

Inevitability 181

Chapter 181 The Loyal Ciel

Lumian settled back into his seat, taking a casual stance. His gaze locked onto “Giant” Simon as he inquired, “And what's the matter?”

“Giant” Simon cast his light-blue eyes over Louis and Sarkota standing behind Lumian.

“Aren't they Brignais's men? Why would you allow them to tail you?”

“If it were me, I'd put them to work as bouncers.”

Louis and Sarkota exchanged anxious glances when Simon hit the nail on the head.

Lumian wanted to applaud, grateful that Simon had provided him with an opportunity to win their trust.

However, he couldn't entirely trust Louis and Sarkota. He had no desire to become a mobster, but he didn't want to be shot in the back, riddled with bullets someday.

Lumian smirked once again.

“What do you mean Brignais's men? I used to work under Brignais!”

“We're all members of the Savoie Mob, loyal to the Boss. As long as I remain faithful, there's no need to worry about them turning against me!”

Louis and Sarkota nodded repeatedly, impressed by Ciel's broad-mindedness and demeanor.

That's right. Baron Brignais changed our status in the Savoie Mob and gave us a lot of trust, but we're still members of the Savoie Mob. Betraying the Boss is out of the question. And it was the Boss who commanded us to follow Ciel and obey his orders!

Simon choked on Lumian's words. After a few seconds, he finally said, “You may be loyal to the Boss, but others might not be. Brignais is ambitious.”

You find Brignais unloyal to the Boss? Hidden Blade... Uh... ‘Red Boots’ Franca mentioned that Brignais hasn't been obedient lately... Lumian suddenly felt pity for Gardner Martin, the boss of the Savoie Mob.

His most capable subordinates lacked loyalty, and his favorite mistress had ulterior motives. The newcomer he had recently promoted turned out to be a spy from another organization...

Realizing he couldn't shake off Louis and Sarkota, two thugs who often accompanied Baron Brignais and had knowledge of various matters, Simon steered the conversation back on track.

“I came here to discuss the dancers' basic salary.”

“F*cking dammit, why the bloody hell do we have to give those sluts money every day, even when they don't have a single customer?”

“Franca is overbearing. Just because she's the Boss's mistress, she convinced him to agree to such an unreasonable demand!

“We're mobsters, not a charity. By Steam, when I handed money to those women, I felt like a bloody priest!

“That's fine by me. I only need to give them a few licks each day. But it's 1 verl d'or a day for Salle de Bal Brise. The textile workers in Quartier du Jardin Botanique earn only 1.5 verl d'or a day, and they work from morning till night!”

No wonder Franca's beautiful dancers refused to work on Rue du Rossignol. The prices there are low, and the base salary is meager... Why are you cursing like Franca and Jenna? Can vulgarities be contagious? Aurore seemed to curse in the same manner during her occasional bouts of madness... Lumian deliberately ignored Louis's suggestion and asked with a smile, “What's your plan?”

Simon's fury remained etched on his face.

“You, me, and Black, we'll go to the Boss together. We must make him change his mind and rein in Franca!

“Which of the other mobs pays their dancers a base salary?”

Is he trying to take advantage of my recent takeover of Salle de Bal Brise? Is he inciting me to rebel against the Boss? Heh heh, as Aurore once said, the early worm gets eaten by birds, and ravens who stick their necks out get shot... Lumian raised his hands, cracking his knuckles with a sly smile.

“It's pointless. Franca is the Boss's mistress. The Boss will undoubtedly heed her. If you want him to change his mind, there's only one way—become the boss yourself!”

Is this something you should say in front of so many people? Louis, Sarkota, and the others behind Lumian were so terrified that they almost covered their leader's mouth.

“Giant” Simon also appeared taken aback.

“What nonsense are you spouting?”

Most of his thugs trembled with fear.

“What I mean is...” Lumian suddenly seized the table's edge and flung it at “Giant” Simon!

Clang!

The table crashed to the ground, and the cups upon it shattered into shards.

“Giant” Simon had already retreated two steps, his expression darkening. His subordinates instinctively reached for their revolvers. He looked at Lumian and demanded,

“What do you want?”

Lumian stood behind the upturned wooden table, seething with anger.

“You wretched dogsh*t, does the Boss mean anything to you? How dare you plot a mutiny in secret, attempting to force him to change his orders!

“Do you truly aspire to be the boss?

“The Boss's commands must be carried out, whether they're good or bad. If there's an issue, you can address it with the Boss privately, but you cannot conspire with others to coerce him!”

The question exposed “Giant” Simon's true intentions, leaving him unable to explode in anger or continue inciting Ciel.

He spat out his words. “Damn it, is there something wrong with your brain? When did I say I wanted to force the Boss? I merely suggested that everyone should approach the Boss and explain that providing a dancer with a base salary is unreasonable. It places a heavy burden on us.”

With that, “Giant” Simon waved his hand, wearing an expression that conveyed difficulty in communicating with Ciel. He turned and departed, his subordinates trailing after him, descending the staircase.

Observing their departure, Lumian inwardly chuckled.

Thank you so much. Tomorrow, no, tonight, the Boss will come to know how loyal I am!

Lumian had stumbled upon an opportunity to earn Gardner Martin's trust, and he seized it without hesitation.

Putting on a show, he simulated an angry exhale, restraining his emotions. Pointing at the mess on the floor, he commanded Louis and the others, “Clean this up.”

Just as Lumian finished speaking, a figure emerged from the shadows near the staircase.

It was Jenna, having finished her performance in the dance hall.

Jenna wasn't wearing a revealing outfit today. Her rose-colored dress, supported by a petticoat, made her resemble an upside-down flower. Her brownish-yellow hair was tied in a simple bun at the back, with some loose strands cascading gently. The dark circles around her blue eyes were less pronounced, lending her a touch of elegance. A mole adorned the middle of her left cheek.

This symbolized elegance.

Observing Jenna, Lumian couldn't help but chuckle.

“Do the folks in the market district appreciate this style?”

He was referring to Jenna's less provocative attire.

Jenna smiled smugly.

“It works surprisingly well from time to time. Franca mentioned that sometimes, the more unattainable something appears to men, the more they desire it. F*ck, I can't quite fathom that mentality.”

“What's the matter?” Lumian glanced at the waiters tidying up and found another table to sit at.

Jenna took a seat opposite him and smiled.

“I'm here to discuss the singing fee for next week. Previously, it was 10 songs per night, 4 verl d'or, and a third of the money thrown onto the stage.

“Lately, it seems I've become more popular than in the past few months!”

Lumian pondered for a moment before responding.

“Has the Poison Spur Mob grown suspicious of you, making it difficult for you to perform at their dance halls?”

“F*ck, that infuriates me! Couldn't you have disguised yourself better? You were identified so easily, and it ended up implicating me!” Jenna replied indignantly.

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

“Starting from today, you will still perform 10 songs per night, but the fee will be increased to 10 verl d'or. You can keep two-thirds of the money thrown onto the stage.”

Louis, who stood behind Lumian, felt a pang of sorrow.

Although Little Minx didn't sing here every night, she frequented the place several times a week. This change would result in Salle de Bal Brise earning 2,000 verl d'or less annually!

However, it seemed that Little Minx had played a significant role in the assassination of “Hammer” Ait, the mob leader. As a consequence, she had lost the opportunity to perform in Poison Spur Mob's territory, amounting to a loss of over 1,000 verl d'or per year.

Jenna appeared quite content.

Receiving 10 verl d'or for 10 songs and keeping two-thirds of the money thrown on stage was the most generous treatment in the underground singer industry.

She smiled and said, “I can only come for three days next week, from Friday to Sunday night.”

“Seeking opportunities at dance halls in other districts?” Lumian inquired casually.

Jenna shook her head.

“No, I don't have that much time to bloody sing. I have other things to attend to.”

“Isn't being an underground singer your profession?” Lumian inquired curiously.

“This is just a part-time gig!” Jenna emphasized with a smirk. “My main job is being the shared mistress of ‘Lion’ Ciel and ‘Red Boots’ Franca!”

Louis's legs nearly buckled at the jest.

In his mind, Franca was a possessive woman. She had taught a lesson to any man who dared to snatch Little Minx away from her.

If the boss truly became involved with Little Minx, he would undoubtedly face Red Boots' fury!

This fellow has other identities? Lumian's thoughts raced as he asked thoughtfully, "Is Jenna your real name or an alias?"

Part-time underground singers often adopted an alias to avoid impacting their other occupations.

Jenna's lips curled up, and she blinked before replying, "What do you think, Monsieur Ciel?"

She deliberately emphasized the name Ciel, implying that he, too, used an alias.

With that, Jenna rose from her seat, leaned across the wooden table, and whispered into Lumian's ear, "After hearing your conversation with 'Giant' Simon, I have a sincere suggestion. The less loyal someone is, the more they boast about their loyalty. Your performance went a bit overboard, hehe."

Jenna straightened up, wearing an air of pride, and confidently walked toward the staircase.

Finally, it was her turn to "educate" Ciel!

Is that so? Lumian pondered as he watched Jenna's departing figure.

"Aren't you wearing perfume today?"

Jenna turned around, her expression brimming with delight as she inquired, "So you didn't notice me ascending the stairs?"

Chapter 182 Truth Serum

"What do you think, Madame Jenna?" Lumian grinned, throwing Jenna's own words back at her.

"Damn it!" Jenna exclaimed, raising her hand in frustration before turning around with a scowl and storming back downstairs.

Lumian pondered for a few moments, tapping the table in front of him. He turned to Louis and Sarkota and said, "Bring me a glass of fennel absinthe."

Being the "protector" of Salle de Bal Brise had its perks, and his meals here were on the house.

As he remembered that he had to hand over most of the dance hall's profits to the Boss and bribe the police, Lumian felt less inclined to be frugal.

No matter how difficult things became, he couldn't let himself suffer. He had to do his utmost to make the Boss suffer instead!

Lumian drank two glasses of the bitter, mind-altering light-green liquid and remained at Salle de Bal Brise until nearly midnight.

Standing up, he turned to Louis and Sarkota and declared, "I'm going to bed. Wait until the dance hall closes before you head home."

“If anyone causes trouble, throw them out. If you can't handle them alone, gather everyone and be bold enough to take action. Don't worry, I'll take responsibility if anything goes wrong.”

What he left unsaid was: If I can't handle the responsibility, I'll leave it for the Boss to worry about.

Salle de Bal Brise stayed open until 2 a.m. every day, usually opening between 10:30 a.m. and 11 a.m.

“Yes, Boss,” Sarkota and Louis replied in unison.

Upon returning to his bedroom, Lumian lingered for another fifteen minutes before grabbing the brown suitcase containing Aurore's grimoires. He squeezed out of the window and smoothly landed on the ground from the second floor.

He walked through the shadows, turning from Avenue du Marché into Rue des Blouses Blanches, and entered the safe house he had rented previously.

After hiding the grimoires and releasing some sulfur to repel the bugs, Lumian left the room and turned into an alley behind Rue des Blouses Blanches. He planned to take a detour to Auberge du Coq Doré, where he would spend the night.

After walking a dozen steps, he noticed a pile of trash beside a barricade.

Scavengers and cleaners wouldn't come until the next morning to clean it up. At that moment, it had become a haven for rats, cockroaches, flies, and stray dogs.

Seeing the rats and stray dogs, Lumian suddenly remembered something.

Among the three metal canisters he had acquired from the perverted Hedsey, one remained unidentified.

