or afflicted with abnormalities?

I was contemplating exploiting Termiboros's desperation to escape, to bleed Him dry by compelling Him to respond to the ritual magic, thereby boosting the likelihood of success and the eventual impact. But it seems the Angel has plenty of tricks up His sleeve to screw me over, even in His imprisoned state...

I need to tread carefully. Before I really tap into Termiboros, I must have Madam Magician verify my plan for any flaws.

On this front, Lumian doubted that the vice president of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society, Hela, would offer any viable advice. Only Madam Magician, who could effortlessly slip in and out of the time loop and easily tackle the colossus atop the crimson mountain, was worthy of his trust.

Lost in a whirlwind of thoughts, Lumian, lamp in hand, navigated his way back to the level marked by a street name, leveraging his honed Hunter's intuition and recollection.

He attempted to shout in a hushed tone, "Termiboros..."

No answer came.

Lumian intended to inquire whether the Angel, imprisoned within him, was aware of the events in Cordu. After a thoughtful examination, he concluded that Termiboros likely remained in the dark.

Termiboros had only materialized in Cordu at the ritual's culmination before being shackled. He was oblivious to the intricate details.

Phew... Lumian let out a sigh, surveying his present condition.

His Provoker potion had undergone further digestion. It was akin to encapsulating a fresh principle of action.

Could inciting a superior entity expedite the digestion of the Provoker potion? Ah yes, this is a high-ranking entity within the Inevitability domain. In a way, it's a tip of fate. It aligns somewhat with the principles I've deduced... Lumian mused with a chuckle.

Were it not for Termiboros's silence, he would have stirred Him up thrice daily, like clockwork meals!

Pondering over this, Lumian felt that goading an Angel to digest this morsel of a potion wasn't a worthy trade-off.

He hypothesized two reasons. First, Termiboros was sealed and presented a relatively low threat. Second, Termiboros hadn't genuinely been incited.

Shaking his head, Lumian curbed his thoughts, shelving matters whose solutions eluded him.

He retraced his steps to the subterranean Rue Anarchie and climbed the stone steps towards the surface.

Having snuffed out the carbide lamp and returned to Auberge du Coq Doré, Lumian instantly noticed Charlie perched on the steps outside.

Charlie puffed on a cigarette, gazing at the grayish-white sky with a somber countenance.

“What's up?” Lumian settled down next to Charlie.

Charlie heaved a sigh. “Miss Ethans has moved out.”

“Isn't that a good thing?” Lumian queried, his smile unwavering.

Charlie stammered, pausing for a few seconds before admitting, “Yes, it indeed is. Too many folks around here know her and her deeds. Sigh...”

Lumian clicked his tongue and rose, approaching the Whiskey Sour vendor and presenting 5 coppers worth of copper coins.

“Half a liter of Apple Whiskey Sour.”

The vendor responded with a grin, “Got it.”

He ended up pouring Lumian more than the requested volume of liquor.

Lumian's eyebrows quirked, but he refrained from questioning. He ambled back to Charlie, took a seat, and nonchalantly remarked, “Seems like the Whiskey Sour guy recognizes me?”

Charlie chuckled.

“He might be aware you're with the Savoie Gang. No, the Savoie Mob.”

Lumian sipped his Whiskey Sour, inquiring, “How'd he find out?”

Charlie cleared his throat.

“After breaking the news to Miss Ethans last night, I hit the underground bar for a drink and mentioned your induction into the Savoie Mob and your takeover of Auberge du Coq Doré.”

A vivid image flashed in Lumian's mind:

Charlie, beer in hand, clambering onto a small round table, flailing his stubby arms.

“Ladies and gentlemen, lend me your ears! You wouldn't believe the bombshell that dropped at the motel today! Ciel, our Room 207 resident, is now calling the shots for the Savoie Mob and has sent the Poison Spur Mob packing!”

With a drawn-out sigh, Lumian turned to Charlie and quipped, “You're just worried the police won't come knocking at my door, aren't you?”

Chapter 152 “Entrustment”

Charlie's bones shook as Lumian's words settled in his ears.

“S-so you're saying, you don't want word getting around about you joining the Savoie Mob?”

Charlie had seen the leaders of the Savoie Mob, Poison Spur Mob, and the rest; their names carried weight in the market district of Rue Anarchie. Yet, as notorious as they were, the law never seemed to touch them.

Lumian took a slow pull of his Whiskey Sour, his grin returning.

“That's fine. Just think twice before you speak, that's all.”

Even though Lumian had infiltrated the Savoie Mob, he was far from claiming the title of a leader. He hadn't been privy to the mob's deepest secrets, didn't have a crew of thugs at his disposal, and all he had to show for it was the rundown dump they called Auberge du Coq Dor.

So Lumian had his sights set on a fast-track to infamy, eager to climb the mob's ladder and fulfill Mr. K's mission.

A mission that involved gaining the trust and favor of Mr. K, and eventually finding a place in the organization behind him all to complete the task given by Madam Magician.

There is something off about the whole thing Lumian thought, his left hand stroking his chin.

Charlie, standing by his side, asked hesitantly, “What exactly should I keep quiet about?”

He had his hunches, but he didn't want to risk annoying the lawless Lumian by not covering all bases.

Lumian's smile didn't falter as he turned to Charlie.

“Avoid discussing anything tied to Susanna Mattise. That includes any mention of threats I made to her, or that time I posed as a lawyer to get into the police station to talk to you.”

He had meant to warn Charlie about this, but hadn't found the right moment.

“Got it.” Charlie visibly relaxed. “You know, I was thinking about telling the guys at the bar about the time we chased Wilson out of that motel”

Charlie's number one hobby was regaling the crowd with his exploits.

But Lumian's eyes turned stormy at his words.

His gut was telling him Charlie was about to walk into some minor trouble, but it wouldn't be anything life-threatening.

In theory, it has nothing to do with Susanna Mattise. If it did, it wouldn't be just trouble, it would be a disaster I suppose I can stop worrying about Susanna Mattise for a while, but how long is a while? Lumian mulled over the sense of bad luck.

He'd come to realize that unless someone was extremely unlucky or lucky, or if danger was about to strike, he needed to concentrate to perceive a person's general luck through his intuition.

It was unlike a Hunter's danger sense. It wasn't always activated passively.

Charlie's voice began to fade as he talked. He turned to Lumian and asked, “Why are you staring at me like that?”

He was half expecting Ciel to jump out with a prank.

Lumian sneered.

“You might want to swing by the nearest Eternal Blazing Sun cathedral and say a prayer. I have a feeling you're about to hit a rough patch.”

His tone mirrored that of Osta Trul, the conman.

“What kind of rough patch?” Charlie asked, his voice sharp.

Then it hit him. “How would you know?”

“I have a hunch,” Lumian replied, a smirk playing on his lips.

Of course, it's a joke Charlie let out a sigh of relief.

“I'm hoping your prediction's off, then.”

“On the contrary, I couldn't be more certain.” Lumian's words were rock solid.

Charlie squinted at him, suspicion etched on his face.

Lumian let out a low chuckle.

“And if I'm wrong, I'll give you a thrashing. That way, even if something bad does happen, that just proves me more right.”

“” Charlie was speechless.

Is that even allowed?

Regardless, this approach could come in handy for some practical jokes with some slight modification

Lumian was about to rise when he noticed a thin, mangy mutt creeping towards Auberge du Coq Dor from the shadowy street, eyeing the trash he'd tossed from the fruit vendor's cart.

The mutt moved with care, aware that many of the destitute locals would gladly turn him into dinner.

Just then, Lumian lunged forward, pressing the dog's neck to the ground.

Caught off guard, the mutt writhed helplessly, baring its teeth in a futile attempt to bite, but its head was immobile.

With his free hand, Lumian pulled out a small vial of tulip powder, emptying its contents into his pocket.

Then, he held the vial to the mutt's frothing mouth, collecting the saliva as the dog squirmed.

Soon, he had five milliliters. He released his grip and stood up.

The mutt, ready to snap at him, whimpered and scampered off, tail tucked between its legs, when Lumian shot it a menacing glance.

Charlie, who had been standing by, was flabbergasted.

A story he'd once heard came rushing back to him.

The protagonist in the tale would often describe the villain's cruelty with a line penned by best-selling author Aurore Lee: He would kick any dog that crossed his path!

Lumian downed the rest of his Whiskey Sour and made his way into the motel.

As he passed the front desk, the perpetually grumpy Madame Fels, forced a smile.

“Good morning, CielMonsieur Ciel.”

Lumian gave the plump Madame Fels a sideways glance and asked nonchalantly, “No sign of Monsieur Ive today either?”

Monsieur Ive, the owner of Auberge du Coq Dor, was known far and wide in Rue Anarchie for his penny-pinching ways.

As the new 'guardian' of Auberge du Coq Dor, Lumian figured he ought to have a word with Monsieur Ive, just to make sure he didn't run crying to the cops, afraid the Savoie Mob would shake him down for more cash.

Madame Fels pursed her lips.

“As stingy as he is, only paying for a weekly cleaning crew, he's a stickler for cleanliness and wouldn't be caught dead in the motel.”

“Who cleans his house?” Lumian asked, a hint of amusement in his voice.

“He's a widower. He and his two kids take care of it.” Madame Fels scoffed.

If she were the one with that kind of money and a motel to boot, she would hire someone to handle such chores. She'd just sit back and enjoy life.

Lumian nodded and chuckled.

Madame Fels replied, a hint of fear in her voice, "I visit him thrice a week to deliver the motel's earnings and various bills. I'll let him know you want to see him."

She mistook Lumian's words as a veiled threat to Monsieur Ive. If he didn't meet with the new guardian of Auberge du Coq Dor soon, his survival might be at stake.

Lumian didn't bother to clarify. He climbed the stairs to his room on the second floor. Under his pillow, he found Mr. K's finger and tucked it back into his pocket.

After dealing with the tulip powder, he planned to pick up some containers for the ingredients he needed to gather next. But then, a knock on the door interrupted his thoughts.

Lumian swung the door open, curiosity piqued he didn't recognize the footsteps.

In the doorway stood a man in his forties, clad in a dark jacket, worn-out brown trousers, and a grubby cotton hat. He offered a smile, asking, "Is this Monsieur Ciel?"

"Who else would it be? Madam?" Lumian retorted, his eyes taking in the man's appearance, expression, and body language.

His brown hair, though slightly greasy, was neatly combed. His dark-brown eyes held a hint of sycophancy, and his lips were creased with lines of practiced smiles. He had an affable air, but there was an unmistakable slickness about him.

"Yes, yes, yes," the man echoed Lumian's words.

Lumian's eyebrows twitched.

"And who might you be?"

"I'm Fitz from Room 401. Bankrupt businessman," the man introduced himself with a congenial smile.

Without waiting for Lumian to press further, he spilled his beans.

"I went belly up 'cause of a con that cost me 100,000 verl d'or. I've been traveling between Trier and Suhit for over a decade, saving up. Wanted to settle down, start a family, but then this swindler tricked me out of everything, promising a joint venture.

"If you help me recover that money, I'm willing to part with 30%, no, 50%!"

Lumian didn't invite Fitz into Room 207. Leaning against the doorframe, arms folded, he asked, "Why didn't you go after that money with Margot or Wilson before?"

It wasn't as if they required an upfront payment.

Fitz didn't beat around the bush.

"I did go to Margot. He agreed initially, but then one day, he just said it wasn't possible to recover the money."

Even the Poison Spur Mob couldn't retrieve it? Was the con man bankrupt or backed by someone who made the Poison Spur Mob tread lightly? Lumian, who had been only half-interested till now, leaned in. "Did Margot say why?"

