

Inevitability 261

Chapter 261 Escape

The branches and vines pursuing Lumian swiftly withdrew, as if responding to an unseen command. A javelin-like tree trunk crashed down, causing the rest to vanish into thin air.

Gasping for breath, Lumian cast his gaze upward as he sprinted onward.

At that moment, his eyes fell upon the incinerated form of Susanna Mattise, consumed by the vegetative sphere that had enveloped her. Not far off, he witnessed an unfamiliar tree trunk snap and succumb to fiery destruction.

She's dead! Relief flooded Lumian's being. She's dead! The burden of his struggle lifted, and he crumpled to the ground, no longer able to hold on.

The crimson flames that had enveloped him abruptly extinguished, unveiling his charred and disfigured body.

With great effort, Lumian struggled to prop himself up, his back pressed against the vine- and branch-adorned wall of the Auberge du Coq Doré. He resembled a forsaken vagabond, abandoned by the world, a hint of derision in his voice as he observed the Tree of Shadow sinking deeper and deeper into the earth.

Moreover, he witnessed the vines and branches retracting into the main trunk, the once-suspended individuals released from their tethers and descending to the ground from varying heights.

Among the initial group of victims, whose essence had been drained, three to four individuals remained suspended nearly three meters above the ground. Already weakened, most of their remaining vitality escaped as they suffered the harsh impact, causing them to lose consciousness on the spot. Perhaps there was still hope for their salvation, or perhaps they were beyond rescue.

The hundreds who had been suspended but had not yet lost a significant portion of their essence sustained various injuries from the fall. Though their lives were not immediately endangered, they hurriedly rose to their feet, driven to escape to the fringes of the wilderness.

Gabriel's complexion turned pale, bruises marring his hands and feet. Rather than fleeing, his initial instinct led him to stoop and collect the scattered Lightseeker script from the ground. The eloping couple, entwined together in their suspension, exchanged curses for being a hindrance, but they supported one another as they limped forward, their legs injured from the fall. They joined the fleeing throng, vanishing into the distance. Pavard Neeson, the proprietor of the clandestine underground bar, suffered relatively minor injuries. Grasping the freshly drawn draft, he raced ahead...

Charred and weary, Lumian settled on the street, leaning against the Auberge du Coq Doré, situated perilously close to the Tree of Shadow. Tilting his head back against the wall, he wore a faint smile while observing the energetic exodus of peddlers, passersby, and inhabitants of modest abodes as they fled towards the outskirts of the wilderness.

Within the confines of the Tree of Shadow, Lady Moon beheld a tumultuous clash unfolding, with numerous angels and saints joining the fray. Her faction faced mounting pressure due to reinforcements from the two Churches and Bureau 8. An overwhelming sense of retreat washed over her.

Should this continue, the two Churches might resort to drastic measures, beseeching divine intervention! Lady Moon swiftly resolved.

Deprived of several abilities and ensnared by various Prohibitions, she pressed against the bulge in her abdomen and parted her lips.

An ear-piercing Shriek erupted within this alternate realm, causing the nearly two-meter-tall Tree of Shadow before her to undergo an instantaneous metamorphosis.

Upon the branches and mist-shrouded bark, which depicted scenes from the past, figures born from diverse desires, now lifeless, sprang back to existence, save for Emperor Roselle.

Many were demigods, emerging from their respective “histories” with vacant, icy expressions and an aura of chilling darkness.

Resurrection!

Empowered by the Divine Fetus nestled within her womb and the unique essence of the Tree of Shadow, Lady Moon temporarily revived the accumulated desires from over a millennium in their original corporeal forms.

Though the revival would be short-lived, and the resurrected beings notably weaker than before, the sudden influx of demigods into the battle within mere seconds could profoundly impact the unfolding chaos.

It was precisely due to the timely aid of the Divine Fetus that Lady Moon dared to linger behind, partaking in this tumultuous clash. Without it, having only agreed to provide cover and hindrance to those from the Bliss Society, she would have already sought refuge elsewhere.

In eerie silence, the resurrected phantoms disintegrated beneath the scorching sunlight. Lady Moon seized the opportune moment to summon Paramita, which had not yet fallen into complete disarray, merging with it and vanishing from sight.

On Avenue du Marché, inside the khaki-colored four-story building that housed the parliament member's office.

Imre, the mixed-blood individual, refrained from immediately questioning Jenna, an assassin. Instead, he directed two agents from Bureau 7 to tend to Jenna's wound, staunching the profuse bleeding and applying bandages. He conveyed the impression that allowing the culprit to succumb to her injuries would hinder their ability to gather crucial clues. Valentine, Antoine, and the other agents observed and interrogated the remaining participants of the banquet, including Cassandra and Rhône, who belonged to Greg Artois's team.

Rumble!

Once again, the ground beneath their feet trembled. Those near the windows caught glimpses of Rue Anarchie, Rue du Rossignol, and Rue des Blouses Blanches, intermittently flickering with light. Approaching them were clergymen garbed in white robes embellished with golden threads, wielding various contraptions.

This development disrupted the interrogation of Imre, Valentine, and the others. After a while, Angoulême de François strode into the banquet hall, clad in a coat adorned with golden buttons,

accompanied by a grayish-white humanoid mechanical creation. Several additional team members and a contingent of police officers followed suit.

Upon hearing Imre's report, Angoulême cast a glance at Jenna and instructed Travis Everett, “Bring all the attendees of the banquet to headquarters for separate interrogations.

“Leave the assassin here. We shall handle her questioning. Hmm... also keep the members of Monsieur Member of Parliament's team. There are matters we must clarify.”

Everett raised no objections. The organization's constables escorted the anxious onlookers away from the khaki-colored building housing the member of parliament's office.

As the hall emptied, Angoulême turned to the two Bureau 7 agents standing beside Jenna and instructed them, “Escort the assassin to the lounge. We must ensure she does not overhear our conversation and withhold any truths.”

With Jenna escorted to the lounge facing the back alley, Angoulême approached Cassandra, Rhône, and the others, speaking in a deep voice, “Hi there, there is information we must acquire.”

A faint smile adorned his face.

“Indeed, Monsieur Member of Parliament has met his demise. According to the law, his position is immediately vacated.

“In other words, you are no longer part of Monsieur Member of Parliament's team. The immunity you once enjoyed is no more.

“So, before we engage in our discussion, let us proceed with some notarizations.”

Upon hearing Angoulême's words, Cassandra and the others' expressions underwent a marked change.

Meanwhile, in the lounge, Jenna, who had calmed herself after assassinating Hugues Artois, heard a tumultuous commotion emanating from the hall.

One of the armed agents from Bureau 7, tasked with keeping watch, hastened to the door to investigate.

Seizing the opportunity, Jenna's heart skipped a beat as a plan materialized in her mind.

Her countenance transformed, and she gazed past her remaining guard with a mix of surprise and fear.

Though extensively trained, the agent possessed an understanding beyond that of ordinary individuals. Today, an abnormal occurrence had unfolded on Rue Anarchie, culminating in the assassination of Monsieur Member of Parliament. Reports indicated a battle involving supernatural forces transpiring within the hall. It was only natural for him to worry about potential repercussions reaching the lounge and an unseen threat lurking behind him.

Subconsciously, he entertained the notion of turning around, but halfway through the motion, caution compelled him to remain vigilant.

Yet, this proved to be the only opening Jenna needed.

Already restrained by handcuffs, she balled her fists and struck the agent's shoulder and neck with force, sending him sprawling to the ground. His revolver slipped from his grasp.

Before the agent near the door could react, Jenna positioned her hands on the windowsill, propelling herself upward. She crashed through the glass and descended into the back alley with the grace of a feather.

Suppressing the pain from her gunshot wound, she sought refuge in the shadows of a nearby corner and swiftly departed the khaki-colored building.

Lady Moon weaved through different directions, employing various abilities until she finally emerged from Paramita.

At that moment, she found herself in Quartier Éraste, northwest of Trier. Before her stood a magnificent building adorned with golden steeples.

Lady Moon cautiously surveyed her surroundings and discreetly let out a sigh of relief.

Had the Tree of Shadow's deeper intrusion into the Fourth Epoch's Trier served the Great Mother's interests, she wouldn't have joined the Bliss Society's mission. She had no desire to reveal herself. It was well-known that those who controlled desires often fell prey to their own desires. The chances of failure were not insignificant.

Without delay, Lady Moon slipped into the beige building from its side entrance.

A few hundred meters away, a golden retriever sat silently beside a woman dressed in green.

They observed Lady Moon's every move and the grand structure with its numerous steeples, their expressions solemn.

It was the Sacred Heart Cloister of the Eternal Blazing Sun Church.

In the wilderness where Rue Anarchie, Rue du Rossignol, and the buildings on Rue des Blouses Blanches crumbled, Lumian witnessed the Tree of Shadow on the brink of sinking into the ground. He couldn't help but taunt Termiboros.

"Well, I'm not that unlucky after all. I've actually succeeded."

Hardly had the words left his lips when Franca, who had regained her senses, rushed over and hissed, "Are you trying to play the role of a charred corpse?"

As she spoke, she retrieved the Healing Agent she had obtained from the Poison Spur Mob, intending to offer Lumian half a canister.

Lumian's injuries weren't as severe as they seemed. Fatal burns for most Low-Sequence Beyonders would require no more than a month or two for Pyromaniacs to recover from. As for fractures, explosions, and impacts, none of them could claim the life of a Hunter immediately. Enduring until tomorrow would naturally bring about recovery.

Considering the potential pursuit of official Beyonders after the wilderness completely vanished, Lumian didn't tempt fate and consumed half a vial.

Soon, he felt his body rapidly regenerating.

At this moment, the wilderness teetered on the edge of collapse. The streets had returned to their original positions, and many people had already rushed in.

Franca surveyed her surroundings and spoke swiftly, “Can you still move? We must leave this place swiftly.”

“Alright.” Lumian rose to his feet.

He took a couple of steps to the side, intending to retrieve the charred tree trunk that had been part of the Tree of Shadow before departing.

Just as Lumian grasped the trunk, something caught his peripheral vision.

Within the depression left behind by the Tree of Shadow's submersion, a hazy and translucent creature darted past.

Lumian's pupils dilated, struggling to believe what he had witnessed. He yearned for a clearer view.

It was a diaphanous, indistinct figure resembling a lizard!

It bore an uncanny resemblance to the elf he had encountered in his dream!

It was the very creature that had emerged from Aurore's mouth!

Chapter 262 Review

Lumian had always held the belief that the lizard-like elf he saw was merely a figment of his dreaming mind. Symbols and metaphors held a deeper significance than the tangible reality.

Yet now, before his very eyes, the diaphanous and elusive lizard-like creature revealed itself in all its existence!

It was undeniably real!

Moreover, it had appeared in Paramita, emerging from the deep chasm left by the Tree of Shadow—a most peculiar event involving formidable powers!

Could it be that the lizard crawling out of Aurore's mouth was not a fabrication? What did it symbolize, and what were its intentions? Lumian's brow furrowed as he contorted his expression, experiencing a mix of pain, shock, confusion, and withdrawal.

This agitation stirred something within Lumian, making him feel that he could regain some of his memories and determine their authenticity. Yet, this time, the scenes didn't flicker through his mind as they did during psychiatric treatments or after hearing Madame Pualis's words. The dream still lingered in his memory.

In that moment, Termiboros's resonant voice echoed in Lumian's ears.

“Do you truly believe that I am responsible for all the anomalies and misfortunes surrounding you?”

“Do you think you can escape Susanna Mattise, who is nearly a demigod with a backup plan, by relying solely on the efforts of the sealed me and a Sequence 7 Beyonder like yourself?”

“Do you believe that Susanna Mattise's failure is solely due to her being an evil spirit, extremism, impatience, and lack of preparation before the ritual? Is there no other underlying reason?”

These words overlapped and resounded in Lumian's mind, allowing him to grasp their meaning within a short span of time.

Lumian was taken aback, feeling as if he had been plunged into an icy lake, experiencing the transition from early summer to winter.

He blurted out, “Then what is it?”

Termiboros remained silent, as if sensing and comprehending something.