I might as well give it a try... Lumian nodded to himself imperceptibly.

Relying on his exceptional skills, lightning-fast reflexes, nimble movements, and keen observation, he swiftly stepped on a rat with grayish-black fur. He crouched down, retrieved the slightly heavy metal canister, and poured some odorless, colorless liquid into the “prey's” mouth.

The rat let out a quick squeak, but aside from that, nothing out of the ordinary happened.

Considering the pervert's methods, I thought it might be an aphrodisiac, but it doesn't seem like it... That makes sense. That pervert possesses Beyonder powers that stimulate desire. He wouldn't need an additional canister with the same effect... Lumian lifted his right foot, watching as the rat scurried back to its companions. It joined the swarm while emitting continuous squeaks, but it didn't do anything else.

Suddenly, a voice as clear as crystal rang out from behind him.

“What are you up to?”

Lumian whirled around and beheld “Red Boots” Franca emerging from the shadows at the far end of the alley.

She still sported her trademark red boots, off-white breeches, and a black-and-white checkered blouse. Her flaxen hair was neatly tied up.

Why are you here? Lumian was about to inquire, but he promptly recalled that Franca resided at 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches.

He could only respond honestly, "Conducting an experiment."

"What kind of experiment?" Franca approached with curiosity.

Her eyes, resembling sparkling lakes, surveyed the rats before she let out a chuckle.

"Has your sister taught you to experiment on rats?"

"Are you referring to laboratory rats?" Lumian found it easy to converse with Franca. Many words required no further explanation.

He then said, "Didn't Jenna inform you that after I disposed of the pervert, I obtained three metal canisters? One contained gas that could render people unconscious. I depleted it when I eliminated 'Hammer' Ait. The second canister contained an accompanying gaseous stimulant, and there's still a fair amount left.

"The third canister holds a liquid. I'm unsure of its properties. Hence, I experimented on these rats."

Understanding dawned on Franca's face.

"So, it's a leftover from that pervert."

She then asked with anticipation, "Could it be an aphrodisiac?"

Why do you share my thoughts, Madame? Lumian gestured towards the squeaking rat, finding amusement in the situation.

"It doesn't seem so. You appear somewhat disappointed?"

Franca didn't conceal her feelings and let out a sigh.

"Indeed. If it were truly an aphrodisiac, how intriguing it would be."

"If it were indeed an aphrodisiac, what would you want to use it for?" Lumian suddenly harbored suspicions that Franca intended to do something to Jenna.

Franca glanced at him.

"Damn it, are you accusing me in your mind? Do you think I have no moral boundaries?"

"I hope it's an aphrodisiac. My main curiosity lies in experiencing its effects and effectiveness. I would consume some myself and have Gardner try it as well. If his mistresses desire, they can partake too. Do you understand the pleasures of flirtation and amusement?"

"..." Lumian was momentarily at a loss for words. After a few seconds, he responded, "You Trierians certainly excel at games."

"I'm not a Trierian," Franca retorted, "but I concur with your statement."

She turned her gaze towards the metal canister in Lumian's grasp.

"Shall I assist you in discovering its properties?"

"Aren't you concerned about the dangers?" Lumian was somewhat taken aback.

It remained uncertain whether this vial of liquid was a slow-acting poison or a vessel for curses!

Franca chuckled and replied, "You truly need to supplement your knowledge of mysticism.

"I intend to employ divination. Witches possess considerable divinatory abilities."

Aurore's grimoires made no mention of it. They solely documented the Witch's Potion, which causes gender transformation. It speculates that every Witch excels in spells... Yes, those proficient in spells shouldn't be lacking in divination... Lumian handed the liquid-filled canister to Franca.

Franca walked to the edge of the alley and halted behind a five-story building.

She extended her right hand and traced it back and forth on the dim glass window.

Simultaneously, she softly recited something in Hermes. Even with Lumian's acute hearing, he could only catch a few words.

Spirituality... Inquiry... Answer...

A few seconds later, the glass window darkened and deepened, as though it led to an enigmatic, unknown world.

Franca stepped back, raised the metal canister, and spoke in Intis, "What is the purpose of the liquid inside?"

From the depths of the glass window, an aged voice responded, "Induces an urge to confess."

Franca nodded, expressed gratitude, and concluded the divination.

As the glass window returned to its original state, she turned to Lumian and stated, "It appears to be a concoction akin to a truth serum."

"Truth serum?" Lumian inquired.

Aurore had never mentioned such a term.

Franca casually explained, "It's a serum that compels people to speak the truth.

"Once their desire to spill their secrets is triggered, along with the interrogator's questioning, although there may be a fair amount of nonsense, it becomes exceedingly challenging to lie. What they utter should stem from their innermost desires."

Confiding their desires... Similar to the pervert's other abilities, involving diverse human yearnings... As expected of a boon from the Mother Tree of Desire... This could prove quite useful for a Beyonder like me, who lacks proficiency in spirit communication and divination... Lumian retrieved the metal canister from Franca.

Franca glanced around and queried with a smile, “Why did you choose Rue des Blouses Blanches for the experiment? Shouldn't your activities be centered around Avenue du Marché and Rue Anarchie?”

Lumian withheld nothing.

“I rented a safe house here to safeguard my sister's grimoires. I fear they may be damaged if I am targeted.”

“Very cautious,” Franca nodded approvingly. “Your sister is fortunate to have a brother like you. I used to have a brother too. He was conceited, enjoyed flaunting his skills, and lacked practicality. I yearned to teach him a lesson every day...”

She trailed off midway, her gaze falling upon her red boots.

Used to have. Does that imply he is no longer present? Lumian keenly sensed Franca's unspoken meaning and promptly understood the reason behind her sudden despondency.

After a few seconds, Franca's smile returned.

“Your sister must trust you too. Otherwise, she wouldn't have revealed our organization to you. Although we never explicitly mentioned keeping the research society a secret from our families, hardly anyone ever discloses it. After all...”

Franca fell silent once more, her smile taking on a bitter tinge.

After all, what? Lumian was perplexed, but he refrained from asking. Instead, he simply elaborated on Aurore's rationale.

“We were caught in a calamity back then, unsure of who would survive and who would perish. That's why my sister divulged some secrets to me, hoping they would prove useful in the future.”

“Understood.” Franca nodded, regaining her composure. She smiled and remarked, “I thought you came to Rue des Blouses Blanches in search of me, eager to learn about mysticism.”

“It's too late now.” Lumian was already feeling weary.

Franca clicked her tongue and chuckled.

“I won't do anything to you. It's too... too mad and shameful to engage in such activities with someone who knows my true gender.”

Is that so? I was afraid that once you got accustomed to it, the shame would only heighten your excitement... Lumian suspected that Franca, who could be swayed by the notion of “Life is short, why not give it a try,” would engage in more unforeseen endeavors.

After bidding farewell to the Demoness, he returned to Auberge du Coq Doré.

Nothing eventful occurred in Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman until Thursday.

At 8 p.m., Lumian arrived at 19 Rue Scheer on Avenue du Boulevard and met Mr. K in the basement.

Mr. K gestured towards the three assistants holding silver trays behind him and stated, "There are a total of three mystical items, each priced between 15,000 verl d'or and 20,000. Make your selection."

Chapter 183 Three Items

Upon entering the basement, Lumian's eyes immediately fell upon three silver plates holding the items.

There was an unassuming white glove, a pair of gold-rimmed glasses with a teocolored tint, and a shiny golden button.

Observing Lumian's interest in the mystical objects, Mr. K, seated in a red armchair, introduced them in a low, raspy voice, "That glove is Circus. It grants you some weak but peculiar mystical abilities. It can conjure a gust of wind, create fog, and use bursts of light to mess with your target's vision. By touching them, you can freeze your enemies. You can also open most doors without a key. It can even guide you through solid walls.

"These techniques suit your need for mysticism, but remember, carrying it will make you lose your way more often. And sometimes, getting lost brings misfortune.

"Price is 18,000 verl d'or."

Sounds like the Sequence 8 Trickmaster of the Apprentice pathway mentioned in Aurore's grimoires... Although the powers aren't formidable, if used as support alongside traps or my close combat skills and revolver shots, they can yield miraculous results. Lumian found solace in the positive effects of the Circus glove, compensating for his lack of mysticism and helplessness in certain situations.

However, the negative effects were dire. For Hunters who relied on tracking and pathfinding, losing their way frequently meant losing their strengths entirely. Misfortune could strike at any moment, even without wearing the glove. Merely having it in his pocket would affect Lumian.

Mr. K shifted his attention to the brown, gold-rimmed glasses and addressed Lumian, "Do you remember the painting from the gathering?"

Painting? Lumian's mind immediately conjured the image of the dizzying oil painting.

The painting, reputedly created by a Beyonder before his demise, boasted vibrant colors, a peculiar pattern, and a hallucinatory scene. It seemed as if the artist had descended into madness before his death.

"I do." Lumian nodded.

Mr. K continued, "After the painting's owner passed away, his Beyonder attributes together with a strange power fused into his glasses, creating a unique mystical item.

"It allows the wearer to perceive things invisible to the naked eye. Occasionally, one can glimpse the truth of this world to some extent..."

Aurore's cautionary words echoed in Lumian's mind: "Don't see what you shouldn't see, don't listen to what you shouldn't hear."

Internally, Lumian couldn't help but criticize, Isn't this pair of glasses doing the exact opposite? It's like a weapon of self-destruction! These items seem to have nothing to do with my two needs...

Mr. K glanced at Lumian, his voice still low and raspy in the confined basement. "By perceiving the world from a different perspective and witnessing the once-invisible, the wearer will be seized by an uncontrollable urge to paint. Each painting produced will possess supernatural effects. For instance, a painting of an ocean will make onlookers feel as if they're drowning."

"In a similar vein, if you apply various cosmetics to your face instead of painting on canvas, you can achieve an excellent disguise. Anyone scrutinizing your face will be convinced that it's your true appearance, albeit temporarily."

"Remember, once you've painted a 'new' face, avoid looking in the mirror. Otherwise, you'll believe it to be your real self. Slowly but surely, your body and mind will transform until you become an entirely different person."

"Much like this, you can't sustain that newfound countenance indefinitely. After a span of three hours or more, your sense of self will gradually succumb to its influence until you wholeheartedly believe that you are one and the same."

Upon analyzing the possible Beyonder domain of the mystical item, Lumian couldn't help but speculate, It sounds akin to the hypnosis and suggestions of the Psychiatrist pathway, but it differs greatly in other aspects... Considering the demise of the painter, could it be a power or aura left behind by an evil god?

Mr. K fixed his gaze on the brown glasses.

"You can probably surmise its negative effects. Seeing what should remain unseen and perceiving the truth of the world without adequate protection exposes you to unknown dangers. Perhaps, one day, you may meet a peculiar death like the painter, leaving behind an enigmatic painting.

"The price is 15,000 verl d'or."

Corresponding to a Sequence 9 Lawyer? The crucial aspect lies in the peculiar power associated with it. Yes, it doesn't fully reflect a Lawyer's abilities. Aurore's grimoires describe Lawyers as masters of eloquence and reasoning, adept at uncovering loopholes in rules and exploiting their opponents' weaknesses. They create an advantageous atmosphere to achieve ultimate victory. They can influence judgment, thoughts, and conclusions through their words, actions, and established processes. Additionally, they excel at utilizing the power of order... Lumian mentally reviewed the relevant mystical knowledge.

