

Inevitability 271

Chapter 271 Acting

With this in mind, Lumian's gaze automatically drifted over "Rat" Christo and "Giant" Simon, taking them in.

He sensed that the chances of them becoming expendable pawns were slim. Potion-consuming Beyonders, unlike the Blessed relying on divine favors from evil gods, were a rarity. They couldn't be simply stockpiled at will. Firstly, the ingredients required were specific, and secondly, ample time was needed. At the Mid-Sequence, luck and mastery of the acting method played a role.

If he were to use them as mere pawns in this mission, the likelihood of reclaiming the Beyonder characteristics would be greatly diminished. It constituted a substantial portion of Gardner Martin's control over the underground world in the market district.

As a member of the secretive organization, the Iron and Blood Cross Order, Gardner Martin could indeed bear such a loss, but he wouldn't make such a colossal sacrifice for something insignificant.

And if the mission was of sufficient importance, sending only one Sequence 7 and two Sequence 8 Beyonders was clearly inadequate. Shouldn't Gardner Martin be concerned about failure?

With this realization, Lumian swiftly revised his conjecture.

Either this was a preliminary test, a low-risk mission designed to assess him, regardless of whether "Rat" Christo and "Giant" Simon were aware of it, or it was indeed a crucial and perilous operation. While using them as pawns, there would be powerhouses present as a safety net. This was also a test.

With this in mind, Lumian's initial reaction was to gaze at Gardner Martin and accept the mission, projecting an image of an ambitious young man striving to climb the ranks.

If it was the first possibility, this was his best chance to prove himself. If it was the second possibility, Lumian still had Mr. K's finger quietly nestled in his pocket as a trump card. When the time came, if he needed to divulge his affiliation with the Aurora Order to ensure his survival, he could abandon the Iron and Blood Cross Order's mission.

As long as he remained alive, he could await another opportunity!

After the catastrophe caused by the Tree of Shadow, Lumian visited Psychic's headquarters and met Mr. K before Gardner Martin could conduct an investigation.

He concealed his experience with the Tree of Shadow, merely mentioning that something had occurred in the market district, trapping them in a peculiar wilderness. Then the brownish-green tree descended, and Susanna Mattise appeared, draining everyone's energy. To combat the Fallen Tree Spirit, he used the finger to fashion a robust defensive flesh robe, but he didn't receive additional assistance.

Later, with the aid of the tree's further descent, Susanna Mattise's weakened state, and the involvement of the other two present Beyonders, he barely overcame the enemy and vanquished her using his Pyromaniac abilities and the Fallen Mercury from Cordu.

He spoke the truth, albeit blurring the sequence of events, time, and location, as well as omitting a few details. The logic remained intact. Mr. K harbored no suspicions after hearing the account;

instead, he sighed and cautioned Lumian not to overly rely on the finger since there were multiple ways to sever the mystical connection between him and it.

Satisfied with Lumian's advancement to Pyromaniac with Gardner Martin's assistance, Mr. K plucked another finger for him.

This led Lumian to believe that, as long as he didn't encounter extraordinary environments like Paramita or the Tree of Shadow and wasn't entangled in the perilous affair of confronting a godlike entity head-on, with Mr. K's finger, even if he couldn't completely reverse the situation, he still had a high chance of escape.

Just as Lumian was about to express his stance to the boss, he suddenly sensed that he shouldn't push his acting too far.

That was what Jenna would occasionally say.

According to Franca, Boss is at least a Sequence 6 Conspirer. I can't underestimate his intelligence and discernment...

My background is undeniably evident. I'm young and hail from the countryside. I was once entangled in a Beyonder catastrophe and lacked knowledge. I wanted to change my fate, but I've spent a considerable time in the market district, openly and covertly accomplishing much. Even with what the Boss only knows, it should be enough for him to perceive that I'm not an ignorant country bumpkin who acts rashly and mercilessly.

Based on today's incident, the impression the boss has of me should be someone capable of detecting mission abnormalities and potential dangers. Simply agreeing without reason or observation would only raise suspicions of ulterior motives or reliance on something.

That would be troublesome...

A whirlwind of thoughts raced through Lumian's mind. He immediately shifted his gaze to "Giant" Simon and "Rat" Christo, eagerly awaiting their reactions and attitudes toward the mission.

It remained unclear whether "Rat" Christo was recalling the incident involving the "mirror person" or his brother's demise due to it. His expression grew nasty, tainted with fear and apprehension.

Doubt and wariness flickered across "Giant" Simon's face, yet he didn't voice any objections.

After a few seconds, they nearly spoke simultaneously.

"Yes, Boss!"

Observing this, Lumian deliberately hesitated before continuing, "Yes, Boss!"

With keen eyes, Gardner Martin observed Lumian, Christo, and Simon, assessing their expressions and demeanors.

After their unanimous agreement, the boss of the Savoie Mob grinned with satisfaction and said, "I shall now disclose the mission details."

He reached into a drawer and retrieved a scroll made of faux goatskin, laying it out on the desk before them.

Approaching, Lumian and his companions beheld a map revealing a section of Underground Trier!

The map measured a meter in length and 50 centimeters in width. The upper level depicted the Underground Trier, formed by the municipal department through the excavation of various tunnels and reinforcement of the quarry cave. It corresponded to the streets and squares above ground.

The map focused solely on the underground areas of Quartier du Marché, Quartier de la Cathédrale Commémorative, Quartier du Jardin Botanique, and Quartier de l'Observatoire. However, it was intricately detailed, as if copied from the original by infiltrating the municipal department.

Lumian could clearly discern extensions on both sides, although the drawing did not continue.

In the middle of the map lay quarry caves, ancient catacombs, and underground river tributaries, scattered in a haphazard manner and connected to the upper level through visible or concealed tunnels.

This portion contained numerous gaps and omissions. Beside these areas were inscriptions such as “to be investigated,” “to be explored,” and “to be searched.”

The lower levels of the map encompassed collapsed mines and more missing information, as if veiled in a shroud of fog. Even the Iron and Blood Cross Order, a secret organization, lacked comprehensive knowledge.

Numerous passageways extended downward from this level, but the map did not indicate their connections.

Fourth Epoch Trier? The place referred to as the Ancient Ruins Reserve by the authorities?

It's evident that this map is a copy of a more comprehensive one...

A complete version includes Fourth Epoch Trier?

The Iron and Blood Cross Order possesses extensive knowledge of the underground... Lumian speculated as he committed the incomplete map to memory.

After his three subordinates had taken a cursory glance at the map, Gardner Martin pointed to a location and said, “This is your destination.”

It marked a collapsed mine, yet there remained some open space.

Situated at the lowest level of the map, it was near Fourth Epoch Trier.

Above it, corresponding to Avenue Sèlbù, Rue des Mauvais Enfants, and Place de la Forêt, lay the intersection between Quartier de l'Observatoire and Quartier du Jardin Botanique.

“It's called the Albert Mines,” Gardner Martin introduced. “To reach it, you must traverse two privately-bored tunnels. It remains unknown to the authorities and most people who travel underground.”

As he spoke, Gardner Martin traced the tunnel with his finger and instructed Lumian, Christo, and Simon on the correct entrance.

Finally, he sighed with a tinge of emotion and added, “Six years ago, Albert Goncourt, the leader of the rebellion and the mastermind behind the uprising, relied on this mine, which he discovered and named, to elude the army, police, and official Beyonders who were searching the underground. He survived.”

Six years ago... Rebellion... Uprising... Lumian instantly recalled what he had witnessed and heard.

During the war with the Loen Kingdom, prices in Trier skyrocketed, leaving people in despair due to the exorbitant cost of food. This triggered a massive protest that swept through the city, resulting in various conflicts.

From Gardner Martin's words, it was evident that the protest wasn't purely spontaneous. Someone had planned and guided it. Was the Iron and Blood Cross Order also involved? Lumian continued to gaze at the map, lost in thought.

Concluding his explanation, Gardner Martin said, "Your task is to reach the Albert Mines before noon and await the arrival of a trader who will hand you a box.

"You need not give him anything, nor do you need to communicate with him verbally.

"On your return journey, you must not open that box, as doing so would expose you to immeasurable danger.

"As long as you strictly follow my instructions, the mission poses minimal risk. While you may encounter peculiar phenomena concealed underground or face Beyonder monsters, good teamwork will resolve those challenges."

After providing them with additional guidance, Lumian, Christo, and Simon each took a carbide lamp and departed from 11 Rue des Fontaines, making their way to the nearest entrance to Underground Trier.

Casting a final glance at the now-out-of-sight grayish-white villa, Lumian considered the impression Gardner Martin had of him.

With a smile, he casually inquired of "Rat" Christo and "Giant" Simon, "Have you undertaken similar missions before?"

"Rat" Christo fell silent for a few seconds before answering, "Thrice."

"Once," "Giant" Simon replied in a slightly buzzing voice.

Lumian chuckled.

"Well, the fact that you're still alive suggests that such missions aren't too perilous."

"Rat" Christo remained silent, as though he had fallen into a grim recollection. "Giant" Simon reassured himself, echoing Lumian's words.

"You're right. Perhaps this is a test from the boss. Those who pass may have an opportunity to advance further."

Lumian smiled.

"And what about those who fail? Do they perish on the spot?"

Chapter 272 Charismatic Artist

“Giant” Simon found himself momentarily speechless, struggling to find the right words. After a few seconds of contemplation, he finally spoke up.

“Are you out of your mind? If you fail, the worst outcome would be missing an opportunity.”

“Rat” Christo chimed in.

“If the mission is truly important, the Boss wouldn't hesitate to handle it personally. He wouldn't send us. And if it's not a significant task, the risk won't be too high.”

This train of thought mirrored Lumian's initial concerns.

Lumian glanced towards the nearby entrance of Underground Trier, intentionally wearing a smile.

“Perhaps we are merely bait in this scenario?”

“For instance, the Boss suspects that a faction is secretly watching us, so he has deliberately devised this mission. If everything goes smoothly without any abnormalities, he can deactivate the alarm and consider it a test. However, if he does catch something, he can follow the trail of clues to uncover the truth and eliminate any hidden dangers. As for us being the bait and potentially getting caught, it's not his concern. As long as we ultimately achieve his goal, losing a few Low-Sequence Beyonders falls within his level of tolerance.”

“Rat” Christo's face turned pale upon hearing these words, while “Giant” Simon fell into silence.

Although they lacked experience with mysticism, their years as mobsters and leaders had honed their basic analytical skills.

They couldn't help but admit that Ciel's theory made sense.

This, naturally, brought about a deep sense of fear for their lives.

Especially for Christo, memories of his brother Erkin's death and the pained expressions of his wife and children flooded his mind.

If it weren't for the Boss assigning him another task and excluding him from the smuggling operation, he might have been replaced by the so-called “mirror people” and met a tragic end somewhere underground.

And as for his wife, his dogs, and the other animals he cared for, the “mirror person” would have had the opportunity to enjoy them for a while!

With these thoughts weighing on their minds, the three of them ignited their carbide lamps and descended the steel stairs in silence.

Christo scanned the dark tunnel with the bluish-yellow light, his voice trembling as he spoke.

“The Boss wouldn't purposefully send us to our deaths.