Fitz shook his head. "No, but it's certainly not because Timmons is broke. His dance hall in Quartier de l'Observatoire is printing money!"

Timmons Lumian suspected the con man had either powerful backing or was shielded by a high-ranking figure, which made the Poison Spur Mob wary of pressing him for repayment.

Or maybe, Timmons was a force unto himself.

"So why do you think I can get your money back?" Lumian asked Fitz, a smirk playing on his lips.

Fitz pondered for a moment before laying it all out.

"You're more ruthless than Margot. Plus, even if you decide not to pursue after your investigation, I have nothing to lose.

"Without that money, I can't afford to pay a dime."

"Honest to a fault." Lumian nodded, appreciating the candor. "I'll look into it, but don't get your hopes up."

If Timmons was simply bluffing and managed to scare off the Poison Spur Mob, the prospect of pocketing an easy 50,000 verl d'or was tempting to anyone.

Fitz, the bankrupt businessman, was playing a long shot. With a nod of assurance from Lumian, he thanked him and made his exit from the second floor.

In that moment, Lumian realized that his spirituality had bounced back considerably. The recovered amount surpassed his original spirituality reserves.

The Alms Monk has boosted my spirituality significantly. At Sequence 8, I can rival the spirituality of other pathways Lumian mused quietly.

Simultaneously, he recalled an uncanny sensation he experienced while sipping the Whiskey Sour.

If he chose to live in poverty, practiced self-restraint, abstained from alcohol, shunned wastefulness, sought alms, and preached, all while adopting the demeanor of an ascetic monk, he would likely experience an enhancement in his intuitive sense of destiny and the likelihood of success of his five ritual spells.

Yet, Lumian had no intention of following that path. He believed it would morph him into a mirror image of the Bestower, gradually merging his identity with His.

Shaking off his introspective thoughts, Lumian left the room, making a beeline for Salle de Bal Brise. His next move was to solicit the Savoie Mob's help to gather the remaining ingredients and the right containers required for the Prophecy Spell.

He had to seize every opportunity at his disposal!

Chapter 153 Strange Rule

Standing before the white globe-shaped statue, an assemblage of countless skulls, in the Salle de Bal Brise,

Lumian paused. His eyes scanned the Intis inscription—”They sleep here, waiting for the arrival of happiness and hope.”

Pulling his gaze from the statue, he strode toward the entrance.

Two henchmen, donned in crisp white shirts and dark overcoats, spun on their heels to face him,

“Good morning, Ciel.”

They'd been buzzing with the whispers about this brash newcomer who'd reportedly offed Margot and left Wilson licking his wounds, all within a few fleeting days. It was no secret that he'd been roped into the Savoie Mob.

“Good morning, my cabbages,” Lumian tossed back, his lips curling into a grin as he borrowed Dariège's pet phrase.

The Salle de Bal Brise was still waking up. Waitstaff moved with placid efficiency, arranging chairs, scrubbing the floors.

Lumian had intended to seek out Louis, a familiar face. No need to ruffle the feathers of Baron Brignais over such small matters. But there, nestled at the bar, sat Maxime—the very same one who'd tailed him.

Maxime, still sporting his trademark cap, drank a pint of rye beer.

A smirk spread across Lumian's face as he sauntered over.

Perceiving a presence nearing him, Maxime, out of habit, flicked a sidelong glance.

He went rigid, as though struck by a sudden frost.

In the next heartbeat, he vaulted off his stool and swiveled toward Lumian, plastering on a toadying grin.

“Good morning, Ciel.”

He too had caught wind of the rumors—of Ciel's assassination of Margot and the defenestration of Wilson from the fourth floor of Auberge du Coq Doré.

A surge of relief washed over him. Thank the stars he hadn't pushed his luck when he'd been nabbed tailing Ciel. Considering Ciel's penchant for violence, he could've easily ended up as fodder for the rats in some godforsaken corner of Underground Trier.

This man was a bona fide killing machine. No qualms, no hesitation!

Lumian smiled.

“Merely ‘Ciel’ doesn't quite ring with the proper respect, does it?”

Seeing Maxime blanch, Lumian added,

“I'm curious as to when I'll hear ‘Baron Ciel’ rolling off your tongue.”

This was a jest, yes, but also a thinly veiled indication of his ambition—to rise to the ranks of the Savoie Mob leadership, and sooner rather than later.

His internal dialogue sang a different tune: I'd call you 'Baron' this very moment if it kept you happy, just like our 'Baron' isn't a real baron, but a self-proclaimed one.

Lumian claimed a stool at the bar and patted the one next to him.

“Have a seat. I have a few questions for you.”

Maxime swiftly obliged, gesturing to the rye beer before him. “Fancy a pint?”

“Ranger for me, if you please,” Lumian responded without missing a beat.

A 'Ranger'—a tangy blend of orange and pomegranate beer—cost two licks more than the rye.

Though it pinched his pocket, Maxime hollered over to the bartender, “A glass of Ranger.”

Swiveling back towards Lumian, he flashed a grin.

“What would you like to know?”

Lumian bided his time until the generous pint of the orange-colored beer was delivered before launching his inquiry, “How did you join our Savoie Mob?”

“I'm Savoie born and bred.” Maxime gestured to his weather-beaten features.

“Hopped over to Trier in search of greener pastures, but my buddy who'd put me up had already joined the Savoie Mob.”

The Savoie Mob was the brainchild of a handful of Savoie natives who'd made their living as laborers, servants, and peddlers in Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman. They were a fierce lot, unafraid to put themselves in harm's way, and they'd quickly carved out their own slice of the pie. As the mob's influence grew, they began to pull in recruits from other provinces and even Trier locals, but the heart of the organization still came from Savoie.

Lumian gave a slight nod, steering the conversation to his next question,

“And is Baron Brignais the head honcho of the whole Savoie Mob?”

“No.” Maxime stared at Lumian, aghast.

He'd joined the mob without even grasping the basics?

And he'd taken out Margot and severely injured Wilson in the name of the Savoie Mob!

Lumian took a leisurely sip of his orange-pomegranate beer, a playful grin adorning his face.

“I was under the impression that Baron Brignais was the head honcho. I mean, his swagger, his flair, his brawn... how could he not be the top dog?”

Maxime recoiled in terror, clapping a hand over Lumian's mouth.

Were such words safe to spill in such an open area?

If word got back to that person, it could put a serious kink in his relationship with the baron!

Maxime wasted no time in setting the record straight.

“The baron is in charge of the Salle de Bal Brise, Avenue du Marché, and the loan shark operations. His peers include “Rat” Christo who oversees smuggling, “Giant” Simon who runs the dance joints on Rue du Rossignol, “Red Boots” Franca who oversees Rue des Blouses Blanches, and “Bloody Palm” Black who controls half of Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman.

“There's a top dog above them, but I've never laid eyes on him nor do I know who he is.”

In a hushed voice, Maxime added, “Rumor has it he's a legitimate merchant, a card-carrying member of the Savoie Chamber of Commerce. And he's no small fry, either.”

A member of the Savoie Chamber of Commerce? So, the Chamber of Commerce is backing a mob to handle their dirty laundry and keep the competition in check... Lumian pieced together the puzzle from his own experiences as a drifter, snippets from Aurore's offhand comments, and a smattering of books, magazines, and newspapers he'd devoured at home.

News of Ciel's arrival at the Salle de Bal Brise reached Louis, Baron Brignais' shadow. He made a beeline for the bar, his heart pounding with worry that the audacious country boy was about to stir the pot yet again!

He was really worried that the bold country boy would cause trouble again!

Finding Lumian engrossed in conversation with Maxime, Louis slid onto a stool on the other side, easing into the chat, “What's got you coming to the Salle de Bal Brise at this hour?”

Lumian shot him a sly smile. “I've got a favor to ask.”

Louis, his forehead still sporting a nasty bruise, shrank back at the sight of Lumian's grin.

“What is it?”

Sensing they were about to dive into heavier matters, Maxime beat a hasty retreat from the bar, nursing his rye beer closer to the dance floor.

Lumian retracted his gaze and said slowly, “I need you to fetch me a lizard's eye, a rock from an eagle's nest, and a snake's venom gland.”

He kept the full list of the Prophecy Spell's ingredients under wraps, planning to source them from different places.

“What do you need those for?” Louis found the trio of items vile and bizarre.

Lumian chuckled. “Remember how Margot bit the dust?”

Louis felt a chill run down his spine. It felt like a veiled threat, and it was working!

I'm not trying to rattle you... Lumian snickered to himself.

“I stabbed him. My blade was laced with poison.”

“Right,” Louis remembered Ciel's chat with Baron Brignais.

Seeing Louis still hadn't caught on, Lumian mentally berated, Why is this guy denser than Charlie?

He sighed, spelling it out for him. “Those items are to whip up another batch of poison.”

“What are you planning?” Louis nearly jumped out of his skin.

He had a hunch Lumian was about to stir the pot.

“Self-defense,” Lumian replied tersely.

With no grounds to object, Louis let out a sigh of relief, promising,

“I’ll get someone on the job to collect those three items for you.”

He ran through the list of items again, making sure he’d got it straight.

Once he’d confirmed the details, Lumian took a swig of his Ranger, switching gears.

“Ever heard of the Salle de Bal Unique?”

Louis eyed Lumian suspiciously, advising, “Best steer clear of that place. The dance hall’s owner, Timmons, is tight with the police commissioner of Quartier de l’Observatoire. And there’s a shadowy organization pulling his strings. Anyone who’s tried to squeeze them has found themselves in a world of hurt, and some have even vanished off the face of the world.”

Each quartier in Trier had its own police headquarters, each headed by a commissioner.

The police commissioner’s official title was the Commissioner of the Trier Police Affairs Committee, answering to the Minister of the Trier Police Department.

So that’s why the Poison Spur Mob never had the guts to chase up Timmons’ debt... Lumian nodded, deep in thought.

Seeing the worry etched on Louis’s face, afraid he was about to stir up a hornet’s nest, Lumian threw him a curveball.

“Who else in the Poison Spur Mob ranks up there with Margot? And who’s their boss?”

What are you trying to do? Louis almost blurted out.

Could it be that Ciel’s planning to knock off all the heavy hitters in the Poison Spur Mob?

Are you out of your mind?

Keeping his cool, Louis replied, “That’s none of your concern right now.”

Lumian responded with a knowing smile, not pushing the matter. He downed his Ranger.

In the shadowy enclave of Quartier de l’Observatoire, nestled near the catacombs,

Lumian found Osta Trul huddled by the bonfire.

He laughed mockingly.

“You’re the most professional person I’ve ever come across.”

Like clockwork, Osta was here seven days a week, peddling his con.

“I'd love to be soaking myself on some beach, but my debts tell a different story.” The thought of hopping a steam locomotive out of Trier and dodging his outstanding loans had crossed Osta's mind. Yet, each time he made it as far as the station, Baron Brignais's goons would be there to give him a good thrashing.

This had instilled in him a healthy fear of the Baron's reach, and he'd since abandoned any such ideas.

“I need you to fetch me a few things,” Lumian cut to the chase, settling down beside Osta. “For each item you bring, there's an extra 5 verl d'or in it for you.”

Osta's eyes sparked with interest.

“What are you after?”

Lumian stared into the fire, his voice low. “Lynx innards, hyena tongue, stag bone marrow, and any deadly herb.”

“They're not easy to come by.” Osta tried to haggle.

He'd already made up his mind to scour the eateries in Quartier de l'Observatoire.

