

## **Inevitability 281**

Chapter 281 Reflection

As the charred and decrepit wooden door creaked open slowly, Lumian felt a shiver down his spine, like ice water trickling over his scalp.

Wasn't it impossible to open the door?

Was my guess wrong?

...

If it could open the door, why did it take so long and talk so much?

Just get on with it! Is there something wrong with its brain?

Although Lumian had become a Pyromaniac and had experienced various dangerous situations, his heart couldn't help but race at this moment. It felt like a steam locomotive hurtling on tracks and pillowwood. If he weren't worried about Gardner Martin or other members of the Iron and Blood Cross Order lurking nearby, he would have set up an altar then and there, summoning Madam Magician's messenger or praying to Mr. Fool.

Instinctively, Lumian prepared to summon Fire Raven and create a cloak, readying himself for a battle. But Termiboros's warning echoed in his mind once more: Don't respond.

This was entirely different from just not opening the door! Lumian couldn't shake the feeling that something fishy was going on. Why would the creature knock on the door, threaten him, and then open it itself? So, he restrained himself, staying silent and staring at the door like a statue.

The charred wooden door continued to swing open, and the dark gap gradually widened, enough for one person to pass through. But there was nothing outside the door. The room, far from the window, was engulfed in darkness. The crimson moonlight seeping through the broken glass barely revealed any outlines.

Where was the fellow that knocked on the door? Lumian's first instinct was to activate his Spirit Vision to see if there was an invisible monster. But he held back, afraid that it would count as a response.

The wobbly door came to a halt, and nothing emerged from the darkness outside. No wriggling shapes, just silence. Lumian remained motionless in his sitting position, gazing in that direction. This whole situation was incredibly bizarre. He couldn't even target an enemy if he wanted to set them on fire.

Silence took over, and time seemed to stand still. Then suddenly, a drop of liquid fell from the ceiling, landing in front of Lumian. His eyelids twitched, and under the crimson moonlight, he saw that it was bright red, resembling blood.

Drip. Drip. Blood dripped, gradually staining a large area red.

Lumian couldn't shake the unease that crept over him.

Drip!

Another droplet landed on Lumian's right cheek. It was cold, sticky, and silky. It didn't seem like human blood, but it wasn't tainted by darkness either. The pungent smell of blood filled Lumian's nostrils, making him want to roll to the side, stand up, and leap out of the window instinctively.

Don't respond. He recalled Termiboros's words once again.

Lumian took a deep breath, allowing the viscous liquid that smelled like blood to hit his face and head. Gradually, he felt his body grow heavier. He quickly examined his exposed hands. Cold, viscous blood dripped onto his hands, silently merging into one, as if encasing him in a blood-colored glove.

Lumian began to suspect that he was trapped in a mucous blood membrane, making him feel heavier and heavier. Instinctively, he thought about reaching into his pocket to pull out Mr. K's finger. He wanted the Aurora Order Oracle, skilled in blood-related spells, to help him resist this strange mucous blood membrane.

“Don't respond.” This time, the Inevitability angel's powerful voice echoed in Lumian's mind, instead of him reminding himself of Termiboros's earlier warning.

Lumian managed to regain control of himself, but he could feel his body growing heavier, and his breathing became labored. Slowly, the strange blood began to seep into his skin, as if it had a life of its own, determined to enter his body and consume him from the inside out.

As the blood infiltrated him, his thoughts grew hazy, and a surge of violent tendencies flooded his mind. The urge to kill and burn everything—this place, Trier, the entire world—overwhelmed him!

Dammit! Could Termiboros be using this opportunity to deceive me and use the strange power here to take control and escape the seal. He couldn't help but question the effectiveness of Termiboros's “don't respond” and the true intentions of the Inevitability angel.

Despite wanting to resist and break free from the burned-down building, Lumian couldn't shake the feeling that there was something mystical about the “abnormality” and the creature's persistence in knocking, talking, and asking for permission.

If he hadn't harbored those suspicions, he wouldn't have fully trusted Termiboros, an enemy rather than a friend. He wouldn't have endured until now. With these thoughts swirling in his mind, Lumian decided to hold on a little longer and observe what would happen next.

His head felt heavy, and his thoughts grew increasingly chaotic. A grinding sound rang in his ears, and his body seemed to ache from a distant pain. It was as if he was slipping into a semi-conscious state, while someone took the opportunity to dismember him, severing his limbs and tearing his body apart.