In an instant, Lumian's joy surged. He felt the heavy burden on his shoulders dissipate significantly.

Does this mean that Aurore truly fell under the control of that peculiar lizard-like creature?

Was that why she remained oblivious to any abnormality when awake, seeking assistance from the outside world alongside me?

No, perhaps she sensed that something was amiss. The correct interpretation of the letter's order should be: “We are getting weirder. The people around us need help as soon as possible!”

Franca nudged Lumian.

“Why are you lost in thought? Hurry, let us leave this place swiftly. The official Beyonders and clergymen have arrived!”

Lumian shook off his daze and dashed with Franca to the far end of Rue Anarchie, his singed clothes clinging to his body, along with the tree trunk originating from the Tree of Shadow—not Susanna's later creation.

During this process, two revelations suddenly dawned upon him.

As an angel of Inevitability, Termiboros also displayed an astute understanding of various matters. It is inconceivable for Him to remain oblivious to Susanna Mattise's offering Him as a sacrifice to the Mother Tree of Desire with me as the primary vessel without unsealing the seal. He is no novice to the mystical world like me!

Therefore, He never anticipated the outcome of Susanna Mattise breaking the seal from the very beginning. He made those claims purely as a bluff, coercing me to seek His aid and agree to certain unequal terms, creating an opportunity for Him to truly escape.

What He didn't foresee was my choice to deceive Susanna Mattise, compelling Him to provide me assistance based on the information she provided. No, He must have considered this possibility, but he had nothing to lose by attempting it. What if I had not devised a swift solution at that critical moment?

Dammit, His intentions are far too sinister! I could have fallen victim to His deception with the slightest carelessness!

Likewise, Susanna Mattise is no paragon of honesty.

Since she sought guidance from the Mother Tree of Desire and acknowledged the possibility of an angel being sealed within me, why wouldn't she contemplate the potential transmission of power through the seal? Subsequently, she prayed for power capable of withstanding the influence of Termiboros's leaked power, or even surpassing it. I failed to perceive it then and came dangerously close to corruption despite being distant.

Had I not escaped the Tree of Shadow in the nick of time, I would have succumbed to corruption.

Why didn't Susanna Mattise seek assistance right from the start? Could it be that corruption poses a threat to her as well?

Indeed, despite unforeseen circumstances during the Cordu ritual, the padre, as the host of the sacrificial ceremony, was shielded by the power of Inevitability. He did not transform into a monstrous entity or merge into the three-headed giant like the others and successfully escaped... Susanna Mattise also planned on relying on the protection of the ritual to resist corruption?

Hence, she bought time, awaiting the completion of the ritual's preparations!

She did not target and control me initially because she knew that pushing too hard would prompt Termiboros to intervene prematurely, introducing too many uncertainties.

Thus, she endeavored to create an illusion for me, fostering the belief that resistance and escape were within reach. Only when I broached the subject of the angel did she stall for time, stringing together a series of seemingly revealing words. She concealed her true trump card, biding her time for me to make the wrong choice with Termiboros's aid and fall into her prearranged trap.

Although she did not anticipate the attack from the Montsouris ghost, had it not been for an external intervention exploiting the crack created by the ghost, I would have remained trapped within the Tree of Shadow's depths. Moreover, she was on the verge of officially activating the ritual and gaining protection.

Dammit! Beautiful Actors truly possess the knack for deceiving others!

As Lumian and Franca sprinted ahead, their surroundings suddenly transformed into a surreal spectacle. Vibrant layers of colors intertwined with indescribable, fantastical creatures. His head spun, and his vision became hazy.

When his sight cleared, Rue Anarchie was nowhere in sight, and the vibrant palette had vanished.

Instead, he found himself standing on a verdant hillside, facing Madam Magician, adorned in an orange dress.

She's here too... Lumian glanced around but couldn't spot Franca.

As if sensing his unspoken question, Madam Magician smiled and spoke, "The Two of Cups departed with her Major Arcana card to attend to some matters."

"The Two of Cups?" Lumian was perplexed.

"That's Franca. She is one of us. Her code name is Two of Cups, just as you are the Seven of Wands," Madam Magician casually explained. "You have officially joined our ranks. Speak to the Two of Cups later and have her introduce our organization. I won't say much."

Not only is Franca a member of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society, but she is also part of the secret organization utilizing tarot card codenames? Lumian felt a mix of surprise and elation.

This meant that he and Franca were true comrades.

Madam Magician scrutinized Lumian's charred countenance and fragmented attire. From somewhere, she produced a simple brown suit tailored for a man and tossed it to him.

“Change into this later. While it's not particularly scandalous for Trieriens to roam the streets nude, one mustn't entirely succumb to the surroundings. You must maintain your true self. Only then can you resist the potion's corruption and minimize the risk of losing control.”

Lumian caught the clothes, and Madam Magician pondered for a moment before speaking, “Tell me in detail what has transpired recently. Although I knew you would encounter followers of the evil gods and become entangled with them, I did not anticipate you getting embroiled in such weighty matters directly.”

Lumian recounted the events, starting from his arrival in Trier to his use of the Summoning Dance to lure Susanna Mattise. He focused on the sacrificial ritual, Termiboros's involvement, and the enigmatic lizard-like creature.

As Madam Magician listened, her expression grew solemn. Once Lumian finished speaking, she nodded slightly and said, “This is highly abnormal. Both Termiboros and that elf are far from ordinary.”

She gazed at Lumian, speaking in a direct manner, “It wasn't Termiboros who aided you in enhancing Fallen Mercury's abilities within the Tree of Shadow and allowed the Montsouris ghost to arrive early.”

“Not Him?” Lumian had speculated the issues that Madam Magician might uncover, but he never expected her to address this matter so clearly.

If not Termiboros, then who else could it be?

Moreover, the subsequent changes only occurred after the compromise of the Inevitable angel.

“I don't have the answers either.” Madam Magician shook her head slowly. “What I can affirm is that the seal of that great existence wouldn't allow Termiboros to unleash such power. If that were possible, He would have long manipulated you to assist Him in breaking the seal.”

Observing Lumian's perplexed expression, Madam Magician continued, “All Termiboros can do is influence your judgment and choices. After all, He is sealed within you, and your fates are intertwined to a certain extent.

“To put it simply, concerning Charlie's situation, Termiboros couldn't expedite Susanna Mattise's recovery. He couldn't dictate when or how she planned to find Charlie. He could merely utilize this situation to instill in you the intention of

employing the Luck Transference Spell to alter Charlie's fate and augment the corresponding likelihood.

“From this standpoint, do you believe He possesses the capability to enhance Fallen Mercury's abilities and allow the timely arrival of the Montsouris ghost?”

“However, it is plausible for Him to aid you in shouldering the burden of the past scenes within the Tree of Shadow.

“Hence, I have consistently advised you to seek my counsel beforehand on critical and perilous matters rather than making decisions on your own.”

Lumian's heart surged like a tumultuous ocean.

He recollected the incident where Rentas took Charlie underground and realized that Madam Magician's words held truth.

Charlie's gruesome plight and destiny stemmed from two factors. Firstly, the threat posed by the Bliss Society through Rentas, and secondly, Lumian's own choice at the crossroads of fate. Thus, once Rentas was slain by their hands, Charlie's fortune merely improved marginally. Only when Lumian made the correct decision did everything revert to normalcy. There were no indications of Termiboros's influence.

If He could sway Charlie's path in the same manner He manipulated the Montsouris ghost, Lumian would have fallen victim long ago.

Moreover, why would Susanna Mattise entertain the idea of capturing me alive, knowing that I can receive indirect assistance from an angel after she departed from the Tree of Shadow and was in a weakened state, despite being aware of Termiboros's limited influences?

Unless Susanna Mattise, who possesses a trace of godhood due to the Tree of Shadow, had already deduced that Termiboros was impotent in exerting influence and remained tightly sealed following the internal conflict within the Tree of Shadow. There must be another origin to this quandary! And that origin did not depart alongside her! Dammit! I had presumed that even if my judgment faltered or the fate exchange prolonged, Termiboros would never allow Susanna Mattise to capture me alive, as it would render Him a sacrificial pawn. Little did I know, He lacked the capability entirely... Lumian postulated, obtaining a more rational explanation for the recent turn of events.

“What exactly happened?” he inquired, a tinge of anguish and anger coloring his tone.

Madam Magician pondered for a few seconds before responding, “Taking into account those misfortunes, I suspect that Termiboros has allies in the outside world. In other words, there may be a Beyonder lurking around you who possesses the ability to influence fate. He secretly accomplished tasks in accordance with the ideas transmitted by Termiboros, but he did so with subtlety to avoid exposure.”

A word suddenly flashed across Lumian's mind: Sufferer!

In his dream, after entering the underground altar with Ryan's team, they had become tainted by the aura of a Sufferer!

As for the owl and the other “him” within the Warlock's tomb, prior to their unveiling, they always gave him the impression that they were the root of the problem and the mastermind behind it all.

Could these be symbolic as well?

Chapter 263 Choice

Lumian had always believed that his dream self represented his darker side, a twisted persona born from the corruption of Inevitability.

But now, it seemed there was more to it.

There was no problem with his understanding of his own essence, but was he, along with the owl hidden in the Warlock's tomb, also serving as a symbol?

A representation of the puppet master behind the scenes, the true orchestrator of the lizard-like creature and the grand ritual in Cordu?

And now, he was lurking in the shadows, attempting to collaborate with Termiboros in order to break free from the seal.

However, Termiboros's attitude towards the lizard-like creature seemed to suggest otherwise...

Lumian fell silent for a few seconds before sharing his speculations in detail with Madam Magician.

The Magician listened attentively, pondering for a moment before speaking.

“I initially believed that by undergoing progressive psychiatric treatment and recalling forgotten events one by one, the truth of Cordu Village would become clear to you. It wouldn't be any different from what I already know.”

“But hearing what you've just said, I suspect that some of the symbols and metaphors in your dreams hold deeper, hidden secrets.”

“But regardless, those symbols and metaphors are projections from my actual experiences. It's impossible that I still can't decipher them after regaining my memories, right?” Lumian objected.

Madam Magician smiled and replied, “That might not be the case.”

Seeing Lumian's confusion, she explained simply, “On the one hand, you may not have directly experienced those events, but your spirit and subconscious sensed danger and abnormalities, projecting them into your dreams with symbolic elements.

“On the other hand, Termiboros is sealed within you. Your fate is intertwined with His. Your subconscious might have detected something unusual through this connection.”

Lumian grasped Madam Magician's meaning to some extent and pondered for a moment.

“After completing the full psychiatric treatment, can Madam Susie directly awaken my subconscious and inquire about the meaning of the different symbols?”

“It's extremely risky. When the time comes, we'll have to rely on the joint opinion of the two Psychiatrists to decide if it's worth attempting,” Madam Magician replied thoughtfully. “But that's a long way off. Before then, I can assist you in finding Beyonders skilled in decrypting symbolism to see if we can accurately interpret it without relying solely on your subconscious. Would you like that?”

“Alright,” Lumian agreed eagerly.

Then, he asked with concern, “What about the potential Termiboros ally lurking nearby? Are we not going to do anything about them?”

Madam Magician remained calm as she answered, “Now that we have sensed this possibility, I don't think they will risk staying close to you. Of course, I will continue to keep watch.”

She then inquired, “Do you plan to continue the mission assigned to you by the Aurora Order? Many people probably witnessed you charging toward the Tree of Shadow. This will raise Gardner Martin's suspicions.

“If you don't want to take the risk, inform Mr. K about it. He will likely be delighted that you've slain a Fallen Tree Spirit and thwarted the Bliss Society's plan. He can assign you a new mission.

“If you wish to proceed, I can arrange for someone to blur the memories of those who saw you. In any case, it's normal for your exact appearance and physical characteristics not to be clearly discerned in that environment.”

Without hesitation, Lumian declared, “I wish to proceed.”

Gardner Martin, a Sequence 6 or Sequence 5 of the Hunter pathway, commanded a formidable group of Hunters. If Lumian continued to interact with him and joined the Iron and Blood Cross Order, there was a high chance of acquiring the potion formulas and main ingredients after Pyromaniac.