Lumian brushed him off, changing the subject. “Where can I find aquatic monsters in Trier?”

Osta pondered a moment before replying, “There's an underground river in the catacombs nearby, fed by the Srenzo River. Every so often, someone claims to have run into an aquatic monster. And occasionally, some surface along the Srenzo River banks, but they're quickly dispatched by the Purifiers or the Machinery Hivemind.”

Lumian nodded. “Do you know the Salle de Bal Unique?”

“Sure do.” Osta pointed skyward. “It's over on Rue Ancienne, right by Place du Purgatoire.”

“1 verl d'or. Show me the way.” Lumian rose to his feet.

He planned to scope out the place, gather what intel he could. If it was a dead end, he'd move on.

In no time, Osta was leading Lumian topside, veering into Rue Ancienne near the square, and halting in front of a vintage edifice.

The building, a somber shade of blue-gray, retained its pre-Roselle charm.

Classic pediments, a chevron roof, and leaded windows.

The Salle de Bal Unique occupied the ground floor, its entrance resembling a giant maw.

It happened to be past noon, and a carriage pulled up to the curb as three men and a woman alighted.

Dressed in dark short suits, they sauntered towards the Salle de Bal Unique.

As they neared the entrance, each member of the quartet produced a monocle, fitting it over their right eye.

Watching this, Lumian turned to Osta, bemusement written all over his face.

Osta, flashing a knowing smile, enlightened him, “That's one of Salle de Bal Unique's rules. Everyone who steps inside must be donning a short suit and a monocle.”

Chapter 154 Mini-Theater

Taking in Osta's revelation, Lumian couldn't help a chuckle, thinking, What kind of strange rule is this?

His mind flicked back to the turtle-walking, the space bridge, clutching a candle while touring the catacombs, and sprinting just to keep up with the latest fad. He felt that this seemed inconsequential, but perhaps not for the folks of Trier, who seemed to relish something unique.

As the stream of monocle-clad patrons flowed in, Lumian queried with a casual air, “What happens if a newcomer isn't privy to the rule?”

Osta gestured to the far end of Rue Ancienne.

“There's a place selling monocles and short suits there.

“I'd wager the proprietor of Salle de Bal Unique is behind it.”

No doubt about it... Lumian murmured under his breath.

He wouldn't put it past Timmons to concoct such a rule for the Salle de Bal Unique to cash in on the monocle and short suit trade.

Undeniably, it was also a nod to the citizens of Trier's relentless pursuit of the latest trends and fashion.

“How long has this joint been in business?” Lumian nonchalantly gestured toward the Salle de Bal Unique across the street.

“Over two decades. It's been here since I first landed in Trier. Rumor has it, it opened when dance halls became the rage.” Osta stole a glance toward Place du Purgatoire. “Anything else? I need to get back underground.”

His mind was on making money, wary of missing out on potential clients seeking his divination and “assistance.”

Lumian swung his gaze onto him.

Osta's heart stuttered, feeling as though he were in the crosshairs of a formidable predator.

“What's the matter?” He subconsciously forced a smile again.

Lumian withdrew his gaze, nonchalantly advising, “Stay sharp for the next couple of days.”

“What?” Osta found himself flustered, bewildered, and somewhat frightened.

Ciel isn't threatening me, is he? We just had a smooth collaboration. He even tasked me with finding some materials!

A grin played at the corners of Lumian's mouth.

“Exactly as I said, but it's got nothing to do with me.

“Also, do me a favor and dig up more details on the aquatic monster. The more comprehensive, the better. Same pay as before.”

Is he implying that I might be getting unlucky and be beaten up? Osta tried to decipher Lumian's cryptic message.

At the same time, he found something oddly familiar about Lumian's demeanor and tone but couldn't quite put his finger on it.

As a Secrets Suppliant, his divination prowess was remarkably superior to the average person.

Suddenly, it struck him why he found the whole exchange eerily familiar.

Wasn't this the exact manner he addressed his own “customers”?

Across from the antiquated building, Lumian contemplated whether to invest in a short suit and monocle to infiltrate the Salle de Bal Unique and gather intel.

If Timmons is indeed part of some mysterious organization and chummy with the police commissioner, snatching him for a bounty of verl d'or isn't a smart move. It'd muck up my operation. Wouldn't the money spent on the short suits and monocles go down the drain? They don't come cheap, after all. Lumian was never one to hold back on expenses, with Trier teeming with “generous souls,” but he knew when to pinch pennies.

Mulling over his options, he scanned his surroundings, his eyes landing on an “Alone” bar diagonally across the Salle de Bal Unique.

Patrons of a dance hall would likely frequent a bar too. They must be rivals... Suddenly, a light bulb went off in Lumian's head.

After all, enemies often knew one another best, and those most familiar with a dance hall would likely be its competitors!

Even if their accounts were likely embellished, they could still offer some grains of truth.

Without missing a beat, Lumian swiveled around and sauntered into the Alone bar.

The buildings on Rue Ancienne were steeped in antiquity, with most dating back to pre-Roselle times. Their windows were mere slits, letting in scant daylight. The overarching theme here was one of darkness.

Unperturbed by the unlit gas lamps, Lumian navigated through the dimly lit hall, sparsely populated by patrons, and took a stool at the bar.

Removing his cap, he ordered, “A gin on the rocks.”

The bar counter was tucked away in the darkest corner of the joint. The lean bartender was shrouded in shadows, his features obscured, revealing only a silhouette.

Despite Lumian's keen eyesight, he could barely discern the man's curly black hair, slightly blue eyes, and a somewhat low bridge of his nose.

As he awaited his gin, Lumian flashed a casual smile and remarked,

“Business seems slow here. The Salle de Bal Unique across the way appears to be drawing quite the crowd.”

The bartender slid a lemon wedge and iced gin across to Lumian.

Casting a glance at the door, he replied, “We do alright, but most folks are downstairs waiting for the play.

“How about it? Fancy a peek? Patrons with drinks can gain entry to the cellar for five licks. Uh, make it eight for your gin.”

“A play?” Lumian couldn't hide his astonishment.

This was a facet none of the Rue Anarchie bars could boast.

The bartender sighed, explaining, “They can dance, sing, shoot pool, play cards across the road. We've got to stand out somehow to lure in customers.

“Many bars and cafes on the north shore now have their own mini-theaters.”

Lumian was at a loss for words, resorting to a mere sigh. “Has the bar scene gotten so cutthroat?”

He then produced three 20-coppet silver coins etched with gears and a 5-coppet copper coin, handing them to the bartender.

The total amounted to 13 licks or 65 coppets, including the ticket to the mini-theater for the performance.

The bartender promptly pointed to the stairs next to the counter leading down.

“You can head to the cellar anytime. Feel free to take your drink with you.”

No ticket required? Lumian wasn't in a rush to vacate the counter. He smiled, asking, “The Salle de Bal Unique across the way seems rather... unique?”

“It certainly is.” The bartender lowered his voice. “Did you get swindled over there? Is that why you're so curious?”

“Exactly.” Lumian nodded without missing a beat.

He saw no reason of hiding it.

The bartender chortled.

“We get scammed hopefuls straggling in here every day, but none ever pull it off. Heck, I once spotted the police commissioner of Quartier de l'Observatoire, Conde, strutting into the dance hall, all decked out in a short suit and a monocle.”

Timmons is no pushover... Lumian quickly abandoned any notion of conning the proprietor of Salle de Bal Unique.

Gin in hand, he pushed away from the counter, making his way down to the cellar.

Before he could reach the timber door, the bartender's shout echoed, “Patron coming through!”

The door creaked open with a groan.

Lumian slowed his stride, taking in his surroundings as he stepped inside.

It was a makeshift theater, a half-height wooden platform stretching across the far end. Two gas wall lamps cast a feeble light.

Where the illumination fell short, stools and chairs were scattered sparsely.

At that moment, over 20 guests were settled in, engrossed in the show unfolding on the stage.

The silence was deafening, punctuated only by the sporadic clink of glasses, the dimly lit cellar rendered almost eerily hushed.

Lumian claimed a chair near the exit, his eyes drifting to the stage.

The performer was not a person but a puppet half the height of a person.

Adorned in a palette of yellow, white, and red paint, regardless of gender, each puppet bore an overstated grin.

Guided by nearly invisible threads, the puppets moved, opening their mouths, turning, running, carrying out a variety of plays.

From somewhere, a deep male voice and a slightly shrill female voice took turns delivering the lines.

Bathed in the faint, yellowish glow from the gas lamps, against the looming darkness, the painted clown puppets took on a sinister edge.

Lumian was instinctively put off by the ambiance.

Not one to squander the ticket cost, he stuck around a bit longer until the play wrapped up.

Throughout, not a sound was made. The audience, some faces bathed in the yellow light, others shrouded in darkness, were far more engrossed than Lumian had imagined.

Having drained his gin, Lumian took his leave of the mini-theater, where only two gas lamps held off the darkness.

As Lumian made his way back to Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman, he claimed a window seat in a public carriage. As the shops and pedestrians retreated in the backdrop, he mulled over his next moves.

First order of business, secure some aquatic monster flesh and collect the necessary components for the Prophecy Spell. Second, elevate my standing in the Savoie Mob, aiming for a leadership position sooner rather than later... What's the plan...

Lost in his thoughts, his eyes snagged on a familiar figure.

There was Wilson of the Poison Spur Mob, clad in a white shirt and black jacket, his craggy face framed by a mop of curly brown hair.

With his two goons in tow, Wilson navigated Avenue du Marché, disappearing down a side alley. He moved with an assured stride, his posture unscathed.

Lumian was taken aback. He's up and about after being thrown down by him?

The fall was from four stories high!

That was some recovery. Made cockroaches look like amateurs!

A theory started to form in Lumian's mind.

The Poison Spur Mob has extraordinary healing powers?

Possibly Planter pathway's Doctor?

As he pondered, a memory surfaced.

In his dream, Madame Pualis had demonstrated the power to heal wounds instantaneously!

Although the dream might have distorted or exaggerated the reality, Madame Pualis's anomalous pathway did encompass a sphere related to life.

And Louis Lund was suspected to show up on Avenue du Marché... Could the force behind the Poison Spur Mob be linked to the evil god worshiped by Madame Pualis? As Lumian ruminated over this, a smirk slowly crept onto his face.

Chapter 155 Jenna

The circumstances of Wilson's rapid recovery were riddled with uncertainty. Lumian toyed with the idea that it was the work of a Sequence 8 "Doctor" from the Planter pathway, or a Sequence 9 "Apothecary" from its namesake pathway. Yet, his heart clung to the hope of unmasking Madame Pualis and her subordinates.

Had he pieced together the puzzle sooner, and had Wilson and his crew not gone far off into the distance, Lumian would have thrown himself from the moving public carriage, hot on their trail. He envisioned wrangling Wilson into some clandestine quarry cave, pressing him for answers about his miraculous recuperation.

If this saga bore no link to the evil god that Madame Pualis revered, Lumian was prepared to swallow his pride and apologize to Wilson, who, in turn, would owe Lumian his life for not permanently silencing him.

But, to snuff him out was also on the table. The ball was in Lumian's court.

As the carriage came to a halt at its station, Lumian was the first to alight, retracing his steps to the alley where Wilson and his crew had disappeared.

No barricades existed here. It was a bustling place, with people constantly coming and going. Wilson and his gang hadn't left any clear trail. Lumian devoted a painstaking quarter of an hour to trying to discern any signs of them, finally admitting defeat.