However, he remained uncertain about the Lawyer trait, particularly how to harness the power of order. Aurore lacked knowledge in that regard as well.

In essence, the brown gold-rimmed glasses fulfilled Lumian's need for better disguises. They also provided mystical means that required preparation but were less troublesome than the Alms Monk's elaborate rituals.

The only issue was its perilous nature!

Lumian contemplated, but didn't reach a final decision. He awaited Mr. K's introduction of the golden button.

Before long, Mr. K's raspy voice resounded again.

“It's called Flare. It originated from a deceased Light Suppliant.

“It grants additional buffs such as courage and strength through singing. It enables you to sense the presence of undead creatures and evil entities. You can also employ spells and rituals from the Sun domain, making it highly effective against undead souls and similar targets.

“After wearing it, you'll feel compelled to sing. Darkness and cold become unbearable, and you'll yearn for sunlight and warmth. If you haven't removed it after half an hour, you'll become a devoted follower of the Eternal Blazing Sun, earnestly praising the Sun.

“The price is 20,000 verl d'or.”

If it can resolve my issue of resisting the undead, the negative effects are bearable... The problem lies in the limited viable targets... Lumian pondered deeply, torn between which item to choose.

His rationale suggested opting for Flare or Circus, yet he couldn't make a decisive choice.

The brown gold-rimmed glasses catered to both of his needs and were his preferred option.

By wearing them solely before disguising himself and creating paintings with supernatural effects in a safe environment, he could effectively evade most of the negative consequences. Thus, he would avoid witnessing things he shouldn't and the so-called truth of the world.

In essence, it wasn't an item that needed constant donning. Lumian could choose the opportune moment to utilize it.

This way, he could proactively construct a spiritual barrier, screening out anomalies, similar to when he performed the Summoning Dance.

Considering his seal, the “coincidences” of Inevitability, and the occasional Summoning Dance, Lumian didn't believe an additional trait would worsen matters.

“I want those glasses.”

Mr. K appeared taken aback by Lumian's choice. After a few seconds, he queried, “Are you certain?”

“I'm certain.” Lumian produced a small cloth bag brimming with banknotes and meticulously counted out 15,000 verl d'or.

Mr. K refrained from further persuasion, emitting a raspy chuckle.

“You're even crazier than I presumed.”

There was a hint of admiration in his tone.

Instructing the attendant to accept the 15,000 verl d'or and hand over the brown glasses to Lumian, Mr. K nodded and remarked, “You can give them a test run here. It's safe enough.”

Lumian caressed the frame and discovered that the seemingly metallic material had an odd rubbery texture.

I'll dub you the Mystery Prying Glasses... Lumian pondered, recalling his sister's Beyonder pathway.

In the ensuing moment, he placed the brown gold-rimmed glasses on the bridge of his nose.

Almost instantly, he beheld a multitude of scenes from various angles.

The mottled ceiling, bloodstains in the corners, Mr. K's back that should have been out of sight, and the attendants stationed in the corridor...

Lumian also caught sight of a blot of darkness, a silhouette, a gaze emanating from an unknown source, and a visage concealed within the shadows.

Beneath the hood lay black, feathery hair, delicate features, sunken eyes, dark orbs, and ageless skin, only visible from below.

Is that Mr. K's face? Lumian experienced a sudden revelation.

Images from different perspectives flooded his mind, leaving him feeling lightheaded. His state of mind grew increasingly abnormal, and an insatiable urge to capture everything overcame him.

Hastily, Lumian removed the Mystery Prying Glasses, and his vision reverted to normal. Yet, the compulsion to draw lingered within him.

Exhaling deeply, he declared, “It's tolerable.”

Mr. K offered a brief warning, “Try to employ it in familiar and secure situations.”

After bidding farewell to Mr. K and departing the Psychic's headquarters, Lumian boarded a carriage back to Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman.

En route, as he passed through Quartier de la Cathédrale Commémorative, a thought struck him.

I must gather some canvases, brushes, and paints...

Even though my skills are limited to sketching and not particularly exceptional, the quality of the painting shouldn't influence the attached supernatural effects. Perhaps, the more distorted and grotesque it appears, the better the outcome...

Fifteen minutes later, Lumian alighted from the carriage ahead of schedule and located a shop specializing in oil painting supplies.

Upon hearing the price, he couldn't help but inquire, “What? 160 verl d'or? A single canvas costs 160 verl d'or?”

Chapter 184 Painting

When Lumian stepped back into the Auberge du Coq Doré, his mind was still filled with the exorbitant cost of painting supplies.

Among his colleagues at the Salle de Bal Brise, Charlie's monthly salary as a waiter was considered decent. However, it would take him two months of forgoing food and drink just to afford a single roll of canvas!

Lumian couldn't help but view painters as a destitute lot. How could they ever afford canvases, brushes, paints, wooden frames, human models, and all the other expenses that came with their craft?

Perhaps they relied on financial support from their families just to get by. Shaking off these thoughts, Lumian closed the door behind him and carefully placed the stack of items on the wooden table.

Eventually, he resigned himself to the fact that he couldn't afford proper canvases. Instead, he settled for the cheapest brushes, paints, paper, and other necessities. The truth was, Lumian didn't aspire to be a painter or have his work displayed in an exhibition. He simply needed a medium to imbue the supernatural power, obtained from the Mystery Prying Glasses. The quality of the paint, the possibility of cracking, the fading over time, or even his painting skills were all inconsequential matters.

And so, Lumian spent a total of 30 verl d'or, acquiring his modest supplies.

Mixing a palette of vibrant colors and unfurling a flexible sheet of white paper, Lumian prepared himself for the ritual ahead. With the sanctified silver dagger in hand, he crafted a wall of spirituality within Room 207.

His intention was to explore what he could draw and observe the effects it would yield.

Based on the reaction of Madam Magician's messenger at Auberge du Coq Doré, Lumian surmised that there was nothing particularly abnormal about this place. The only notable issue seemed to be the abundance of bedbugs. Susanna Mattise's predicament most likely had its origins in Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons or perhaps even an underground cavern.

Taking a slow breath, Lumian retrieved the brown glasses with golden rims and carefully placed them upon the bridge of his nose.

In an instant, the world around him seemed to spin, as if he had plummeted from the sky into the depths of the earth.

During this disorienting journey, Lumian beheld the inverted motel with its occupants moving about in a similar fashion, an underground bar, roots of trees and soil extending beneath the surface, rats lurking in the corners, and vermin scurrying about.

Deeper and deeper he fell, enduring the nauseating sensation of weightlessness.

And then, he caught sight of an immense network of brownish-green roots stretching in all directions, reaching into the distance and vanishing into the void.

“Ugh...” Lumian nearly expelled the contents of his stomach. The remnants of his unfinished dinner rose to his throat, threatening to escape.

Swiftly, he removed the Mystery Prying Glasses and fought the urge to vomit. Fueled by an insatiable desire to draw, Lumian picked up a paintbrush, dipped it into the paint, and began sketching upon the blank canvas.

Unbeknownst to him, his spirituality infused the brush with an increasing vigor.

After a few minutes, Lumian halted his strokes and gazed upon his creation.

What in the world have I drawn? The question echoed in his mind.

Upon careful observation, he managed to discern the subject of his artwork: a triangular house with a grayish-blue hue, its roof adorned with green trees, and rain resembling mud.

Lumian stared at the painting for a moment and suddenly felt an itching sensation on the back of his hand. Unable to resist, he scratched it, only to witness his skin turning red and swollen, accompanied by an all-over itchiness.

Could this be the Beyonder influence of the painting? Lumian's heart stirred as he looked away, attempting to soothe the irritation through the friction of his clothes. But his efforts were in vain, and he couldn't help but scratch a few more times.

As he averted his gaze from the child-like graffiti of an "oil painting," the itching gradually subsided and eventually vanished.

The urge to paint had vanished as well.

He turned around and contemplated the details.

I have to stare at the painting for at least three seconds before my body itches...

It's challenging to use it in battle. I can't just stick it on my face, can I?

If I use it as a trap, it might have some utility...

I wonder if there are any paintings that can be used without drawing the target's attention?

After careful consideration, Lumian resolved to make another attempt.

He donned the Mystery Prying Glasses once more, and the experience was nearly identical.

However, this time he also glimpsed deep darkness and shadowy figures moving within it.

Amidst the waves of nausea, Lumian removed his brown gold-rimmed glasses, retrieved a fresh sheet of paper, and took up a paintbrush.

This time, he didn't surrender to impulsive strokes but instead focused on visualizing what he desired and endeavored to bring the drawing closer to the image in his mind.

With this approach, Lumian crafted a golden-red sun, surrounded by a vibrant circle of colors—red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet.

As he finished, Room 207 suddenly warmed, and the chill in the air dissipated.

It seems to have a simple exorcism effect... Lumian wasn't entirely certain.

He sat on the edge of the bed, carefully observing the changes.

Over time, the warmth, which initially evoked restlessness and unease, began to fade.

Lumian attempted to fold the painting, keeping its back facing outward. The warmth promptly vanished, and the loss of spiritual essence within the painting slowed to a barely noticeable pace.

I should be able to preserve it for about two months... When unfurled, it can only be used for three days at most... Yes, this is akin to an alternative method of creating Beyond weapons. Lumian estimated, recalling his previous experiences.

Drawing two paintings in quick succession had placed a considerable burden on his spirituality.

After taking a short break, Lumian proceeded with his third experiment.

This time, he switched to using makeup-related painting tools.

Putting on the Mystery Prying Glasses once again, he braced himself for the sensation of spiraling into the depths. In the midst of it, Lumian caught sight of several indistinct figures lurking in the shadows. Removing the mystical item, he began smearing various substances on his face, carefully tracing lines with the aid of the glass window, which was illuminated by the light of the carbide lamp.

Similar to his previous attempt, Lumian made an effort to maintain control over his makeup, but occasionally, his instincts took over.

Reflecting on the "mirror," he saw his appearance becoming worn and haggard. His eyebrows appeared disheveled, his cheekbones slightly more pronounced, and his lips a touch fuller.

It felt as if he were looking at a stranger. Hastily averting his gaze, he drew the curtain to conceal the result of his "painting."

Having packed away the Itchiness and Sun paintings along with the various tools, Lumian decided it was time to venture out and verify the effects.

As he made his way to Salle de Bal Brise, he noticed Jenna engaging in flamboyant gestures while singing at the top of her lungs, and Charlie, who had just delivered some drinks to the outskirts of the dance floor.

The thugs paid no attention to Lumian, and none of them addressed him as their boss. Feeling a sense of relief, Lumian walked over to Charlie's side, gave his shoulder a friendly pat, and smiled. "Good evening!"

Charlie, clad in a white shirt and black vest, turned around, returning the smile as he asked,

"Good evening, Monsieur. Would you like something to drink?"

Deliberately, Lumian inquired, "Don't you recognize me?"

Caught off guard, Charlie's eyes widened, and for a few seconds, he gazed at the distant gas wall lamp.

Suddenly, a smile spread across his face, and he exclaimed in astonishment, "It's you! Praise the Sun. How long has it been since we last met? Just wait a moment. I'll come to you as soon as I'm not so busy!"

Charlie pointed towards the bar counter and bid Lumian farewell.

"This kid's acting skills are quite impressive," Lumian chuckled with satisfaction. "He didn't even recognize his own boss, me!"

Shifting his gaze, Lumian approached Jenna's stage, patiently waiting for her to finish singing a song filled with vulgar lyrics.