Then, suddenly, Lumian's consciousness withdrew. It was as if his spirit had separated from his body. He watched himself sitting by the window, covered in blood, with his eyes strangely empty. In front of him squatted a charred figure, brandishing a bloodied axe and hacking at his thigh, splitting the bone in half.

Uh... Lumian slowly realized that something was amiss.

He instinctively looked down and saw that his body remained whole!

He was still sitting by the shattered window, but the scene he witnessed was no longer the crumbling charred wooden door. Instead, he saw a “reflection” of his surroundings and his own dismemberment by the burnt shadow.

Compared to his severed legs and extracted bones, the most striking aspect was his empty, lifeless eyes.

After a brief daze, the horrifying and bloody vision disappeared, and the open, dilapidated wooden door returned to his sight.

He knew it wasn't an illusion because he felt as if he had surfaced from water, and his entire body relaxed.

If I had responded, what would have happened? Would the nightmarish scenes I saw have become real? Would that response have established a mystical connection, allowing those terrifying and almost illusionary encounters to materialize? Lumian exhaled slowly, fear still lingering in his heart.

He placed his hand on his left chest, lowered his voice, and chuckled.

“Temiboros, you truly are remarkable.”

Indeed, a worthy angel. Even in His sealed state, He easily discerned the essence of the abnormality.

Termiboros's voice echoed, overlapping as if from multiple sources. “The abnormality here is considered minor.”

“Minor?” Lumian couldn't believe it. “If you hadn't reminded me not to respond and if I hadn't been determined enough, something terrible might have occurred. That Gardner Martin, that vile scoundrel, really wants me dead!”

Termiboros replied in a thunderous voice, “You won't die. The abnormality will merely transform you, leading your thoughts to become fanatical about certain things while rejecting others.”

Lumian pondered the explanation, finding it a bit hard to grasp.

Just then, Termiboros added, “It's like being conquered, both physically and mentally.”

Suddenly, realization dawned on Lumian, and he spoke quietly, “Gardner Martin wanted me to stay here overnight so he could use this anomaly to control me and eliminate any potential threats.

No wonder he came to Salle de Bal Brise so late and didn't give me time to think!

Termiboros confirmed Lumian's suspicion, “Have you only just realized how shallow you are?”

Lumian cursed under his breath and thought to himself, Even if he succeeds, I won't be under Gardner Martin's control; I'll be manipulated by the power of this place. Isn't he worried that something might go wrong?

The abnormality here is connected to the Iron and Blood Cross Order. Is he not concerned about that?

With these thoughts swirling in his mind, Lumian furrowed his brow and asked Termiboros, “Since I won't be affected or altered abnormally, will Gardner Martin notice something off about me when I leave tomorrow morning?”

Termiboros's voice boomed.

“If such a level of corruption was easily detectable, Gardner Martin and his allies would have been eliminated by the official Beyonders long ago.

“Unless the source of corruption provides direct information, they can't tell that you're unaffected.”

Hmm... As Lumian contemplated the situation, he suddenly realized a hidden truth in Termiboros's words—Gardner Martin and the members of the Iron and Blood Cross Order were already corrupted!

They were under someone else's control!

Hiss... The more Lumian thought about it, the more he found it terrifying.

After a few seconds, Lumian tried to get more information from Termiboros, asking, “When I meet Gardner Martin, how should I display my fanaticism, and which beliefs should I reject?”

Termiboros surprisingly replied, “Show fanaticism towards war and chaos and reject belief in other deities.”

Lumian nodded, but another concern arose. “Considering the intensity of the recent abnormality, shouldn't everyone who enters and stays here be corrupted?”

Termiboros clarified, “Only two specific pathways inevitably trigger the abnormality here. The rest require specific actions at precise times before the anomaly will occur. The officials only recognize the latter situation and secretly prevent others from entering this building at those specific times.”

“Two special pathways... Hunter and Demoness?” Lumian could roughly guess.

Termiboros didn't deny it.

As Lumian recalled the entire incident, he couldn't help but smile, saying, “Termiboros, it seems you've truly understood your situation and positioned yourself wisely.”

Termiboros remained silent this time, providing no response.