“Even as Low-Sequence Beyonders, we still have our uses. If we perish underground, it might take the Boss half a year or even a whole year to groom a replacement.”

The “mirror people” incident came to his mind, the Boss's request for him to undertake a different task being a clear attempt to protect him without revealing anything.

“Everything comes at a price. Perhaps the stakes involved this time are more valuable than the three of us combined.” Lumian held the carbide lamp emitting a yellowish glow, walking steadily through the dark and slightly damp passageway. He sneered and said, “I hope this mission won't be as perilous as the Boss claims, but we can't afford to be naive. We must prepare for the worst.”

Noting Ciel's significant improvement, Christo couldn't help but ask, “What should we do?”

From his perspective, Ciel was the most reliable person in this mission—a lifeline in critical moments.

Surprised by Christo's sudden timidity, “Giant” Simon turned towards him.

When did the “Rat” become so fearful?

As a leader under the Boss, why would he choose to display weakness and worry in front of Ciel?

Where is his pride and self-esteem? Wasn't he afraid that Ciel would overshadow him and encroach upon his smuggling business?

This was precisely the effect Lumian intended. He genuinely spoke up.

“The Boss has helped me multiple times, and I'm more than willing to carry out missions for him. However, the risk involved should not be excessively high, leaving us with only the option of 'death.' Damn it, I haven't lived long enough!

“That's why my stance is to attempt the mission if possible. If it becomes too dangerous, I won't hesitate to abandon it and ensure my own survival. This might require the three of us to let down our guard against each other and cooperate fully to overcome any hidden threats.”

Such an attitude struck a chord with Christo and Simon, prompting visible or imperceptible nods from them.

No one was entirely selfless. Taking a calculated risk for the Boss was already a testament to their loyalty!

Accepting this attitude and genuinely cooperating to resist danger seemed to be the only viable choice, at least on the surface.

“How should we collaborate?” Christo swiftly made up his mind.

He didn't want another “mirror people” incident.

Lumian smirked once more.

“First and foremost, we must understand each other's abilities so that we can complement one another more effectively.”

Christo pondered for a moment before speaking up, “I'm a Beast Tamer, a Sequence 8 of the Apothecary pathway. I can directly confront and communicate with various beasts to a certain extent. I have the ability to gradually tame them and make them my assistants.

“I'm also skilled in treating illnesses and providing comprehensive medical care...”

At that moment, he couldn't help but cast a questioning glance at Ciel, as if hinting at his need for a remedy to improve his performance in bed and replenish his physical stamina.

Word had gotten around about Ciel being quite a libertine. Not only was he involved with Jenna, “Red Boots” mistress, but he had also been linked to nearly ten dancers. He had arranged for them to receive acting lessons at Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons, allowing them to earn money without having to accompany customers.

An Apothecary? If only I had known that “Rat” Christo was an Apothecary, I would've gotten him to give plenty of medicine to Jenna's mother... She would've made a quick recovery and returned home that very night... Lumian silently sighed and nodded approvingly in the flickering light of the carbide lamp.

The more “Giant” Simon listened, the more astonished he became.

He began to suspect that “Rat” Christo had lost his mind by divulging the secrets of his Sequence!

Until now, apart from Gardner Martin, nobody knew Christo's Sequence or the pathway he belonged to. After all, there were plenty of people in Trier who had a fondness for pets—some even had a large number of them or formed intimate relationships with animals, as occasionally seen in the newspapers.

In a flash, an idea struck Simon.

“Rat” Christo was in charge of the smuggling business and had completed most of the Boss's secret missions. Perhaps he knew something and had become pessimistic about this operation, hence his sincere cooperation with Ciel.

Christo let out a sigh and continued, “I've been unlucky. I haven't managed to tame a genuine Beyonder creature yet. Otherwise, I wouldn't be powerless against Mid-Sequence Beyonders even if I encountered them.

“This mission was sudden and we didn't have time to prepare. I only brought a few companions with me. Is he afraid that we won't die quickly enough?”

As he spoke, he raised his right hand.

A colorful snake-like creature with a triangular head emerged from his sleeve.

Soon after, Christo had the snake retreat back into his sleeve. He reached into his pocket and produced a palm-sized rat.

This rat was different from the ordinary kind. Its fur was pale white and distinct, with eyes as bright as rubies.

“This is Taffy. It's a unique creature I discovered underground during my smuggling days. It can't be used as the main ingredient for any potion, but it has the ability to sense hidden dangers,” Christo briefly introduced.

“It can also sense the approximate strength of others, right?” Lumian asked thoughtfully.

Christo looked at Lumian with surprise and hesitated for a moment before replying, “Yes.”

Recognizing that Christo had already divulged enough information, Lumian didn't press further, despite suspecting that he possessed other abilities or other animal companions. Instead, he shifted his gaze to “Giant” Simon.

Simon hesitated for a moment, recalling his earlier speculation. In a muffled voice, he said, “I'm a Sequence 8 Pugilist of the Warrior pathway. Like ‘Hammer’ Ait, I excel in face-to-face combat and various fighting techniques. I carry a gun, a dagger, a bayonet, and boxing gloves.”

His explanation was brief, as Pugilists didn't possess any extraordinary abilities.

No mystical item? That's true. It's indeed challenging for mobsters groomed by secret organizations to acquire such items... Lumian chuckled to himself.

“You're stronger than ‘Hammer’ Ait because you're intelligent and can read the situation clearly.”

These words left Simon unsure whether to feel angered or proud.

Holding the carbide lamp, he looked at Lumian and said, “What about you? Which Sequence 8 pathway are you from? Hunter?”

Since they were working together, Ciel couldn't keep his Sequence a secret!

Lumian smiled, raising his right hand in front of him.

Silently, a crimson flame emerged from his palm and hung in the air, burning silently.

“You're a Pyromaniac?” Simon exclaimed in surprise.

Among Trier's mystical circles, the most common information concerned Mid-Sequence Beyonders of the Hunter pathway, especially those below Sequence 6.

Lumian didn't respond, opting to maintain his smile instead.

Simon suddenly understood why “Rat” Christo's attitude towards Ciel had undergone such a drastic change and why he appeared to seek his assistance.

Sequence 7 was the starting point for Mid-Sequence Beyonders. Compared to Low-Sequence Beyonders like themselves, their strength had undergone a qualitative transformation. They were countless times more powerful!

With his attention now diverted from the pocket of “Rat” Christo, Simon asked Lumian in surprise and suspicion, “Does the Boss know that you've advanced to Sequence 7?”

“The Boss provided me with the necessary supplementary ingredients,” Lumian truthfully replied, dissipating the crimson flame in his palm under the yellowish glow of the lamp.

Wha... Simon's pupils dilated.

Lumian looked around and continued, “That's why, if I can complete this mission, I will do everything in my power to see it through.”

With those words, he pulled out an iron-colored canister and tossed it to Simon.

“This is Scorpion Poison that I obtained from ‘Hammer’ Ait. You can apply it to your weapon.

“Increasing your strength will increase our chances of survival.”

Simon caught the canister, momentarily taken aback.

Though Ciel disgusted him and they were at odds, his knowledge, intelligence, strength, and approach to things made him seem reliable. Unconsciously, he found himself listening to him and following his lead.

Lumian, who was walking ahead without turning back, let out a sigh of relief.

He had exaggerated the risks and instilled fear to dampen the spirits of “Rat” Christo and Simon, plunging them into a state of worry. Then, by revealing his own strength, offering convincing suggestions, and providing small favors, he would establish himself as the team's leader.

Only then could he fully harness the team's combined strength without exposing his hidden trump cards and effectively combat any potential threats.

Chapter 273 Trader

Holding the carbide lamp aloft, “Giant” Simon trailed behind Lumian for a few steps, his keen eyes picking up on the inconsistencies in Lumian's words.

“Ciel, the Boss knows you've turned into a Pyromaniac. He won't just toss you aside recklessly, will he?”

Lumian gazed ahead at the tunnel bathed in the yellowish glow, a smile playing on his lips as he posed a question without turning around.

...

“How long have I been with the Savoie Mob?”

Both “Giant” Simon and “Rat” Christo had a moment of enlightenment and found themselves in agreement with Lumian's explanation.

It was true that Lumian, a Beyonder with a dubious past who had recently joined the mob, had brought with him a crucial ingredient for a potion. Such a person couldn't be trusted right off the bat. They had to undergo a series of tests in the form of missions.

And if Lumian were to meet his demise during one of these missions, it would simply be chalked up to his ill luck. Losing a foreign Beyonder was far less painful for the Boss than losing a subordinate he had meticulously groomed.

The two leaders of the Savoie Mob hesitated no longer. They cautiously followed Lumian, maintaining a distance of two to three steps. It was a familiar arrangement, much like when they traveled with a few mobsters stationed at similar positions behind them.

In the midst of their journey, "Giant" Simon donned gloves and applied a small amount of Scorpion Poison to his dagger, bayonet, and boxing gloves. He then returned the canister to Lumian.

The trio descended into the tunnel marked on the map. Despite their soft steps, the special environment caused their footfalls to echo faintly in the dark, eerily silent underground.

Nearly 45 minutes later, they passed through the area marked as an ancient tomb and arrived at the entrance of a concealed passageway.

It led to an abandoned quarry cave that had lain dormant for ages. The ground was uneven, covered in moss. In the distance, the sound of an underground river could be heard, occasionally accompanied by the rumbling of a steam subway passing by.

Lumian observed for a moment, clenching the ring of the carbide lamp between his teeth. With both hands, he grasped a protruding stone wall and climbed to the cave's summit.

Then, extending his right hand, he pushed an apparently ordinary stone behind him, wedging it between the side wall and the cave roof.

A pitch-black hole materialized, allowing someone as tall as Simon to bend over and crawl through.

The hidden tunnel had been fashioned using a long-forgotten ventilation system that already existed in a nearby quarry.

The three of them hunched over and strode deeper into the underground tunnel. Gradually, the sounds of the underground river and the steam subway faded away.

Apart from their own breathing and footsteps, the surroundings were silent as a tomb.

After nearly half an hour, Lumian and his companions followed the markings on the map and leaped from an exit, emerging into an already existing underground cave.

From high above, stalactites dangled like the menacing teeth of a terrifying beast lurking in the darkness.

Lumian didn't rush to enter another hidden tunnel at the cave's base. Instead, he turned to "Giant" Simon and "Rat" Christo, who had accumulated a fair amount of dust on their heads. Wearing a grave expression, he spoke.

"Before we proceed, let's confirm something to avoid any mishaps. We won't have time for verbal communication."

"Alright." Both "Rat" Christo and "Giant" Simon accepted Lumian's words without question.

With a subtle nod, Lumian replied, "Firstly, from the moment we enter the second tunnel until we return here, no one is allowed to speak. Make use of physical gestures as much as possible. If that's not feasible, you must obtain my permission before uttering a word."

This precautionary measure stemmed from Gardner Martin's advice regarding the lack of need for communication with the trader. Lumian had expanded its scope and made it absolute to prevent any potential mishaps.

Christo and Simon recalled the Boss's counsel and nodded in agreement.

Observing their response, Lumian pressed on, "Secondly, no matter what anomalies occur, unless something attacks both of you, stay calm and act in accordance with my lead.

"Thirdly, I won't force you, but if you wish to survive, it's best to heed my instructions."