As soon as Jenna finished collecting the copper and silver coins from the stage and descended, Lumian eagerly greeted her and exclaimed, "You sang magnificently! Can I treat you to a drink?"

Jenna immediately put on a cautious expression.

Ever since the incident with that perverted Hedsey, she couldn't afford to be careless around any audience member who approached her. She worried about encountering another unpleasant situation.

For a few seconds, she examined Lumian's face and forced a smile to conceal her wariness.

"I must preserve my voice for my next song! Help me out by having another drink!"

With a wink, Jenna approached the two mobsters guarding the stage, seeking their assistance.

The mobsters didn't dare offend Showy Diva, who was rumored to be their boss and Red Boots' lover. Stepping forward, they positioned themselves between Lumian and Jenna.

Seizing the opportunity, Jenna made her way to the lounge near the bar counter.

Before leaving, she glanced at Lumian's hair color and scrutinized his face intently for a moment. She muttered to herself, "Bloody hell, is this some sort of fashion trend now?"

Lumian happily averted his gaze and turned toward the staircase leading to the café. The two vigilant mobsters guarding the area stopped him.

Very dutiful... Lumian smiled and replied, "Just going for a cup of coffee!"

After observing Lumian closely for a few seconds, the two mobsters stepped aside.

Entering the café and noticing that Louis and Sarkota had nothing to do, Lumian made his way to the washroom.

He didn't dare look at himself in the mirror. Instead, he splashed tap water on his face and rubbed it a few times, gradually removing his makeup.

When he was done, he looked at the mirror and saw his pale and weary reflection staring back at him.

It drains my spirituality quite a bit... I even painted two artworks earlier, Lumian thought to himself, regaining his composure before leaving the washroom.

Louis glanced around and stood up in surprise.

"Boss! When did you return?"

"Just now," Lumian replied, pointing towards the corridor. "I'm going to get some rest."

"Understood, Boss," Louis and Sarkota responded obediently, refraining from questioning further.

Lumian entered his room, compelled himself to freshen up, and settled down on the bed, drifting into sleep.

In his dream, he experienced the unbearable sensation of freefalling from midair towards the ground. As he plummeted, the earth beneath him unexpectedly cracked open, revealing a sea of raging flames. Lumian felt a searing and piercing pain in his mind. He snapped his eyes open, sitting up and gasping for breath.

In that moment, the room was enveloped in darkness and silence. Only a faint glow of crimson moonlight filtered through the curtains, casting a dim light upon the desk beside the window.

Chapter 185 Missing Goods

Why did I have such a dream? It felt eerily real... Lumian collected himself and assessed his condition, but found nothing amiss.

Yet, in his dream, he felt as though he was once again wearing the Mystery Prying Glasses, and they revealed even more.

After pondering for a while, Lumian suspected that the negative effects of wearing the Mystery Prying Glasses three times in a row still lingered. They seemed to have seeped into his subconscious, manifesting in his dream within the confines of Salle de Bal Brise, an ancient burial ground.

It appears that something is truly amiss beneath the surface here... Lumian sighed inwardly. He rose from his bed, donned his coat, and resolved to spend the night elsewhere to test his hypothesis.

Under the cover of darkness, with Salle de Bal Brise devoid of any illumination, Lumian followed the shadows along the roadside and returned to Auberge du Coq Doré, its main entrance locked.

For Lumian, this posed no obstacle. He didn't try rousing the irritable Madame Fels by knocking on the door. Instead, he circled around to the side, traced the pipe, and climbed onto the balcony on the second floor.

In Room 207, Lumian slept until six in the morning. He experienced only two sporadic, ordinary dreams.

So, it was indeed the ancient bones buried deep beneath Salle de Bal Brise that triggered the residual powers of the Mystery Prying Glasses within me... Lumian sat up, a mixture of delight and disappointment washing over him.

His original plan was to use the Mystery Prying Glasses to create one or two supernatural paintings each day, accumulating them for future needs. However, it seemed that frequent use of the glasses was ill-advised. He would have to wait until the lingering negative effects dissipated before attempting further experiments. Otherwise, he risked something dreadful and bizarre happening over time, possibly leading to a strange demise akin to the Lawyer who had left the glasses behind, leaving behind only an eerie oil painting with enduring abnormal effects.

Tonight, I shall sleep within Salle de Bal Brise and ascertain whether the negative effects have dissipated... In the future, I must refrain from wearing the glasses more than twice in a brief span of time... These are the details Mr. K neglected to mention. Yes, I must experience them firsthand.

Only through firsthand experience can I truly comprehend... Lumian rose energetically and made his way to the washroom to freshen up.

It being still early, many of the tenants were still abed, and the morning remained tranquil, devoid of the usual clamor over access to the washroom.

From time to time, Madame Fels would ascend the stairs to inspect the water meters on each floor, ensuring no one wasted the precious resource.

A contract had been inked between Auberge du Coq Doré and the Imperial Water Supply Company, stipulating a daily allowance of no less than 250 liters and no more than 500 liters of water. The cost amounted to 100 verl d'or per year.

Leisurely, Lumian strolled to the café on Rue des Blouses Blanches. He indulged in delectable treats like sablé cookies and brioche, a softer variation of croissants. Afterwards, he sought out a place for exercise.

Upon returning to Auberge du Coq Doré, he spotted Charlie, sporting a linen shirt and black trousers, seated on the steps outside the entrance, relishing a mouthful of meatloaf accompanied by an Apple Whiskey Sour.

“So early?” Lumian inquired, a smile playing on his lips.

Salle de Bal Brise closed its doors at 2 a.m., and the morning had yet to reach 8:30 a.m.

Uncertain whether to hastily rise and greet his employer or engage in the usual casual conversation, Charlie hesitated for a moment before standing up, a sheepish smile on his face.

“I think I'll catch a bit more sleep before heading back to the dance hall. I don't think I can keep doing this. I reckon there ought to be some time when we don't have to sleep or work. Otherwise, it feels, feels...”

Salle de Bal Brise opened at 10:30 a.m.

“Feels like we're mere machines built for work, devoid of a life to call our own?”

Lumian finished Charlie's sentence, lending him a helping hand.

“Exactly! That's spot on!” Charlie agreed. “You're quite the refined individual, you know? Sometimes, you don't seem like a mobster at all. I mean, not like the leader of the Savoie Mob. You come across as more... civilized!”

Had everything gone according to plan, I would have been studying at a university in Quartier de la Cathédrale Commémorative. I would be spending time chatting with my classmates and exploring the depths of Underground Trier... Lumian's heart sank as he focused his attention on Charlie.

This was the method he used to observe whether Susanna Mattise's issue still lingered and when it would rear its head.

“W-What are you staring at?” Charlie stammered nervously. “Do you see something amiss?”

Lumian eased his worry. His luck appears to be relatively normal and stable. He smiled, raising his right hand and giving a wave behind Charlie's back.

“Good morning, Susanna!”

Charlie spun around, eyes wide open, scrutinizing every detail.

A few seconds later, he exhaled and turned back, forcing a smile. He addressed Lumian, “You're just messing with me again.”

That name remained a haunting nightmare he couldn't shake off anytime soon.

“I'm strengthening your mental endurance. This way, if something truly occurs, you won't panic and find yourself unable to devise a solution.” Lumian earnestly patted Charlie's shoulder.

Moments before 10:30 a.m., Lumian made his way back to Salle de Bal Brise.

Upon his arrival, Louis and Sarkota approached simultaneously, their voices merging into one as they spoke. “Boss, something's up!”

“What's the matter?” Lumian inquired with a smile, seemingly oblivious to the anxiety and unease radiating from his two subordinates.

Louis glanced towards the staircase, lowering his voice. “Red Boots, Giant, and Rat are all here. It must be something serious.”

Every leader present? Lumian pondered his recent actions and found it hard to believe that he hadn't offended all the leaders of the Savoie Mob.

I've been on my best behavior these past few days!

“Indeed,” Louis confirmed with a solemn nod.

Lumian ascended the second-floor stairs nonchalantly, where Franca and the others awaited.

Franca had swapped her footwear for darker red boots. She sported light-colored pants and a trendy dark skirt that had gained popularity in Trier recently. Completing her ensemble was a more masculine formal attire.

With her right leg crossed over her left, Franca grinned at Lumian as he approached.

To her right was Baron Brignais, donned in a formal suit and top hat. On her left was a slender-faced man, barely reaching a height of 1.6 meters, boasting a pair of rat-like whiskers. He wore a dark brown shirt that fell short, and his thick, grayish-black hair framed his countenance. His dark blue eyes revealed a trace of anxiety.

“‘Rat' Christo,” Baron Brignais courteously introduced Lumian to the thin-faced man.

Baron Brignais then gestured towards the man seated opposite him. “‘Blood Palm' Black.”

Black possessed brown hair, blue eyes, and a round face. He appeared to be in his early thirties and had a warm smile that hardly resembled that of a mob leader.

Clad in attire leaning more towards formality, his hands were large, with clearly defined bones beneath the surface. He held a slowly smoldering cigar.

“Good morning, everyone.” Lumian dragged an armchair closer and settled in, positioning himself nearly a meter away from the table, assuming the air of someone in control.

“Giant” Simon glanced at him, took a drag from his cigarette, and exhaled a cloud of grayish-blue smoke.

“Christo met with some trouble and requires our assistance.”

“What sort of trouble?” Lumian directed his gaze towards “Rat” Christo.

Christo played a vital role in Salle de Bal Brise's lucrative business.

Despite the premium he charged for the smuggled liquor he peddled, its lack of taxation made it significantly cheaper than the wholesale liquor stores in Trier. Moreover, a substantial portion of the alcohol Christo dealt with was moonshine, cleverly adorned with labels from relatively renowned brands and origins.

Gritting his teeth, Christo, who bore a striking resemblance to a rat, spoke up.

“I've lost a shipment underground. The delivery men and escorts have vanished. Damn it, my younger brother was among them. His wife and child are in tears at my place!”

Something has transpired in Underground Trier? Smuggling operations are divided into carriers and armed protection? That's right. Osta Trul had mentioned helping others transport illicit books. Horse-drawn carriages are useless in Underground Trier; they rely solely on manual labor... Lumian nodded subtly and inquired, “What kind of goods?”

“A batch of red wine and brandy, along with some Blackfish.” “Rat” Christo couldn't help but slam the table. “Damn it, we've taken that route countless times. Nothing ever happened, nor did we encounter those hyenas.”

The term “hyenas” referred to the quarry police, who specialized in cracking down on smuggling activities and maintained order in the underground.

Observing Lumian's confusion, Baron Brignais casually explained, “‘Blackfish’ refers to firearms.”

Among the mob's top five lucrative ventures, the bootleg alcohol supply chain ranked second. Firearms, due to low demand, brought in the least profit. The casino business, which was the most lucrative, wasn't particularly favored in the market district, given the modest incomes of the local population. The money one could extract from the patrons was rather limited. Compared to gambling, which required wit, those who toiled all day preferred indulging in cheap liquor, gyrating their bodies, and seeking solace in the company of captivating dancers.

Regarding the sale of psychotropic drugs, the police department in Trier cracked down heavily on it. Following repeated warnings from the market district's police headquarters, Salle de Bal Brise had

put an end to such incidents. However, Rue du Rossignol, overseen by “Giant” Simon, occasionally experienced a few cases.

Lumian turned to “Rat” Christo and spoke, “Any suspects?”