But he wasn't beaten down. Wilson may have slipped through his fingers, but there were others like Will or Williamson. The Poison Spur Mob was a hydra of sorts, with a plethora of leaders just a notch above Wilson. Each had their own turf, their own dealings. They could run, but they couldn't hide. Lumian just needed patience. Sooner or later, he'd cross paths with one or two of them. And they, undoubtedly, were more intimately involved with the shadowy forces pulling the strings behind the Poison Spur Mob than Wilson. They knew more!

Phew... Exhaling a deep breath, Lumian wrestled his impatience into submission, deciding to lay low and watch for a while before concocting a hunting strategy.

If the Poison Spur Mob truly was entwined with the evil god that Madame Pualis worshiped, then the leaders on par with Margot were either Sequence 8s, endowed with Beyonder characteristics, or they were spawn of an evil god, gifted with boons akin to a Sequence 8 Beyonder. They could even be stronger. If Lumian didn't arm himself with enough intel and set an appropriate snare, he was likely to end up on the losing side.

I can't forget I'm a Hunter, just because I've become a Provoker. Chiding himself, Lumian slipped down Avenue du Marché and strolled into the Salle de Bal Brise.

Given it was barely past three in the afternoon, the place was practically deserted. No music played, no one danced. His eyes immediately found Louis, the thug, nursing a glass of pomegranate ale at the bar counter.

"Soda?" Lumian grinned, sauntering over. "How about drinking something an adult would drink?"

Louis swiveled, meeting Ciel's amiable smile draped over the bar counter.

The sight left him momentarily stunned, as if he couldn't quite place the young man before him.

Was this the same Ciel who masked his wild ruthlessness behind a constant grin, one who'd resort to violence over the slightest disagreement?

He seemed more like a greenhorn, a naïve country boy who had just been roped into the Savoie Mob.

Louis gave his soda a wistful swirl, a bitter smile tugging at his lips.

"I've got to be at the baron's side later. Can't afford to get sloshed."

Lumian's eyes flicked to the bruised knot on Louis' forehead, a chuckle bubbling up. He pointed at his forehead, commenting, "Still nursing that bump? How long's it been?"

"I ran into Wilson earlier. After I broke his arm and tossed him from the fourth floor, you'd think he'd be worse for wear. But he looked perfectly fine."

Louis was taken aback.

"Seems so, at least on the surface. Wanted to say hello, but he hightailed it out of there too fast." Lumian's tone carried a hint of regret.

Say hello? More like you want to rough up Wilson again and not even give the guy a chance to heal, Louis thought, but he didn't dare voice it.

His face took on a grave cast as he muttered to himself, "When we clashed with the Poison Spur Mob in the past, their wounded always bounced back in just a few days. The baron thinks they've got some Beyonders with a knack for healing. But for someone like Wilson to recover so rapidly from such serious injuries... that's unheard of."

"Could it be because you guys have never managed to put a serious dent in any of the Poison Spur Mob members?" Lumian's voice was laced with mockery.

Louis pondered, then conceded, "There have been a few, but not many. Plus, we usually don't see them again for a good long while. By then, they're all healed up."

So, Wilson's recovery outpaces even Doctor and Apothecary Beyonder powers? Lumian managed to glean a crucial tidbit from Louis's words.

Although it could point to a higher Sequence Beyonder on the corresponding pathway, it at least narrowed down some possibilities for him.

Just as Lumian was gearing up to probe the progress on gathering concoction ingredients, a stunning figure swept into the room.

A woman, ostentatiously attired, with her chestnut hair tied up, loose tendrils framing her ears, cheeks, and falling down her back.

Her face was dusted with powder, black eyeliner accentuating her blue eyes, lending them a deep, decadent allure.

At present, she was decked out in a bold red dress that left little to the imagination, sequins catching the light at strategic spots.

Isn't this the chanteuse known for her bawdy songs at the Poison Spur Mob's Salle de Gristmill? Lumian did a double take.

This was the Savoie Mob's Salle de Bal Brise!

Still, Lumian couldn't be entirely sure if it was the same woman. The singer had a mole by her lips, while this woman sported one at the corner of her left eye.

"Catching your eye, is she? That 'Little Minx'?" Louis followed Lumian's gaze.

Lumian chuckled. "How about we use a more respectful moniker? Manners matter."

"You sound just like the baron sometimes," Louis mused. "Her stage name is 'Little Minx', 'Little Minx' Jenna. She's known as a 'Showy Diva'."

"And what exactly is a 'Showy Diva'?" Lumian didn't attempt to cover up his ignorance. After all, he was a newcomer to Trier, straight out of a backwater like Cordu.

Louis took a moment to recall the baron's words and then delivered smoothly, "It's all about her performance style, her acting, her flamboyant outfits. She's a standout singer."

She's a chanteuse too? Lumian probed, "She performs at the Salle de Gristmill as well?"

"Sure does. As long as she's getting paid, she'll belt out tunes in any dance hall on Rue Anarchie." As Louis spoke, "Little Minx" Jenna sauntered over.

Her blue eyes roamed the room, lingering on Lumian before moving to Louis.

"Ten songs, four verl d'or. I'll keep a third of the tips thrown on stage."

"Deal." Louis had the baron's approval.

Only 4 verl d'or for a night's performance? Lumian found himself questioning. Had he overpaid Osta Trul?

In unfamiliar territory, he was woefully out of touch with the going rates.

Spotting his lingering gaze, Jenna swiveled her head, flashing him a grin.

“Feel free to let your eyes wander a bit lower.”

She was referencing her scantily clad chest.

For Lumian, whose only exposure to such scenarios was through novels, this was uncharted territory. Yet, his face betrayed no unease. Flashing a smile, he said,

“I was merely wondering. The last time I spotted you, your mole was by your lips. Now it's nestled by your eye.”

Jenna's reply came in the form of a captivating smile, which made Louis swallow hard.

“Are you from out of town?” Jenna queried.

Lumian bobbed his head in affirmation.

With a playful grin, Jenna leaned in, a finger tracing her cheek as she softly elucidated,

“It's all the rage here in Trier. Ladies often sport a faux mole. Right in the middle of the cheek for elegance, smack in the middle of the nose for audacity, at the corners of the eyes for passion, by the lips for allure, and nestled in the décolletage for secrets...”

As she spoke, she sent Lumian a saucy wink, as if to say, “Today, I'm all about passion.”

Ah, Trier... Lumian could only shake his head in amazement.

Given their proximity, the intoxicating blend of Jenna's natural scent and the heady perfume she wore invaded his senses.

This led Lumian to instinctively rub his nose.

Jenna's reaction was immediate.

“Don't tell me you still have your virginity? I'm not a street girl, but for you, I might make an exception.”

She took a moment to appraise Lumian, seemingly pleased with what she saw.

Virginity? Something that magically returns every morning at 6 a.m.? Lumian scoffed inwardly, his smile nonchalant.

“Right now? I'm afraid you might miss your performance tonight.”

Back at the Ol' Tavern in Cordu Village, Lumian often had to match the locals in their coarseness, else he'd become the butt of their jokes.

Jenna's response was a hearty laugh and a dismissive wave of her hand.

“I'll find you after my set tonight.”

With that, she sauntered off towards the modest wooden stage at the front of the dance floor, keen to get a feel for the place.

Isn't she jumping the gun a bit? Where's the agreement on a time and place? Lumian mused to himself.

She was clearly just yanking his chain!

Louis chimed in, a tinge of envy coloring his voice, "Don't fall for her act. She gets a kick out of toying with good-looking men. She won't actually follow through.

"I reckon she's Franca's sweetheart."

"Franca, 'Red Boots' Franca?" Lumian's surprise was palpable.

"Red Boots" Franca was a key figure in the Savoie Mob, ruling over Rue des Blouses Blanches, and rumored to be a woman.

"Exactly," Louis affirmed. "Franca appears to be the Boss's mistress, but she seems to swing both ways. She and 'Little Minx' are thick as thieves."

A lover's lover... Lumian once again marveled at the peculiarities of Trier.

Louis watched Jenna, now swaying gracefully on the stage, a look of longing etched on his face.

"She wasn't this mesmerizing when she first arrived in the market district. Over the past couple of years, she's become more adept at presentation, more feminine. What a shame..."

"If you manage to climb the ranks and stand toe to toe with Red Boots, you might have a shot," Lumian teased, stoking Louis's ambition. He then shifted gears, "Any luck tracking down those three items I needed?"

Louis tore his gaze away from Jenna to respond, "I was just about to tell you, we've managed to gather them all."

"That quick?" Lumian was taken aback by the Savoie Mob's efficiency.

Why not start a factory? Why stick with the mob life?

Louis elaborated, "'Rat' Christo keeps a variety of critters, some rare, some less so. Some we could take off his hands for the right price. That's how we got the lizard's eye and the snake's venom sac. The eagle's nest rock was a bonus."

"Rat" Christo, the one in charge of smuggling? Lumian mulled over this newfound information.

Chapter 156 Landlord

Louis carried on, "I'll arrange for someone to bring those three items to Auberge du Coq Doré later."

“And the cost?” Lumian was prepared to offer Louis an extra reward for his diligence.

Louis merely shook his head.

“The baron says you needn't worry about the payment. He believes your strength building equates to our Savoie Mob's strengthening.”

Even without Baron Brignais spelling it out, Louis deduced his ploy of roping Lumian in. In any case, the cost was under 10 verl d'or.

So according to the baron's logic, I can have him refund the materials I require to progress to Pyromaniac? Lumian mused with a hint of sarcasm.

Louis was taking a sip from his pomegranate soda when a group sauntered into the Salle de Bal Brise.

The group's leader was strikingly tall, towering over 1.9 meters. His light-yellow hair, short and plush, clung to his scalp akin to high-grade velvet.

He had a huge nose, light-blue eyes, and a roughly textured face. He was dressed in a figure-hugging black suit, topped off with a wide-brimmed round hat.

Louis's features tightened, he carefully placed down the soda bottle, turning to Lumian, “I need to attend to the baron.”

Just then, the beefy man in his early thirties walked a crew that had the air of gangsters about them towards the café's staircase.

“Who's he?” Lumian questioned, unable to hide his curiosity.

Louis rose, offhandedly answering, “That's ‘Giant’ Simon, runs the dance halls on Rue du Rossignol.”

“Isn't he a part of our Savoie Mob as well?” Lumian probed further.

Louis nodded. “True, but he's not on good terms with the baron. He's always arguing that the baron, since he oversees the loan-sharking, ought to relinquish control of the Salle de Bal Brise.

“I'm heading up; need to see what he's here for.”

Louis had barely taken two steps when he noticed Lumian, still planted at the bar counter, from his peripheral vision.

He couldn't resist an inward sigh.

He just doesn't grasp how to seize the moment. Shouldn't he have shown some initiative and backed me up with the baron? If ‘Giant’ Simon dares say anything unsavory, stare him down, threaten him with a gun. Only then will he start to earn the baron's trust.

Yes, he may be ruthless, mad, and powerful, but he remains a greenhorn when it comes to these things.

Naturally, if Lumian truly wanted to accompany him to the second floor and aid Baron Brignais in maintaining appearances at the café, Louis would turn him down. After all, the baron and “Giant”

Simon could potentially be discussing confidential matters concerning the Savoie Mob. It was no place for a rookie to eavesdrop.

Lumian ruminated, The Savoie Mob seems riddled with internal strife...

Suppose there's a showdown between Baron Brignais and "Giant" Simon and one bites the dust. And then the head honcho needs a strong hand to quell the storm and take over their positions, wouldn't I be the perfect candidate? When that time comes, as long as I pass muster, I'll have fulfilled Mr. K's mission.