Through these experiences, Lumian had gained a profound understanding of the disparities between Sequences, the terror of powerful individuals, and his own limitations. He felt an urgent need to enhance his strength. It was a sharp contrast to his initial nonchalance upon arriving in Trier, where he sought hope amidst confusion.

Only by becoming strong enough could he withstand misfortune and unveil the truth behind the catastrophe in the perilous world of mysticism. Only then could he discern whether various propositions using Resurrection as bait concealed sinister intentions!

Madam Magician nodded slightly, granting Lumian's request.

Prompted by their previous conversation, Lumian inquired with curiosity, “Has the Tree of Shadow been dealt with?”

“How could that be?” Madam Magician scoffed. “Even if both Churches requested divine intervention, the Tree of Shadow would remain unresolved. Heh heh, it's not impossible, but the price is exorbitant, deterring anyone from paying it.”

“What sort of price?” Lumian pressed further.

As if taking a leisurely stroll, Madam Magician moved two steps to the side of the hill.

“After being nourished and exerting influence for over a thousand years, the Tree of Shadow has become one with Trier. It's akin to its shadow, its dark aspect. Unless we obliterate the entire city and exterminate every inhabitant, not even a true deity could fully eradicate it.

“Of course, we could relocate Trier elsewhere and resettle its entire population. Then, after five to six years, when the Tree of Shadow has weakened due to the loss of nourishment, we could uproot it. However, by doing so, the other perils lurking beneath Trier would become uncontrollable.”

There are other dangers? Lumian furrowed his brow.

Isn't the underground of Trier too daunting?

Perplexed, he asked, “Why wasn't the Tree of Shadow destroyed when it was first planted?”

Madam Magician chuckled.

“Well, wasn't it due to the urgency of constructing the city and countering certain underground threats? They failed to notice someone secretly planting the Tree of Shadow.”

She didn't divulge details about the dangers, implying that Lumian didn't need to know them at present.

Lumian keenly sensed this and sealed his lips.

Madam Magician looked at him and let out a self-deprecating laugh.

“Are you unhappy that I sent you directly to Trier and involved you in a series of perilous affairs without providing corresponding assistance?”

“No,” Lumian replied, puzzled by Madam Magician's question.

From his perspective, accepting missions, completing tasks, and reaping rewards seemed fair enough. And throughout this process, Madam Magician would offer guidance through letters.

Apart from the past few years of adoption, Lumian had long grown accustomed to not relying entirely on others and making full use of the various resources at his disposal to achieve his goals.

Madam Magician chuckled.

“Didn't you see the Major Arcana card summoned by the Two of Cups? It happened because she was coincidentally in Trier. Otherwise, it wouldn't have been so effortless and effective.”

She paused for a moment before continuing, “If I were to treat you as an extension of my eyes and hands, a loyal subordinate devoid of your own will, I could allow you to recite my name and provide ample assistance to ensure your safety most of the time. However, you chose the Hunter pathway. It's a path that demands combat and a strong sense of self.

“A flower nurtured in a greenhouse cannot become a qualified Hunter. It's immensely challenging for a Hunter, who always fights within their comfort zones with a patron, to attain godhood and become a saint. In due time, they will have to invest more time and pay a higher price to compensate for their present deficiencies.

“What kind of person do you aspire to be?”

Lumian fell silent for a moment before responding, “I want to be the one who makes those scoundrels tremble.”

His answer was unequivocal.

Madam Magician nodded in satisfaction.

“Of course, that doesn't mean I won't care about you. I will still reply to your letters, provide my opinions, and even extend assistance upon request. However, I don't want you to feel perpetually shielded.”

Lumian nodded, signifying his understanding.

He recalled Susanna Mattise's swift recitation of certain words to seek high-level assistance. Combining that with the keywords mentioned by Madam Magician, he spoke thoughtfully,

“Can reciting the honorific name of a specific entity draw their attention and receive corresponding aid through prayer?”

“Yes,” The Magician nodded subtly. “However, it requires the sufficient goodwill of the other party. Once you reach a certain stage, I will also disclose my name to you. Yes, you are aware of Mr. Fool's honorific name, but without a ritual, simply reciting it will be difficult to elicit an effective response. It may even have adverse consequences. This is because Mr. Fool is contending with an ancient deity. The outcome will determine the fate of us all and whether this world can survive the apocalypse.”

Mr. Fool? The abbreviation for that mighty existence is The Fool? Truly befitting of a secret organization that employs tarot cards as their codenames... When Lumian heard of The Fool, he instinctively connected it to the tarot cards he encountered daily, rather than associating it with the honorific name. It seemed more like a description.

Madam Magician changed the subject and glanced at the tree trunk in Lumian's hand.

“This is a valuable item. Attacks without godhood cannot harm it, and upon striking a target, it may trigger a particular desire.

“If you acquire Beyonder characteristics that align with it, you can find a way to employ a saint-level Artisan to combine them, turning it into a mystical item.

“You shouldn't carry it with you at all times, though. Otherwise, your desires will gradually spiral out of control. It poses great danger for Beyonders who consume potions.”

Just as she finished speaking, Madam Magician turned her head slightly, as if listening to something. Then, she addressed Lumian, “That will be all for today.”

In the blink of an eye, Lumian's vision filled with a blend of vibrant colors and ethereal, indescribable creatures.

In the next moment, Rue Anarchie appeared before him, riddled with cracks.

Madam Magician had vanished,

leaving Lumian bewildered as he hastily donned the clothes and pants he held in his hands.

His attention was then drawn to Franca, standing not far away.

Simultaneously, the two of them exchanged smiles.

Before they could convey their shared sense of being part of the same secret organization, Jenna emerged from the alley shadows, dressed in a grayish-blue gown.

Lumian and Franca instinctively went on guard.

Jenna winced, gripping her wounded ribs, yet expressed joy, “Dammit! You guys are alright!”

She appears genuine... Franca mumbled and approached her, concern etched on her face. “What happened to you? Why are you injured?”

Jenna cast nervous glances around and lowered her voice.

“I assassinated Hugues Artois and ended up getting shot.”

“Dammit! You succeeded? And you managed to escape?” Franca exclaimed, taken aback.

Even she didn't believe she could pull off such a feat.

What was this called? This was the embodiment of a true assassin!

Lumian noticed a few passersby on Rue Anarchie, so he interrupted Jenna.

“We can discuss it once we reach Auberge du Coq Doré. I'll extract the bullet and treat your wounds.”

“I still have half a vial of Healing Agent,” Franca chimed in happily.

She supported Jenna and, following the shadows along the roadside, they made their way back to Auberge du Coq Doré.

As they neared their destination, they encountered Anthony Reid, the information broker.

Lumian chuckled derisively.

“I thought you'd have escaped.”

“I still have some unfinished business in the market district,” Anthony Reid replied vaguely.

The four of them took a few more steps and laid their eyes upon the beige five-story building.

Auberge du Coq Doré leaned a little more than before. Cracks marred its walls, intertwined with withering vines and branches.

As the remaining tenants had yet to return, it exuded an indescribable dilapidation and silence.

It had been some time since the catastrophe.

Amidst the crowd, a young man dressed plainly disembarked from the steam locomotive, carrying an old suitcase. He left the platform behind and strolled all the way to Rue Anarchie.

There, he laid eyes upon the beige five-story building, its surface adorned with streaks of vibrant red paint.

“Auberge du Coq Doré,” he murmured, reciting the name of the establishment. He reached into his pocket, feeling the banknotes and coins, realizing it was likely within his means.

To his surprise, Auberge du Coq Doré was much cleaner than he had envisioned. While certain areas were plastered with outdated newspapers and cheap pink paper, there were no signs of the ubiquitous bedbugs, repugnant phlegm, or various types of rubbish.

After renting Room 302 for 15 verl d'or, the young man climbed the stairs with his suitcase, feeling content.

It's even more affordable than I thought. A clean motel like this costs only 15 verl d'or per month...

Once he had stowed away his suitcase in the cramped room, he decided to treat himself to a drink using the money he had saved.

In the Capital of Joy, one had to play the part!

He made his way to the underground bar, immediately engulfed by the lively clamor as he stepped inside.

A man in a shirt and bow tie, beer in hand, flailed his short arms, energetically expounding to the people around him. Others reveled, singing and dancing, refusing to be subdued.

At the bar counter, a few patrons sat with an intriguing contraption.

Curiosity piqued, the young man approached, examining the rubber hose and glass canister of the device. He asked with fascination, “What is this?”

A handsome customer with blond hair streaked with black turned his body and responded with a bright smile,

“It's called the Idiot Instrument that tests an individual's intelligence. Or you could say that it measures a person's foolishness.”

Chapter 264 Secret Organization

Volume Opening: Everyone is a hunter, and everyone is prey.

“Deputy Director of Loen Kingdom's MI9 Spotted in the Crossfire of Market District Terror!”

“Fiery Debate at National Convention: Eternal Blazing Sun Church's Role in Hugues Artois Assassination!”

“Shocking Malpractice!”

“Negotiating the Limits: Two Churches in Talks Over Parliamentary Immunity Restrictions”

“No Oath, No Immunity: Debating the Rights of Unsworn Members”

“National Convention or Heretic Haven?”

“Hugues Artois Shielding Heretics Behind Market District Terrorism!”

The headlines from different newspapers stood out, capturing Jenna's attention under the blazing afternoon sun. She scanned the newspapers' headlines, witnessing the fervent debate taking place from different angles.

Jenna's gaze eventually settled on the wanted posters adorning the newsstand's side.

“Guillaume Bénét...”

“Pualis de Roquefort...”

“Lumian Lee...”

“Celia Bello...”

Jenna stared at her own poster, finding it peculiarly enchanting.

The portrait displayed bore no resemblance to her; her features were almost reversed, except for her undeniable beauty. Even her brother Julien would fail to recognize her as his sister, let alone any bounty hunters.

And so, Jenna continued her studies at the Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons by day, and entertained audiences with her voice at the Salle de Bal Brise by night, making ends meet. Her life remained unchanged, just as it had been.

If it weren't for the daily newspaper debates surrounding Hugues Artois's demise and the ensuing conflicts, Jenna would have doubted whether her act of assassinating him was merely a dream born out of emotional turmoil.

Based on Franca's findings and her own speculations, the official Beyonders seemed to appreciate Jenna's elimination of Hugues Artois. They believed she had made a significant contribution in eradicating a group of heretics. Had it not been for the pressure from the National Convention and the various restrictions in place, they might have even considered honoring Jenna with a medal.

Hence, they intentionally spread misleading information, crafting a wanted poster that deviated from reality. They employed an investigation as a pretext to aid Jenna's brother, Julien, in purging the malicious powers that had destabilized his emotions. They cured his latent psychological illness and provided him with a legitimate occupation as a fitter, all under the guise of humanitarianism and support for believers.

For Jenna, aside from the necessity to avoid her neighbors whenever she encountered Julien, her life remained relatively unhindered. She pursued her studies in theater acting and transformed into Showy Diva whenever the need arose.

Drawing from Franca's experience, if Jenna lingered in the market district for a few more days, the Purifiers of the Eternal Blazing Sun Church would likely approach her, sharing common knowledge and taboos to prevent any accidental disasters caused by her wild Beyonder powers. They might even attempt to recruit her as an informant.

If it were a Beyonder from the Church of the God of Steam and Machinery, they might choose to observe her covertly, trailing her steps and uncovering the source of her Beyonder characteristic. Depending on the circumstances, they would determine whether to apprehend her immediately and transform her into an informant or play the long game to capture more significant players. The Purifiers, on the other hand, would likely adopt a more transparent approach, considering Jenna's substantial assistance in their cause.

Jenna paid little mind to these matters. If the official Beyonders sought her capture, she would flee. If they wished to recruit her as an informant, she would comply. And if they disregarded her altogether, she would continue working to repay her debts and save for next year's tuition.

Retracting her gaze, Jenna, dressed in a grayish-white gown, stepped out of Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons. She turned towards Rue des Blouses Blanches, seeking some rest before adorning her face with smoky and decadent makeup, preparing to become the captivating Showy Diva at the Salle de Bal Brise.