“None,” Christo lamented. “Damn it, that route is incredibly well-concealed. Apart from me and my men, no one in the market district is aware of it.”

He paused for a moment before sharing his intentions.

“I need your help to search for clues along that route, using your expertise. I've gone through it myself, but found nothing.”

Without waiting for Lumian's response, Franca nodded and suggested, “Let's form pairs to ensure safety during the investigation.”

“Right, I'll team up with Ciel. There's something I need to discuss with him.”

“Giant” Simon's gaze flickered between Franca and Ciel a few times before he recalled that Ciel was suspected of sleeping with Franca's mistress, thus cuckolding her.

Seizing the opportunity to teach Ciel a lesson, “Giant” Simon nodded imperceptibly and said to “Blood Palm” Black, “You and I will be a team.”

Baron Brignais then turned to “Rat” Christo. “I'll accompany you for your second trip.”

After Baron Brignais and “Giant” Simon scoured the underground route to no avail, Lumian and Franca followed a smuggler into Underground Trier.

Chapter 186 Strange Footprints

Holding an iron-black carbide lamp, Franca glanced at the path between stone pillars and asked the smuggler, Fernandez, who was leading the way, in a state of confusion, “Doesn't this lead to Quartier de l'Observatoire?”

Though Underground Trier was a complex maze, the tunnels on this level had street names corresponding to the surface. After pondering for a moment, Franca realized they were going in the wrong direction.

Smuggling operations certainly entailed entering the city from its outskirts, and Quartier de l'Observatoire was positioned closer to the center of Trier compared to Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman. The district stood on the other side of the Srenzo River, effectively separating it from Avenue du Boulevard.

Fernandez, a smuggler associated with “Rat” Christo, turned around with a smile and explained, “The hidden route we're taking leads to Quartier de l'Observatoire. We always deliver the goods to the warehouse there.”

“Is that so?” Franca slowed down and increased the distance between herself and Fernandez, who wore a brown felt hat.

Since they hadn't entered the smuggling route yet, she lowered her voice and conversed with Lumian.

“I remember you traded your Pugilist Beyonder characteristic for 18,000 verl d'or with Gardner. You know it's a Beyonder characteristic, right? Or rather, do you grasp a Beyonder characteristic's true meaning?”

“My sister mentioned it before.” Lumian attributed his knowledge to Aurore.

Franca was tall and had long legs, making it effortless for her to keep up with Lumian.

Overwhelmed with emotion, she sighed and commented, “It's fortunate to have someone to guide you. In the past, we were stumbling around like blind mice, relying on ourselves to figure things out. Otherwise, I wouldn't have made the choice...”

Her voice trailed off, ending with a long sigh.

This reminded Lumian of a saying, either spoken by Aurore herself or relayed from Emperor Roselle's famous words: “Once you make a grave mistake, it will haunt you for a lifetime.”

Franca quickly regained her composure and whispered to Lumian, “You've just entered the field of mysticism. Apart from knowledge, you're lacking much more.

“It's best not to be frugal with that sum of money. Use it to purchase a mystical item or a Beyonder weapon to compensate for a Hunter's limitations in mysticism. Otherwise, if ‘Black Scorpion’ Roger truly seeks revenge against you, he won't need to go through much trouble. He can simply summon a few undead to hunt you down. If you have such intentions, I'll keep an eye out for you.”

Lumian chuckled.

“I've already made a purchase.”

“So quickly?” Franca nearly lost control of her voice, causing smuggler Fernandez to glance back.

The carbide lamps cast intersecting shadows, obstructing Lumian's view of Fernandez's expression. He couldn't discern what thoughts they triggered.

Lumian replied “honestly,” “Before joining the Savoie Mob, I discovered a circle of Beyonders through Psychic's gathering of mysticism enthusiasts. There, I exchanged the verl d'or that the Boss gave me for a mystical item.”

“No wonder...” Franca revealed a knowing expression and praised Lumian. “Your mind is even sharper than I imagined. Hmm, is it an item that enhances your mysticism abilities?”

Lumian spoke frankly, “A pair of Lawyer glasses, but they seem to have been tainted by some strange power.”

Franca's brow furrowed ever so slightly as she interrupted Lumian. “That's highly dangerous.”

“I know,” Lumian explained with a smile. “But as long as I choose the right environment and take precautions, it won't be too risky. Besides, it offers excellent disguises and mysticism techniques...”

Lumian briefly recounted his urge to paint after donning the Mystery Prying Glasses.

Franca's ponytail bobbed behind her head.

“It's certainly useful. If I were in your shoes, I'd make the same choice.”

“Only the leaders and thugs of the Poison Spur Mob haven't really interacted with you. They only know you by your peculiar hair color. Otherwise, they would have recognized your true identity by now. They wouldn't have needed to act themselves. They could have sought revenge by sharing your information and wanted posters with the police headquarters and the two cathedrals.”

Lumian chuckled.

“That's right. I can already set up a coffee meeting with Officer Everett.”

Franca's vibrant lake-like eyes sparkled as she said, “You've shared so much with me about the mysticism gathering and your trump cards. Jenna even kept telling me how cunning and deceptive you are. Yet, you're truly sincere and straightforward! Of course, our relationship is different from others. I knew it. Muggle's brother isn't that kind of person!”

For a moment, Lumian felt a twinge of guilt. He spoke sincerely, “Yes, she completely misunderstood me.”

After chatting for a while, they finally reached the outskirts of Quartier de l'Observatoire's underground area and turned into a southward tunnel.

Soon, Fernandez halted in front of a secondary well belonging to an abandoned quarry.

He positioned the carbide lamp at the mouth of the well and gestured downward.

“Let's go in.”

With the aid of the blue light, Lumian peered down into the depths of the well. It had been neglected for a long time and appeared to be completely blocked by gravel.

Using the recess in the well wall, ropes concealed in the shadows, and a basic iron ladder fastened to the moss, the three of them descended and swiftly reached the well's bottom.

Fernandez moved a few seemingly heavy rocks, revealing a narrow tunnel at the well's edge, wide enough for one person.

As they traversed the tunnel, which emitted a foul stench, the passageway ahead widened, as if they had entered another section of the quarry cave.

The air grew eerily still and darkness enveloped them. The cave ceiling was damp, with scarce traces of moss.

Lumian and Franca, each holding a carbide lamp, slowed their pace and meticulously examined the various signs along the smuggling route.

After an indeterminate amount of time, Fernandez pointed to a nearby tunnel.

“Our boss and Baron Brignais weren't entirely fruitless. They discovered that the caravan's tracks vanished into thin air over there.”

It was a tunnel connecting two sections of the quarry cave. The path was strewn with rubble and potholes. In the distance, darkness prevailed, devoid of any light.

Lumian and Franca swiftly located the relatively fresh footprints that had abruptly vanished. They squatted down, closely examining them.

“Only footprints going in. The ones coming back end right here. Most people returning carry heavy loads. Their footprints are deeper, distinctly different from when they came... We can rule out the possibility of them turning around and retracing their steps...” Lumian swiftly made a series of deductions.

Franca averted her gaze from her surroundings and stood up.

“No signs of a struggle. It's incredibly peculiar!”

She then motioned for Fernandez to move further away and wait in the quarry cave.

As Fernandez's carbide lamp glow faded into the distance, Franca produced a small makeup box and a white handkerchief with a blue checkered pattern.

The handkerchief belonged to “Rat” Christo's brother, Erkin, who had also gone missing during the smuggling operation.

Franca placed the carbide lamp down, opened the light-gold box, and ran her fingers over the mirror inside.

Meanwhile, holding the handkerchief, she repeated in a whisper, “Erkin's current whereabouts, Erkin's current whereabouts...”

The already dim tunnel grew even more stifling. The light from the two carbide lamps was pushed back by an invisible force, and the palm-sized mirror emitted a watery glow, as though revealing the depths of a dark river.

Before Lumian could count to three, a scene materialized on the mirror's surface.

Laborers lugging wooden crates and smugglers armed with revolvers and rifles trudged through the tunnel. As they progressed, the darkness behind them engulfed the space where the light had receded. Eventually, the carbide lamp's glow vanished from view, and the mirror's surface turned pitch-black.

“They did vanish in this area.” Franca ended her divination, her thin red lips pressed together. “But I can't discern anything further.”

Lumian didn't suggest trying the Mystery Prying Glasses. From his perspective, Trier's underground was a treacherous place, concealing all manner of secrets. There were ruins from the Fourth Epoch, foul-smelling old bones, catacombs with specific rules to follow, and the lingering Montsouris ghost that had defied eradication for years. They were all elements that instilled fear in those seeking the

truth. If he were to use the Mystery Prying Glasses to survey the surroundings, there was a high chance he would explode on the spot.

In due time, Trier's underground would boast another legend entwined with the power of an evil god.

Therefore, Lumian would lend a hand out of consideration for the Savoie Mob's boss, but he wouldn't go all out and take unnecessary risks.

After all, it was "Rat" Christo who suffered the loss. What did it have to do with him, "Lion" Ciel? Salle de Bal Brise still had an abundant supply of alcohol!

Franca glanced at him, not intending to make things difficult.

Red Boots stowed away the makeup box and Erkin's handkerchief, picked up the carbide lamp, and said to Lumian,

"Let's return and find Fernandez. Let him guide us forward. Perhaps there are other clues left behind."

"Alright." Lumian felt that Franca was merely fulfilling her duty as a member of the Savoie Mob.

The two turned around, carrying their carbide lamps, and ventured back toward the original quarry cave, plunging into the ever-deepening darkness.

After taking a dozen steps, Lumian abruptly halted, his expression growing grave.

"What's the matter?" Franca asked, perplexed.

Lumian's voice resonated with gravity as he directed her attention to the scattered rubble and pockmarked ground.

"No more footprints. The smugglers' tracks from their departure and our own as we crossed have vanished! But there's a trail of footprints carrying a heavy load leading forward!"

Franca's heart skipped a beat. She peered ahead, coming to the realization that the ground lay in disarray. The footprints left by her, Lumian, and Fernandez in the tunnel had vanished, replaced by the sudden reappearance of the missing caravan's tracks out of thin air!

Chapter 187 Shadow

"Dammit!" Franca exclaimed with frustration, her voice filled with intensity.

She scanned her surroundings, her mind racing as she pondered and speculated.

"Did we stumble upon the same thing that the missing caravan encountered?"

Entering that tunnel transported us to another world, erasing the original footprints?

Did we vanish into thin air in Fernandez's eyes?"

Lumian had never faced such a situation before, nor had his sister Aurore written about anything similar in her novels. He couldn't make sense of what was happening.

Lost in thought, his brows furrowed, Lumian suddenly heard Franca's conjecture.

How imaginative... Lumian's initial reaction was a deep sigh before he contemplated the possibilities.

The more he considered it, the more he realized that Franca's words were eerily similar to their current predicament. He knelt down and examined the footprints once again.

“Indeed, the footprints suddenly appear with the weight of something heavy,” Lumian said, gesturing to a dozen steps behind him.

That was the same spot they had previously traversed, yet there were no traces of their passage.

Franca clenched her teeth and spoke up.

“It seems we truly have entered another world. Or rather, an underground realm...”

“Dammit it! Why did this happen to us? Christo, Brignais, Simon, and Black encountered nothing and safely returned to the surface!”

Uh... Lumian suddenly felt a twinge of guilt at Red Boots's questioning of destiny.