Now the trick is to pit Baron Brignais and "Giant" Simon against each other without arousing suspicion...

Lost in his strategic contemplation, Lumian requested a glass of absinthe.

Before he could savor the last of the enigmatic emerald elixir, he spotted "Giant" Simon emerging from the staircase, henchmen in tow, a thunderous expression on his face.

Well, he doesn't seem pleased... Lumian noted, retracting his gaze.

He wasn't rushing to translate his thoughts into action; he was still woefully short on the ins and outs of the Savoie Mob.

Later that evening, on his return to Auberge du Coq Doré, Madame Fels, seated at the reception desk, rose and informed him, "Monsieur Ive has arrived. He's waiting for you in the first-floor dining room, by the window."

Not bad. He came quite quickly... Lumian nodded approvingly, making his way to the small dining room opposite the lobby.

Monsieur Ive had heard tell of Ciel's eccentric yet stylish hair. On seeing him step into the dining room, he rose, all smiles.

"Monsieur Ciel, right this way."

He was a man on the cusp of his fifties. His blonde hair, streaked with silver, was neatly arranged. He sported a faded dark suit with a pair of chestnut tweed trousers. His eyes were a bright blue, and he bore a thin beard.

Lumian glanced at the cane resting against the dining table, then approached, a congenial smile playing on his lips.

"Good evening, Monsieur Ive."

Once both men were seated, Ive beckoned the waiter to begin serving.

"My apologies for the delay in visiting, I've been swamped recently," Ive expressed remorsefully.

His accent distinctly belonged to the Trier region.

Feigning ignorance, Lumian questioned, "Do you own more than one motel?"

Otherwise, what's kept him so busy?

Ive was taken aback. He hadn't anticipated that Lumian would take his polite remark literally.

He stammered, "There are... some other affairs, but they're neither here nor there."

As their conversation flowed, the waiter brought in the evening meal, a serving each.

Bean soup, pork sausage, Feynapotter rice, and a sauce that occupied a fifth of the plate.

"This is their signature meat sauce," Ive informed, bubbling with enthusiasm.

Is that all? Lumian's perception of the landlord's miserliness took a new dimension.

It didn't overly concern him, though. He dug into the Feynapotter rice, smothered in the mildly meaty sauce, laced with pepper and vinegar.

After consuming his meal for about a minute, Lumian looked up, addressing Monsieur Ive with a wry smile, "With your penny-pinching tendencies, why provide each room with sulfur?"

He purposely avoided the softer term "frugal," his tone saturated with sarcasm.

Monsieur Ive's face clouded over, evidently displeased.

He kept his emotions in check, forcing a strained smile.

"The motel is riddled with bedbugs. Nobody would stay here without the sulfur we provide."

Really? As long as the price is low enough, those hard up for cash won't fuss about a few bedbugs... Lumian casually sectioned off a piece of sausage, taking a bite.

After mulling it over a bit, he suggested, "Why not employ a couple of regular cleaners for daily cleaning? That could effectively cut down on the bedbugs."

"Two full-time cleaners would set me back 130 to 150 verl d'or a month, while a thorough cleaning once a week only costs 18 verl d'or," Monsieur Ive protested, visibly pained at the prospect.

Lumian simply smiled.

"I meant, why don't you do the cleaning yourself, get your kids to help?"

That would shave off 18 verl d'or from his weekly expenses.

Monsieur Ive appeared to mull over the proposal, seeming to see the merit in it.

However, after a reflective pause, he sighed and said, "Sadly, we're otherwise occupied."

Doing what? Lumian didn't push for an answer.

He had already established that Ive was nothing short of a tightwad.

Monsieur Ive studied Lumian, hesitating before he offered, "I used to hand Margot 20 verl d'or weekly. Which day would you prefer?"

Lumian scoffed.

"No need to hand it over to me. Invest in an additional thorough cleaning each week."

Monsieur Ive was somewhat surprised but raised no objections. After all, the cleaning service cost only 18 verl d'or, and if contracted for twice a week, he could haggle for a better rate.

Having polished off his plate, Lumian queried,

“Do you happen to know what happened to the tenant from 504?”

He was speaking of the man who'd plastered Susanna Mattise's portrait in Charlie's room, a frequent face on Rue de la Muraille, Rue de Breda, and Rue du Rossignol, who had since moved on.

Lumian had sought this information from Madame Fels earlier, but she'd offered no insight. As far as she was concerned, her interest in tenants ceased as soon as they paid their rent and didn't damage anything.

Monsieur Ive appeared taken aback, glancing at the leftovers on his plate before replying,

“I'm not sure who you mean. I don't often visit the motel. I'm unaware of who's occupying which rooms.”

That response... Smacks of guilt... Lumian's eyebrows twitched slightly, but he didn't push the issue. He watched as Monsieur Ive tidied up his plate, not a morsel of rice or a trace of sauce left behind.

After Monsieur Ive had taken his leave, Lumian emerged from the motel some 20 seconds later, tailing the landlord from a safe distance.

He tracked Monsieur Ive to a beige, six-story apartment block situated in the heart of Avenue du Marché.

From what he'd gathered from Madame Fels's usual chitchat, this was most likely Monsieur Ive's residence.

Lumian didn't rush to make a “house call”. There were certain activities best carried out under the cloak of night. Moreover, he wasn't entirely sure whether the official Beyonders were still probing into Susanna Mattise's affairs or hoping to find any leads through Monsieur Ive. An accidental encounter could be rather awkward.

If it came to that, Lumian would have to make himself scarce promptly.

Under the warm glow of the streetlamps, he circled Monsieur Ive's apartment, taking in his surroundings.

What struck Lumian most was the three-story, brick-red edifice diagonally across from the apartment on the opposite side of Avenue du Marché.

The foyer, propped up by pillars, bore a sign overhead: “Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons.”

People streamed in continuously. Every now and then, bursts of applause and strains of music floated out, creating a lively atmosphere.

Lumian knew that this was a theater catering to common folk with its affordable ticket prices, holding a monopoly in Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman.

An ideal spot for evading pursuit... Lumian was reminded of theater-related incidents from various novels. Grinning, he crossed the street and entered the foyer of the Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons.

Posters advertising current and upcoming plays, as well as a few past classics, adorned the walls.

As Lumian considered how best to exploit the theater, he stood there, earnestly examining the photographs, sketches, and captions.

Suddenly, a familiar face caught his eye on a poster tucked away in a corner.

Playing an extra in the background, a man with a shock of starkly blond hair, blue eyes, and a wispy beard was featured. It was none other than Monsieur Ive, the man he'd been tailing!

Chapter 157 Ancienne Cage à Pigeons

Monsieur Ive, a theater actor as well? Or merely an enthusiast? Lumian pondered the enigma.

His immediate impression was, as proprietor and landlord of the Auberge du Coq Doré, Monsieur Ive could be classified as affluent. Moreover, he managed several other enterprises, so the notion of him dabbling in acting appeared improbable. Nevertheless, taking into account Ive's proclivity for hoarding wealth and his frugal tendencies, Lumian couldn't completely rule out the possibility of the man dabbling as a minor actor during his idle hours. It was an opportunity, after all, to rake in a few more coins and avoid squandering valuable time.

Once satisfied that the small-time character indeed was Monsieur Ive, Lumian's eyes drifted to the poster's title: Forest Fairy.

From the additional script, Lumian deciphered that this was a classic production from the Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons, occasionally revived for new runs.

The actress portraying the Forest Fairy boasted distinct facial contours, an ethereal and captivating aura, and lake-blue eyes filled with innocence and sanctity.

However, Lumian found her less than bewitching, given her adornments of bracelet, necklace, and belt fashioned from tree branches and verdant leaves, topped off by a floral laurel crown. She stirred memories of Ava, the Spring Elf from his dreams, and Susanna Mattise with her cascading turquoise tresses.

For Lumian, these were not nostalgic musings. Especially the latter, bereft of the unusual allure her hair had once commanded, now evoked an eerie and revolting image.

Charlotte Calvino. After noting the actress's name, Lumian scrutinized the other posters for more clues.

Ultimately, he deduced that Monsieur Ive had performed in three plays at the Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons, yet in each, he was but a mere supporting actor, easily replaced.

Entering the theater with a thoughtful demeanor, Lumian forked out ten licks for a ticket.

The Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons was a well-designed edifice. A large stage dominated the far end, illuminated by gas wall lamps, cloaked by lofty curtains and equipped with several steam-powered machines.

Neat rows of seating lined the theater, progressively ascending like terraced staircases.

Lumian took his ticket stub and located his seat.

The ongoing play was “Princess and the Beast”. The actors' attire tended towards the liberal, with hints of risqué—entirely in keeping with the aesthetic sensibilities of Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman.

Watching the performance unfold, Lumian was struck with an internal gasp of awe.

Could this be Trier's standard for acting?

Such theatrics only earn them keep in Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman? What caliber do the theaters in Quartier de la Maison d'Opéra hold?

Lumian wasn't a stranger to the world of theater. Despite Aurore's homebody tendencies, even she occasionally craved the outdoors. Sometimes she borrowed a pony from Madame Pualis, or chatted with Cordu's old ladies, narrated stories to local children, and occasionally she'd even take Lumian to Dariège to attend plays, opera, circus performances or visit the underground book market for creative inspiration.

In comparison to the Ancienne Cage à Pigeons, those theatrical performances seemed akin to amateur efforts.

The lead actors on the stage were simply spellbinding. Whether through their facial expressions, physical gestures, or delivered lines, they were as though plucked from the narrative's pages and set into the world of the living. Lumian, initially focused on scouting for anomalies, found himself unexpectedly engrossed in the unfolding drama. He felt a pang for the Beast's tangled turmoil of self-doubt, brutality, and torment, and for the Princess, her unspoiled innocence, kindness, and heartfelt distress.

Any one of these principal performers could easily steal the spotlight in a Dariège theater.

As the curtain fell, Lumian found himself rising to his feet, clapping his approval, a twinge of disappointment in his heart that the performance had concluded so swiftly.

He detected nothing suspicious with the actors, nor could he discern anything out of the ordinary within the theater itself during his regular sojourns to the restroom during intermissions.

Madame Fels had hinted that Monsieur Ive cultivated a rooftop vegetable garden as a cost-saving measure. Lumian deduced that the Ive residence must, therefore, be on the apartment building's top floor, the sixth to be exact.

After a brief scrutiny, Lumian's gaze landed on the faintest of the glowing windows.

In keeping with Ive's penny-pinching character, he probably refused to light an additional gas lamp.

Finding a secluded, dark corner, Lumian set himself up, his focus locked onto the dimly lit window, a silent sentinel awaiting any sign of activity.

As the hours wore on, a homeless man wandered by, hoping to claim this sheltered nook as his makeshift bed for the night. However, catching sight of Lumian's shadowy figure, he reluctantly shuffled off elsewhere.

Such encounters barely registered with Lumian anymore. Unperturbed, he maintained his vigil.

Close to 11 p.m., the feeble light in the window blinked out.

Roughly fifteen minutes later, Monsieur Ive, garbed in a faintly dark suit and chestnut-hued tweed trousers, materialized at the apartment door.

With cautious glances cast about him, clutching a carbide lamp, he made his way along the street's shadowy cloak towards the Underground Trier entrance a stone's throw away.

Lumian bore witness as a living statue, observing the retreating illumination of Monsieur Ive's lamp until it was swallowed by darkness.

Several minutes later, with no signs of official Beyonders tailing Monsieur Ive, Lumian arose, dusted off his attire, and crossed the Avenue du Marché towards the hidden stone staircase leading underground.