Apartment 601, 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches.

Franca, clad in a blouse, light-colored breeches, and wooden slippers, warmly greeted Lumian.

“Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons proves more profitable than anticipated!”

At the heretic's estate charity auction for the post-disaster reconstruction, Gardner Martin had acquired Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons for 50,000 verl d'or and entrusted its management to Franca. Most of the profits were left in her hands as his mistress.

During the auction, he had also secured Auberge du Coq Doré for 2,000 verl d'or. Occasionally, he dispatched individuals to conduct peculiar investigations, as if seeking to uncover the truth behind the disaster.

Lumian undoubtedly took charge of the daily operations.

As the weather warmed, Lumian embraced the change by donning a light brown pair of trousers, a crisp white shirt, and a black waistcoat. He didn't bother with a coat.

Rather than inquire about the profits of Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons, Lumian surveyed the surroundings and posed a question.

“I wish to know more about the secret organization we've joined.”

He had initially assumed Franca would inform him at an opportune moment. However, after waiting for several days, it seemed Franca had forgotten about the matter, leaving Lumian no choice but to seek answers himself.

Franca was taken aback, her surprise evident as she blurted out, “You don't know?”

You joined without any knowledge of the organization?

Had it not been for Madam Judgment's confirmation that Lumian was a member, Franca would have suspected he was bluffing and hadn't actually joined.

Lumian explained sincerely, “I was on probation before, and after passing the assessment, my Major Arcana card left it to you to reveal the details.”

Franca accepted the explanation, recalling her own limited knowledge during her early days with the organization.

She settled back into the recliner, crossing her legs and straightening her posture.

“We are all members of the Tarot Club.”

Tarot Club... Upon hearing the name, Lumian, already seated on the opposite sofa, showed no surprise. After all, members of this clandestine group adopted tarot cards as their code names. The core members were associated with the Major Arcana cards, while ordinary members bore the Minor Arcana cards.

Franca's face gradually lit up with pride.

“Our Tarot Club is the most exceptional secret organization in the entire world. One could even argue it is among the most powerful.”

“That's because our leader is a supreme entity standing at the apex of all deities. In other secret organizations, the deities they serve merely watch over and provide divine insight. They do not actively participate. However, before Mr. Fool descended into a deep slumber, He regularly convened gatherings in His divine kingdom for the Major Arcana cardholders. What do we call it? A true Divine Council! Other Churches may have so-called Divine Councils, but at best, they are meetings held under the watchful gaze of a deity. It is not a gathering conducted in the presence of a deity with the deity's direct involvement.”

Franca pressed a hand to her chest and offered a slight bow.

“Praise The Fool!”

Lumian had contemplated the Tarot Club's potential. After all, Madam Magician exuded an air of mystery and power. Yet, he never anticipated that the great existence she spoke of would be the leader of the Tarot Club.

This shattered his preconceived notions of deities.

After a moment of contemplation, he voiced his thoughts.

“Is Mr. Fool called ‘The Fool’ because He holds The Fool card from the Major Arcana?”

So He, too, is a member of the Tarot Club?

“That is partly the reason,” Franca replied after a brief pause. “However, no one can confirm it. I suspect it is because ‘The Fool’ is one of the many honorific names bestowed upon Mr. Fool. Hence, when establishing the secret organization, He chose the name ‘Tarot Club’ and assigned different tarot cards to each member.”

“But can we really address Him directly as ‘Mr. Fool’?” Lumian questioned, finding it somewhat blasphemous or disrespectful to refer to a deity using the honorific ‘Mr.’ It seemed too ordinary and lacked the necessary sanctity.

Franca smiled and assured him, “There is no issue. It is said that Mr. Fool Himself quite enjoys this form of address.”

Seeing that Lumian had no further inquiries, Franca continued.

“In many ritualistic magics, if you are unable to find a suitable recipient for your prayers, you can seek aid from Mr. Fool. Although the process may differ from your expectations, it will invariably lead to the desired outcome in a wondrous manner.”

“The only caveat is that Mr. Fool is in a deep slumber, and we must not disturb Him too often. According to my Major Arcana card, we should not do so more than once a month unless absolutely necessary. Reciting His honorific name alone will not draw attention or assistance. In fact, it may result in failure and pose a certain risk. The power inadvertently released by a slumbering deity is capable of obliterating us countless times over. Thus, we must perform a ritual to ensure our safety.”

Madam Magician had mentioned this before, but as per her explanation, Mr. Fool's slumber holds more significance than mere sleep... Franca seems unaware of the details? Lumian contemplated this as he asked thoughtfully, “What kind of deity is Mr. Fool?”

Franca cleared her throat and replied, “My lecture wouldn't do it justice. Haha, I don't remember all that much. I suggest you visit Mr. Fool's cathedral and listen to the bishop's sermons.”

“Mr. Fool's cathedral?” Lumian exclaimed in surprise.

Was there a cathedral dedicated to Mr. Fool in Trier?

Weren't there only two Churches in Intis?

Franca explained, “Mr. Fool's Church primarily resides in the Rorsted Archipelago of the Sonia Sea and some locations in the Southern Continent. However, due to the beliefs of many merchants,

sailors, bounty hunters, and treasure seekers at sea, we often encounter followers of Mr. Fool at Lavigny Docks in the square district.”

“Later, for certain reasons, the two Churches agreed to construct a small cathedral there for Mr. Fool's Church, allowing passing sea merchants to offer their prayers. However, proselytizing or preaching outside the cathedral is strictly prohibited. Most Trieriens are unaware of its existence.”

The square district lay on the north bank of the Srenzo River, west of Trier. Lavigny Docks bustled with various goods arriving from numerous seaside ports. Sea merchants frequently passed through, while sailors sought to experience the vibrancy and prosperity of Trier.

To the west of Lavigny Docks stood Trocadéro Town, renowned for its Trocadéro liquor.

Lumian nodded and said, “I shall find time to visit and listen.”

With that settled, he asked curiously, “What is the connection between Mr. Fool's Church and our Tarot Club?”

Chapter 265 The Major Arcana Cards

Franca, sitting cross-legged in the recliner, had long pondered over this question. After careful consideration, a smile curved on her lips as she spoke,

“Mr. Fool's Church is akin to an independent subsidiary of our Tarot Club.”

Observing Lumian's bewilderment, she went on to explain, “Each of our Tarot Club's Major Arcana Cards represents an influential figure in the world, be it in reality or mysticism. I suspect that the Pope of The Fool's Church is one such figure. As for the other Major Arcana Cards, they may lead different organizations. While these organizations might not believe in Mr. Fool, they can provide assistance to certain operations of the Tarot Club.”

“To put it simply, the Tarot Club is the highest governing body directly overseen by Mr. Fool. Each holder of a Major Arcana card possesses a distinguished status and their own sphere of influence. And one such holder is The Fool's Church,” Franca elaborated.

Lumian grasped Franca's meaning roughly and inquired, “How many Major Arcana cards do we have?”

Franca shook her head and replied, “I cannot provide an exact number as the identities of the Major Arcana card holders are kept confidential. The only card we interact with the most is the Major Arcana card to which we are subordinate. Well... mine is Madam Judgment.”

“Mine is Madam Magician,” Lumian added.

Franca chuckled, “It seems that these two cards often appear together. Yes, our Tarot Club has a habit of scattering the entire deck of tarot cards at the scene after completing a task. We also place the card that represents us in the most prominent position...”

“Isn't that wasteful?” Lumian interrupted Franca.

“What harm is there in using a deck of tarot cards? Don't you find such actions cool?” Franca muttered. “You can leave the card that represents you, but what use is a deck without one? You'll have to buy a new one next time. If you visit the factory and customize a large number of tarot cards with just one card, you'll become an easy target.”

“I can draw it myself,” Lumian proposed, already formulating a solution.

While he couldn't replicate the printed quality, he could capture the main characteristics of the Seven of Wands.

Franca fell silent for a moment, then said, “Wouldn't something you draw have a mystical connection? Wouldn't you have to expend energy to counter divination?”

“Sigh, we don't have to scatter them every time. We don't have to scatter them when working with non-Tarot Club members. We don't have to scatter them during stealth missions, such as the one we're on now. And we don't have to scatter them when we're under suspicion.

“Dammit! How did we get off track? What I wanted to convey is that due to the Tarot Club's customs and traditions, I've learned from various newspapers and mystical gatherings about the more active Major Arcana cards.

“Madam Justice has appeared multiple times on the Midseashire coast, in Trier, and Backlund. Mr. Hanged Man has made appearances at sea. We have Madam Hermit and Mr. Sun, as well as Mr. Moon and Mr. Star from the Southern Continent. As for any other Major Arcana card holders, I'm unaware.”

Madam Justice, Mr. Hanged Man, Mr. Sun, Madam Hermit, Mr. Star, Mr. Moon... Lumian realized that the names possessed an air of mystery and sophistication, unlike the mundane-sounding Seven of Wands and Two of Cups.

After pondering for a while, he recognized a crucial point mentioned by Franca: Madam Justice had been seen in Midseashire, Trier, and Backlund.

Apart from Madam Judgment and Madam Magician, this was the only Major Arcana card with confirmed sightings in Trier.

Lumian distinctly recalled that Madam Susie had mentioned the possibility of people from the West Midseashire Coast being Beyonders of the Spectator pathway.

This implied that she had a good understanding of the West Midseashire Coast.

Considering that she and the other Psychiatrist were in Trier, their areas of activity overlapped by at least two-thirds with Madam Justice's.

Furthermore, when Madam Magician mentioned that the two Psychiatrists were equals and that his psychological problem involved matters at a higher level, Lumian suspected that one of them was Madam Justice.

Based on the fact that both Madam Magician and Madam Judgment preferred to address themselves with tarot cards and conceal their true names, it was more likely that the enigmatic lady sitting across from him was the holder of the Major Arcana card, Justice. Susie, on the other hand, seemed to be her subordinate Minor Arcana card.

With these thoughts in mind, Lumian glanced at Franca, who had adjusted her sitting position, and spoke, "Were you planning to find a genuine Psychiatrist for Jenna's brother from within our Tarot Club?"

Franca, confused by Lumian's sudden change of topic, was taken aback.

"No, I intended to approach members of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society.

"I try my best not to contact my Major Arcana, Madam Judgment unless it's a particularly critical or serious matter. Although she always appears composed and willing to help, do you know? She's a true demigod and a prominent figure with godlike status. I can't burden her with trivial matters frequently. She says she doesn't mind, but who knows if she's truly honest. Each insignificant problem might decrease her favor towards me.

"When her favorability drops to a certain extent, a demigod has numerous ways to make your life unbearable. Besides, you won't even know why it's happening.

"I usually handle things on my own. If that fails, I turn to Gardner Martin or the members of the Research Society. And if that doesn't work, I consider reaching out to Madame Judgment."

Lumian shared the same sentiment, but he had the excuse of reporting the mission's situation and suppressing Termiboros's influence. He could write to Madam Magician from time to time to gather information.

In any case, he was already in the process of writing a letter. There was no harm in asking!

Observing that Franca's Psychiatrist wasn't the same as his own, Lumian didn't mention Susie. He nodded gently and replied, "Same here."

Franca glanced around and lowered her voice.

"However, don't hesitate to seek help when you need it. The resources and influence wielded by Major Arcana card holders exceed your imagination. What you find difficult can be resolved with a mere command or thought.

"Wasn't my mystical item, the Ring of Punishment, incredibly powerful? Madame Judgment granted it to me directly upon my request. She even allowed me to owe an equivalent exchange for a period of time.

"Uh... I see how you obtained the Pyromaniac potion formula and its main ingredient so quickly!"

You're not wrong... Lumian smiled, conveying to Franca that she had hit the mark.

He believed that if he could acquire Beyonder characteristics that complemented the Shadow Branch, he could genuinely seek the help of Madam Magician in finding a saint-level Artisan to craft the corresponding mystical item.

Compared to him, who was only a Sequence 7, Madam Magician, already a demigod, was more likely to be acquainted with a high-level Artisan!

Franca exhaled and continued the conversation.