These two requests were met with resistance from "Rat" Christo and "Giant" Simon. They would be entrusting their safety to Lumian's intelligence, skills, reactions, and knowledge. It was a departure from their usual reliance on their own wild Beyonder instincts.

After a few seconds of hesitation, "Rat" Christo forced a smile, recollecting Ciel's strength and previous performances.

"I'll follow your arrangements, but if you fail to react in time and Taffy warns me of danger, I'll take matters into my own hands.

"Dammit, the longer I've been in this smuggling business, the more I dread Trier's underground."

"Giant" Simon chimed in, "I'm with you on that, 'Rat.'"

Lumian felt a sense of satisfaction, having successfully "tamed" the two Beyonders who also served as leaders in the Savoie Mob. He didn't push further and simply nodded in agreement.

"No problem.

"Fourthly, I will be the one to make contact with the trader later and retrieve the box the Boss desires."

Upon hearing this, "Rat" Christo and "Giant" Simon looked at Lumian as if they were seeing Ciel in a new light.

They had expected the Pyromaniac to leverage his strength and authority to assign one of them to interact with the trader and handle the riskiest part of the mission. Alternatively, they thought Lumian might suggest drawing lots to determine who would handle the task. To their surprise, Lumian volunteered to take on the responsibility himself.

Ciel is quite fair... "Giant" Simon couldn't help but sigh.

He knew he wouldn't be able to do the same if he were in Lumian's position.

This realization made both "Rat" Christo and "Giant" Simon less resistant to following Lumian's instructions.

Though the lighting was dim, Lumian managed to observe his two colleagues' reactions.

He couldn't help but sneer inwardly.

If it weren't for the fact that you two Beyonders lack mystical knowledge and might cause trouble during the box exchange, I wouldn't be taking such a risk myself.

Lumian sighed from the depths of his heart. Sometimes, weakness could be an advantage.

Emphasizing that they were to maintain silence, Lumian picked up the carbide lamp and made his way to the bottom of the cave. He gestured for "Giant" Simon to embrace a rock about half his height and move it aside.

The rock was incredibly heavy, posing a challenge even for Simon's strength. It took him some time to shift it, revealing the deep entrance to the hidden tunnel.

The tunnel wasn't particularly long, and it took them only seven to eight minutes to crouch down and make their way through. They arrived at a mineral cave that had suffered significant collapse, leaving only a limited space.

This was their destination—the Albert Mines.

Lumian surveyed the cluttered gray-black stones and turned to "Giant" Simon, who was dressed in a black formal suit. He pointed at his chest.

Understanding the unspoken request, Simon produced an iron-gray pocket watch and opened it with a snap.

The dial revealed numerous tightly clenched gears, exuding a sophisticated yet cold mechanical beauty.

"Giant" Simon held up his pocket watch, showing it to Lumian and "Rat" Christo, indicating that there were still over ten minutes until the designated time of the transaction—noon.

Lumian nodded and remained silent, patiently awaiting the appointed hour.

After a while, he subtly turned his head, listening intently for any signs of movement around them.

He sensed an unusual sound emanating from underground, as if a multitude of people were screaming, roaring, and fighting.

Beneath the illumination of the carbide lamp, Lumian glanced at Simon and Christo, noticing their similar reactions, as if they too had caught wind of the commotion.

Observing Simon and Christo's gazes fixed on him, Lumian lowered his right hand, signaling them to refrain from being affected.

Intermittently, they could hear peculiar movements. The three of them stood at the edge of the Albert Mines, silently waiting.

Suddenly, the sound of footsteps echoed from the other side of the mine, as if someone in leather shoes was approaching from an unusually quiet tunnel dozens of meters away.

Is that the trader? Lumian mused, casting his thoughtful gaze in that direction.

The footsteps paused and then resumed, resonating through the Albert Mines.

When they were merely a few meters away from the entrance, they mysteriously ceased altogether.

After a brief wait, Lumian and his companions spotted a figure emerging from the opposite mine entrance. It was a man over 1.8 meters tall, donning a white shirt, yellow vest, black formal suit, and dark pants. He clutched a small brown leather suitcase in his hand.

The man wore a silk top hat pulled low, casting a shadow over his face. However, Lumian's Hunter eyesight allowed him to discern the man's appearance with the aid of the three carbide lamps.

The man had short auburn hair, brownish-red eyes, slightly unkempt and thick beard, and thick eyebrows. He resembled a starved male bear, exaggeratedly thin.

The collar of his shirt was tightly fastened, as if he dreaded the cold.

Lumian held the carbide lamp and was about to approach the man.

But then, Christo tugged at his arm.

When Lumian turned his head, Christo anxiously and fearfully pointed at his right pocket.

Does this mean that Taffy, the peculiar rat, has issued a warning of danger? But judging from Christo's behavior, the threat hasn't materialized yet and is still manageable. Otherwise, he would have already turned and fled... Lumian interpreted the signs and nodded at Christo, indicating that he would proceed with caution.

Christo didn't stop him. He watched Lumian with concern as he advanced toward the trader.

As he closed the distance, Lumian's gaze carefully assessed the man's physique, analyzing every detail.

His clothes are slightly oversized, as though they don't quite fit him... He seems fearful of something, yet his eyes hold anger and hatred... His hands don't extend beyond his sleeves, and they're concealed within, including the handle of the suitcase... His feet...

Lumian's pupils dilated as he noticed that the trader wasn't wearing shoes but rather a pair of gray socks.

This contradicted the sound of leather shoes they had just heard!

Could it be that the footsteps didn't belong to him but someone else? Lumian grew increasingly vigilant.

With limited space remaining in the Albert Mines, he swiftly arrived in front of the trader.

The man, resembling a starved bear, chuckled and inquired with a hint of amusement, "Did Gardner Martin send you?"

"Was he scared out of his wits after receiving a message from his companion, who went underground to search for the entrance to the Fourth Epoch Trier, months after disappearing, claiming to possess an important item to deliver to him."

Chapter 274 Escape

The entrance to Fourth Epoch Trier? The Iron and Blood Cross Order is hunting for it? This person reappeared after vanishing for months? Lumian's mind raced upon hearing the trader's words.

He kept in mind the warning not to speak and tried his best not to. Leaning forward slightly, he extended his right hand to receive the small brown leather suitcase.

The man, resembling a starved bear, didn't refuse and chuckled.

...

“If I were Gardner Martin, I'd pray I never find out what's in this box.”

What does this mean? Lumian wondered as his palm touched the suitcase.

At that moment, his eyes narrowed as he noticed the trader's right palm was absent from the suitcase's handle, floating as if held by an invisible force.

Following the handle, Lumian saw there was no arm in the sleeve. It was empty, supported by something invisible!

No arm! His heart tightened as he glanced up at the trader. His brownish-red eyes, accentuated by his thick beard and eyebrows, were as cold as a wild beast's, filled with undisguised hatred and fear.

Various thoughts raced through Lumian's mind as he forced himself to control his reaction. He calmly took the suitcase, not inquiring or observing. He didn't instinctively defend or attack, as if he hadn't noticed anything.

The trader's emotions seemed to shift slightly, and his laughter carried a hint of sorrow.

“Tell Gardner Martin that it won't be long before he goes underground too!

“All the pain and torture I've endured, he too will experience them!”

Lumian didn't say a word. He picked up the small suitcase and was about to turn around and leave the Albert Mines with “Giant” Simon and “Rat” Christo.

Suddenly, footsteps echoed from the other entrance behind the trader.

Compared to earlier, it became much clearer, almost within arm's reach.

Lumian felt more certain now; he could hear the distinct sound of leather shoes approaching from the silent tunnel!

In an instant, a figure emerged before Lumian, Christo, and Simon.

It was a man, completely naked, his head missing, blood oozing from the neck wound.

He wore only dark-blue shorts and strapless black leather shoes.

With two swift steps, the headless monster reached the trader from behind, stretching out its hands, seizing his head, and yanking it upwards.

“Save me! Save me!” cried the trader, unable to hide his panic and fear.

Almost simultaneously, his entire head was lifted, exposing a blood-stained spine dangling below. The spine was unusually long, swaying gently like a tail.

Silently, the trader's shirt, vest, pants, and formal attire lost support and collapsed to the ground.

He had no body left, only his head connected to the bloody spine.

“Save me! Save me!” The trader struggled with all his might, but the headless monster held him tightly, seemingly attempting to stuff him into its empty neck.

Although Lumian had encountered many terrifying and warped creatures in Cordu, this was the first time he had come across something so bizarre and terrifying.

Without hesitation, he turned around and dashed towards the entrance of the hidden tunnel, ignoring the trader's pleas for help.

“Giant” Simon and “Rat” Christo, who had been frightened from the very start, finally lost control. Like cyclists hearing the starting signal, they bent down and hurried into the tunnel.

Lumian caught up with them in a few strides, the echoing voice of the Albert Mines haunting their trail.

“Save me! Save me!”

“If I die, you guys can forget about living!”

“Help!”

With their carbide lamps in hand, the trio silently made their way through the hidden tunnel, their hearts constricting at the screams left behind.

A few minutes passed, and the shrill cries suddenly ceased, leaving an eerie silence that enveloped the Albert Mines.

Then, the echoing sound of tapping leather shoes reverberated through the hidden tunnel.

“Rat” Christo, being the shortest, found it easiest to keep his back bent as he moved forward. In a state of fear, he frantically pointed at his pocket with his right hand, as if he had seen death itself.

Has that peculiar rat given us a perilous warning? Lumian glanced at Christo's left chest and nodded reassuringly, indicating that he would cover their rear. All they needed to do was run with all their might.

As the tapping sounds drew nearer, Lumian and the others grew tense.

Though they had to bend their backs to navigate the concealed tunnel, it only slightly reduced their escape speed. After all, they were skilled Beyonders, their physical abilities notably enhanced.

With each passing moment, Lumian felt a chill down his spine. Just as the sound of the leather shoes approached to within a few meters, the trio finally reached the tunnel exit and burrowed out.

Seeing “Giant” Simon about to flee on his own, Lumian, who had already returned to their agreed position, could no longer stay silent. He lowered his voice and growled, “Block the door!”

As he spoke, he turned around and abandoned the carbide lamp and small suitcase, attempting to push the heavy rock beside the exit.

“Giant” Simon subconsciously ignored Lumian's command, but his heart still trembled from the low shout.

Throughout their journey, he had grown accustomed to following his instructions, as if it were the only way to ensure his survival.

He found himself caught in a dilemma.

After a brief moment of hesitation, “Giant” Simon suspected that if he ran away and left Ciel to fend for himself against the monster, Ciel might very well attack him and kill him as a deserter once he survived the attack!

“Rat” Christo had similar thoughts, but he believed that if they both didn't help, Ciel wouldn't waste time blocking the tunnel exit. When the time came, whoever ran the slowest would become the monster's first target, buying enough time for the other two to escape.

After evaluating each other's pathway characteristics and Sequences, Christo realized he was definitely the slowest. Moreover, he couldn't injure “Giant” Simon and “Lion” Ciel in a short period of time, meaning he couldn't slow them down and overtake them.

Without hesitation, he stopped fleeing and returned to the tunnel exit, assisting Lumian in pushing the stone to block the door.