Lumian did not attempt to follow him. First and foremost, he had no source of light; his only candles were those used in ritualistic magic, their scent too conspicuous. Second, he lacked knowledge about Monsieur Ive's true capabilities, his motives for venturing into Underground Trier, or the extent of power he might command.

Retracing a few steps, Lumian melted into the shadow of a nearby building's pillar, shrouding himself in the comforting dark.

A tedious wait ensued. As midnight loomed, the blue radiance of the carbide lamp punctuated the darkness at the underground entrance.

The elongated shadow of Monsieur Ive once again graced the scene.

Just as he came to the bottom of the stone staircase, Lumian tugged his cap lower over his eyes and stepped forward, barking out, "This is a hold-up!"

The strategy behind this sudden ploy was to gauge Monsieur Ive's strength. Should the landlord be a formidable force, Lumian suspected he would merely dismiss the mugger with lethal efficiency. In that case, Lumian would have the opportunity to make a swift exit, his greatest risks being some minor injuries and a dent in his pocket.

If, however, Monsieur Ive failed to exhibit significant ability, the faux robbery would quickly morph into a real kidnapping. Lumian would then corner the landlord in a remote pocket of the Underground Trier, demanding answers about his secretive behavior around Room 504's tenant and his nocturnal trips to the underground world.

At Lumian's gruff demand for a 'hold-up,' Monsieur Ive visibly flinched.

Seeming to accept his fate, he pulled out a worn brown leather wallet, extracting a single silver coin valued at 1 verl d'or.

An unexpected surge of avarice flooded Lumian at the sight of the silver coin. Its intricate design, with the cherubic relief on the surface and radiating lines, drew him in.

Almost against his will, he found his right hand reaching out to snatch the coin from Monsieur Ive. With a swift pivot, he spun on his heel and took off, playing the part of a robber to perfection.

Five or six steps into his escape, a niggling thought started to bother Lumian.

What sort of robber would flee after pilfering a solitary 1 verl d'or coin?

And why did I even seize the coin?

Lumian's senses abruptly reignited. Channeling Dancer's agility, he made a forceful twist of his frame and skidded to a halt.

He noticed Monsieur Ive was also on the run.

The landlord of Auberge du Coq Doré darted across Avenue du Marché and made a beeline for Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons.

Lumian, originally preparing to pursue, abruptly dropped his pace.

Monsieur Ive, now a victim of robbery, didn't aim for the sanctuary of his home nor the aid of law enforcement in the bustling market district. Instead, he elected for the theater, situated at an angle from his dwelling!

Could it be that he perceived a more effective guard there? Lumian's brow furrowed in contemplation.

Then, within the span of a heartbeat, he spun around and resumed his faux robber's role.

He was anxious that Monsieur Ive might rally a force capable of reclaiming his pilfered silver coin.

Given Monsieur Ive's infamous miserliness, such a response was within the realm of possibility!

Although Lumian was not particularly concerned about losing a single verl d'or, getting caught would undoubtedly unmask his identity.

Exiting Avenue du Marché, he nonchalantly flipped the silver coin to a destitute vagabond dozing at the street's edge.

At the metallic ring, the man's eyes flickered open, resting on the gleaming piece nestled under the nearby lamplight.

Once back on Rue Anarchie, Lumian peeled off his cap and coat, tucking them under his arm as he resumed his leisurely stride.

His test had confirmed his suspicions: Monsieur Ive was no ordinary man. He possessed Beyonder abilities, albeit seemingly ill-equipped for combat. He had elected to “gift” a silver coin to an apparent burglar and retreat.

This little episode filled me with a sudden, overwhelming desire for that silver coin. A desire so fierce, I nearly abandoned my true intentions, almost succumbing to madness... Lumian reflected on the strange encounter.

It was a sensation he recognized.

He had experienced a similar one when facing Susanna Mattise.

One filled him with paralyzing fear, the other stripped him of rational thought, substituting it with raw hatred.

The similarities of these abilities' manifestations... Could Monsieur Ive be linked to Susanna Mattise? What fate could have befallen Room 504's tenant... The Forest Fairy, the foliage, laurels... Does Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons have ties to Susanna Mattise as well? Lumian speculated as he retraced his steps to Auberge du Coq Doré.

He slipped into the underground bar to find Charlie, glass of beer in hand, belting out a tune with a few of the inn's tenants.

“We impoverished souls, dwelling in the attic...”

Catching sight of Lumian's return, Charlie excused himself and ambled over to the counter, heaving a sigh as he began,

“You wouldn't believe what transpired this afternoon. The hotel manager nicked my drinks twice, and then had the gall to say that because of Madame Alice's situation, he couldn't promote me to an official attendant. I'm stuck as a lowly handyman. How utterly odious. Just how unlucky can I get?”

Suddenly, Charlie fell silent, muttering to himself, “Unlucky, unlucky...”

After repeating it a handful of times, he glanced up at Lumian, a look of surprise registering on his face at the sight of Lumian's subtle smile.

Chapter 158 “Report”

As he pondered on Ciel's early morning warning of potential misfortune, Charlie was dumbstruck. The very afternoon he had lost the job prospect he'd been eagerly awaiting and even squandered a few verl d'or hosting a round of drinks. The thought of it all intensified the weight on his shoulders.

Ciel's smirk hit him, and Charlie's voice instinctively dropped to a hush.

“You can predict the future?”

His forecast had hit the mark with uncanny precision!

“Didn't I tell you? Just a wild guess,” Lumian stated, his lie rolling smoothly off his tongue.

Yet, it wasn't entirely untruthful. It was more an educated guess, based on the luck patterns he'd perceived. It was akin to devising the method after having the final answer.

Charlie's expression reflected his disbelief, yet he didn't challenge the claim. Instead, he asked hopefully, “Has my run of bad luck ended?”

Lumian turned, his focus shifting, and his eyes growing stormy.

His face soon mirrored the seriousness of his thoughts.

Charlie, witnessing Ciel's shift in demeanor, felt his pulse quicken and his mouth go arid with anxiety.

“What, what's going on?”

Lumian pressed his lips together before stating, “You're in for a disaster.”

Charlie's countenance faltered, his complexion turning pale, a stark contrast to its earlier flush.

Lumian chuckled.

“Just pulling your leg. You may not have the best luck for a while, but you won't be particularly ill-fated either.”

It suggested that even if the issue with Susanna Mattise hadn't been entirely handled, it wouldn't escalate any time soon.

Charlie couldn't quite grasp Lumian's words. “Really?”

“It's a tall tale! Believe it if you wish. No skin off my back if you don't,” Lumian remarked, ordering a glass of absinthe fennel with a dismissive smile.

Lumian's nonchalant demeanor helped Charlie breathe easy. He nestled onto the bar stool next to him, sipping his rye beer.

“I had thought the whole situation wasn't quite done yet.”

That's not out of the question... Lumian made no effort to unnerve Charlie further.

Charlie's gaze fell on the bar top as he murmured, “You know, in that moment, I wished to be a lowly handyman and leave the market district ASAP.”

Lumian glanced his way.

A raw bitterness bared itself on Charlie's face.

Lumian suggested further, “You might as well pay a visit to the nearest Eternal Blazing Sun cathedral and pray more.”

“And by the way, I dined with our landlord, Monsieur Ive, today. He seemed a bit odd when Room 504 came up in our chat, almost as if he knows something about the previous tenant but isn't keen on sharing.”

Charlie froze for a moment before comprehending Ciel's reference.

He lowered his voice again. “The one who hung that woman's portrait?”

Lumian confirmed with a slow, assertive nod.

Charlie stayed quiet for a beat before muttering, “Does that woman have any ties to Monsieur Ive? Does he suspect something off about the portrait? I-I should inform the authorities. I'll head to the nearest cathedral at dawn and speak to the priest...”

Not bad. A few days under my wing and you're much sharper than Louis from the Savoie Mob. You caught my hint right away... Lumian raised his glass, taking a sip of the visually appealing green liquid.

Lumian was not well versed in the details of Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons, hence the severity of the problem was a mystery to him. Any self-led investigation would take at least a couple of weeks to gather any meaningful information. Even then, he might not possess the means to tackle it. As such, his best course of action was to alert the authorities from the get-go, allowing them to take the reins.

Once he'd reached a decision, Charlie shot a covert glance at Pavard Neeson, who was engrossed in the art of mixology. Confirming that he had the man's undivided attention, he leaned in and whispered to Lumian, "If they query the source of my information, what should I say?"

"Just tell them that it cropped up during our chat," Lumian responded candidly.

With Charlie previously singing his praises, the police in Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman were aware that Auberge du Coq Doré had fallen under Ciel's jurisdiction. Thus, it was only a matter of time before Ciel and Monsieur Ive, the landlord, crossed paths over a meal and some idle chatter.

When the time came, the official Beyonders could make casual inquiries and ascertain that all was in order. They would have no reason to cast suspicion upon Lumian.

"Alright." Charlie's demeanor noticeably relaxed.

Lumian savored another sip of his La Fée Verte before posing a question, "Which of the leaders of the Poison Spur Mob do you know?"

Charlie had previously alluded to the leaders of the Savoie Mob, the Poison Spur Mob, and several other smaller gangs having a certain notoriety in Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman—enough to frighten the youngsters.

"What are you scheming?" Charlie's countenance lit up with excitement.

"I intend to ask them a question or two," Lumian chose to frame it in the most courteous manner possible.

Charlie's enthusiasm dipped a notch, realizing he wouldn't be privy to any spectacle.

"Besides Margot, I know of two others. One's 'Hammer' Ait. He was a regular at Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman, but he's been frequenting Rue Anarchie of late. Then there's Harman, sans any nickname. I've observed Margot in his company on multiple occasions, showing him considerable deference. He's bald, by the way.

"The head honcho of the Poison Spur Mob is 'Black Scorpion' Roger. He appears to reside somewhere on Avenue du Marché..."

Garnering Margot's respect implies Harman's status and power within the Poison Spur Mob superseded his... Perhaps "Hammer" Ait has taken control of Salle de Gristmill and Rue Anarchie, hence his regular appearances here? Lumian pondered, setting his sights on "Hammer" Ait.

His plan was to shadow the gang leader over the ensuing days, familiarizing himself with his routines and behaviors. Should he fail to locate Wilson in due course, he would contemplate making an example of Ait.

After emptying his glass of absinthe, Lumian and Charlie made their way upstairs.

Upon reaching Room 207, Lumian noticed a wooden crate, adorned with the black-painted emblem of the Savoie Mob—a bullet and a dirk—placed near the entrance.

Could it be the ingredients sent by Louis? Lumian stooped to pick up the crate, subsequently unlocking the door to the room.

As he flipped open the lid, the foul stench of bird droppings wafted up from a dark stone, accompanied a pair of eyeballs, bloodshot and haunting, and a poison sac, securely encased within a glass jar.

Avenue du Marché was bathed in a yellowish glow thanks to the gas lamps.

Ive, the landlord of Auberge du Coq Doré, was guiding someone towards a vagrant, slumbering soundly with eyes tightly shut.

“Here lies my silver coin!” he pronounced.

The person behind him threw a skeptical glance towards the sleeping tramp and queried, “Did he rob you?”

“Absolutely not,” Ive replied with firm conviction. “The differences in height, physique, even clothing are too significant.”

“A robber that tosses stolen loot to a tramp... this situation is undeniably peculiar.” The figure, teetering on the edge of the lamp's glow, nodded in near imperceptibility. “We must remain vigilant, prepared for unforeseen complications or potential investigations.”