“Every bearer of a Major Arcana card is a demigod, with a high probability of being a saint. At the very least, the more active ones don't seem to be at the level of Grounded Angels. However, Madam Judgment told me that the Tarot Club has more than one angel!”

At least eight saints, and more than one angel? They're even stronger than the Aurora Order... Truly befitting the most extraordinary secret organization... Lumian sighed, wondering if the Tarot Club's core members were exaggerating to instill a stronger sense of belonging among their subordinates.

With a yearning expression, Franca added, “My current dream is to progress step by step to Sequence 5, then advance to Sequence 4 of the Hunter pathway and become a demigod. That would grant me the right to obtain a Major Arcana card.

“Not only would it mean greater strength and a sense of security, but it would also allow me to participate in the Divine Council and ask Mr. Fool about things once he awakens.”

According to Madam Magician, obtaining a Major Arcana card isn't dependent on advancing to Sequence 4 and becoming a demigod... Lumian dealt Franca a blow to prevent her from having overly high expectations.

However, Franca didn't mind at all. She smiled and said, “In any case, my question will have to wait until Mr. Fool wakes up. When the time comes, demigods will undoubtedly be more qualified than other members to obtain a Major Arcana card.”

At this point, she looked at Lumian and continued, “Apart from us, there are four more Minor Arcana cards active in Trier. In total, there are 23 cards in the world, but there might be fewer. Many Beyonders find it fashionable to scatter tarot cards at the scene of an incident and intentionally imitate us. They might do it to misdirect the official Beyonders' investigation.

“In Trier, the most renowned card is the Knight of Swords. At the beginning of the year, he detonated a warehouse belonging to the Southern Continent's terrorist organization, the Rose School of Thought. The warehouse concealed a significant amount of explosives, and non-human remains were found at the scene...”

Lumian listened attentively to Franca's account, gaining a better understanding of the Tarot Club and the Major Arcana and Minor Arcana cards.

After a brief moment of contemplation, he asked, “Do Minor Arcana cards have gatherings in the world of mysticism?”

“No,” Franca shook her head again. “Unless we meet in person, like we have, we can only communicate through our respective Major Arcana cards. Yes, regular gatherings do take place between Major Arcana cards in Mr. Fool's divine kingdom!

“However, Madame Judgment mentioned once that in urgent situations, with the assistance of our Major Arcana, we can communicate in a way that transcends reality, but such occurrences are rare.”

Lumian had no further questions. After chatting for a while, he heard Jenna's footsteps ascending the stairs.

He stood up, preparing to leave.

“Where are you going?” Franca asked, puzzled.

At this hour, there was nothing for him to do in Salle de Bal Brise, so he might as well stay and play Fighting Evil, the game Emperor Roselle had “invented.”

Lumian smiled, a mix of emotions in his expression.

“To the catacombs.”

The ashes of the lunatic Flameng and the Ruhr couple were finally being laid to rest in the catacombs.

Chapter 266 Catacombs

Outside the police headquarters in the bustling market district, Lumian, donning the enigmatic Prying Glasses, climbed aboard the carriage adorned with painted irises.

Two ordinary constables, clad in black uniforms, occupied the seats opposite, their feet resting beside three somber urns. The names of the departed flickered in fluorescent ink.

Taking his place across from them before the carriage slowly steered forward, Lumian caught the older constable's inquisitive gaze.

“What brings you here? What's your connection to these departed souls?”

He remembered that two of the deceased had neither kin nor friends, and the remaining one had distant relatives who trembled at the mere mention of the name Flameng. Not only were they unwilling to come and collect the ashes and relics, but they also reluctantly admitted that they were related by blood or marriage.

Lumian responded calmly.

“I'm their landlord, in a manner of speaking.”

“Just the landlord?” The older constable appeared skeptical.

“Officer, a landlord is a person too. They can feel for others!” Lumian chuckled. “I've shared a drink or had a chat with them. Accompanying their remains into the catacombs isn't a big deal.”

The younger constable feigned disinterest, gazing out the window, while the older constable exuded an air of familiarity.

“Youth suits you well. But in the motel or apartment business in the market district, you must guard against developing attachments to tenants. Otherwise, you'll either be deceived or heartbroken. After a few more such experiences, your enthusiasm for others will wane.”

Lumian offered a perfunctory reply, and the constable broached another subject.

“We still have Flameng's belongings. His kin refuse to collect them. Would you like them? If not, we'll handle it ourselves.”

“I'll take a look when I return from the catacombs,” Lumian replied nonchalantly.

During the journey from the market district to the Place du Purgatoire in Quartier de l'Observatoire, the older constable chatted away, alternating between engaging Lumian and attempting to draw his colleague into conversation. His chatter seemed ceaseless.

Finally reaching their destination, Lumian disembarked from the carriage, cradling Ruhr's ashes in his arms. Despite his outgoing nature, Lumian felt a newfound relief, as if his ears had been granted respite.

The catacomb administrator, whom Lumian had encountered before, awaited their arrival.

In his mid-thirties, of average build, with curly brown hair, a thick beard, and slightly upturned eyes, he sported yellow pants, a white shirt, and a blue vest.

“Kendall, why is it you again?” the older constable greeted him warmly.

Kendall held an unlit carbide lamp and smiled.

“Robert, I heard you were coming, so I made sure to delay my other duties and be here for you.”

As Kendall spoke, he scrutinized Lumian and emphasized, “You didn't forget to bring the white candles, did you?”

“That will be the last thing I forget!” Robert, clutching Flameng's urn, fumbled in his pocket and retrieved three white candles. He tossed one to his colleague and another to Lumian.

With everything in order, Kendall ignited the carbide lamp and turned around, leading them deeper into the darkness, down the stone staircase comprising 138 steps.

Along the way, they passed a heavy wooden door engraved with two imposing Sacred Emblems and traversed a hushed corridor where even the sound of their breaths seemed amplified.

Lumian was no stranger to such a foreboding atmosphere, but the young constable displayed signs of nervousness. He clutched Madame Michel's urn tightly, seeking solace.

After traversing a broad avenue, illuminated by gas street lamps, the quartet arrived at the catacombs' entrance.

The natural cavern, subsequently modified, stood silently in the dim yellow glow. Skulls, skeletal arms, sunflowers, and reliefs depicting steam elements adorned both sides. Beyond them, an impenetrable darkness loomed.

Etched on the lintel were two inscriptions in Intisian:

“Halt!

“The Death Empire lies ahead!”

Although Lumian had witnessed this sight before, he still felt a profound sense of reverence.

Unlike his previous curiosity and confusion, he now keenly grasped the gravity conveyed by these warnings and the surrounding environment.

Beneath Trier's surface lurked countless perils capable of obliterating the entire city and even Intis itself. These dangers included, but were not limited to, Trier, the Tree of Shadow, and invisible flames from the Fourth Epoch. The catacombs, situated here, were unlikely to be innocuous.

According to Osta Trul, a Secrets Suppliant, visitors who descended into the catacombs with lit white candles invoked the protection of a concealed entity, akin to a ritual.

Lumian couldn't help but suspect that opening such a place to the public served to suppress some subterranean peril, much like the new city erected upon Trier in the Fourth Epoch.

Kendall turned to Lumian and the others.

“It's time to light the candles. We must ensure they don't go out before we leave the catacombs.

“If we happen to get separated, don't panic. Look for a road sign. If you can't find one, follow the black line above you until you reach the exit.”

With Kendall holding the carbide lamp, Lumian and the two others ignited their white candles, casting a soft yellowish glow.

As the four candles flickered gently, Kendall extinguished the carbide lamp and led the way through the boulder gate, entering the realm of the Death Empire.

Lumian followed closely behind, clutching the urn in one hand and the white candle in the other.

Suddenly, a chill swept over him, sending shivers down his spine.

But the cold didn't originate from his surroundings; it emanated from deep within his heart, causing his hair to stand on end.

Simultaneously, Lumian felt eyes fixed upon him, their gazes piercing his soul.

Using the flame of his candle, he looked to his right and saw pits carved into the stone wall, each one containing a ghastly skeletal corpse.

The hollow-eyed skulls stared at him lifelessly, devoid of emotion.

Lumian didn't avert his gaze as he carefully observed the corpses. He realized that the eerie sensation of being watched didn't stem from them, yet the feeling remained.

An instinctive urge to activate his Spirit Vision surged within him, but he had changed since arriving in Trier. He had encountered enough to know that many warnings were inscribed with blood and tears by those who came before him.

I shouldn't look at what I shouldn't... Since it poses no danger to me, there's no need to search for the source of this abnormality... Lumian silently muttered, turning his attention to the police officers beside him.

They seemed oblivious to any anomaly and continued following the tomb administrator, Kendall, as if everything was normal.

This made Lumian suspect that the experience was a result of the qualitative change in his spirituality after his advancement to Pyromaniac.

It's good that you can't feel it... Lumian couldn't help but sigh.

Under the weight of countless gazes, his skin erupted in goosebumps.

He cautiously looked up and saw a thick black line painted on the top of the tomb, with an arrow pointing toward the exit.

As he advanced, Lumian noticed that both sides of the path were lined with bones. Some were nestled in pits along the stone walls, others were piled by the roadside, and some were covered by tattered garments. Some lay bare, stripped of all burial items, their skulls coated in a layer of dark green mold. The air carried a diluted scent of decay.

The catacombs were divided into multiple chambers, each designated by name, ensuring visitors could locate specific remains.

Lumian and his companions followed Kendall through the narrow passage between the tomb chapel and the tomb memorial pillar. Ahead, they saw dozens of yellowish candles.

At times, the flames clustered together like fireflies in the night, while other times they formed a river of dim starlight.

Lumian glanced around casually and spotted a bride, her face veiled in white, adorned in a sanctified gown. Beside her stood a groom in a black tailcoat, a floral handkerchief adorning his chest pocket. Surrounding them were 30 to 40 youths, holding lit white candles and laughing merrily.

“What's happening?” Lumian couldn't hide his confusion.

Kendall scoffed and explained, “It's part of a wedding ceremony.

“Since last year, newlyweds have been bringing young guests into the catacombs, crossing paths with the deceased. It's become a popular tradition in Trier. Young folks are always daring, taking pride in their courage and delighting in scaring others. I've seen guests purposely pick up skeletal hands and pat the bride and groom on the shoulder, nearly causing them to faint in fear.”

Oh, you Trierians... Lumian shook his head in amusement.

It didn't take long for the four of them to reach their destination, the Tomb of Lights.

In the center stood a black pedestal, atop which an obelisk painted white bore the emblem of the Sun. At its peak rested an ancient, extinguished oil lamp. The walls and floor were filled with bones, urns, and countless tear bottles.

Upon entering, Lumian realized a problem.

“Where are Flameng's relatives?”

He had wanted Flameng to rest alongside his children, wife, and parents.

After a brief moment of contemplation, Lumian suddenly understood why Flameng hadn't specified the location of his kin's remains.

He felt guilty and self-reproachful. Flameng desired to be with his family, yet he didn't dare approach them. He intended to stay in the same chamber and watch over them from a distance.

An indescribable sorrow enveloped Lumian as he stood silently, choosing to honor Flameng's final wish. He found an empty spot and gently placed the urn of the troubled soul.

Once Robert and the others had arranged the urns of the Ruhr couple, the four of them offered simultaneous prayer, either uttering “Praise the Sun” or “By Steam.”

On their way back, they encountered the newlyweds and their young entourage.

As Lumian brushed past them, he noticed a young couple in the group. Seizing the moment when the tomb administrator's attention waned, they impulsively attempted to blow out the white candle in their hands, curious to see what would happen.

Whoosh!

They had indeed done it.

The two yellowish flames were extinguished.

In that instant, Lumian's mind turned adrift.

Quickly regaining his composure, he realized the young couple had vanished without a trace.

They're gone... Lumian's eyes widened as he tried to comprehend the situation.

A few seconds later, he accepted the undeniable truth.

The young couple had truly vanished!

Lumian then shifted his gaze back to the entourage.

Whether it was the newlyweds leading the way, the attending guests, or those at the rear, no one seemed to notice anyone missing. They continued to smile, joke, and move forward.