Taking a cue from the “Rat,” “Giant” Simon chose to obey and turned around.

Together, in just a few seconds, the trio secured the entrance to the hidden tunnel.

The sound of footsteps faded into nothingness.

Simultaneously, “Rat” Christo couldn't contain his surprise and delight, exclaiming, “Everything's fine now!”

There was no more visible movement in his pocket, where the rat named Taffy resided.

Lumian didn't share Christo's exuberance. He picked up the carbide lamp and small suitcase, speaking in a deep voice, “Let's talk when we get back to the first underground level.”

“Giant” Simon and “Rat” Christo's relaxed minds tensed up once more. Instinctively, they followed Lumian up the rock wall and turned into another hidden tunnel.

Along the way, they didn't encounter any attacks, but being underground meant they were surrounded by either complete silence or occasional strange sounds. After their recent fright, the environment was far from pleasant for them. If Lumian hadn't remained calm and composed, “Giant” Simon and “Rat” Christo might have resorted to drastic measures.

Upon returning to the area corresponding to the streets and squares above ground, “Rat” Christo reached into his pocket to comfort Taffy and let out a long sigh.

“When I saw that monster, I thought we were going to die right there.”

Though he and Simon had killed over ten people, interacted with other Beyonders, and even fought them, they had never encountered a monster like the headless one before. It was an abnormal horror they had never experienced.

This was even scarier than the horror stories they had heard in their youth!

Lumian smiled.

“Didn't the Boss say that there won't be much risk if we don't communicate or open the box?”

However, in such a situation, most people couldn't stay calm! “Giant” Simon and “Rat” Christo gained a newfound appreciation for Ciel's mental fortitude.

Thanks to the shock brought about by the trader and the headless monster, Lumian and his companions weren't interested in what lay inside the box. They hurriedly left the underground and returned to 11 Rue des Fontaines, where they met Gardner Martin in the study.

Gardner Martin took the small suitcase and examined it casually. He smiled and said, “Very good. You've all done well. I'll reward you later.”

After praising them, the Savoie Mob boss looked at Lumian and nodded gently.

“I have a message for you. If you wish to progress further on the Hunter pathway, you must remember this sentence:

‘The Demon is our friend, and hell is someone else's.’”

The Demon is our friend, and hell is someone else's... Lumian couldn't fully grasp the true meaning of this sentence, but Gardner Martin didn't provide further explanation.

As his three subordinates left the study, Gardner Martin turned to the door connecting to the activity room.

The door creaked open, and a man in a half top hat, white shirt, yellow vest, black suit, and dark pants approached.

He had short auburn hair, brownish-red eyes, a thick, messy beard, and thick eyebrows, resembling a starving bear. He was the trader who had given the small suitcase to Lumian and the others and been dragged back by the headless monster.

“Olson, any thoughts on him?” Gardner Martin inquired.

The trader addressed as Olson replied with a smile, “Simple background, clear origins, smart, bold, and decisive. He could bring together a few people who were originally unrelated into a team in a short period of time. Isn't that what you want?”

“As for loyalty, that's the least of my worries. When the time comes, even if he's not loyal, he'll become loyal.”

Gardner Martin nodded slightly.

“Observe him for a while longer and see who he interacts with.”

After discussing this topic, Gardner Martin looked at the small suitcase on the table and asked curiously, "What's inside?"

"Like I said, you'd better pray you never find out." The trader known as Olson smiled, picked up the suitcase, and left the study.

After taking a few steps in the hall, he suddenly found his head a little tilted. He raised his hands, held his head, and straightened it with a snap.

Chapter 275 Poaching

In the carriage heading back to the market district, Lumian stared out the window, reflecting on Gardner Martin's actions after completing the mission.

He felt that the Savoie Mob's boss didn't seem too concerned about the suitcase they risked their lives for. The boss merely glanced at it casually and placed it on the desk.

Was it really some kind of test? The Iron and Blood Cross Order possesses information about the spine-dangling head and headless monster. As long as I stick to the prescribed procedure and don't act independently, they won't really come after me?

...

But the Boss used to be a Conspirer. Perhaps he just wanted us to see the suitcase, but it might not reveal his true intentions...

Regardless, the head-only trader and the headless humanoid monster are real. What do they symbolize? Can I trust the words of the former? He disappeared for months searching for the entrance to Fourth Epoch Trier and experienced terrifying events. His head and body got separated, and both gained consciousness?

When Boss said, "The Demon is our friend, and hell is someone else's," it felt like he was warning me not to trust others easily... Did he mention this because he was satisfied with my performance on the mission?

Has he sent someone to secretly follow and observe us in detail? Or maybe "Giant" Simon or "Rat" Christo are not as scared as they seem and one of them is secretly working as a spy for the Boss?

Since the Boss didn't keep me here, the "audit" isn't over yet. Could someone be tailing this carriage and lurking in the shadows?

Heh heh, Mr. K and his subordinates love doing this too. It'd be amusing if they ran into each other...

In the carriage, "Rat" Christo and "Giant" Simon, who were using the Salle de Bal Brise's carriage to return to the market district, grew a bit uneasy as Lumian remained silent and gazed out of the window.

After five minutes of indescribable silence, Christo forced a smile and asked, "Ciel, what are you looking at?"

"It's too cramped," Lumian sighed, disregarding the question.

Christo and Simon exchanged glances, thinking that Ciel might be mocking them for taking up space in the carriage.

After hesitating for a moment, Christo decided to share his intentions.

He lowered his voice and said, "Ciel, I want to use this opportunity to talk to you. Damn it, I didn't expect Simon to join us!"

"Son of a sow. I was the one who suggested borrowing the carriage in the first place!"

"Giant" Simon retorted.

Ignoring him, Christo continued, "Ciel, this mission has allowed me to reacquaint myself with you. Apart from Boss, you are the most intelligent, powerful, and calmest Beyonder around me."

The calmest? You haven't seen me when I'm impulsive... Lumian teased, deliberately provoking.

"Is that so? Am I more intelligent than Brignais and stronger than Franca?"

"Rat" Christo was at a loss for words. After a few seconds, he said, "Uh, well... what I mean is, in the future, when the Boss assigns me secret missions, I want your help to analyze and figure out what to do. I don't want to be flustered when facing a similar monster next time."

Oh, intel has come knocking on my door? Lumian smiled and replied, "I don't mind helping, but aren't you afraid the Boss will be angry if he finds out?"

Christo glanced at Lumian, then at "Giant" Simon beside him, and his tone turned cold.

"If you keep quiet, and we keep quiet, the Boss won't find out."

Simon's eyelids twitched, and he added, "My thoughts align with Rat's."

He didn't want to die on the next secret mission either.

Lumian pondered for a moment and grinned.

"Alright, I can assist, but I can't guarantee I'll uncover the truth or find a way to avoid danger based solely on your descriptions. Also, I might make some small requests."

"No problem!" "Rat" Christo agreed without hesitation.

Today's encounter alone wouldn't have pushed him to this state. He had just escaped the mirror people incident, and his nerves were on edge.

"Giant" Simon also expressed his agreement. Then, he looked at Lumian and cursed himself softly,

He cleared his throat and said, "Ciel, my Big Bro, I apologize. I wasn't too friendly before, and I even encouraged you to deal with 'Red Boots' when you were new to the Savoie Mob and knew little about us.

"I'm a rough and unrefined guy. I can't say pleasant words, but I hope you can accept my apology. In the future, I, Simon, will follow your lead!"

Wow, you've grasped the situation so quickly, and you're so humble... This fellow is quite a talent... Lumian pretended to be nonchalant and replied, "I've already forgotten about the past. Besides, have I targeted you or sought revenge recently?"

With that said, Lumian added inwardly, Well, it's mostly because I'm too busy to bother with a mere mob leader like you...

Simon breathed a sigh of relief, convinced that Ciel wasn't too petty.

Lumian smiled and questioned, "Why do you call me Big Bro? I'm much younger than you."

Simon smiled sheepishly.

"You're already a Sequence 7. In terms of strength, I should call you Big Bro."

Lumian couldn't help but jest, "If you stick to addressing someone by their Sequence, will you have to call me 'Uncle' once I reach Sequence 6?"

Simon hesitated for a moment before clearing his throat.

"If you wish..."

Damn it, isn't this guy too shameless? Is he like this even when talking to the Boss privately? "Rat" Christo turned his head in surprise and looked at the burly man, who stood more than 1.9 meters tall, as though this was the first time he had met this giant.

Simon continued, "But I believe I'll reach Sequence 7 before you hit Sequence 6.

"You must have just become a Pyromaniac. It might take years, even decades, to fully master the power of flames and withstand the next potion."

He was implying: "Haha, I was just joking. Perhaps we'll both be Sequence 7s soon, and you'll still be my Big Bro."

Upon hearing this, Lumian's mind wandered back to the moment he had used invisible flames to burn Susanna Mattise to death, feeling the potion digesting a little inside him.

However, he couldn't be sure as he hadn't yet completed the first acting principle, making the degree of digestion unclear.

Combining past experiences and recent events in the market district, Lumian sensed that the first acting principle was close to being revealed, but it always fell short. His thoughts lacked clarity, and he had a feeling that he needed to wait for the right opportunity.

His mind then shifted to Gardner Martin's possible covert observations and subsequent tests.

As a result, Lumian decided to postpone his plans to attend Mr. Fool's bishop's preaching at Lavigny Dock in the square district the day after tomorrow. He felt it would be better to wait until he passed the test and officially joined the Iron and Blood Cross Order.

But what about my psychiatric treatment scheduled for tomorrow afternoon? Should I still go?

I believe my mental state and emotional control have improved over the past few days, but I'll need the two ladies to confirm it. Yes, they always use Psychological Invisibility. Madam Justice is a true demigod, so it's unlikely for Gardner Martin or his subordinates to see her. As a Hunter, it's normal

for me to have an interest in studying plants. After visiting the botanical garden, I'll have a coffee and take a break. No one can accuse me of anything... Lumian made a quick decision to continue the psychiatric treatment the next day.

However, before heading to Mason's café, he planned to spend two to three hours exploring the nearby botanical garden.

Once the carriage stopped at Salle de Bal Brise, Lumian went upstairs to enjoy a cup of coffee while watching "Giant" Simon and "Rat" Christo leave Avenue du Marché.

Around 4 p.m., he put on a dark wide-brimmed round hat and left the dance hall. His destination was Franca's place at Rue des Blouses Blanches to discuss the peculiar mission and Gardner Martin's behavior in the afternoon.

As Lumian strolled along Avenue du Marché, a sudden thought struck him.

If Boss is indeed sending someone to watch my actions during this period, he might think I'm having an affair with Franca if I frequent her apartment on Rue des Blouses Blanches.

But maybe, as a Trierien, he wouldn't mind?

Right, there's already a rumor about me having an affair with Jenna. I'm going to Rue des Blouses Blanches to find Jenna, not Franca. He won't be suspicious...

Lumian calmed himself and arrived at 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches. He knocked on the door of Room 601.

Franca, who was wearing her usual blouse and light-colored pants, snapped, "Why are you here again?"

At that moment, Lumian noticed peculiar drawings on her face—a turd on the left side and a dark green turtle on the right.

"Lost at cards?" Lumian raised an eyebrow.