Crouched on the ground, he instinctively raised his hand and touched his left chest.

Was this somehow inevitable?

Yes, I can't dismiss the possibility that it's Franca's doing. Her Sequence is higher than mine, and she carries a mystical item that may hold some secrets... Lumian quickly gathered himself.

Franca looked down at her companion and muttered to herself, “Could it be linked to one of our Sequences? Alternatively, it might be the adverse effect of your glasses.”

Lumian replied thoughtfully, “Hunter and Demoness are neighboring pathways.”

In other words, if this problem stemmed from the convergence of Beyonder attributes, the two of them couldn't escape responsibility.

Of course, at Lumian and Franca's level, the convergence of Beyonder attributes wouldn't have such obvious effects. However, Lumian recalled encountering two Demonesses less than two weeks after arriving in Trier, and he was only a Sequence 8. He suspected that the power of Inevitability had transformed convergence into something fated to occur.

Hmm... Franca fell into deep thought.

After a few seconds, she clenched her teeth and spoke.

“Perhaps this encounter is truly a problem with our pathway, but why did Christo's smuggling caravan enter this space and mysteriously vanish in reality? They've traversed this route countless times without any issues. Why is it different now? Dammit! That blasted rat must not have spilled all the beans! He wasn't just

smuggling alcohol and firearms this time. There's something else, something linked to mysticism?"

Franca was reluctantly swayed. She exhaled and said, "Now is not the time to dissect the cause. What matters is finding a way out. Sigh, why is Underground Trier intertwined with the abnormalities of the Hunter and Demoness pathways? Uh..."

Franca fell silent abruptly, as if recalling something.

"Have you figured something out?" Lumian stood up.

Franca pondered before responding.

"I don't know if your sister ever mentioned anything about the Fourth Epoch. Uh, she might not even be aware. In short, Trier during the Fourth Epoch served as the capital of the Tudor Dynasty, and the Blood Emperor who ruled the empire was likely a High Sequence Beyonder of the Hunter pathway. Furthermore, the Demoness family of that era shared a certain connection with one or several prominent nobles of the Tudor Dynasty. It's reasonable for them to have left something behind in Trier."

"Demoness family?" Lumian was taken aback by the term.

Franca pursed her lips.

"In the Fourth Epoch, the Demoness pathway was under the control of a specific family. Sigh, since I chose the Assassin pathway, I could only do my best to gather relevant information, but I still lack substantial knowledge."

Lumian steered the conversation back on track.

"Do you suspect that this space is linked to the sunken Fourth Epoch Trier?"

"Yes," Franca replied vaguely, not ruling out the possibility. She contemplated for a moment before adding, "The two Churches must have dealt with the ruins to some extent. If we can find the corresponding node, we should be able to escape."

Carrying the carbide lamp, Lumian once again examined the ground.

"Should we press on or turn back?"

"Christo's smuggling caravan doesn't seem to have noticed anything amiss. They're still moving forward."

Franca pondered for a few seconds and said, "Let's go back to the spot where we entered this space and investigate. It's just a few steps away. We won't waste much time."

"Alright." Lumian walked toward the center of the tunnel.

Soon, he and Franca stood at the place where the smuggling caravan's tracks had materialized out of thin air, attempting to take a step forward.

There was no trace of footprints ahead.

After walking another dozen steps, the darkness deepened. Only Lumian's and Franca's footprints remained on the path.

They had not returned to reality.

“Wait.” Franca raised her right hand, signaling to halt. “Let's turn back and head to the quarry cave we came from. We need to see if Fernandez has entered this space.”

Lumian didn't object.

It could help them further determine the nature of the problem.

Guided by the bluish glow of their carbide lamps, Lumian and Franca followed the tracks left by the smuggling caravan.

Before long, they reached the quarry cave.

A figure stood at the boundary of light and darkness, with its back turned towards them.

Franca exclaimed with delight, “Fernandez!”

It seemed that the smuggler had also entered this space. Perhaps the problem didn't lie with her or Ciel!

However, Franca's expression tightened as soon as she finished speaking.

Simultaneously, Lumian spoke in a deep voice, “Something's off.”

Fernandez, the smuggler, had been carrying a carbide lamp. There was no way he would just stand there in the darkness!

In the next moment, the figure turned around.

Under the illumination of Lumian and Franca's carbide lamps, a bloodied face came into view.

The man had short flaxen hair, thick brown eyebrows, and lake-blue eyes.

His lips were thin, and his appearance was unremarkable. Yet, his eyes radiated indescribable malice and hatred.

At that moment, sticky blood stained the man's face, as if it might drip at any moment.

It's not Fernandez! Why does he look familiar... Lumian assessed the situation as he reached for the black revolver concealed under his arm.

With a clang, Franca's carbide lamp fell to the ground.

Startled by the noise and the flickering light, the figure darted into the darkness and disappeared into a tunnel connecting to the cavern.

“What's wrong?” Lumian turned to Franca.

As a Sequence 7 Beyonder, a member of a secret organization, and an experienced combatant, she shouldn't be displaying such abnormal behavior and exaggerated reactions!

Franca gazed into the darkness for a few seconds before speaking, “That... that was my past self...”

Your past self, when you were still a man? Lumian was alarmed.

An unsettling feeling crept over him as he asked in a low voice, “You mean, before you drank the Witch potion?”

“Yes.” Franca bent down and retrieved her carbide lamp, confusion and fear etched on her face. “I thought no one in this world would remember that face except for me... Why? Why am I seeing it here? Is it generated from my memories? Can't our memories be kept secret in this space?”

Wouldn't that be a good thing? Lumian's initial reaction was one of excitement.

If this space could reveal the hidden memories of his subconscious, he could begin piecing together the truth of the Cordu disaster!

As for whether this space might intrude on something it shouldn't and risk severe corruption and damage, he paid it no mind.

With his carbide lamp and revolver in hand, Lumian cautiously circled the empty quarry. He found no other figures or anything related to his past.

Disheartened, he expressed his disappointment to Franca, “I couldn't find my past self.”

“Could it be that it's not a memory from the past, but rather something from the future?” Franca suggested returning to the secondary well that had brought them to this level. By searching for more anomalies along the way, they might be able to infer the nature of this space and find a way to leave.

Side by side, they traversed the quarry cave, following the footprints left by the smuggling caravan, heading towards the edge of Quartier de l'Observatoire.

As time went on, Lumian and Franca noticed something on the ground almost simultaneously.

They were scattered droplets of blood, mingled with the disordered footprints of the smuggling caravan.

“Are the abnormalities starting to manifest?” Franca whispered.

Lumian nodded.

“If we proceed further, we might encounter those people.” He glanced at Franca and added, “Although they may no longer be human.”

Franca scoffed.

“Are you trying to frighten me? Do you think that will scare me? Whether they're corpses or monsters, it's within my expectations.

“Remember, the most terrifying thing in this world is the unknown.”

Just as Franca finished speaking, Lumian's expression froze, illuminated by the glow of the carbide lamp.

“You're still trying to frighten me...” Before Franca could finish her sentence, she felt something warm sliding from her nose and falling to the ground.

It was a drop of bright red blood.

Chapter 188 Confidence

“Dammit!”

Franca couldn't help but blurt out her usual modal particle. With a quick swipe of her index finger across her nose, her hand revealed a bright red stain. The sight alone sent a shiver down her spine.

Franca snorted.

In an instant, black flames flickered in her nostrils, fingers, and the blood on the ground, swiftly vanishing into thin air.

Catching Lumian's gaze, Franca, slightly contorted from the pain, forced herself to enlighten him.

“We can't leave our blood in this unknown place. Otherwise, unimaginable horrors may unfold. Hey, why are you unharmed?”

From Franca's perspective, she surpassed Ciel in terms of Sequence and experience. There was no reason for him to emerge unscathed while she suffered!

“Perhaps I'm fine for now,” Lumian patronizingly responded, pondering thoughtfully.

“Maybe the shadow we encountered represented the old you, not the old me.”

“So why did we come across the old me and not the old you?” Franca eyed Lumian suspiciously.

Could this bloke be hiding another secret?

Lumian pondered for a moment before answering.

“Perhaps this space is more intertwined with Demonesses.”

“Could be...” Franca fell into deep contemplation.

After a few seconds, she pointed towards the footprints and blood droplets on the ground and suggested, “Let's catch up and investigate. The current condition of those people could reveal our future and help us prepare in advance.”

Lumian responded with action, walking into the darkness that swallowed the footprints and blood droplets.

The yellowish-blue light of the carbide lamp quietly resisted the encroaching darkness.

As they tracked further, the abnormalities on their bodies became increasingly apparent. Warm blood began to trickle from Lumian's nose, while crimson liquid seeped from Franca's eyes, gums, skin, and ears.

With her black flames, not a drop of blood remained.

Finally, they “returned” to the secondary well, where the tracks of the smuggling caravan and the slowly congealing blood abruptly vanished.

Whether it was the tunnel leading to the secondary well or the path to other areas, there were no traces left.

“They vanished again?” Franca, her face enveloped in black flames, frowned.

Lumian, his nose sealed by the black flames, took a deep breath and smiled.

“This might be our end. When the blood reaches a certain point, our bodies will gradually fade away.”

Lumian chuckled.

“So what if I do? Too many negative emotions will only cloud my thinking.”

“Sometimes, I reckon you're more mature than me.” Franca sighed.

“Did you just figure that out?” Lumian naturally wouldn't mention that he was both sincerely pondering the issue and confident.

Compared to Cordu, trapped in an endless loop, at least there was no sign of terrifying power in this place!

Moreover, Lumian didn't need to rack his brain to come up with several escape strategies.

The first option was to take a risky move by using the Mystery Prying Glasses to explore the surroundings from different angles and locate an exit.

Secondly, he could try throwing out Mr. K's finger to establish a connection, hoping it would create a passageway.

Thirdly, summoning Madame Hela or the messenger of Madam Magician was another possibility. If it succeeded, it would mean that this place wasn't entirely cut off from the spirit world. The two ladies might have a way to forcefully extract Lumian and Franca.

Fourthly, if all else failed, he could set up an altar and offer prayers to the mysterious ruler beyond the gray fog. Such a bizarre space couldn't restrict a great entity. Even the cycle of fate orchestrated by the evil god couldn't shield them from His watchful eye, let alone this place.

Lastly, if the great entity remained unresponsive, Lumian could perform a ritual and beseech for a boon. He could activate the black thorn symbol on his chest, allowing the sealed evil god's corruption to amplify. This disruption might create a vulnerability in the workings of this space.

You can be as calm and composed as me when you have numerous untried methods and believe there's a high chance of escaping this place... Lumian criticized inwardly, feeling somewhat perplexed.

It felt like he had forgotten something important, but it eluded his memory momentarily.

Franca retrieved a light-gold makeup box, opened it, and placed it on the ground.

Her form swiftly faded away, leaving no trace behind.

The aqueous light within the palm-sized mirror flickered, illuminating Franca's figure.

How magical... Lumian sighed, marveling at the sight.

Franca glanced around within the mirror for a few seconds before vanishing.

She reappeared across from Lumian, shaking her head, and uttered, "I can't find a way out by relying on the mirror..."

Without awaiting Lumian's response, the Witch attempted several more methods, but all proved futile.

Finally, she caressed the mirror inside the makeup box, seeking guidance from her spirituality.

In such a place, she hesitated to perform Magic mirror divination, fearing a perilous and dreadful connection.