Chapter 267 Remains

For a moment, Lumian thought he must be seeing things.

There was no sign of the couple, nor any attempt to put out the candle flames!

If Lumian hadn't witnessed it himself and been well aware of the dangers lurking in Underground Trier, he might have questioned whether the problem was with his own mind rather than searching for any trace of the couple's existence.

The people behind the couple hastened their steps and caught up to the person in front, closing the sudden gap in the procession.

They showed no surprise, fear, or confusion.

Everything appeared normal.

Lumian, already aware of the countless unseen gazes fixed upon him, felt the goosebumps on his skin intensify.

Subconsciously, he glanced at Kendall, the tomb administrator, who led the way with two police officers, to gauge his reaction to the recent events.

Clad in yellow trousers and a blue vest, Kendall held an extinguished carbide lamp in one hand and a quietly burning white candle in the other. He walked directly toward the exit of the catacombs, seemingly oblivious to the strange happenings surrounding the entourage.

Suddenly, Kendall turned around and met Lumian's gaze.

“Is something the matter?” Kendall's deep voice reverberated through the passageway, echoing in the nearby skull chambers.

Lumian maintained a composed demeanor and replied calmly, “I'm afraid I might get lost.”

Kendall nodded almost imperceptibly.

“Then I'll slow down.”

He continued toward the exit, deliberately reducing his pace. He staggered slightly, remaining silent, resembling a zombie from a horror novel.

Lumian held the flickering yellow candle and passed by the laughing wedding party participants, who occasionally made eye contact with the white skulls. Thoughts raced through his mind.

They truly didn't notice that someone was missing...

When they leave the catacombs, will the families of the man and woman discover their absence?

I've always wondered. The catacombs are open to the public, and university students often take risks and dance among the bones. Are there truly no issues?

Even visitors guided by the catacomb administrators disobey the warnings, let alone youngsters who venture in with a solitary white candle...

Initially, I believed there were safety measures or that accidents were infrequent enough not to deter those individuals. Now, it seems to be a different matter altogether...

Lumian suspected that not only would the body of the person “consumed” by the catacombs vanish, but even the memory of their existence would be erased from the minds of friends and relatives!

Why can I remember them? Could it be because Termiboros is sealed within me, connecting my fate to His to some extent?

Why do the government and the two Churches continue to open such a perilous place to the public? Do the catacombs require a constant flow of living people to keep something suppressed? Are those who disregard the warnings deemed necessary sacrifices? The more Lumian dwelled on it, the more his hair stood on end. He forced himself not to delve further into the analysis.

Without sufficient information, he couldn't explore the matter any deeper.

Regardless, there was nothing worth investigating within the catacombs. Visiting occasionally posed no threat as long as he adhered to the rules!

Once they entered the catacombs, the “talkative” police officer, Robert, fell silent, clearly uncomfortable in the environment.

With his silence, the conversation ceased. In an indescribable silence, the quartet retraced their steps to the natural entrance adorned with intricate reliefs and emerged back into the open.

As soon as Lumian crossed the threshold, he sensed the countless invisible gazes vanish.

The chill in his body dissipated, and his skin quickly returned to normal.

“Phew...” Robert exhaled deeply. “I always feel uneasy whenever I'm in the catacombs. Kendall, how can you go in more than ten times a day and still be so cheerful?”

Kendall chuckled and replied, “Do you think we remain unaffected? If we're not on night duty, those with families rush to find their wives. If not, they head to places like Rue de la Muraille and bask in the warmth of others.”

“To be honest, after spending so much time here, I feel as if I'm slowly turning into a corpse.”

As they conversed, Kendall lit the carbide lamp and extinguished the candle in his hand.

Returning to the surface, Robert glanced at the police headquarters carriage parked outside the entrance building and sheepishly smiled at his colleague and Lumian.

“That prolonged discomfort makes me need to use the loo. Wait for me. I'll go to the restroom first.”

With that, he headed toward the two-story building, painted a muddy gray, which served as the ticket office for the catacombs.

Lumian gazed at the stone-engraved dome and positioned himself by a pillar at the edge, absentmindedly observing the pedestrians on Place du Purgatoire. The other police officer boarded the carriage and settled in to wait.

At that moment, Lumian felt a sudden chill.

It resembled the sensation he experienced upon entering the catacombs, though not as intense.

Instinctively, he warily turned around and saw Kendall, the tomb administrator, standing behind him, wearing an expressionless face.

“What's the matter?” Lumian calmly inquired.

Kendall, with his thick brown beard, spoke in a deep voice, "What were you looking at?"

Lumian's heart sank as he responded with a mixture of sincerity and pretense,

"Which aspect are you referring to?"

"When we passed by that group of people on our way back." Kendall's tone remained neutral.

Lumian acted as though a light bulb had switched on.

"I find the concept of a wedding among the dead quite intriguing. They seemed unafraid and were enjoying themselves."

Kendall scrutinized him for a couple of seconds before nodding.

"Don't imitate them."

With that, the tomb administrator carried the unlit carbide lamp and made his way toward the muddy gray building that housed them.

Before long, police officer Robert jogged back, and the carriage departed for Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman.

In the Evidence Room deep within the corridor on the first floor of the market district's police headquarters, Robert led Lumian to a wooden frame divided into multiple compartments and pointed to one of them.

"Here, Flameng's belongings."

Among the items, there was a dark suitcase, a fountain pen, paper, an ink bottle, and several large books crammed inside.

Lumian pulled out one of the books and quickly skimmed through its pages. He realized it was a mineralogy textbook focusing on Trier's underground rock formations. As an unschooled youth, the content proved challenging, with numerous unfamiliar words that were exclusive to mineralogy.

The other books were also mineralogy texts, some containing basic teaching materials while others comprised complex collections of papers.

Confirming this, Lumian retrieved the suitcase, placed it on the floor, and opened it.

Inside, along with two sets of clothes and daily essentials, the suitcase was filled with small grayish-white cloth bags. Each bag had a different name written on it with a fountain pen:

Flower, Sedge, Sheep...

These are the names Flameng mentioned, referring to the various rock strata beneath Trier... Could these bags contain corresponding mineral specimens? Lumian briefly recollected Flameng's words and formed a rough idea of what the cloth bags contained.

Despite his madness, Flameng hadn't forgotten to bring along his research subjects!

But all of this held little significance for Lumian, and he began contemplating letting the police headquarters handle them.

Just then, Termiboros's magnificent voice resonated in his ears.

“The cloth bag on the far right.”

Oh, so a loser like you is finally speaking up again? Lumian's initial reaction was to mock Termiboros. However, he turned his gaze toward the cloth bag hinted at by the Inevitability angel, feeling a mix of surprise and suspicion.

The cloth bag rested on the far right side of the suitcase, sandwiched between Flameng's socks and his razor. Dark blue ink formed a combination of terms on its surface:

“Earth Blood.”

Earth... Blood... Lumian, crouching beside the suitcase, silently muttered as he calmly picked up the cloth bag in front of the police officer, Robert, and opened it.

Inside the bag was a brown rock pockmarked with potholes. Each depression contained dark-red speckles, resembling blood seeping from the earth.

For some reason, just looking at it filled Lumian with a sense of frustration.

He refrained from touching the mineral specimen with his bare hands. Instead, he securely tied the cloth bag and placed it back in the suitcase.

He swiftly skimmed through the book detailing the materials found in Trier's underground rock formations, searching for answers.

With a clear target in mind, he quickly discovered the answer.

“Earth Blood rock stratum lies between 55 and 56 meters underground in Trier and has a thickness of approximately 0.76 meters... This is the deepest mineral we can gather. Beyond lies the forbidden Ancient Ruins Reserve...”

Beside this textbook description, Flameng's familiar handwriting jotted a few words:

“A small number of ores within the Earth Blood rock stratum are more peculiar than the others. They are suspected to contain volatile toxins that can induce irritability and lead to a mental illness known as mania.

“A researcher suddenly went berserk and slashed his colleague.

“To handle specific mineral specimens from the Earth Blood rock stratum, one must wear corresponding protective gear.”

Earth Blood is a rock stratum near Fourth Epoch Trier? It's undeniably peculiar... No wonder Termiboros made me pay attention... As Lumian pondered, Robert urged, “Do you want them or not? Make a decision quickly!”

“Yes,” Lumian responded, rising to his feet.

Even though he only desired the mineral specimen from the Earth Blood rock stratum and the mineralogy textbook detailing Trier's underground rocks, he signed and took possession of all of Flameng's belongings to avoid arousing suspicion.

Upon returning to Room 207 of Auberge du Coq Doré, Lumian neglected to wash off his enigmatic makeup. He whispered to Termiboros, "What makes this mineral specimen so special?"

Termiboros's voice echoed in Lumian's ears once more.

"Don't tell me you think it's normal for the Montsouris ghost to spare Flameng?"

Chapter 268 Possible Encounters

Upon hearing Termiboros's question, Lumian felt a jolt of alarm.

He had never suspected that there might be something amiss with Flameng's prolonged stay at Auberge du Coq Doré, evading the clutches of the Montsouris ghost.

From Lumian's perspective, Flameng's immediate family and wife had already met their demise, and it was only a matter of time before he met a similar fate. The archives at Psychic's headquarters revealed instances where victims had been slain by the Montsouris ghost up to 11 months after encountering it. While Flameng's circumstances were rare, they were not unprecedented.

In an instant, Lumian's mind seized upon an intriguing detail.

The previous victims had all met their end within the same year of their encounter, whereas Flameng had crossed paths with the ghost last year. He had even sought the sanctuary of the clergy during the New Year festivities.

Although less than a year had passed since Flameng's encounter with the Montsouris ghost and his subsequent suicide, it was an unprecedented delay compared to the other cases.

"Could this Earth Blood ore be responsible for protecting Flameng, causing the Montsouris ghost to repeatedly postpone its actions and disrupt its usual patterns?" Lumian asked Termiboros, his voice hushed, seeking confirmation.

Termiboros was a true angel, devoid of power due to a perfect seal but possessing remarkable insight, knowledge, and level made Him capable of deciphering many matters.

Termiboros replied in a majestic voice, "It instills fear and repulsion in the Montsouris ghost, but it holds no power of its own. For you, this could be a crucial key."

"A key?" Lumian swiftly made numerous connections. "The key to a hidden chamber in Fourth Epoch Trier?"

Termiboros responded in an unusually deep voice, "You will inevitably enter Fourth Epoch Trier. It is where your destiny, both treacherous and serendipitous, awaits you.

"Rather than remaining passive, it would be wiser to explore proactively, leveraging the insights gained from each venture to better prepare yourself."

"Aren't you revealing your intentions too quickly?" Lumian couldn't help but chuckle. "Are you trying to hasten my demise? So that you may utilize the unique underground environment to block the signal of the collapsing seal and ensure your own safe escape?"

Given that the Tree of Shadow hadn't taken root in Fourth Epoch Trier, Lumian held no interest in venturing underground.

Without awaiting Termiboros's response, he left the room and made his way to the nearest washroom, eager to wash off the mystical makeup that concealed his true identity.

Having eliminated the latent threat, Lumian settled at a wooden table and began to write.

It was clear that both Flameng and the Earth Blood ore were extraordinary cases. He couldn't simply follow Termiboros's directives; consulting Madam Magician was imperative.

If he lacked knowledge and blindly believed the words of an angel tied to an evil deity, he would inevitably suffer dire consequences, even risking his life.

Termiboros's voice resonated once more.

“Can you truly trust this Magician, this Tarot Club, as they claim?”

“They sealed me within your body instead of seeking my eradication. I fear they have ulterior motives, intending to exploit you for their nefarious purposes.”

“They cast you into Trier, the very heart of the storm, yet they displayed no concern nor made any inquiries about your well-being. Don't you find this suspicious? It cannot be explained away as mere training.”

Lumian beamed and said with a sigh, “Have you never deceived or manipulated others in the past, relying solely on your status and abilities to achieve your goals?”

“Would you like me to purchase a copy of the Art of Persuasion and read it aloud daily for your instruction?”