Ive simply grunted his agreement, grumbling under his breath, “Had he not cast my silver coin to this vagrant, we could have traced him directly.”

He possessed the unique capability to sense the location of his possessions, but only for a limited time.

The following morning found Lumian holed up in Auberge du Coq Doré, engrossed in Aurore's grimoire.

He needed to keep an eye on “Hammer” Ait and his cohorts, which meant altering his study routine to the morning. These gangsters only made their appearance in the afternoon, and their nightly escapades ended in the early morning hours.

Charlie had left at dawn for the closest Eternal Blazing Sun cathedral. Upon his return, his calm demeanor was underscored by a radiant smile; he seemed to have found a source of solace and received validation.

As the clock approached noon, Lumian stowed his grimoire and ambled over to Avenue du Marché. He positioned himself a short distance from Monsieur Ive's apartment and the Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons, hoping to witness any activity from the official Beyonders.

The streets were bustling as usual, the shops brimming with activity, and carriages weaving in and out. Yet, none bore any hints of the recent events.

After observing for some time, Lumian was about to seek out a restaurant to satiate his hunger when he spotted Monsieur Ive in the distance.

Still clad in his faded formal suit and chestnut tweed trousers, donning a gray wide-brimmed hat, and grasping a black cane, he made his way towards his apartment.

The official Beyonders haven't made their move yet? Lumian contemplated briefly before crossing Avenue du Marché to intercept the landlord.

“Good afternoon, Monsieur Ive. Out on an errand?” he greeted, all smiles.

Monsieur Ive looked slightly disoriented before scrutinizing Lumian, a touch of trepidation in his gaze.

“I'd something to attend to at the police station.”

So, the official Beyonders roped in Monsieur Ive through the police station, but delegated the interrogation to someone with the required abilities? Lumian surmised the situation, albeit with a lingering query: The officials didn't uncover that Monsieur Ive possessed Beyonder powers?

Lumian responded with a gentle nod and a reassuring smile.

“Is there something I could assist you with?”

“No need,” Monsieur Ive responded, his tone veering between guarded and resistant.

He gestured towards the beige apartment.

“I need to get home.”

In an effort to not arouse any suspicion, Lumian made no further attempts to detain or probe him.

As Monsieur Ive walked away, Lumian was left behind, a slight furrow marking his brow.

Looking back at their brief exchange, nothing seemed off. Yet, certain details felt out of place, leaving him with a peculiar sensation.

On impulse, Lumian shifted his focus to the retreating figure of Monsieur Ive, attempting to gauge his recent string of luck.

It seemed pretty ordinary; nothing too fortunate or adverse.

Nonetheless, Lumian found his suspicion intensifying rather than alleviating.

During their dinner the previous night, Lumian had instinctively assessed Monsieur Ive's luck.

It had leaned towards the unfortunate end of the spectrum!

And now, in a span of a day, his luck had taken a turn for the better. What could've transpired? Lost in thought, Lumian sauntered down Avenue du Marché, his hands nonchalantly tucked into his pockets.

Chapter 159 Savage

The tide of fortune seems to have taken a turn for Monsieur Ive...

His handling of the robbery the previous night must have laid bare his secret, especially in the face of a disguised Beyonder masquerading as a police officer...

Had they sniffed out something amiss and laid a trap in anticipation?

The gears in Lumian's head whirred ever faster, his growing suspicion suggesting that his 'robbery' attempt on Monsieur Ive had alerted the man and his unseen benefactors.

Still, he couldn't verify any peculiarity regarding the landlord without attempting some sleuthing.

Realizing the eyes of the figure at the Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons could be upon him, Lumian abandoned the thought of paying a 'visit' to Monsieur Ive, making a hasty exit from Avenue du Marché.

An urgency overwhelmed him to execute the Prophecy Spell in order to unravel some of the mysteries plaguing him.

Within the confines of Quartier de l'Observatoire, near the subterranean cemetery, warmed by a flickering bonfire, Lumian spotted Osta Trul's peculiar stance. "Did you manage to procure the items I asked for?"

Osta responded with a genuine grin, "Indeed. The entrails of a lynx, tongue of a hyena, marrow of a stag, and some gray henbane. It all amounts to 5 verl d'or. Including the reward you pledged, it comes to 20 verl d'or."

Per their agreement, Lumian was to hand him an extra 5 verl d'or for each item. But, noticing the sum worth of the items was only 5 verl d'or, Osta's conscience wouldn't allow him to charge full price, hence the discount.

Lumian didn't mind. The arrangement saved him a great deal of time.

Naturally, he didn't push to pay more, handing Osta a sum of banknotes amounting to the quoted price of 20 verl d'or.

The four items were contained in either modest glassware or small wooden boxes and cloth bags. Lumian inspected them individually before sliding them into his pocket.

His gaze once again fell on Osta Trul. "Any further insights on the aquatic monster?"

Osta nodded. "Indeed."

His expression bore a plea for affirmation.

"In my effort to gather more information about the aquatic monsters, I even ventured into the underground river myself. Regrettably, the ground was treacherous, and I ended up taking a tumble."

He pulled up his sleeve, revealing the distinct marks of his slip on his forearm.

So that's why his posture seemed off... If I hadn't requested Osta to gather information on the aquatic monster, would he have avoided the injury? Yet I only enlisted him after foreseeing an imminent accident. What could have transpired if I had rescinded? A feeling of inevitability wrapped Lumian.

He was also a pawn in the game of destiny, his actions and will embedded in the luck he sensed.

Lumian curtailed his musing and responded with a light chuckle.

"I did advise you to be cautious."

The recollection of Ciel's warning for the upcoming days suddenly sprung to mind.

Did it manifest so rapidly? Is his divination prowess truly this potent? Amid his astonishment, Osta queried, "You divined I would be injured within the next two days?"

What Sequence does Ciel belong to?

Not only does he appear combat-savvy, but his divination skills are impressive!

A grin played at the corners of Lumian's mouth.

"It's not divination."

He held back further explanation, leaving Osta to his own conjectures.

Seeming to take the hint, Osta didn't press further. Instead, he shifted the conversation back to the aquatic monster.

"I've been able to piece together the whispers and conjecture, and it seems there are three kinds of aquatic monsters in the underground river:

"The first appears to be a drowned corpse, bloated and eerily pale. The second resembles a grotesquely mutated fish, standing nearly as tall as a man, covered in sturdy scales that seem impervious to harm. The third bears an uncanny resemblance to strands of black hair floating atop the water, only to suddenly reach out and ensnare the unwary souls on the banks, dragging them under.

"These aquatic monsters, however, aren't particularly formidable. Most of their attacks on humans end in failure, which accounts for the abundance of tales and rumors.

"They're an elusive lot. Sometimes seen two or three times a month, sometimes they disappear entirely. I ventured down there last night myself, but aside from my unfortunate slip, I found no trace of them."

Lumian scoffed at this, saying, "With your level of combat prowess, I wouldn't bet on your return if you ran into one of them."

Osta only managed a sheepish smile in response, not deigning to refute the comment.

The only reason he dared to venture there was due to the aquatic monsters' reputed weakness and his own divination.

Lumian's brow furrowed in contemplation. Given the aquatic monsters' record, any Beyonder team from the two Churches or Bureau 8 could effortlessly eradicate them. So, why were they still prevalent?

If the underground river concealed a greater peril, any poor soul encountering the aquatic monster should have no chance of escape.

As these thoughts spun in his mind, Lumian took the materials Osta Trul had provided and carefully concealed them between a pair of nearby rocks.

He was cautious, thinking that should he engage in a heated battle with the aquatic creature in the future, these delicate items might get damaged.

Afterward, Lumian handed Osta a 5 verl d'or note.

“This is for your insights about the aquatic monsters.”

Lumian picked up his carbide lamp and, following Osta's instructions and the tunnel signs, began his journey towards the underground river.

A few moments of hesitation later, Osta quickly rose, grabbing his own carbide lamp and hurriedly following Lumian.

Upon hearing the rapid footsteps, Lumian spun around, his puzzled gaze landing on Osta.

Osta managed a strained smile and said, “I'll come with you. I might be of some assistance.”

“You?” Lumian couldn't veil his incredulous disdain.

Osta cleared his throat before divulging his actual motive.

“The aquatic monster is a spiritual being. It's improbable that you'll want everything. I-I'm hoping to scavenge what you leave behind.”

If fortune smiled upon him and he found a buyer for the parts, he could make a tidy sum of more than ten verl d'or!

Lumian merely stared at Osta, letting the tension build before finally breaking into a grin.

“You're welcome to tag along, but don't expect me to play your bodyguard.”

From what he could discern, Osta's luck was veering away from a bloody end and instead showing promise of a minor financial windfall.

Essentially, if Osta joined him on this underground river expedition, it implied that the hunt might be relatively safe and potentially lucrative.

Of course, Lumian couldn't be entirely sure that his decision wouldn't sway the course of Osta's luck.

“No problem.” Osta replied, devoid of apprehension.

In his mind, he'd merely be tailing Ciel from a distance. If they happened to encounter an aquatic monster, he'd simply keep a wider berth. The threat to his own life seemed minimal at best.

Osta's unwavering resolution prompted Lumian to study him a moment longer.

Seeing that his luck hadn't shifted, Lumian lifted his gaze, picked up his carbide lamp and resumed his journey forward.

In a way, having someone like Osta trailing behind had its benefits.

Sometimes, the art of fishing required bait. On other occasions, in the face of a formidable monster, one needn't outrun the beast. One just needed to outpace their so-called allies!

The two of them ventured deeper into the subterranean world, each step guided by the flickering light of their carbide lamps.

After roughly ten minutes, they were engulfed by an escalating humidity, and Lumian could discern the faint murmur of flowing water.

He held his lamp aloft, casting an eye over the tunnel signage before veering into a pathway shrouded in darkness to his right.

Soon, the telltale shimmer of water, distorted by the lamp's radiance, beckoned ahead.

Lumian approached the underground river with caution.

It stretched five to six meters wide, ensconced beneath a naturally-formed stone dome peppered with stalactites. The water was relatively clear, meandering through the carved gullies.

Apart from a scattering of moss, Lumian detected no signs of life at first glance.

Osta had already ceased advancing, observing from a safe distance as the dangerous Beyonder meticulously combed through the riverside.

The pair maintained a distance of over ten meters, sporadically progressing and halting.

Fifteen minutes elapsed, and Lumian's search bore no fruit.

Half an hour passed, and the situation remained unchanged.

As the path ahead began to constrict, Lumian's keen eye spotted some anomalies.

By the riverbank, several rocks lay scattered, their edges tinged with soil.

A struggle here? This thought nudged Lumian's heart as he cautiously neared the area.

He crouched down, setting the carbide lamp aside and examined the vicinity with careful scrutiny.

Soon enough, he discovered a pair of footprints and signs of something being dragged away.

Yet, where these traces led, the river flowed transparent and calm. The riverbed was clearly visible and bore no hint of lurking dangers.

Drip. A solitary droplet of liquid landed on Lumian's nape.

It was chilly and adhesive.

An immediate sense of peril overwhelmed Lumian. Without delay, he jerked his head upwards.

In the cavernous interlude between stalactites, a glistening figure of grayish-white writhed.

Its head resembled a python, the body slick with scales akin to a fish. From where fins should have been, emerged two arms and a single leg, eerily human-like.

The monster's mouth gaped open, unveiling a neat row of ferocious white teeth. From its mouth corner dripped a viscous and foul-smelling liquid.