Franca had mentioned playing cards with Jenna and her dancers, involving strange punishments without money being at stake.

Franca glanced back and lowered her voice, "Jenna has been in a bad mood lately. I'm trying to find a way to cheer her up."

Lumian followed her gaze and noticed that Jenna's face was also decorated with strange drawings—moles and a pig's mouth. The lead dancer had similar marks.

"In that case, I'll wait for you to finish," Lumian said as he entered the living room.

Assuming Ciel was there for Jenna, the lead dancer hurriedly got up, washed her face, and left Apartment 601.

Being in a better mood, Jenna teasingly asked Lumian, "Are you here for me or Franca?"

That came out wrong... Lumian replied honestly, "Boss assigned me a strange mission, and I want to consult Franca."

Curious, Franca asked, "What mission is it?"

Lumian briefly recounted the noon encounter, including how he managed to keep “Rat” Christo and “Giant” Simon in check, making them follow his instructions.

Both Franca and Jenna were scared by the head-only trader and the headless monster, and they fell into silence for a moment.

After a few seconds, Franca clenched her teeth and said, “Gardner Martin, that son of a bitch!”

“What's wrong?” Jenna didn't understand why Franca suddenly cursed the Boss.

Franca explained vaguely, “I suspect this mission is Gardner Martin's way of testing Ciel. He wants to see if Ciel is fit to enter the core group.

“Dammit, f*cking hell, I've been with him for so long, and he still doesn't trust me. He doesn't even want to test me!”

Chapter 276 The Disappointed Susie

Jenna, who had no experience in relationships and was clueless about the truth, didn't know how to respond to Franca's complaint.

Lumian roughly understood Franca's anger and disappointment.

We're all here to infiltrate the Iron and Blood Cross Order. Why is the test scheduled just a month after your joining? I've been here for nearly a year, and I'm almost giving birth to Gardner Martin's child, yet there's still no progress!

...

This makes me look like a failure!

After carefully considering Franca's thoughts, Lumian replied earnestly, “This might not be an opportunity, but a danger.

“The fact that they want to ‘audit’ me so quickly suggests they might see me as expendable. Or perhaps my Beyonder pathway is just right and could be useful for something recent.”

Jenna found Lumian's explanation reasonable and quickly advised Franca, “Maybe the Boss didn't ‘audit’ you because he cares for you and doesn't want you involved in dangerous matters.”

“...” Franca's expression turned odd. “That's not right...”

This made her feel guilty for deceiving others.

When Madam Judgment arranged for her to be an undercover agent in the Savoie Mob and wait for an opportunity to join the Iron and Blood Cross Order, she had been explicitly instructed not to sacrifice herself by seducing the target. The Tarot Club didn't engage in such tactics. Later, as a Witch, she wanted to experience a romantic relationship with a man, and Gardner Martin happened to be interested, so they became lovers.

From Franca's perspective, this was a pure, joy-sharing relationship that didn't involve any emotional aspects. They wouldn't have real expectations of each other. After the mission was completed, they would part ways without hesitation and continue with their exciting lives.

Of course, at that time, the Iron and Blood Cross Order might have already suffered a setback. It remained unknown if Gardner Martin could continue with his exciting life.

If Franca had enough strength, she would have rehearsed the scene of a cold assassin killing her lover.

After a few seconds, Franca exclaimed, "Impossible, impossible!"

"That guy is very chauvinistic and discriminates against women. Him not auditing me must be because he thinks that a woman should just manage the dancers well and have the ability to protect herself. She should just bear a child sometime later. She doesn't need to be qualified to join the core group!

"Dammit! Did I fail because of my gender?"

What she didn't want to admit was that the undercover mission had likely failed because she took a chance, which led her to form a stronger bond with Gardner Martin.

Cannon fodder didn't matter if they were male or female!

It didn't matter if the expendables of a secret organization were male or female either!

Jenna and Lumian exchanged glances and pursed their lips. Then, they turned to Franca and asked curiously, "How can you tell that the mission is a test?"

Those two monsters were undoubtedly terrifying and dangerous!

Jenna didn't think she was as foolish as Lumian had teased her, but she knew she lacked experience in mysticism and playing these kinds of games. Subconsciously, she yearned to learn more.

Franca smiled again and said confidently, "I deduced it from the whole process and final outcome.

"Think about it. Does this matter really require Ciel, Simon, and Christo's involvement?"

"Find a couple of core members who understand the situation roughly. Follow the procedures and precautions, and you can escape the monsters and retrieve the box successfully. Moreover, there's no need to worry about leaks or give them any special reminders.

"No matter how dangerous the darkness around us seems, the fact that nothing happened this time suggests that there's a way and people to resist them. If someone else were to go, they could still complete the transaction."

Jenna pondered Franca's analysis for a while and exclaimed in admiration, "That's true... Dammit! Why didn't I think of that just now?"

Hearing this, Franca and Lumian exchanged smug and pleased glances.

The fact that Jenna could curse meant she was gradually feeling better!

Lumian had also considered this before concluding that the Boss was “auditing” him.

So, it was very likely that there were observers around him during this period.

After some thought, Lumian asked Franca, “Do you know what those two monsters are?”

They lurked underground and were suspected to be related to Fourth Epoch Trier. Lumian might have to venture underground in the future using Earth Blood mineral. Knowing about the terrifying monsters he might encounter would help in his preparations.

Franca appeared thoughtful.

After a while, she said uncertainly, “Neither I nor anyone I know has encountered such monsters, but I've heard rumors from sailors.

“On the Sonia Sea, there's a port called Bansy. Once, a humanoid monster with a spine and no head appeared there. It sounds quite similar to what you described, but the port is now abandoned, likely due to damage caused by a high-level power.”

Bansy? Lumian wasn't unfamiliar with the term.

Madam Magician had used it once to illustrate Cordu's likely fate. It had been severely corrupted and directly destroyed by the Church, leaving a deep impression on Lumian.

After chatting for a while, Lumian and Jenna returned to Salle de Bal Brise. Jenna had changed into a beige fluffy short dress and transformed into Showy Diva.

Late at night, upon returning to Room 207 of Auberge du Coq Doré, Lumian drew the curtains and unfolded a piece of letter paper. He penned down his encounter, thoughts, and Franca's analysis, preparing to send it to Madam Magician.

Shortly after, he arranged the altar, creating a wall of spirituality, and summoned the arm-height puppet messenger.

In the faint blue candlelight, Lumian gazed at the pale-white spirit world creature in a light-gold dress, with light-blue eyes and pure golden hair. A sudden idea struck him, and he asked thoughtfully, “Is there someone monitoring me nearby?”

The messenger spoke in an ethereal and illusory manner, “Yes.”

There really is... Lumian wasn't surprised and pressed further, “Can he or they discover that I'm summoning you?”

The messenger's eyes flickered as she replied disdainfully, “They're not worthy.”

Relieved, Lumian thanked Miss Messenger and watched her vanish into the candlelight with the letter.

Before long, a neatly folded reply appeared on the desk in Room 207.

Lumian skillfully opened it and began reading.

“It's not a good thing to be chosen so quickly and be tested.

“From now on, especially after becoming an official member, you have to be more careful. Once you're assigned a mission and feel that things aren't simple, something that even Mr. K might not be able to handle, find an opportunity to summon my messenger and inform me.

“The two monsters you encountered are indeed similar to those in Bansy, but they are quite different. They seem to have their own consciousness.

“As for what abilities and characteristics they can display, since Bansy Harbor has already been destroyed, I can't give you any useful information.

“I believe most of what the head said is true. What it didn't say was that it and its body might have entered Fourth Epoch Trier during the months he was missing.

“There's a high chance they possess a method to enter Fourth Epoch Trier. You need to pay special attention to this matter.

“By the way, the Sequence after Alms Monk is a Contractee. You need to sign a contract with different creatures and obtain one of their abilities. When the time comes, don't be in a hurry to choose. Write a letter and tell me that you already have the corresponding power. I can give you a pile of information on spirit world creatures for you to choose from. I have significant knowledge in this area. I'll also give you a copy of Sights in the Spirit World.”

Madam Magician truly possesses a deep understanding of the spirit world... Lumian gleefully crumpled the letter and watched it fuse with the crimson flames.

On the sunny Sunday afternoon, Lumian satisfied his hunger and hopped into a public carriage headed for Trier's botanical garden. After buying tickets, he leisurely strolled through the vibrant flora.

He marveled at the sight of many plants he had only encountered in books, newspapers, and magazines, including the Donningsman Tree, which the Intisians mocked as Loen's national tree.

These trees originally thrived in the rainforests of the Southern Continent. Legend had it that the sap from these trees could promote hair growth, a tempting prospect for many Loenians lacking significant hair volume.

Around 3:30 p.m., Lumian made his way to Mason café and settled into Booth D. He ordered a cup of Reem espresso, eagerly anticipating the arrival of Psychiatrist Madam Susie.

Before long, he heard a familiar, gentle female voice.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Lumian Lee.”

Without turning around, Lumian smiled and replied, “Good afternoon, Madam Susie.”

Susie commented, sounding surprised, “Your mental state seems better than I expected.”

Lumian smiled wryly.

“Perhaps it's thanks to my previous treatment that I've regained some inner strength.

“As the saying goes, what doesn't kill you makes you stronger.”

Susie expressed her curiosity, asking in a conversational tone, “I wonder if you're willing to share your experiences?”

Lumian pondered for a moment before looking ahead and muttering to himself, “Are you in the same organization as Madam Magician?”

“Yes,” Susie confirmed.

Relaxing, Lumian leaned back on the sofa, sipped his espresso, and began recounting his ordeal.

From capturing Louis Lund to taking down Susanna Mattise and saving the lives of most people involved in Paramita, he concluded,

“Since that day, my mental state has significantly improved. It's like a fire still burning within my heart.”

Susie responded gently, “Sometimes, life itself plays the role of a psychiatrist. Those experiences indeed triggered your inner strength and improved your condition. However, it also requires resilience and a suitable personality. Otherwise, one might easily descend into a state of collapse, despair, self-blame, and abandonment.”

“And this vulnerability might be exploited by the angel sealed within you.”

At this point, Susie's emotions were complicated. She added with a hint of disappointment, “Your remarkable progress has rendered the treatment plan I prepared for today useless.”

Chapter 277 Guidance

Susie's words elicited a chuckle from Lumian. “Isn't that a good thing?”

Susie replied, smiling, “That's a good thing. One of the happiest moments for every psychiatrist is to see their patient gradually emerge from their trauma.”

Lumian probed, “Can we move on to the next stage of treatment?”

...

“Let's have a chat first. I'll assess your mental state.” Susie's voice was gentle, and her demeanor remained calm.

“About what?” Lumian had already shared most of his recent experiences.

Susie verbally ruminated for a few seconds before responding, “We can talk about what else you're confused or troubled about.”

Lumian fell silent momentarily before continuing, “Am I really the unlucky one? Will I bring disaster to the people around me?”

This time, it wasn't Susie who answered, but the other lady.

She said with a soothing chuckle, “If disaster is the inevitable fate of those around us, it isn't your fault. If it comes because of you and fate turns sour, it just means that destiny isn't set in stone.