In the following hours, Lumian encountered two more abnormalities. One almost broke his neck, while the other caused an explosion that sent his organs flying.

Remembering the words “don't respond,” he endured the trials, eventually returning to his unharmed body.

Finally, a tinge of reddish-gold appeared on the horizon as the sun rose. Lumian stood up, basking in the morning light for a moment before leaving 13 Avenue du Marché.

There, he saw Gardner Martin sitting in a carriage opposite. Their eyes met, and in the next moment, Gardner Martin smiled.

Lumian smiled back.

Sorry for the inconvenience. Thank you very much!

Chapter 282 Treacherous

Gardner Martin stepped out of the carriage and warmly embraced Lumian.

Oh, his attitude changed instantly... Lumian criticized as he returned the hug. After the embrace, Gardner Martin let go and smiled, declaring, "From now on, we're true brothers."

True brothers? Can I inherit your estate if you die? Lumian, whose mental state had improved significantly and had successfully passed the difficult "test," held back his teasing thoughts.

"You're still my boss," Lumian said, his habitual loyalty shining through in his words.

He thought that while it might have been a bit over the top, the gesture didn't feel insincere or out of place.

Gardner Martin laughed.

"In the future, when there's nobody else around, you can call me 'CO Sir.'"

"CO Sir..." Lumian found the title a little strange.

The Iron and Blood Cross Order was a secret organization, not an army.

Gardner Martin didn't offer any explanation; he just smiled.

"Come to 11 Rue des Fontaines at 8 p.m. tonight. That's when your initiation ritual will take place."

With that, he gave Lumian's shoulder a reassuring pat.

"Rest well now."

Lumian acknowledged his words with a nod and bid farewell to the boss of the Savoie Mob. He made his way back to Auberge du Coq Doré and drew the curtains of Room 207.

It was already past 6 a.m., so Lumian didn't need to catch up on sleep. He sat at the wooden table and began writing to Madam Magician. He recounted the previous night's encounter and Termiboros's performance. Finally, he inquired about how to report this matter to Mr. K.

Alone, Lumian couldn't avoid the peculiar "abnormality" in the abandoned building. He needed to explain the situation convincingly to Mr. K without revealing that he possessed The Fool's seal and an angel from the Inevitability domain.

After neatly folding the letter, Lumian set up a ritual and summoned the "doll" messenger in the light-gold dress.

The messenger lowered her head and nodded with satisfaction upon seeing the square-shaped letter. As she levitated the letter, she warned Lumian, "Someone is still monitoring you."

Huh? I didn't notice it at all... His tracking, concealment, and observation skills are impressive... Lumian prided himself on being a skilled Hunter with strong anti-tracking abilities. Yet, he had failed to detect the presence of the monitors!

Mr. K's subordinates? No, if Miss Messenger felt the need to warn me, it couldn't be the Aurora Order... The monitors sent by Gardner Martin must still be lurking, even after passing the test and facing that abnormal corruption last night. I've let my guard down after being informed about my induction, and that's made me vulnerable... Damn, how cunning! Lumian realized he had been too naive and not cautious enough compared to Gardner Martin.

If he hadn't pretended to be exhausted from sleep deprivation and torture, drawing the curtains to sleep would've been an obvious red flag. It would have definitely raised suspicion among the monitors.

At the same time, Lumian was grateful that Madam Magician's messenger seemed powerful enough not to be detected by the monitors.

After sending off the "doll" messenger, Lumian lay on the bed, waiting for a reply. When it finally arrived, he read the message carefully.

"As a secret organization with a history spanning two to three centuries, the Iron and Blood Cross Order doesn't recruit members so readily. The fact that they are allowing new members to be corrupted goes against the test I know of.

"It appears that the Iron and Blood Cross Order has undergone some negative changes over the years. Don't rush to uncover the reasons behind this just yet. Take it step by step and focus on protecting yourself for now.

"When Termiboros offered help and warned you, it was likely because He didn't want you to be corrupted or perish outright. That would have an impact on Him. At the same time, He probably wants to earn your trust before revealing His true intentions at a critical moment.

"Always remember that an evil god's angel is a true madman. He will surely bring disaster to you and those around you. Stay vigilant at all times. You must both use Him to your advantage and guard against His treachery.