In the following heartbeat, the monster pounced, soaring towards Lumian.

Crouched on the ground, Lumian tumbled backwards.

Simultaneously, his body coiled like a spring, catapulting his right leg upwards in a swift whip-like motion.

With a satisfying crack, Lumian, teetering on the brink of falling, landed a solid kick on the airborne monster who failed to evade the strike, hurling it towards the opposing stone wall.

Crash!

The monster collided with the rocky facade.

Lumian was back on his feet, charging at his opponent with the feral urgency of a cheetah.

As the monster slid off the wall, Lumian's form was mirrored in its muddy yellow eyes.

Lumian reached out, seizing its arm.

The monster didn't evade but opened its palm to welcome the assault.

Each of its digits sprouted sharp scales, glinting ominously with a deep blue sheen.

Without warning, Lumian twisted his elbow and flicked his wrist, claspng the monster's wrist with both hands to thwart the menacing blue scales.

He then extended his right foot, sweeping away the monster's lone leg.

With just one leg, the monster was powerless to resist. Its only option was to harness Lumian's grip on its wrist to propel itself upward, its solitary leg trailing behind and its monstrous maw leading the charge, ready to devour Lumian's entire head.

At this critical moment, Lumian relinquished his hold, lowered his stance, and rolled towards the stone wall.

Thud!

The aquatic monster landed heavily behind him.

In a fluid motion, Lumian swiveled, snatching the monster's leg. Channeling his strength from the core, he swung it towards the stone wall.

Crash!

The monster's skull crumpled upon impact.

Lumian didn't pause. He maintained his swinging momentum, battering the monster against the pillar, the wall, and the floor, with dark red blood and pale yellow fluid splattering everywhere.

Amid the pounding sounds, craters formed on the stone wall, and the monster's skull started to fragment, the contents spilling out in a gruesome red tide.

More than ten meters away, Osta Trul stood agape, utterly mesmerized by the violent spectacle.

How savage!

Incredible!

Thump! Lumian unceremoniously dropped the mutilated, lifeless aquatic monster onto the ground.

Chapter 160 Pervert

Osta Trul had never questioned Ciel's competence in tackling the aquatic monster, yet the ruthless efficiency with which he dispatched it caught him off guard.

It felt much like witnessing an adult landing a blow on a child.

A persistent inquiry bobbed to the surface of Osta's thoughts.

To what path and Sequence could Ciel possibly belong?

Why could he engage in combat and appear to wield formidable prophetic capabilities?

Within a region speckled by dark-crimson and dull-golden symbols, Lumian crouched, brandishing his ceremonial silver dagger. He slid the blade into the monster's open wound, cleaving through its flesh, and deposited it in the hollow timber container prepared earlier.

Once two containers brimmed with the monster's flesh and scales casting a dim cerulean glow, he uncapped a metallic flask and began collecting the monster's blood that burbled ceaselessly.

Witnessing this, Osta methodically closed the gap between him and the vanquished monster, lingering nearby.

Before too long, Lumian rose, pivoted, and retraced his steps.

Scrambling, Osta hastily crouched and started amassing blood, scales, and what he believed to be spiritually rich organs.

His gaze frequently darted to Lumian, who was steadily increasing his distance, showing no signs of halting for Osta.

A sense of unease began to seep into Osta.

After all, Ciel had dispatched the aquatic monster with terrifying ease. Given his earlier performance, Osta feared that Ciel could also eliminate him without much effort. Should he remain alone by this subterranean river in the depth of the darkness, and should another monster be lured by the scent of blood, he would find himself in dire straits!

With a sense of urgency, Osta hastily stowed the harvested materials, not daring to dawdle. Fighting the temptation to salvage more of the monster's remains, he left a good 90% behind and hurried after Lumian.

As their carbide lamps winked out at the tunnel's end, darkness reclaimed the area, save for the perpetual whisper of water.

After an indeterminate time had passed, a group of thrill-seeking university students made their way through the cavernous labyrinth, kerosene lanterns in hand.

They discovered a partially collapsed stone wall and a pathway disordered and fragmented.

Apart from that, all was serene and silent. Not a trace of the aquatic monster or blood stains were found.

Having bid Osta Trul adieu, Lumian found himself a seat in a public carriage, bound for Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman.

Retrieving the remainder of his ingredients from Auberge du Coq Doré's Room 207, he grasped his carbide lamp and plunged once more into the realm below ground.

As Lumian descended from the floor, mimicking the surface world, his pace slackened.

Under the glow of the carbide lamp, he noticed fresh, evident footprints marking the slightly damp path.

Heavy footprints... Lumian studied them for a moment, voicing his puzzlement.

From the looks of these prints, he concluded that the passerby must've weighed upwards of 100 kilograms, or been shouldering something hefty.

Who could it be? An underworld smuggler? Lumian had his suspicions, but he didn't intend to tail them.

Trier's subterranean labyrinth was brimming with people. Obsessing over each footprint would only exhaust him.

Besides, the other party had no quarrel with him. Provided they didn't interfere with his upcoming ritual magic, he had no concern even if he was ready to ensure their silence.

Turning the lamp's dial, Lumian tempered the reaction between carbide and water, thus dimming the flame's intensity and casting less light.

He was concerned that the maker of the footprints was near, and might detect the bright light closing in from behind.

Continuing his journey, Lumian suddenly halted, nose twitching.

He detected a familiar aroma.

A musky perfume designed to awaken masculine desires, intermingled with a citrus hint.

After a brief moment of mental rifling, Lumian identified the scent's owner.

Little Minx Jenna, the Showy Diva!

Could these be her footprints? Preposterous. Surely she doesn't weigh more than 100 kilograms? She's not cast of iron! Besides, the prints were clearly a man's... Lumian mulled over two possibilities.

Either Jenna is adept at concealing her tracks, leaving no corresponding marks, or she's been hoisted by a man...

It's quite ordinary for two individuals collectively to exceed 100 kilograms...

Judging by the footprints, the man stands between 1.65 and 1.7 meters tall. His gait seems slightly peculiar...

As Lumian turned this over in his mind, his brow furrowed.

Piqued by curiosity, he resolved to tail the trail and ascertain what predicament Jenna had stumbled upon, or rather, what scheme she was brewing.

It was crucial to note that this Showy Diva was suspected of being Franca's paramour. Her entanglement might reveal a clandestine secret of the Savoie Mob.

This could potentially provide Lumian, who was pursuing "loftier heights," with an opportunity.

Lowering the carbide lamp's intensity further, he hoped that once switched off, the flame would snuff out promptly.

Sticking to the tunnel's shadows, he tracked the footprints, vigilantly gauging the distance. Should anything go awry, he was ready to extinguish the light.

As the footprints appeared increasingly fresh, as though only moments old, he extinguished the carbide lamp and ventured forward in the darkness, relying on his memorized path.

Before he knew it, Lumian had reached a divergence in the path, a faint blue light emanating from the stone wall's end on his left side.

Slipping his black gloves on, Lumian inched closer, a wraith in the shadows.

The blue light radiated from a small cave nestled at the end of the stone wall.

Stationed against the stone, Lumian tucked himself into the shadow's embrace, craning his neck ever so slightly to catch a glimpse of what lay within.

At the cave's heart, a rather primitive iron-black carbide lamp sat in a relatively flat expanse.

Nearby, a capacious bag of grayish-white fabric bulged, seemingly at its full capacity.

A man loomed beside the bag, adorned in a blue cap, a common tweed suit of brown that one would see in Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman, with a linen shirt peeking out from beneath his darker jacket.

The man's breathing was noticeably labored. Standing nearly 1.7 meters tall, his side profile revealed a thin and slightly worn countenance, his brown eyes ablaze with unmasked desire.

Lumian's gaze dropped, registering the man's arousal.

He inwardly chided, Impatient, aren't we? No wonder he was lagging. That explains the irregularity in his footprints.

Lumian grew more convinced that the bag concealed none other than Jenna, the Little Minx.

She must have fallen prey to a kidnapper and rapist.

The man proceeded to remove his cap, casting it aside as his heavy panting echoed through the cave.

His countenance was laid bare before Lumian.

His eyebrows, pale and disordered, were sparse. His eyes sagged slightly at the corners. His nose was a hint of red at the tip, and his mouth bore dry, cracked lips. His complexion was a shade too pale, betraying signs of fatigue and exertion.

The man squatted, loosening the bag's ties, revealing its contents.

Lumian's intuition proved correct—it was indeed Jenna, the “Showy Diva.”

Her customarily tied brownish-yellow hair was in disarray, cascading over her body. Her eyes were sealed shut, framed by a layer of deep shadows. Adorned in a white blouse and a beige fluffy short skirt, it was unclear whether she had lost or hadn't yet donned her mole.

As the man drew Jenna from the bag, his breathing was so labored that Lumian could discern it effortlessly, even if he wasn't a Hunter.

Such a strong desire... bordering on the perverse... Lumian found himself thinking this almost subconsciously.

Stumbling upon such a scenario, he resolved to come to Jenna's aid while he was here. If the Savoie Mob's boss ever considered appointing a new leader, "Red Boots" Franca might vouch for him.

But a hasty rescue wasn't on his agenda. Lumian intended to observe further, ascertain whether the man possessed any unique abilities that emboldened him to cross a leader of the Savoie Mob, "Red Boots" Franca.

He would swoop in once the man was mid-stripping, incapacitated in his haste.

If only I had a long-range weapon. This wouldn't be such a chore... Lumian heaved a sigh, pondering on getting the Savoie Mob to supply him with a firearm.

The man's hands found their way to Jenna's face, patting it lightly twice.

Next, he withdrew a small metal bottle, unscrewing the cap and brought it to Jenna's nose.

Achoo!

A sneeze jolted Jenna awake, her eyes fluttering open.

The man's visage reflected in her wide blue eyes, sparking alarm. An instinctive urge to rise seized her.

But in the next moment, she registered the absence of strength in her body, rendering resistance futile.

"Damn you, dog sh*t, what do you think you're doing?" Jenna mustered enough strength to spit out the words.

A twisted smile spread across the man's face.

"Do you know? I've watched you sing countless times. Each time, the desire to tear away your clothing and have you perform solely for me is overwhelming."

Jenna hurled back, her voice seething with rage, "You lunatic, a bastard who deserves being f*cked by a donkey! You're done for! The Savoie Mob will have you sleeping with the fishes!"

The man remained silent, his brown eyes gleaming with a peculiar light.

Jenna's cheeks flushed crimson, and her breathing grew shallow.

Her body twitched involuntarily, her eyes widening in shock at her own reaction.

"This is just perfect. Not only a hint of resistance but a subconscious acquiescence too..." The man stood up, brimming with anticipation, rapidly disrobing his clothes, trousers, and shoes.

Lumian, observing from his hidden spot, felt a sudden jolt of alarm.

Jenna's reaction is abnormal! Could she be under the influence of some Beyonder power?

Did every human and dog in Trier have access to Beyonder powers?

Has Jenna been coerced into arousal? This... This bears an uncanny resemblance to Susanna Mattise and Monsieur Ive's act...

Lumian's thoughts spiraled as he drew out the ritual silver dagger, tucking it into his right pocket with the blade pointed inward and the hilt pressing against the outer cloth.

Lowering his body, he silently moved from the stone wall into the cave, stealthily approaching the man from the shadow's edge.

The man's attention was fully riveted on Jenna. His eyes blazed with a fanatic light, his face twisted into a perverse grin. As he worked his belt loose and shed his trousers, his gaze roved over Jenna's form.

Emerging from the shadows, Lumian sprang forth like a cheetah on the prowl.