“Allow me to enlighten you. Such tricks wouldn't have ensnared me during my early teenage years. I am well aware of those I can depend on, my true friends, my adversaries, and those I must remain wary of.”

Termiboros fell silent, seemingly contemplating whether to acquire the art of rhetoric.

Lumian swiftly penned a letter to Madam Magician, detailing the recent developments, and entrusted it, along with the Earth Blood ore, to the puppet messenger he had summoned.

In due time, a reply arrived from Madam Magician, who returned the mineral specimen.

“I'm relieved to see that you remained cautious and didn't fully trust Termiboros's words.

“However, there is some truth to what He said. The ore lacks inherent power, but it carries remnants of unknown auras and characteristics, mostly dissipated. It won't aid you directly, but it seems destined to bring about encounters in the future, which could be either beneficial or detrimental. Its current state is highly chaotic, making it difficult to provide an accurate interpretation.

“What Termiboros intentionally misled you about is that the fortuitous encounter He spoke of might not necessarily occur in Fourth Epoch Trier, but somewhere underground.

“If, in the future, you wish to explore the potential encounters and are prepared to take risks, carry it with you whenever you venture into Underground Trier. Alternatively, if you wish to avoid the risk, keep it safely stored in your room.

“The symbolic elements I mentioned previously have already begun to unfold. A friend of mine mentioned that he possesses great proficiency in deciphering such matters. Once he completes his current tasks, I will arrange for you to meet him...”

Suddenly, a blaze erupted from Lumian's hand, reducing the letter to ashes.

Contemplating the words of both Madam Magician and Termiboros, Lumian couldn't help but believe that the Earth Blood ore before him could trigger some kind of mutation within Underground Trier. It could lead to a fortuitous encounter or even claim his life.

For now, it's best not to take unnecessary risks, Lumian thought, aware of his current strengths.

As a Sequence 7 Pyromaniac, he had overcome any deficiencies in both close-quarters combat and long-range attacks, excelling in hand-to-hand combat and spellcasting. He had surpassed the limitations of an ordinary individual. However, Hunters leaned more towards conventional battles and lacked the peculiar abilities and methods to deal with the peculiarities of Underground Trier.

Lumian decided to wait until he had fully digested the Pyromaniac potion and obtained the Contractee boon. Then, he would consider carrying the Earth Blood ore based on the information he had gathered about Underground Trier.

It would be even better if he could transform the Shadow Branch into a mystical item before that.

Suppressing his thoughts, Lumian took the mineral specimen to Rue des Blouses Blanches and concealed it in his safehouse.

Before the afternoon sun waned, he delved into Aurore's grimoire, meticulously studying its contents alongside Franca's teachings and his own experiences with fire spells, searching for any potential issues.

After more than an hour, Lumian stumbled upon a section about summoning creatures from the spirit world and forging contracts.

His mind immediately turned to White Paper, Aurore's contracted creature.

The fragile spirit entity possessed the ability to withstand a specific ability of the contractor.

I wonder if the contract between Aurore and White Paper has been severed. According to the notebook, aside from the designated ritual, the contract can only be broken if one of the parties is completely deceased.

Regrettably, contracted creatures can only be summoned by the contractor and not by others like a messenger. Otherwise, I could utilize White Paper to determine if Aurore is truly deceased...

Hm... Is it possible that Aurore left behind any information with White Paper?

Lost in thought, Lumian's mind shifted to another matter that had previously escaped his notice.

Considering that Aurore occasionally gained clarity and assisted him in cutting up the livre bleu, reassembling letters, and seeking aid from the authorities, and since her initial response in the dream was to summon the messenger of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society's Vice President, Hela, to seek her counsel, why didn't she occasionally summon the messenger when she was lucid and inform Madam Hela about her predicament?

In Madam Hela's earliest response to me, she clearly seemed unaware of the situation.

What prevented Aurore from making such an attempt?

Or could it be that she did summon a messenger, and Hela is concealing it?

Lumian narrowed his eyes. Without the accompanying memories, he couldn't discern the source of the problem.

For now, he wasn't overly suspicious of Hela, believing there must be another explanation.

It was worth noting that Hela's messenger knew Lumian's exact location. If the woman was truly entangled in Cordu's affairs and played a dishonorable role, she would undoubtedly wish to eliminate the final "survivor" without leaving any loose ends. Yet, all this time, she not only refrained from making any substantial moves but also kindly provided knowledge and suggestions.

For a moment, Lumian considered writing down his questions and sending them to Hela to gauge her response. However, he restrained himself, fearing that it might expose the king's new clothes and lead to unfavorable outcomes.

He decided to first have a conversation with Franca and gather opinions from her teammates in the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society and the Tarot Club regarding Hela's trustworthiness.

If Franca believed Hela to be reliable and had shared information about the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society with her Major Arcana card, Lumian would request Madam Magician to keep a watchful eye before sending inquiries to Hela.

He forced himself to regain composure and resumed studying Aurore's grimoire. Only when evening arrived did he leave Rue des Blouses Blanches, making his way onto Avenue du Marché and entering his Salle de Bal Brise.

"Good evening, Boss!" Greetings echoed from all directions as Lumian nodded in acknowledgement and led Louis and Sarkota to the second floor.

Before he could settle in at the café, René, the dance hall manager, approached him.

The slender middle-aged man pressed a hand to his chest and bowed respectfully.

"Monsieur Ciel, Monsieur Martin requests your presence at Rue des Fontaines tomorrow at 10 a.m."

Boss wants to see me? Lumian was both surprised and delighted.

He was taken aback that Gardner Martin had sent for him despite the recent lack of incidents. Yet, he couldn't help but feel a sense of joy at the prospect of further interaction with Gardner Martin and the opportunity to gain his trust to join the Iron and Blood Cross Order.

Chapter 269 Islander

“Alright.” Lumian nodded at Manager René.

Lumian dabbed his mouth with a napkin and rose to his feet. He strolled towards one of the café's balconies, casting his eyes over the nocturnal scenery of Avenue du Marché.

The gas street lamps cast a soft, golden glow, illuminating the carriages and pedestrians that traversed the road.

At that moment, people streamed into Salle de Bal Brise one after another, joining the revelry within.

To be honest, Lumian preferred the cozy atmosphere of the basement bar at Auberge du Coq Doré to this place. It allowed him to unwind and find enjoyment.

From his perspective, the patrons of Salle de Bal Brise were excessively self-indulgent. They cared little for their families or their futures. All they sought was a night of revelry, drowning themselves in alcohol, beauty, dance, and uproar. In contrast, the regulars at the basement bar were mostly tenants of Auberge du Coq Doré. They would return around 9 or 10 p.m. and had to be in bed by 1 a.m. They drank, sang, boasted, and frolicked, making the most of those fleeting two to three hours to find their own slice of joy.

Only then did they gather the courage to face the arduous tasks of the following day and embrace the promise of a new dawn.

It was akin to kerosene lamps that required regular refueling to continue casting their light.

Lumian surveyed Avenue du Marché for a few minutes before his attention was abruptly drawn to a familiar figure.

There stood Charlie, adorned in a white shirt and blue waistcoat, embroiled in a street brawl, his formal coat casually slung over his arm.

Now we're talking... Lumian smiled, a touch of nostalgia and sentimentality washing over him as he used an expression that had recently gained popularity.

Pressing his right hand against the balcony, Lumian gracefully leaped from the second floor, landing nimbly at the edge of Avenue du Marché. With a few brisk strides, he reached the scene of Charlie's altercation.

He made no move to intervene or assist Charlie. Instead, he observed the fight with keen interest.

The other party engaged in this scuffle with Charlie was a slender young man in his mid-twenties, possessed of dark skin and sunken eyes. His lips were thick, and his slightly curly black hair marked him as a descendant of the Fog Sea Islander lineage. However, compared to his fellow islanders, he appeared somewhat more presentable.

“Cheat! You damn cheat!” Charlie spat out, his curses interwoven with their tussle.

The Islander, donning a blue shirt with a fountain pen tucked in his breast pocket, deftly dodged Charlie's onslaught while offering an explanation.

“I didn't want this to happen either. I, too, fell victim to deceit!”

“Dogsh*t!” Charlie's kick missed its mark.

The two engaged in their amateurish scuffle until their breath grew ragged. Simultaneously, they slowed their movements and eventually ceased their struggle.

Only then did Charlie notice Lumian standing beside him, observing the brawl with a smile.

“Ciel, it's Monette! That swindler! The one who conned me out of 10 verl d'or, nearly leaving me to starve!” Charlie's face lit up as he eagerly revealed the identity of his Islander adversary. “Praise the Sun for granting me this encounter!”

The Islander whom Charlie deemed deserving of a dire fate... Lumian chuckled to himself.

“You're partly to blame as well. Haven't you heard the saying? ‘Never trust an Islander.’”

“I thought we were friends,” Charlie muttered, his frustration evident.

How could you be so naïve and easily swayed? You too possess a certain knack for mischief... People like you can be easily ensnared by scheming individuals, falling into their traps without gaining either the affection or the riches you desire. Ah, you've already fallen victim... Lumian chastised, shifting his gaze towards the Islander named Monette.

Monette responded with an obsequious smile.

“I genuinely intended to help Charlie find employment, but I, too, fell prey to a scam and lost all my money.

“I couldn't face Charlie, so I secretly departed from Auberge du Coq Doré.”

As he spoke, he reached into his pocket and withdrew a stack of banknotes, counting three 5 verl d'or bills. He handed them over to Charlie.

“I returned to the market district to find you and return your money, along with interest.”

Charlie's emotions eased considerably as he verified the authenticity of the three banknotes under the glow of the street lamps. He asked, still somewhat suspicious, “Are you someone who gets scammed easily?”

Ever since Charlie had encountered Monette until his departure, he had only witnessed him conning others. He had never seen him on the receiving end of such deals. True to his Islander identity. Monette sheepishly smiled and replied, “Not only was I swindled once, but I fell for it a second time.

“The first instance, I encountered a group of people who claimed that Salle de Bal Unique in Quartier de l'Observatoire wanted to expand and were offering shares for sale. Each lot cost a mere 200 verl d'or.

“You all know how lucrative the dance hall is. I couldn't resist dipping into my savings, but the share subscription certificate I received turned out to be counterfeit!

“I confronted them, only to be swindled once more.”

Salle de Bal Unique... Lumian's eyelids twitched involuntarily.

The bankrupt merchant, Fitz, residing in Room 401 of Auberge du Coq Doré, had previously been duped out of 100,000 verl d'or by the owner of Salle de Bal Unique, Timmons. Fitz had sought Lumian's aid in recovering the sum, but Lumian had investigated and consulted several sources. He found the dance hall's practices dubious, possessing a formidable network. They appeared to wield considerable power, causing Lumian to abandon the commission.

Now, he had encountered another victim of Salle de Bal Unique.

“You were swindled by them once before. How did you fall for it a second time?”

Charlie couldn't fathom such foolishness.

Monette cleared his throat twice.

“They openly confessed to being a group of swindlers and refused to return the money. They even said that reporting them to the authorities would be futile. Impressed by my skills, they asked if I was willing to learn the art of deception from them, allowing me to recoup my losses.

“In the end, they merely taught me what I already knew. They only gave me something else.”

“What was it?” Charlie was always a curious one.

In the blink of an eye, Monette retrieved a transparent monocle from his pocket.

He smoothly placed it into his right eye socket.

For some reason, Lumian sensed an inexplicable change in Monette as soon as he wore the monocle. It was as if he had transformed into a different character altogether.

The corners of Monette's mouth curled slightly as he positioned the monocle over his right eye. He glanced at Charlie first, then turned his gaze towards Lumian. His eyes shifted from Lumian's face to his chest and hands.

Lumian felt a subtle unease, but he detected no immediate danger.

Monette smiled and said, “Are you Ciel, the mastermind behind the Idiot Instrument?”

“Yes.” Lumian did not deny it and remained silently cautious.

Monette adjusted the monocle on his right eye.

“Quite adept at pulling pranks, I must say.

“Would you like this monocle? It's of no use to me. I could exchange it for some cash. With it, you can disguise yourself as a member of Salle de Bal Unique and earn a good amount of money there.”