"As for Mr. K, it's simple. Just explain that you recited that entity's honorific name at a crucial moment, and miraculously, you remained untainted.

"Don't worry about him verifying the authenticity of your claim with that entity. Devout believers wouldn't do such a thing. Besides, even the entity Himself might not be certain if He responded to your prayers."

Wh— Lumian felt a bit bewildered by the last part.

How could a deity not know if He had responded to a specific believer?

Isn't that too absurd?

In an instant, Lumian recalled something Madam Magician had once told him.

If he used anything other than the three-line honorific name to pray to Mr. Fool, she couldn't guarantee that the response would be from that great being. It could be very dangerous.

Something similar to this situation? Matters involving deities are truly unfathomable. And any mistake could lead to a situation more tragic than death... Could Aurore have faced the same problem? Lumian's thoughts drifted.

For the past few days, he had meticulously combed through Aurore's grimoires, copying everything from the two highlighted time periods that Madame Justice had pointed out. His plan was to show it

to the vice president of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society, Madam Hela, when the opportunity arose.

Franca had already read through the corresponding content and found no suspicious details. The unconventional mysticism knowledge was just ordinary spells that could only be cast by a Warlock or Beyonder of the corresponding domain. Neither of them could practice it.

The only issue they found was that since the beginning of the year, Aurore's grimoires had gained a significant amount of ritualistic knowledge related to sacrificial rituals and secret deeds. These were obtained from the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society, but they didn't point to any evil god or hidden existence. They were more basic applications.

A crimson flame engulfed the letter, turning it to ash in Lumian's hand.

He lay down and pretended to sleep, but his mind was busy contemplating the grimoires and planning his next steps.

The most important thing to him was that the one-month deadline set by the Prophecy Spell was approaching. Guillaume Bénet, the padre, would appear somewhere in Quartier de la Princesse Rouge.

In the hill district, at the entrance of Deep Valley Cloister.

Franca, dressed as a typical bounty hunter with a fake mustache and a top hat, sighed to Jenna, "There's really no clue at all."

Jenna was disguised in a white shirt, brown vest, dark pants, and black boots, with a brown beret. She had altered her features slightly to look more ordinary, without any moles or smoky makeup.

As they gazed at the peculiar iron-black building with steel components and massive chimneys resembling steeples, it felt more like a special factory than the Church of the God of Steam and Machinery cloister.

At that moment, white smoke billowed from the chimneys, accompanied by a loud mechanical roar.

"It's mainly because those monks don't want to interact with outsiders..." Jenna replied, feeling frustrated.

For the past few days, they, like other bounty hunters and private detectives, were only allowed to enter the first-floor courtyard. They could only inquire with the new gatekeeper and a few other servants.

The ascetic monks only provided a list of relevant personnel's statements.

Franca diverted her gaze and clicked her tongue.

"This won't be an easy case. Otherwise, the official Beyonders would have figured it out by now.

"Since we can't find any clues in the cloister, let's take a look around."

"Alright." Jenna lacked experience in such investigations and was still learning from Franca.

They strolled around the cloister in the valley, occasionally encountering other investigators drawn by the high bounty.

After about fifteen minutes of walking, they came across a mountain wall showing signs of collapse and new trees growing.

On the side of the mountain wall, there was a cave sealed by a heavy wooden door. A man in his forties sat beside it, seeking shelter from the wind and rain.

He flipped through old newspapers with comic strips, occasionally chuckling. A brass key hung from his waist.

Franca approached and asked in a deliberate hoarse voice, "What's this place?"

The plain-looking, slightly ragged man glanced up at Franca's face and frowned a bit.

His gaze quickly shifted to Jenna, and he seemed more at ease.

"This is the entrance to the Deep Valley Quarry.

"I'm a gatekeeper."

"Why is there a door, and why is it locked?" Jenna had seen a real quarry south of the market district.

"This place is abandoned and could collapse anytime. We can't allow anyone daring enough to disturb a sleeping tiger," the gatekeeper of the Deep Valley Quarry explained with a smile.

"Is this place not connected to Underground Trier?" Franca inquired.

The quarry's gatekeeper shook his head.

"It's on the verge of complete collapse. How could it be connected? I'm about to lose my job!"

With that, he looked at Jenna and tried to be friendly.

"Do you want some work? I'll pay you to have some fun with me—just once."

"You Trierians..." Franca tutted and shook her head.