“The entity sealed inside you by Mr. Fool isn't the entity named Inevitability—just an angel from the same realm. He can't use His powers and can only rely on others, so He can't determine a changed fate.”

“So, you're saying I had a chance to change their fates, but I blew it all?” Lumian sipped his espresso, his voice unconsciously deepening.

The woman maintained her tone.

“First, we gotta be sure that the person who messed with their fate and caused their doom is the companion of that Inevitability angel lurking around you. He came for the seal and Termiboros. It's got nothing to do with you.

“Your only issue is that you didn't do good enough, but nobody can guarantee perfection in everything.”

At this point, the woman spoke with a hint of self-deprecation,

“I get your feelings. Over the years, I've tried my best to do many things, but many of them failed. I even ended up hurting others despite my good intentions. It hit me hard and made me feel real guilty. I felt like running away and never coming back.

“Thankfully, during that time, I managed to achieve a lot. I helped people, stopped disasters, and rooted out corruption. That gave me confidence and motivation, strengthening my beliefs and ideas.

“Later, whenever I felt confident and positive about what I wanted to do, I'd remember my mistakes and failures. It would remind me not to be careless, not to be biased, and not to underestimate anyone.

“Likewise, when setbacks and guilt hit me, I'd remember the people I helped and the disasters I prevented. It reminded me that I'm not all bad, and my beliefs and ideas have a positive side.

“Our past experiences are both a burden and a source of strength, motivation, and growth.”

Lumian listened intently, finally facing the guilt in his heart and not suppressing it anymore.

Maybe some tragedies could've been avoided if I knew more about mysticism.

It is my problem, but I'm not the one causing the disaster. I just haven't done a good enough job. I need to fix this weakness. I gotta strive to improve and be more careful in the future. I can genuinely save those who want help and bring disaster to those bastards who intentionally cause harm...

As these thoughts raced through his mind, Lumian recalled the peddlers, pedestrians, and tenants who had fallen from the Tree of Shadow. He remembered how he had watched with a smile.

Phew... He let out a slow breath, leaning back against the sofa.

“I feel much better now.”

He scoffed and said, “The person who helped Termiboros and messed with my fate and the people around me couldn't have guessed that the pain he caused didn't break me, make me despair, or give up. Instead, it led me to get excellent psychiatric treatment, improving my mental state significantly.

“I really want to find him and ‘thank' him in person.”

The lady chuckled.

“That's why I keep telling Susie that psychiatric treatment is tricky and subtle. If you're not careful, it could lead to the opposite outcome. You can't just be fearless because you're a Beyonder.

“Hmm... Let me remind you of something.

“We can't assume the target's current intentions solely based on their original image and goals without sufficient evidence.”

Lumian didn't quite understand.

“What do you mean?”

The lady explained in a gentle voice, “Many people are deceived because they always assume the other person remains the same, believing that their personalities and thoughts won't change due to the environment, experiences, and circumstances.

“Take what you just said as an example. Have you considered another possibility? Termiboros's companion might have deliberately brought those misfortunes not to make you collapse, but to stimulate you and awaken the power in your heart, allowing you to break free from your mental cage and regain your mental state?”

“How is that possible?” Lumian responded subconsciously.

Could Termiboros's companion be so benevolent?

She smiled and replied, “Just because I'm giving an example doesn't mean it's true.

“But why is that impossible? Perhaps that person initially wanted to cooperate with Termiboros and use various methods to influence your state and create an opportunity for Him to escape the seal. However, gradually, he realized that this was an opportunity that could turn him into an angel.

“As he receives more boons and sees the angelic-level door, he can extract Termiboros's power by controlling you. He can even undo the seal and devour Him while He is weak.

“And to increase the probability of success, he has to ensure that you're in good condition. You can extract Termiboros's power time and time again, weakening Him.

“How is it? Does he have a motive to help you improve your mental state?”

Lumian fell silent.

The more he thought about it, the more he realized that from a human's perspective, this was an undeniable possibility.

After a few seconds, he retorted, “Is that person not afraid of angering the entity known as Inevitability?”

“The power from boons is definitely more influenced by the higher-ups. They are proud to carry out Their will and wouldn't have any blasphemous thoughts.”

The woman in Psychological Invisibility laughed meaningfully and said, “The being known as Inevitability desires an obedient angel to descend upon this land. Whether it's Termiboros or another bestower, I reckon He holds no particular preference or inclination.”

That's true. If someone devours Termiboros, they might become an angel of the Inevitability domain. Perhaps this is what Inevitability expects. If Termiboros can make it here, so be it. If He fails and faces a seal or purification, other bestowers will seek a way to devour His relic and become an angel. Ultimately, an angel in service of Inevitability will emerge on Earth. But the identity of this angel is not crucial... Lumian pondered as he nodded gently.

Suddenly, a wave of inspiration washed over Lumian. He considered the lady who was suspected of wielding the Justice card. Was she not only using this opportunity to teach him, but also conveying these words to Termiboros?

Could she be creating a rift between Termiboros and Inevitability, making Him distrust His companion?

If I can think of this possibility, surely Termiboros can as well...

Uh, He could have figured this out, but since His companion has been discovered, he wouldn't dare to show himself for a long while, nor would he communicate with Him. In such times, suspicions would easily grow between them.

Once the seed of suspicion took root and flourished, it would prove difficult to uproot in the future!

A Spectator is truly terrifying...

Lumian sighed and said sincerely, “I understand.”

The lady smiled and said, “So, we can't assume that people won't change; they can evolve over time. We need to pay close attention to their circumstances and thoughts.

“Other Beyonders might not need to think so deeply, but your next Sequence is a Conspirer. You have to learn to analyze human nature.”

Lumian nodded, gaining a fresh perspective on Gardner Martin's teachings. “The Demon is our friend, and hell is someone else's.”

Continuing the discussion, he smiled and asked, “Is it possible that Termiboros's companion intended to help me improve my mental state from the beginning?”

“That's a possibility,” Susie replied, “but what would be the reason?”

“Why?” Lumian inquired.

His expression suddenly changed, and he sat up straight, trembling slightly.

“Maybe, just maybe, she wanted to help me. She's...”

The lady, suspected to be the holder of the Justice card, interrupted gently.

“Your memories are unlikely lying to you.”

Lumian let out a long sigh and relaxed against the sofa once more.

The lady's voice remained soft as she continued, “However, in the world of mysticism, there are cases where a person's death might not be their true end.

“The world of mysticism holds too many mysteries.

“Once, I encountered a follower of an evil god. He suddenly died just as I was about to eliminate him. It felt too coincidental, so I examined his corpse, his fate, and various mystical connections. Everything seemed in order; he was truly dead, and his family and friends believed so as well.

“Later, when I was eradicating a subsidiary branch of an evil god cult, I came across him again. He had assumed a new identity with a new fate and mystical connection.

“This time, he met his final end. From him, I learned the Sequence name of an evil god pathway—Deceased. They can use death to escape their original fate.”

This is similar to the Substitution Spell, but it seems simpler and lacks prerequisites. Moreover, after the substitute's demise, the original identity and fate appear irretrievable... Lumian pondered on this, recalling a ritualistic magic that came with Alms Monk.

Chapter 278 Consultation

The lady believed to hold the Justice card fell silent, and it was Susie who spoke up.

“Your mental state has improved significantly. If you'd like, I can guide you back into the dream to awaken those forgotten memories.”

“No problem.” Lumian leaned against the sofa and closed his eyes.

...

Unbeknownst to him, he dozed off. He found himself in Cordu, bathed in sunlight amidst the mountains, surrounded by turquoise alpine pastures. White-gray sheep roamed like clouds, creating a painting-like scene.

The events unfolded like an art exhibition. Lumian alternated between experiencing them firsthand and observing as a bystander, his thoughts deeply immersed in the unfolding drama.

As the events progressed, the weather mirrored Lumian's mood, turning increasingly gray and devoid of sunlight. Occasionally, the fog lifted, revealing an azure sky.

These memories confirmed Lumian's suspicions. An anomaly had been brewing in the village from May to June of last year.

Initially, he didn't pay much attention, but by the end of the year, he realized the seriousness of the issue. Aurore didn't take his concerns seriously, dismissing them without investigation.

He later discovered skeletons in Louis Lund's closet and extracted information from him. In the new year, more villagers began revealing certain problems, leading some unaffected ones to sense that something was wrong. As a result, Ava, Reimund, Naroka, and others were silenced.

During this process, Lumian stumbled upon Pons Bénét and his crew burying a corpse and sought revenge, gravely injuring the villain's lower body. However, he couldn't take on the thugs alone and ultimately failed.

Pons Bénét almost crippled him, but Aurore arrived just in time to rescue him.

Only then did Lumian realize that something was amiss with his sister. She was suspected to be part of the padre's group and held a high status.

Most of the time, she appeared cold and indifferent, which was completely different from the sister Lumian knew. Only rarely did she show her true self. Worried for both her and her brother's future, she sought help.

However, she never mentioned summoning the messenger of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society's vice president, Hela. The information in Lumian's dream likely came from her soul fragment.

What followed matched Madame Pualis's account. Aurore stopped her, and Guillaume Bénét, the padre, led a large group of bestowers to attack the administrator's castle, dismantling her setup. She had no choice but to abandon the "territory" she had built up for a long time and leave Cordu with her remaining subordinates.

The only difference was Madame Pualis's claim that she had only given birth to one child whose father was the padre—he eventually perished in the attack. However, Aurore, a Blessed of Inevitability, stated that Madame Pualis had personally given birth to two children. One of them vanished after the administrator's castle was destroyed.

In the end, it wasn't Aurore who knocked Lumian out and brought him to the altar. It was the deputy padre, Michel Garrigue, who also had a lizard-like elf crawl out of him in his dream.

Lumian blinked open his eyes, taking deep breaths to steady himself.

He had anticipated this moment, but the emotional upheaval still left him reeling.

Emerging from the nightmarish life of a street urchin, he had finally found a true, warm home with new friends and boundless joy. Even the villagers' chase and occasional beatings for his pranks couldn't dampen his spirits during those moments of triumph.

However, his idyllic life began to unravel as the people around him changed. The constant anomalies he noticed clouded his heart with growing unease and uncertainty. He tried to persuade his friends, Aurore, Reimund, Ava, and others, to leave Cordu and move to Dariège, but Aurore always delayed, thwarting his plans.

Amidst his fear and disappointment, tragedy struck his friends. To his dismay, he even noticed disturbing signs in his own beloved sister.

In that moment, his mind plummeted into a dark abyss, much like when his grandfather had died. He felt terrified, helpless, sorrowful, and in pain.

But this time, he also felt a profound sense of despair.

Had it not been for the occasional glimmer of hope when Aurore briefly regained her true self, Lumian might not have held on till the end.

Even now, recollecting the past few months felt unbearable. It was as if he was trapped in a suffocating cage, surrounded by darkness and misery, unable to escape. It was suffocating, painful, and full of despair.

Phew, phew... Taking deep breaths, Lumian gradually regained his composure and offered a bitter smile.

“Just as I suspected.”

He hadn't personally experienced the remaining pieces of the puzzle concerning the catastrophe. He needed to decipher the dream's symbols or find the padre Guillaume Bénét to obtain the missing information.