"The way out... The way out..." Franca repeated the divination phrase in Hermes several times, and the mirror darkened, resembling a moonlit lake.

The shimmering aqueous light reflected a figure.

It was Lumian—wearing a wide-brimmed round hat, a white shirt, a brown jacket, and dark pants. Black flames flickered subtly at his nose.

"Uh..." Franca turned around, looking at her companion by her side.

She furrowed her brow slightly and stated, "Finding the exit with your glasses? Isn't that too dangerous?"

Congratulations on finally uncovering the simplest among my five solutions... Lumian pondered and remarked, "This is no longer the true Underground Trier, nor does it seem to be directly linked to the ruins of the Fourth Epoch. As long as we protect ourselves, we should be able to endure any peril."

"Protect..." Franca repeated the word with a smile. "I happen to excel at that!"

With a swift motion of her right hand, she extinguished the black flames on Lumian's nose.

After a few seconds, a drop of bright red liquid trickled down, caught by Franca's open palm.

Then, she conjured fresh black flames, sealing Lumian's nostrils once again.

The mild burning sensation was tolerable for Alms Monk Lumian. He asked cautiously, "What are you doing with my blood, a curse?"

Franca chuckled.

"Do I need to go through all this trouble just to kill you? I'll perform a Mirror Substitution to shield you from the danger of using those glasses."

As she spoke, she retrieved a palm-sized mirror and smeared Lumian's blood upon it.

She has so many mirrors... Are they the essence of a Witch's spells? Lumian observed Franca's busy movements, enlightened and slightly envious.

Franca turned her head and addressed him, "Give me two strands of your hair."

Without hesitation, Lumian plucked two strands and handed them over.

A black flame appeared in Franca's hand, incinerating the golden strands.

She sprinkled the ashes onto the mirror's surface and stroked it with her black-flamed palm while murmuring an inaudible incantation.

When the black flames suddenly receded into the mirror, the traces of blood and hair vanished.

“Do not stray more than 30 meters away from me,” Franca cautioned, holding the seemingly ordinary mirror.

Lumian nodded and retrieved the Mystery Prying Glasses from his pocket.

He placed the brown gold-rimmed glasses on the bridge of his nose, but his right hand remained gripping the mirror holder, ready to remove the glasses at a moment's notice.

Almost simultaneously, Lumian beheld a multitude of scenes:

Faces concealed in darkness, pallid and ferocious, drenched in blood.

A mass of dark hair floated amidst the shadows, comprised of hundreds or perhaps thousands of strands, extending in various directions.

Lingering figures, rock walls shimmering with aqueous light, and an impenetrable darkness.

In the pond-like puddle, a colossal, swollen, and pallid face lurked beneath the lightless surface, peering outward.

There was a glistening cave...

Light... Cave... Lumian's intuition instantaneously struck, compelling his dizzy mind to focus on the edge of the scene.

The luminous-filled cave rapidly enlarged, revealing a dimly lit passage beyond.

As the cave drew nearer, Lumian realized it was merely a reflection in a mirror. Its surface was solid and inaccessible.

The mirror sank to the depths of the lightless pool.

Suddenly, the colossal, swollen, and pallid face swiftly expanded before Lumian's eyes, consuming his field of vision.

Lumian's sight darkened, and he nearly lost consciousness.

Vaguely, he “saw” his flesh attempting to depart from his skeleton.

Whack!

Lumian heard a crisp shattering sound, and his mind cleared.

He swiftly removed the Mystery Prying Glasses and retched.

After he regained his composure, Franca inquired with concern, “Are you alright?”

At some point, the mirror in her hand had shattered into countless fragments, scattered across the ground.

Lumian took a deep breath and replied, “I'm fine now.”

He extended his finger, indicating a specific direction.

“Over a hundred meters from the tunnel, there lies a massive puddle. And at the puddle's depths, you'll find a mirror. That mirror reflects a cave, which leads to a path of light.

“However, be warned, for within that puddle lurks a perilous monster. I nearly died when I beheld its visage.”

Franca listened in silence, her mutterings a mixture of confusion and frustration.

“Goddammit, could this place truly be connected to a Demoness?”

Chapter 189 Cooperation

Observing Lumian's perplexed gaze, Franca provided a succinct explanation, “One of the core abilities of the Demoness pathway revolves around mirrors and manipulating the world within them.

“When I suspected that this place might be connected to the Demoness or Hunter pathway, I pondered whether we inadvertently stepped into a certain location within the mirror world. Thus, I attempted to use the makeup mirror to see if I could escape through it. As you witnessed, it proved fruitless.

“Because of this, I have tentatively dismissed the notion of being in a mirror world or encountering a relic belonging to a Demoness. However, now we have stumbled upon a submerged mirror that likely conceals an exit...”

“So, you suspect that this is a specific place within the mirror world, restricted to certain mirrors?” Lumian attempted to grasp Franca's line of thinking.

“Exactly,” Franca replied with a gentle nod. “But what perplexes me is how we found ourselves here without encountering anything resembling a mirror. Perhaps my conjecture is incorrect, or only partially true...”

Lumian pondered for a moment, hoping to glean some knowledge. He posed a sincere question:

“What exactly is a mirror world?”

Franca grabbed the ponytail at the back of her head.

“Explaining it to you is a challenge since I am not entirely certain myself.

“Allow me to elucidate based on my understanding. In mysticism, mirrors possess distinct symbolic meanings, such as one's reflection or an entrance to another realm. The former suggests that we can use mirrors to create substitutes, while the latter alludes to a mirror world.

“It is often associated with terror, mystery, horror, and the bizarre. I cannot ascertain whether there are hidden elements or if it truly represents an alternate dimension. However, I do know that the mirror world connects to various mirror-like entities. It

could potentially point to spaces that are typically inaccessible. As my Sequence progresses, I should be capable of utilizing the mirror world to swiftly traverse different locations.”

Lumian recalled the recent events and allowed his imagination to run wild.

“Could the version of you we saw be a reflection left behind in the mirror world from a previous encounter, before you became a Witch? That would explain why I have never encountered my past self.”

“That is a plausible explanation, but I haven't come across anything peculiar...” Franca deliberated for a moment. “If that is the case, we must hurry to the puddle immediately. The exit is most likely there! We can no longer afford to proceed cautiously or wait any longer. As I mentioned earlier, the mirror world harbors eerie and terrifying phenomena. If we linger here any further, I dread to imagine what might befall us!”

“Very well.” Lumian maintained his composure.

Franca turned and sprinted, with Lumian closely following her.

As the Witch ran, it appeared as though she employed some form of ability. Small patches of frost materialized beneath her feet, causing a sharp reduction in friction. Her body seemed weightless as she gracefully glided through the dim quarry cave and into the depths of the underground tunnel.

Utilizing all his strength as a Hunter and Dancer, Lumian struggled to keep pace with Franca and avoid being left behind.

In the wintry chill, a thin layer of ice gradually formed on the walls of the surrounding rocks.

Upon the icy surface, visages stained with blood emerged. Their countenances contorted, eyes brimming with hatred, resembling vengeful specters emerging from the depths of hell.

Among them was the previous incarnation of Franca, when she still appeared as a man!

After sprinting for a while, Lumian and Franca caught sight of the puddle.

As the light from the carbide lamp cast its glow, the puddle's surface shimmered with a tinge of yellowish-blue.

“Is this it?” Franca halted abruptly.

In that moment, every fiber of his being throbbled with pain, as if his body was on the brink of bursting, save for the fiery sensation in his nasal cavity.

Holding the carbide lamp tightly, Franca cautiously approached the puddle.

“The challenge now is how to elude the monster you encountered and locate the mirror. Regrettably, I cannot yet traverse between mirrors. I can only remain inside for a few fleeting seconds...”

“I will divert its attention and keep it occupied for a while. Why don't you dive underwater and retrieve the mirror?”

Lumian spoke plainly, “I don't believe you stand a chance against it. It nearly overwhelmed me when I caught a glimpse of it.”

“...” Though Franca felt a twinge of annoyance and frustration, she had to acknowledge that Lumian spoke the truth.

With her Sequence and mystical item, she could still hold her ground even against a Beyonder one rank higher. However, judging by the monster's display, it far surpassed her by more than a single rank!

After a brief pause, Franca clenched her teeth and uttered,

“Even if I am outmatched, my skills in escape and self-preservation are formidable. I should be able to hold out against it for more than ten seconds. If you can retrieve the mirror within that timeframe, we can make our escape!”

Lumian let out a chuckle.

“We shouldn't risk our lives just yet.

“I have a plan to stall that monster for ten to twenty seconds without taking excessive risks. And I trust you can locate that mirror, correct?”

“I'm capable. I have a unique method of detecting mirrors,” Franca eyed Lumian skeptically. “Are you truly up to the task? Is there genuinely no danger involved?”

“In theory, the risks are minimal,” Lumian replied calmly.

Simultaneously, he silently added, If the risks prove too great, I'll find an alternative. Mr. K, Madame Hela, Madam Magician, the great being, and the power of Inevitability are all viable options.

Franca wasted no time and pursed her lips as she spoke, “Alright, just to be safe, I'll create a Mirror Substitute for you.”

Naturally, Lumian had no objections to something that could effectively reduce the risk.

After Franca produced a small mirror and crafted the corresponding substitute, Lumian gripped the ritual silver dagger and encircled the pond-like puddle, creating a spiritual barrier.

Throughout the process, he maintained a distance of four to five meters from the water's edge, fearing the monster would drag him under.

Putting away the ritual silver dagger, Lumian turned to Franca with a genuine smile.

“What comes next involves one of my secrets. Could you turn around?”

“Very well.” Franca was content with his straightforwardness.

She inwardly sighed once more.

Does Jenna misunderstand Ciel?

As Franca turned around, Lumian placed the carbide lamp aside and began the Summoning Dance.

He intended to summon the monster, but he wouldn't allow it to possess him!

Lumian believed that the higher the level of a peculiar creature, the more aware it would be of the corruption within his body. This made it less inclined to attach itself to him.

In other words, as long as he refrained from issuing commands that would influence the monster, it was likely to observe the Summoning Dance eagerly, waiting for an opportunity to attack. However, it was intimidated by the seal and the corruption and dared not act upon its thoughts. It would only truly engage him once the dance concluded.

The Summoning Dance lasted for 20 to 30 seconds, ample time for Franca to submerge herself and locate the mirror.

As long as Lumian could escape this world before the monster attacked, there would be no further issues!

Of course, if he couldn't harness the corresponding powers of nature in this place and allow the Summoning Dance to take effect, he could always employ an alternative method.

Amidst the contorted and frenzied dance, Lumian's spirituality stirred the forces of nature, forming a connection that dissipated into the surroundings, only to be obstructed by the spiritual barrier.

After a few seconds, ripples appeared on the surface of the puddle, and a pallid figure emerged, floating above the water.

It bore a resemblance to a human, with an inflated body and a gargantuan face occupying half its form.

The monster floated toward Lumian and came to a stop in close proximity.

Lumian dared not gaze directly at it. With his eyes half-shut, he called out, "Hurry!"

Without hesitation, Franca discarded the carbide lamp, took two steps, and leaped into the water.

With a splash, water splattered around.

A cold, damp sensation penetrated Franca's skin as near darkness enveloped her vision.

Guided by the faint glow of the carbide lamp seeping through the water, Franca swiftly descended to the depths.

Suddenly, dark creatures resembling seaweed extended their hair-like tendrils, slithering around Franca as if alive.