Do I look like a fool to you? Lumian promptly rejected Monette's suggestion without hesitation.

“I have no interest in donning monocles.”

He had always been skeptical of the peculiar rules of Salle de Bal Unique, keeping his guard up. Disappointed, Monette redirected his gaze, removed the monocle, and turned to Charlie.

“I've given you the money and the interest. If you ever need anything in the future, come find me at Salle de Bal Unique.”

Charlie scoffed dismissively.

He still harbored suspicions that Monette had intended to scam him in the past.

After the Islander left Avenue du Marché, Lumian turned to Charlie.

“Remember to keep your distance from that fellow. Otherwise, you might end up encountering the same situation with Susanna Mattise.”

The latter part of his statement was a fabrication, primarily to instill fear in Charlie and ensure he took the advice seriously.

Charlie was instantly alarmed. Without questioning further, he hastily nodded and replied, “Alright, alright!”

At midnight, Lumian and Jenna, the latter wearing a sparkling red dress, exited Salle de Bal Brise and made their way towards Rue des Blouses Blanches.

Jenna did not inquire about the reason for their route. After a moment of silence, she spoke up.

“Have you ever felt like nothing matters? Lost and devoid of motivation?”

“Definitely,” Lumian replied casually, his gaze fixed on the street ahead. “In such moments, you must rediscover the meaning of life and determine what truly matters to you.”

Jenna fell silent once more. After a while, she asked, “Have you ever experienced something akin to an illusion shattering within you? A mysterious cosmos materializing, adorned with stars of varying sizes?”

“No,” Lumian replied after a brief pause.

He had experienced the sensation of illusory objects abruptly disintegrating. It occurred every time the potion was completely digested. However, he knew nothing of the mysterious cosmos or the glimmering stars of different magnitudes.

Jenna remained silent, deep in thought about the implications of this phenomenon or contemplating other matters.

Soon enough, they arrived at Apartment 601, 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches.

Franca was already back and regarded them warily as they entered side by side.

Before she could inquire, Jenna brought up the topic of the shattered illusions and the appearance of the mysterious cosmos.

Franca was taken aback but spoke joyfully, "Your Assassin potion has been fully digested! Assassinating a parliament member in public and under heavy security certainly facilitated the digestion process."

Is this a sign of potion digestion? Lumian couldn't hide his surprise and perplexity.

Why do I experience only the first half and not the second?

Franca scrutinized him suspiciously.

"You've never experienced it before? How did you advance then?"

Not only is the seal on me restraining Termiboros, but it also restricts some of my mystical senses? That's right. The seal resides within me. It's impossible for it to have zero impact... Lumian formed a vague hypothesis and casually brushed it off.

"It wasn't as pronounced."

Franca, more concerned about her female companion, did not press the matter further and curiously asked Jenna, "So, have you managed to summarize the principles of acting?"

"Acting principles?" Jenna pondered for a moment. "After the assassination, I learned many principles. Yes, assassination is a matter of risking one's life. It is the ultimate form of punishment, a calamity for those criminals..."

Enthusiastically delving into the "acting method" and discussing acting principles with Jenna, Franca suddenly remembered Lumian's presence.

"What—what's the matter?" She glanced at her male companion, who had settled onto the sofa.

Lumian met her gaze and indicated that they needed to speak privately.

Jenna instantly understood, excused herself to change clothes, and retreated into the guest bedroom.

Lumian lowered his voice and addressed Franca, "What do you make of Hela? What kind of person do you think she is?"

Chapter 270 Agreement

"Madame Hela? How do you know her?" Franca's immediate reaction was one of surprise and astonishment.

She quickly remembered that Lumian's sister, Muggle, was also a member of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society. She hastily added, "Did your sister mention Madame Hela to you?"

Lumian nodded.

“Not only did she mention her, but she also gave me the incantation to summon Madame Hela's messenger.”

“Did she suggest seeking help from Madame Hela when you faced trouble?” Franca speculated. “Are you planning to summon Madame Hela's messenger and ask if she can be trusted?”

“Sort of,” Lumian affirmed. “I've already established a connection with Madame Hela and summoned her messenger, but today I realized that some of my sister's actions during the disaster in Cordu were unusual. It seems to be connected to Madame Hela. I don't know if I should question her directly.”

Observing that Lumian hadn't provided further details about the disaster in Cordu or Aurore's abnormal behavior, Franca understood why and refrained from prying. She pondered and replied,

“Personally, I trust Madame Hela. Dammit, you've established a connection with her without even telling me!

“Well... She's one of the most advanced members of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society on the paths of the divine. There are suspicions that she belongs to the Corpse Collector pathway.”

“Not only does she willingly share her knowledge and experience with us, but she also offers assistance whenever possible. The items she trades are only slightly more expensive than their cost price.”

“To many of us, including your sister and me, Madame Hela is like a dependable older sister. She has rescued us from helplessness, anxiety, and indecision. We trust her implicitly.”

“Understood,” Lumian sighed with relief. “I'll have an honest conversation with Madame Hela to uncover the true cause of the problem.”

At this point, he changed the subject.

“Does your Major Arcana card know about the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society?”

“I haven't mentioned it to her directly. All I said was that I joined a secret organization that provides mutual assistance. However, she seems to be aware of the Research Society's situation,” Franca lowered her voice unconsciously. “I suspect I'm not the only member of the Tarot Club in the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society.”

With his lingering doubts cleared, Lumian turned around, smiling, and waved his hand.

“I'm going to summon Madame Hela's messenger.”

“Hey, it's still early. Want to play Fighting Evil for a couple of hours before heading back?” Franca, who wasn't fond of going to bed early, tried to find some entertainment.

Lumian rejected her without hesitation.

When he returned to Room 207 of Auberge du Coq Doré, Lumian didn't rush to summon Hela's messenger. Instead, he unfolded a piece of paper and wrote to Madam Magician once again.

He briefly mentioned the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society and informed the demigod that Aurore was willing to seek help anonymously from the authorities when she was lucid. However, she hadn't summoned Hela's messenger for advice, which didn't align with her behavior in Lumian's dream. He didn't know if Aurore was under another restriction or if there was an issue with Hela.

Before long, Madam Magician replied with a simple line: “Based on the information we have, Hela is trustworthy.”

Phew... Lumian relaxed and began writing a letter to Madame Hela.

In the letter, he candidly pointed out Aurore's abnormality and asked if she had missed receiving any letters.

Skilled in the process, Lumian made slight adjustments to the altar and changed the ingredients. He swiftly summoned a human skull that appeared to be made of pure silver.

As he gazed at the pale-white flames silently burning in the skull's eye sockets, Pyromaniac Lumian felt a greater sense of danger emanating from it than ever before.

It was no less intense than the feeling he got from Madam Magician's puppet messenger!

The pure silver skull clamped onto the letter and vanished into the dense darkness around it.

Lumian didn't rush to tidy up the altar. He patiently waited.

As time ticked by, a letter suddenly materialized on the wooden table in front of him, and he hadn't sensed its arrival until the end.

Of course, this was a significant improvement from before. Previously, he only noticed it after the pure silver skull had placed the letter.

Lumian unfolded the letter and swiftly scanned it under the glow of the two yellow candles on the altar.

“I haven't received any letters from Muggle since February of this year.

“I understand that a one-sided story lacks credibility, but if you carefully consider it, you should find some details that support this matter.

“I suspect that some force had influenced Muggle, causing her to refrain from seeking help from me for some reason. In fact, if she had written to me before the catastrophe completely unfolded, I could have arrived earlier than the official Beyonders. I might have been able to save Muggle and prevent the catastrophe.

“Often, letters and exchanges fail to inspire insights, making it difficult for us to engage in broader and more profound discussions. I will be in Trier in the coming days. If you are willing, we can arrange a time and place to meet and discuss your sister's encounter and the disaster in Cordu in detail. Perhaps, then, I can offer you useful suggestions.”

Lumian pondered for a few seconds before recalling a detail from his dream.

Aurore had attempted to summon Hela's messenger but ultimately refrained from doing so. She was afraid of triggering a loop that would cause Cordu to restart frequently.

This likely meant that she had given up summoning Hela's messenger in reality or that she had tried but failed for some reason.

After realizing this, Lumian replied to Hela's suggestion, “No problem. We'll arrange a time and place when you arrive in Trier.”

After sending the letter, concluding the ritual, and tidying up the altar, Lumian realized it was getting late. He quickly washed up, lay on the bed, and drifted off to sleep.

The following morning, Lumian awoke naturally to the resonating sound of the cathedral bell.

After visiting the washroom, he embarked on his usual morning jog along familiar streets like Rue Anarchie and Avenue du Marché, fully energizing his body.

During his routine, he discovered an empty space in the square outside Église Saint-Robert and spent nearly an hour practicing combat techniques.

Returning to Auberge du Coq Doré, Lumian enjoyed a meatloaf breakfast while sipping a Whiskey Sour. On his way, he passed the Suhit steam locomotive station, where new vendors were already selling photos of street maîtresse d'ateliers.

Lumian scanned the scene and caught sight of Baron Brignais.

The Savoie Mob leader, adorned with a diamond ring and smoking a mahogany pipe, appeared gentlemanly with his half top hat and the absence of any accompanying thugs.

Holding a seven- or eight-year-old child, he made his way from the steam locomotive station towards a carriage parked by the roadside.

The child donned a caramel coat with brass buttons, a black-and-white checkered shirt, and a linen coat. His black strapless leather shoes and white socks paired with a dark-red school bag that appeared somewhat heavy and solid.

With yellow hair, brown eyes, and a sturdy physique, the child had noticeable baby fat on his face and exuded an air of simplicity and honesty.

Baron Brignais's child? He usually resides in other provinces and visits Trier for summer vacations? No wonder they don't seem too familiar... Lumian muttered to himself, redirecting his gaze and continuing his stroll.

11 Rue des Fontaines, within Gardner Martin's grayish-white three-story villa.

Lumian arrived in the exclusive carriage of Salle de Bal Brise. He passed through the hall adorned with weapons and armor, arriving at a room filled with bookshelves.

Gardner Martin, displaying his amiable disposition, deep facial features, and brownish-red eyes, sat in an armchair at the back of the study. Standing before him were the short “Rat” Christo, with his gray-black hair, dark-blue eyes, and mustache, and the towering “Giant” Simon, measuring over 1.9 meters, his light-yellow hair closely cropped, clad in an unusually tight black suit.

Sensing Lumian's entrance into the study, “Giant” Simon and “Rat” Christo turned to regard their colleague.

“Giant” Simon's eyes displayed caution and defiance as he instinctively raised his head.

He believed that Ciel, who had defeated “Hammer” Ait, shouldn't be underestimated. However, he also believed that he himself was unquestionably stronger than that fool and might not lose to Ciel.

“Rat” Christo showed no evident emotions, but the right pocket of his dark brown shirt suddenly stirred, as if something alive resided within.

Christo slipped his right hand into his pocket, his expression abruptly changing.

His gaze upon Lumian grew intense with fear, and he couldn't help but smile obsequiously.

Wh... Lumian felt a tad uneasy.

After pondering for a moment, he suspected that “Rat” Christo had used an item in his pocket to “see” that Lumian had advanced to Sequence 7 and become a Pyromaniac.

In contrast, “Giant” Simon clearly lacked such intuition, failing to notice the subtle shifts in his colleague.

“Good morning, Boss,” Lumian energetically greeted Gardner Martin.

A few days ago, he had informed the boss of the Savoie Mob that he had consumed the potion and advanced to Pyromaniac.

Gardner Martin nodded slightly, shifting his gaze from Lumian's face to “Rat” Christo and “Giant” Simon.

After nearly ten seconds, he spoke in a low voice, “I have a mission for all of you. At precisely noon, retrieve something from Underground Trier and bring it to Rue des Fontaines.”

Mission? Lumian's eyebrows twitched, sensing a potential trap.

As a new Beyonder to the Savoie Mob, trust between him and Gardner Martin was still lacking. Why would he be assigned such a crucial and confidential task?

With these thoughts racing through his mind, Lumian had two conjectures: either he was mere cannon fodder or this was a test.