Susie spoke in a gentle tone, “You've shown tremendous resilience and faced your past head-on. It's a sign that your psychological struggles have improved significantly. Now, the rest of the healing process lies in your own hands.”

“If everything goes as planned, we should only have one more psychiatric session. After you find padre Guillaume Bénét and communicate with him, I'll need to evaluate your psychological state once again and conclude the treatment.”

“Thank you, Madam Susie. Thank you...” Lumian hesitated before adding, “Madam Justice.”

The woman in Psychological Invisibility didn't deny it and smiled, saying, “Just because we have only one session left doesn't mean we won't be in touch again. I might need your assistance with certain matters in the future.”

Lumian smiled back, saying, “I'm only a Sequence 7. I doubt I'll be of much help.”

“We should never underestimate anyone,” the lady replied with a knowing smile. “Besides, different people can have unique impacts on different matters.”

Lumian nodded and said, “No problem.”

He pondered for a moment before changing the subject.

“Ladies, after the Cordu disaster, my sister pushed me away and instructed me to take note of her grimoires. Given your understanding of human nature, what might be hidden in her notebook, and where could it be?”

Though Lumian had studied Aurore's entire grimoire multiple times, he still couldn't grasp many aspects or find anything suspicious.

Susie responded promptly, “Aurore wouldn't have intentionally left any messages or clues in her grimoires. If there were, she would have told you directly or hinted at it once she regained consciousness.”

Lumian nodded slowly, accepting her explanation. Aurore could have sought help from Hela's messenger, but she chose not to.

Susie continued, “I believe there might be something in the notebook that Aurore once considered normal, but later suspected was amiss. So, identifying any abnormalities through superficial observation alone would be challenging.”

No wonder I've been stumped for so long... Lumian asked anxiously, “Then how can I figure out if there's a problem?”

The holder of the Justice card seemed lost in thought as she spoke, “Since you've deduced that the anomaly began in May or June of last year, focus on that particular time frame to find the root of the problem.

“If the source truly lies with Aurore, she must have encountered something before that period that caused her transformation. So, pay special attention to the grimoires six months prior. It's likely to contain something significant that triggered her change.

“Additionally, the grimoires from the last three months might reveal Aurore's true intentions. They are an essential part of the castle in her heart.

“If you analyze these two time periods, you're most likely to find something relevant.”

January to June last year, and January to March this year... Lumian mentally noted Madam Justice's advice.

As Aurore's grimoire spanned over five years, narrowing down the suspected content would save Lumian a considerable amount of time and effort.

If he focused solely on the notebooks from those two periods, his workload would decrease by 90%, enabling him to analyze and consider them more effectively.

After a brief moment of contemplation, Lumian expressed his gratitude once again.

“Thank you, Madam Susie. Thank you, Madam Justice.”

After their discussion, the psychiatric treatment came to an official close. Lumian finished the remaining espresso and left Mason café, waiting for the public carriage by the roadside.

In Trier, dark clouds gathered to the northwest in the distance, while raindrops cascaded down like threads. To the southeast, the sky remained azure, and pure white clouds were tinged with golden light.

Apartment 601, 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches.

“Let's attend a gathering,” Franca said to Jenna.

“What gathering?” Jenna, who hadn't yet put on her smoky makeup, asked with confusion.

Franca rarely invited her to such events.

Franca chuckled.

“A mysticism gathering. Now that you've digested the Assassin potion, you should consider advancing to Instigator. Attending mysticism gatherings, gathering materials and information, and earning money and supplies are compulsory tasks for every wild Beyonder.”

“Advancing?” Jenna was bewildered, as the term was unfamiliar to her.

Franca clicked her tongue and explained, “An important figure told me that the number of evil god believers will increase in the foreseeable future. The same goes for various mysticism-related disasters.

“If you wish to protect yourself, your brother, and the people you care about, you must progress step by step on the divine paths and grow stronger.”

Jenna fell silent for a few seconds before finally nodding and saying, “Okay.”

“Then let's go.” Franca smiled again.

However, Jenna hesitated for a moment before adding, “Should we invite Ciel? It seems like he also needs to attend mysticism gatherings.”

“...” Franca's expression froze.

Chapter 279 Deep Valley Cloister

After a moment, Franca forced on a reassuring smile and spoke, “Don't worry about him. He's got his own mystical gatherings.”

Jenna nodded and didn't say much more.

With disguises, masks, and a bit of makeup, they left 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches and made their way to Avenue du Marché. They hopped on Subway Line 2, which connected the bustling market district's Suhit steam locomotive station to the elegant cathedral district's Northern Trier Train Station. Their destination was Quartier 9, the renowned Quartier de la Maison d'Opéra in the Northern Continent.

...

They arrived at the world's largest and most vibrant arcade, surrounded by department stores and fancy shops. The colorful glass dome above, supported by steel frames, painted the sunlight with a touch of grandeur, showcasing scenes of sacredness and epic tales.

To make up for the dimness from the stained glass, new kerosene lamps on the iron-black street lamp poles burned brightly, emitting a dazzling white light.

They were called draft lamps that utilized the heat they generated to turn kerosene into steam, spraying it onto the scorching mantle around it, creating a bright white light.

In terms of illumination, they were far superior to conventional gas street lamps or regular household kerosene lamps, a modification of the Church of the God of Steam and Machinery.

Jenna followed Franca into the public washroom in the middle of the Opera House arcade. Each found a stall, changed their clothes, and applied simple makeup to downplay their looks.

After that, they headed underground through a nearby entrance.

Unlike other districts in Trier, the underground street beneath the Opera House arcade was bustling with people. Cafés, galleries, beer houses, and small shops filled the space, making it feel anything but dark, cold, or confined.

Only when they left the area did Jenna find her usual impression of Underground Trier.

As Assassins, they could see in the dark. However, to avoid exposing their Sequence abilities to those attending the mysterious gathering, they each held a carbide lamp that cast a bluish-yellow light ahead.

Studying Franca's actions closely, Jenna mimicked her and donned a silver metal mask that covered the upper half of her face. Silently, she ventured deeper into the damp tunnel.

After walking for a while, Franca pointed to a fork in the road and smiled.

“There's a legend of ghosts in that direction.”

“What's the legend?” Jenna asked, playing along.

Franca grinned and replied, “They say people in the opera house often hear strange male voices coming from underground. They hired several bounty hunters to investigate, but none of them returned.”

“Didn't the official Beyonders intervene?” Jenna inquired, puzzled.

“They did, but they found nothing. That's because it's a legend we made up,” Franca chuckled.

Jenna was even more perplexed.

“Why make up such a legend?”

For amusement?

Franca assured her, smiling, “To prevent the people of Underground Trier from meddling with our gathering.”

Jenna finally realized the reason behind it.

“So, you scared them off, and they wouldn't dare come here?”

“No.” Franca shook her head with a serious expression. “No, it's not about scaring them away. It's about diverting their attention to that area, so they don't bother with the surroundings. In simpler terms, it gives the adventurous Trier citizens and university students something to keep them occupied.”

Having grown up in Trier, Jenna fell silent. After a few seconds, she muttered, “Dammit! The Trieriens around me are nothing like this!”

Everyone worked diligently. They just liked to go to bars, dance halls, and other places to drink, sing, dance, or vent their emotions by cursing each other after a busy day.

“People from Trier can be different,” Franca said, clicking her tongue and shaking her head.

As they talked, they squeezed through a gap and entered a new tunnel, arriving at a quarry cave overgrown with dark green moss.

Outside the quarry cave stood a white skeleton, its face hidden behind an iron mask, its eye sockets dark and empty.

Jenna, who had never encountered anything related to mysticism before, couldn't help but feel her heart race with fear.

Franca raised her hand and greeted, “You always send a skeleton. Is all this caution really necessary?”

“Dammit, you even put a mask on the skeleton. What's there to be embarrassed about?” she added.

The white skeleton spoke with a voice that sounded like metal rubbing against metal, “I like a line from The Adventurer series: 'That's basic courtesy.'”

With its eye sockets devoid of flames, it looked at Jenna.

“Who is she?”

“My friend. I brought her here to take a look,” Franca simply replied.

The skeleton didn't push for more information. It cracked its neck, signaling that they could enter the quarry cave at the back.

Inside, Jenna saw many people in various disguises, either sitting on rocks or standing in a corner. Silence enveloped the place.

After scanning the area, Jenna lowered her voice and asked Franca, “They're letting me in just like that?”

Isn't this too easy?

Aren't they concerned about my trustworthiness or safety?

Franca smirked and replied, “I trust him, and he trusts me.”

“Is that so...” Jenna nodded, but she sensed something strange. “How did that skeleton know it was you? Weren't you disguised?”

“He has a special way of recognizing people,” Franca vaguely explained.

Fifteen minutes later, more people arrived one after another. By the time the iron-masked skeleton announced the official commencement of the trade gathering, nearly twenty people had gathered in the quarry cave.

Jenna observed the transactions with curiosity, absorbing the new terms as Franca whispered them to her.

During this process, she couldn't help but be shocked by the prices of potion formulas, mystical items, Beyonder weapons, and various ingredients. Even the cheapest ones required an entire week's salary as an underground singer. As for the expensive ones, she felt that she had no hope in her life.

The last third of the trade gathering focused on commissions. Jenna sat up straight, hoping to find one that could earn her a large sum of money.

A man dressed in a black robe, resembling a Warlock from horror stories, spoke in a deliberately shrill voice, “I have a mission worth 20,000 verl d'or.”

20,000 verl d'or? All eyes in the room turned to the trustee.

Jenna was no exception. She had never seen such a large sum of money in her life.

The man glanced around and said, “The gatekeeper of the Deep Valley Cloister in the hill district has been missing for three days. I hope you can help me find him or his corpse.”

“I can't verify the authenticity of the clues, so only those who bring him or his corpse back to the Deep Valley Cloister can claim the 20,000 verl d'or reward.

“Alternatively, you can bring him here.”

The Deep Valley Cloister belonged to the Church of the God of Steam and Machinery, where ascetic monks devoted themselves to the study of machinery and steam. They didn't marry, have children, or preach.

Located in the hill district, Quartier 19, it was bordered by the cathedral district of the Church of the God of Steam and Machinery's cathedral and the Northern Trier Train Station to the west, and Quartier 20, the cemetery district, to the east.

Seeing no immediate response, the man continued, “The authorities have already investigated, but they found nothing.

“You can all take this commission and investigate Deep Valley Cloister as bounty hunters. Don't worry about suspicion. I'll post notices in bars, dance halls, and beer houses in various districts.”

I can give it a try. It won't cost me anything if I come up with nothing. At most, it'll take some time from me making money... Jenna turned to Franca, tempted.

Franca nodded, agreeing that they could take on this mission.

She was curious about the case, and she wanted Jenna to gain some experience before resorting to dangerous assassinations. If they sensed any danger or discovered something amiss, they could retreat in time.

Of course, the high bounty was also appealing.

After a brief silence, the participants began asking questions one after another.

They wanted to gather enough information before starting their investigations.

The trustee's responses were brief. He informed everyone that the missing cloister's gatekeeper was Pinker, a resident of nearby Deep Valley Town in his early fifties. He was a devout believer of the God of Steam and Machinery, and he had never married. With a fanatical passion for machinery, he became a gatekeeper at Deep Valley Cloister after owning fields.