Franca paid them no mind and continued her descent.

Just as the "seaweed" was about to touch her, it unexpectedly burst into black flames.

The black flames burned silently underwater, showing no signs of extinguishing. The "seaweed" didn't turn to ash, but their consciousness was snuffed out.

They floated in the water, swaying with the currents.

Farther away, a multitude of seaweed continued to surge forward, obstructed by layers of condensed frost.

Beside the puddle, Lumian, engrossed in the Summoning Dance, did not look at the monster. However, he heard a sound akin to a bubble popping. A putrid odor wafted towards him, accompanied by an enveloping chill.

An image flashed across Lumian's mind:

The bloated monster with its enormous face was less than a step away from him, almost clinging to his back. He could even perceive its “breath”!

Hiss... Lumian instinctively gasped, refusing to interrupt the Summoning Dance.

In the water, Franca, having dived deeper, finally sensed the presence of the mirror!

Her form suddenly faded, vanishing from her original position.

Franca's figure swiftly materialized on the ancient silver mirror resting silently on the seabed.

She retrieved the artifact and swam towards the surface, a look of joy adorning her face.

She had just confirmed that this mirror truly led to the underground tunnel in the outside world!

Beside the puddle, Lumian was filled with anxiety as he kept his gaze fixed on the water's surface. The Summoning Dance was nearing its end, and the bloated monster drew closer, its flesh almost brushing against his skin.

If Franca did not emerge soon, he would resort to using Mr. K's finger!

Just then, Franca reached the shore, holding the mirror, and leapt up amidst the splashing water.

Avoiding eye contact with the monster, she lowered her head and hurried to Lumian's side, gripping his wrist.

Simultaneously, both of them turned ethereal, while the ancient mirror clattered to the ground.

A scene unfolded upon the mirror's surface: Franca grasping Lumian's hand and leading him through a short, dark tunnel to an illuminated “cave” before leaping out.

Amidst flickering lights and shadows, Lumian realized he stood upon a dim path, with distant light seeping in.

Franca retrieved the mirror that had served as his substitute and noticed countless cracks marring its surface, on the verge of shattering.

“That was a close call.” She sighed sincerely.

Chapter 190 Unexpected Development

Lumian glanced at the shattered mirror in Franca's hand, relief and confusion evident on his face.

“But I don't feel like I was being attacked.”

His Summoning Dance still had five to six seconds left before Franca grabbed his wrist.

Franca cleared her throat and assumed the stance of a teacher.

“Some mysticism techniques are undetectable. The moment you feel attacked is the moment of your death.”

Could it be that the monster secretly influenced me when I paused the Summoning Dance to enter the mirror for those brief seconds? Lumian nodded thoughtfully.

“Yes, the bleeding in that space caught us by surprise. We had no idea how to prevent it.”

As he spoke, he looked at Franca's face and noticed her smooth skin, devoid of any scars. It was impossible to tell that blood had seeped out from multiple places.

Franca touched her face and pondered before saying, “It's indeed very bizarre. But we did lose some blood. As a Witch, I have a mystical perception of the amount of my blood. In other words, the damage we suffered in the special mirror world isn't fake. It's just that we didn't leave any wounds. Damn it, I didn't bring the carbide lamp!”

As she spoke, she turned around and searched through a pile of gravel on the side of the dim tunnel.

Lumian didn't have time to retrieve his carbide lamp either. He could only observe Franca's every move with the help of the distant light.

In less than ten seconds, Franca pulled out a mirror from the rubble.

The mirror appeared to be made of pure silver. The patterns on both sides were mysterious and sinister, and its surface was dark and lifeless, as if time had eroded it.

“As expected, there's a corresponding mirror in reality.” Franca did her best to avoid being reflected in the silver mirror with its classic design. She also instructed Lumian, “In unsafe places or when encountering strange occurrences, try not to look into the mirror if you can. Otherwise, something terrifying might happen. We mustn't touch such mysterious and evil objects of unknown origin!”

Lumian, who hadn't mentioned to Franca that he couldn't look in the mirror after using the Mystery Prying Glasses to disguise himself, nodded.

“I understand that the exit is a mirror. What I can't figure out is how we entered that space without noticing. We didn't come across anything along the way.”

“That baffles me too.” Franca covered the surface of the classic-styled silver mirror with a handkerchief and other items. She stood up and said, “This thing seems to be closely related to the Demoness pathway. How about you give it to me? I'll find something valuable to compensate you later.”

“No problem,” Lumian chuckled. “You don't have to ask. I can't beat you.”

Franca clicked her tongue and said, “No, the spoils of war must be distributed fairly. Otherwise, there will surely be conflicts within the team. I used to be taken advantage of like this in the past. If it weren't for my good nature and not holding grudges, I would have sought revenge long ago.”

Why does it sound like you're cussing me, Madame... Lumian silently muttered.

If someone took his spoils and exploited him for no reason, and his strength was inferior to the other party, although he wouldn't say anything on the spot, he would definitely find a way to seek revenge later. He wouldn't simply “forgive” the other party so easily.

Stowing away the classic-styled silver mirror, Franca gestured toward the source of light.

“Let's go and have a look over there. We might come across the quarry police or other smugglers. We can ask for directions.

That's right... Lumian agreed wholeheartedly.

If it weren't for that, the Montsouris ghost would have been eradicated long ago by the official Beyonders.

The two of them proceeded through the tunnel, guided by the faint glow, staying alert for any potential attacks.

Before long, they reached a quarry cave. In the center of the cave stood a figure wearing a felt hat. The light emanated from the carbide lamp he held in his hand.

“Uh...” Franca recognized him and called out, “Fernandez!”

She realized that the figure was Fernandez, the smuggler who had been leading the way for them.

This appeared to be the quarry cave where they had arranged to meet him.

Fernandez turned around, surprised, and asked, “How did you come from there? I've been waiting for nearly half an hour, but you didn't show up. I even went to the spot where the footprints vanished to search for you, but you were nowhere to be found.”

Lumian and Franca exchanged glances and nodded.

Indeed, they had spent nearly half an hour in the special mirror world.

Franca approached Fernandez and casually explained, “We stumbled upon some clues and pursued them. However, we ended up circling back here and encountered an ambush on the way. We lost our carbide lamps.”

“What clues?” Fernandez asked, pleasantly surprised.

Franca smiled.

“We'll discuss it with Christo directly.”

Fernandez knew his place well and didn't pry any further. He led the two of them back along the same path they had taken before.

They ascended the secondary well and entered the underground section corresponding to Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman, finally arriving at the exit on Rue Anarchie.

Only when Lumian and Franca laid eyes on street peddlers, children picking up fruit peels, homeless people huddling in corners, and the bustling crowd, did they truly feel as though they had escaped from that strange realm and returned to the real world.

After boarding the carriage that “Rat” Christo had sent for them, Lumian glanced at Franca and asked in a low voice,

“What should we say later?”

Fernandez knew the carriage driver and had taken a seat beside him, so he wasn't in the carriage.

Franca chuckled.

“We'll simply say that we entered an unknown space, discovered some traces, and managed to escape using my mirror magic.

“The rest has nothing to do with Christo.”

Lumian didn't say another word. He closed his eyes and recalled his encounters in the special mirror world.

The four-wheeled carriage swiftly turned onto Avenue du Marché, hurtling toward Suhit's steam locomotive. It veered into the alley that led to the depot.

“Rat” Christo awaited them in the nearby warehouse.

Before long, Lumian and Franca caught sight of the rat-like smuggler.

Christo approached them with a grin and exclaimed, “Thank you, by Steam! Erkin and the others are back!”

Erkin... Franca's eyes narrowed as she blurted out, “The missing caravan has returned?”

Erkin, Christo's younger brother responsible for the smuggling caravan, had vanished previously, and Franca still had his divination handkerchief.

And now he's back?

What the f*ck was going on?

Christo nodded, still smiling.

“Indeed, the goods have returned as well!

“They arrived over an hour ago.”

Over an hour ago? Wasn't that the same time when we discovered the spot where the footprints vanished and entered that peculiar mirror world? Lumian frowned, a hint of confusion stirring within him.

It was only because he had already experienced unbelievable phenomena like the time loop and the vivid dream that Lumian managed to keep his composure, unlike Franca.

Observing the surprised and perplexed expressions of Franca and Ciel, Christo smiled and stated, “I'll let Erkin explain it himself.”

He turned and headed a few steps toward the entrance of the warehouse, calling out, “Erkin, come out for a moment!”

Seizing the opportunity, Franca tilted her head slightly and whispered to Lumian, “This is highly unusual...”

Lumian's lips curled into a smile as he lowered his voice and replied, "I even suspect that Rat and the others conspired to set a trap for us. They used the disappearance of the goods as bait to lure us underground into that perilous realm."

Franca studied him, amusement in her eyes, and remarked, "You don't have much trust in others, do you?"

Lumian spoke candidly, "The dancers' salaries make Giant and Baron Brignais resentful, and I possess the coveted Salle de Bal Brise. Only 'Rat' has no conflict of interest with us, so he was made to intervene."

Franca fell into deep thought, seriously considering the possibility of being deceived.

In that moment, Lumian grinned.

"This is merely a conjecture. It doesn't account for the footprints and other traces in the mirror world."

As soon as he finished speaking, a man who appeared to be under 30 years old emerged from the warehouse.

He was not particularly tall, standing at about 1.6 meters. Apart from the absence of rat-like whiskers, he bore a striking resemblance to Christo.

"It is indeed Erkin," Franca whispered to Lumian.

Then, she turned her gaze to Christo and Erkin, who were approaching together, and inquired, "Erkin, what happened?"

Erkin's dark-blue eyes revealed a blend of fear and joy.

"We entered a peculiar world within a section of the tunnel and couldn't find a way out. In the afternoon, while we were searching in all directions, we suddenly found ourselves back on our original path."

Did our entry provide them an opportunity to escape? Franca had a suspicion.

Lumian stared at Erkin, his expression devoid of any emotion, as if assessing an adversary who might bring him calamity.

In his mind, he recalled the droplets of blood left behind on the ground of the mirror world. Gradually, they coalesced, staining a whole area crimson.

Could someone who had lost so much blood truly return alive?

Franca had evidently pondered this as well. She regarded Erkin and asked, "What happened to you there?"

Erkin couldn't help but tremble.

"We started bleeding inexplicably. Towards the end, many were on the verge of death."

“By Steam, we managed to find the exit in time. As soon as we emerged, we recovered.”

Is that so? Franca felt that Erkin, adorned with the Sacred Emblem, was relaying his account in line with her own experience and could be explained. Thus, she could only temporarily set aside her doubts.

Beside them, “Rat” Christo cast a glance their way and invited them with a smile,

“Regardless of the circumstances, I must express my gratitude. Would you like to sample the most authentic Savoie roast chicken?”

“Alright,” Lumian responded on Franca's behalf.

Christo produced a set of keys and tossed them to his brother, Erkin.

“Go to my office and bring all the spices to the kitchen.”

“Alright.” Erkin received the key and ascended the iron stairs embedded in the outer wall of the warehouse. With his left hand, he inserted one of the keys into the door of Christo's office and turned it to unlock it.

Franca was momentarily taken aback before muttering to herself, “I recall that Erkin habitually uses his right hand...”

Why would he awkwardly open the door with his left hand when he wasn't holding anything?

Hearing Franca's remark, Christo nodded and replied, “Indeed, he is right-handed.”