He returned home once a week, spending one day each time, but he didn't disappear at home.

One night, while the monks were testing a steam contraption in the courtyard, they spotted Pinker standing at the door of the gatekeeper's hut, watching with interest. But the next morning, he was gone.

Jenna took note of the information just like during her acting studies.

Before long, the mysticism gathering concluded, and the participants departed in groups.

A few nights later, Lumian sat at the bar in Salle de Bal Brise, savoring his favorite absinthe and watching Jenna sing and dance.

Just then, Louis approached him and whispered in his ear, "Boss, the Big Boss is here. He's waiting for you at the café on the second floor."

"Boss came personally?" Lumian was slightly surprised.

Without saying a word, he downed the rest of the green liquid, stood up, and headed towards the stairs.

At that moment, Gardner Martin stood near the window, dressed casually in a dark brown jacket and a wide-brimmed hat, as if he had just come from the docks or the depot.

He looked at Lumian with his brownish-red eyes for a moment before motioning for the others to leave.

Soon, only Gardner Martin and Lumian remained in the café.

The Savoie Mob boss smiled and said, "I've expressed my admiration for you more than once, haven't I?"

"Indeed, thank you, Boss." Lumian nodded.

Gardner Martin's expression turned serious.

"Are you interested in joining my circle? This will allow you to come into contact with more Beyonders, stronger powers, and abundant resources."

Is that all for the audit? Lumian wondered, not hiding his puzzlement.

“What's the price?”

Gardner Martin smiled again.

“The price is that you might encounter more danger and have to follow orders to complete certain missions.

“However, as long as you do well, you will definitely progress rapidly. Perhaps in a few years, you can take my position.”

Lumian pretended to hesitate and pondered for a moment before saying, “I don't have a problem with that.”

Gardner Martin nodded solemnly.

“Before that, you need to undergo a test.

“Go to 13 Avenue du Marché now and stay there until the sun rises.”

13 Avenue du Marché? Lumian frowned, doing his best to recall.

Finally, he remembered where that was.

Osta Trul, the Secrets Suppliant, considered it the most dangerous place in the market district.

It was the burned-down building that had yet to be demolished!

Chapter 280 The Knocker

As Lumian thought of 13 Avenue du Marché, his first instinct was that Gardner Martin intended to do him harm.

The place is abnormal, a mystery even to official Beyonders. Why are you asking me to spend the night there?

The image of the dark, charred building he had seen through the Mystery Prying Glasses still lingered in his mind, with a blurry face staring back at him through the empty eyes behind a window.

...

It had given him an uneasy feeling, as Osta Trul had warned it was a dangerous place. However, Lumian had no interest in exploring it and wouldn't have triggered any anomalies due to him lacking an adventurous spirit, so he put it aside.

Amidst his thoughts, Lumian dismissed the idea that Gardner Martin would set a trap in the charred building to harm him.

As a member of the Iron and Blood Cross Order—a secret organization—a powerful Beyonder likely at Sequence 5 or at minimum a 6, Gardner had other, more direct methods to deal with subordinates with ulterior motives.

Simultaneously, Lumian recalled everything he had seen and heard recently.

The charred building stood close to Rue des Blouses Blanches. Each time he passed it while going to his safe house from Salle de Bal Brise or searching for Franca, he would see vagrants seeking refuge from the rain inside. Never had he witnessed any official Beyonders or patrolling police shooing them away, nor had he heard of any fatalities occurring there.

For three reasons, Lumian considered the charred building highly perilous. Firstly, Osta Trul's spiritual perception had urged him. Secondly, its existence remained intact, as if some mysterious force prevented its demolition. Thirdly, his experience with the Mystery Prying Glasses had left him with a certain feeling.

Combining all these signs, Lumian couldn't help but think there was indeed a problem. And it wasn't some trivial matter either. Though under normal circumstances, these abnormalities were unlikely to be triggered; they required specific conditions.

But if there wasn't any trouble, why would Gardner Martin arrange for me to spend the night there? Is it some kind of courage test? That's pointless, Lumian thought to himself.

He believed that the most striking impression he left on Gardner Martin and the others was that of his boldness.

After a brief moment of contemplation, Lumian stared at Gardner Martin, showing his concern and suspicion.

"13 Avenue du Marché? I've heard there's something strange going on there."

"If nothing were amiss, what kind of test would it be to send you there for a night?" Gardner Martin replied with a smile. "As long as your response is flawless, I believe you'll come out of it unscathed."

So, this is a test to see how I handle a 'sudden' abnormality without any prior information? Lumian nodded in understanding, but the situation left him even more puzzled.

If that's the case, why did Gardner Martin come here in the middle of the night and ask me to go to 13 Avenue du Marché immediately? Couldn't he have waited until daytime for me to do this? Then, he could test my ability to gather information and see who I'll contact...

Now, I won't have the chance to summon Madam Magician's messenger and seek her opinion or possible help, allowing me not to face the hidden danger of the charred building alone...

But Gardner Martin doesn't know that I can summon a demigod's messenger. That's probably not what he's worried about... If he suspects that I have another faction backing me, he wouldn't have given me a chance to infiltrate the core—in other words—the Iron and Blood Cross Order. He would have already found a way to make me completely 'disappear'...

Yes, if he really suspects me, he'll give me ample time to see where I go and who I contact to determine if there's a problem...

He must have some hidden motive for making things so urgent...

Giving me time to prepare means I might go back on my word. Instead of heading to 13 Avenue du Marché, I might turn around and sell information about this charred building's possible connection to the Iron and Blood Cross Order to the authorities?

But the problem is, even if I manage to stay until the sun rises, I can still go back on my word or betray them... I'll be apprehended right then and there and forced to sign a contract?

After careful consideration, Lumian still couldn't decipher Gardner Martin's true intentions.

The test was likely just one aspect, but there had to be a hidden motive!

The only thing Lumian was sure of was that Gardner Martin wasn't planning to kill him—at least not for the time being. This mission might be life-threatening, but the real danger lay elsewhere.

With various thoughts racing through his mind, Lumian finally made up his decision.

“Alright, I'll go now.”

Gardner Martin grinned.

“Excellent. If you'd agreed too quickly, it would have disappointed me.

“One of the most crucial traits for those who join our core is intelligence and the ability to think. Otherwise, why wouldn't I just purchase a few new steam robots from the God of Steam and Machinery Church?”

Are you suggesting that Franca is smart, but not very much so? She thinks, but not holistically? Lumian couldn't help but criticize inwardly.

Of course, he knew that this wasn't the reason why the Boss refused to let Franca join the core team.

After his inner critique, Lumian responded to Gardner Martin with a smile, “I'm looking forward to experiencing the core you've described, Boss.”

As he spoke, he turned around and prepared to head downstairs to 13 Avenue du Marché.

Gardner Martin casually called out to him, “Don't reveal this to anyone, not even to those sleeping with you, like Jenna, who's singing downstairs.”

“Alright,” Lumian said, though he didn't give it much thought.

He had to share this with Franca and Jenna!

However, the two of them had been busy investigating the disappearance of the Deep Valley Cloister's gatekeeper and hadn't paid much attention to the affairs of the Savoie Mob.

After leaving Salle de Bal Brise, Lumian touched his left chest.

Then, he drew a triangular Sacred Emblem, as if praying to the God of Steam and Machinery for good luck.

There was still water on the ground from the rain. Lumian followed the iron-black street lamps and reached the intersection near Rue des Blouses Blanches at a moderate pace.

A pitch-black six-story building stood diagonally in front of him. Many of the walls had collapsed, as if pairs of empty, pitch-black “eyes” had grown out of the house.

At that moment, two or three tramps were sleeping on the ground floor, devoid of doors or window frames. It was strewn with blackened bricks and charred wood.

Lumian stood by the roadside and observed for a while, but he couldn't find the blurry face pressed against the window.

Must I wear the Mystery Prying Glasses to “see” it? Without hesitation, Lumian passed through the filthy doorway and entered the target building.

He felt no abnormalities from his body to his soul.

Walking around the tramps, Lumian found what appeared to be the activity room.

There was a small room inside. The wooden door was charred and wobbly, but it remained intact. Beyond the shattered glass window lay an alley behind Avenue du Marché.

Lumian walked in and carefully closed the wooden door.

Then, he sat by the window, ready to climb out of the abnormal building at a moment's notice.

Amidst the inevitable torment, time ticked by, and the night deepened. Lumian remained oblivious to any abnormalities. It was so quiet that only the tramps' occasional coughs echoed.

Suddenly, he straightened his back.

He heard sluggish footsteps.

The footsteps drew nearer, knocking on the dilapidated wooden door that couldn't be locked, instantly tainting the quiet night with an uneasy atmosphere.

At that moment, Termiboros's magnificent voice echoed in Lumian's mind.

“Don't respond.”

Don't respond... Lumian's hair stood on end.

Although he couldn't fully trust the Inevitability angel, considering the current situation, he chose to look at the door silently after weighing the pros and cons.

Knock! Knock! Knock!

The knocks on the door echoed one after another, the intervals long, slow, and heavy.

Knock! Knock! Knock!

After a while, the person outside finally spoke.

“Help me. I was the one sleeping outside.

“Help me, help me. A murderer has barged in!”

This fabrication is absurd... Lumian calmed his tense nerves by entertaining himself.

He didn't respond, acting as though there was no one in the small room.

The voice outside grew more intense, but the pace slowed. There was an indistinct, strange pause.

“He's. Here! He's. Here! I'm. About. To. Be. Killed!

“The next one. Is. You!”

As soon as he finished speaking, the person knocking on the door suddenly let out a scream.

Lumian heard a dull thud.

Thud! It was as if someone had fallen to the ground.

Then, a heavy object outside the door was slowly dragged further away.

Before long, a bone-chilling cutting sound filled the room, accompanied by the sound of gnawing and loud chewing.

An image suddenly surfaced in Lumian's mind: A shadowy figure squatted on the ground, dividing a human corpse with an axe and other items. Occasionally, it would pick up an arm and take a few bites.

After a while, the similar commotion vanished.

Knock! Knock! Knock!

There was another knock on Lumian's small room.

“If you don't. Open the door. I'll. Come in. Myself.” It was the same person who had asked for help.

Lumian gazed at the shaky wooden door and had an idea.

As long as I don't respond, the abnormality outside won't be able to open this door and truly threaten me?

This door is clearly unlocked and was burned by the fire. It's very fragile, but it can't open it...

It doesn't have the ability to open any door. Does it require a response from the person behind the door to establish a connection in the mystical sense?

As these thoughts raced through his mind, Lumian gained a deeper understanding of the current situation and felt more confident.

Knock. Knock. Knock. Amidst the knocking, the person outside spoke in a staccato manner, “I am not. Lying.

“I really will. Open the door. And come in.

“I'll give you. Another. Ten seconds.”

Lumian scoffed, feeling increasingly certain.

He wanted to mock the other party in his heart and tell it to open if it had what it took, but he was worried that it would also be considered a response, so he suppressed those thoughts.

Knock! Knock! Knock!

Three more knocks separated by a long pause.

Suddenly, Lumian heard an inaudible creak.

Then, he saw the rickety wooden door slowly pull back, revealing a dark crack.

It was opening.

Sorry for the inconvenience. Thank you very much!