Jenna responded with her usual catchphrase, rejecting his proposition.

8 p.m., 11 Rue des Fontaines.

Lumian followed Gardner Martin's butler, Faustino, across the lawn and through the hall until they reached a windowless room.

Inside, there was a dining table, but it didn't resemble a lavish villa restaurant. Instead, it appeared quite plain, almost empty.

Lumian glanced around and noticed three rows of dishes neatly arranged on the table. The first row held various utensils, the second row contained cups and bottles, and the third row displayed prepared dishes and unlit candles.



The setup was meticulously symmetrical, forming three parallel lines.

#### Chapter 283 Idea

Gardner Martin's butler, Faustino, didn't leave the room after guiding Lumian in. Instead, he opened his arms with a smile.

“Welcome, new brother.”

You're also a member of the Iron and Blood Cross Order? Lumian was taken aback at first, but then he accepted it as a matter of fact.

A butler, as the master's eyes, ears, and limbs, likely knew many of Gardner Martin's secrets. So it made sense that he either promoted Faustino to be a member of the Iron and Blood Cross Order or had a member of the Order become his butler.

Lumian observed Faustino's slightly gray temples, sunken eyes, and light-blue eyes, then embraced him warmly.

“Thank you.”

Faustino, dressed in his butler attire, went to the dining table and pulled out a chair at the west end, saying to Lumian, “Sit here.”

Lumian nodded and settled down, feeling strangely at home.

Of course, thanks to Aurore's education, he had avoided the habit of raising his legs and crossing them at the edge of the dining table.

Faustino seated himself beside Lumian and briefly explained, “A few more brothers will come later.”

Fifteen minutes later, the rest of the Iron and Blood Cross Order members arrived. Following Faustino's introductions, Lumian embraced each one.

They were:

Vincent Lorraine, representing Gardner Martin in the Rist dock operations, was under 30 years old with a typical Intis look—black hair, blue eyes, refined appearance, and slender figure. He didn't strike Lumian as a Beyonder of the Hunter pathway as he didn't differ much from ordinary white-collar workers, but that begged the question—how did he survive the vigil?

Parsifal, who helped Gardner Martin manage the depot and freight company, appeared as an average middle-aged man with slightly disheveled brown hair and amiable brown eyes when he smiled. However, his emotionless gaze gave Lumian chills, making him wary.

Not in charge of specific matters, Albus seemed to operate in the dark and had a hint of red in his hair. His sharp brown eyebrows and eyes made him rather handsome, but he had a less likable appearance.

There was also an acquaintance of Lumian's, “Blood Palm” Black of the Savoie Mob.

As the manager of Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman, he was dressed formally, had brown hair and blue eyes, and enjoyed a cigar with a warm smile.

Lumian had suspected that the Savoie Mob had an official member of the Iron and Blood Cross Order secretly monitoring the market district and their activities. However, he hadn't expected it to be "Blood Palm" Black, who didn't stand out at all.

Lumian had initially thought it might be Baron Brignais or "Rat" Christo, but it turned out differently.

Strangely, Black bore a resemblance to Gardner Martin.

With Faustino and Lumian, there were now six members of the Iron and Blood Cross Order present.

In the past, Lumian had criticized, "Isn't it too much for a regional mob like the Savoie Mob to have five or six Beyonders?" But now, he found it unsurprising.

As a secret organization with a long history, it was normal for the Iron and Blood Cross Order to have such influence and heritage. Even its subsidiaries enjoyed abundant resources.

After exchanging pleasantries, Butler Faustino introduced the items on the table to Lumian.

"In the ensuing ritual, the goblets will be our weapons. They can also be used as cannons. Red wine will be ordinary explosives, white wine will be potent explosives, food will be the components, and knives and forks will be sharp swords..."

Lumian listened quietly, wondering if there was something odd about their thinking.

Are they too self-aware?

Or is there some mystical significance to this?

By the time Faustino finished speaking, Gardner Martin, now wearing his tailcoat and an Iron Cross medal embedded with a ruby over his chest, entered the room.

He stood on the east side of the long dining table, facing the six seated members on the west side.

With a swoosh, the five members, excluding Lumian, stood up in unison.

Oh... Lumian inwardly sighed as he rose to his feet.

"Good evening, CO Sir." Faustino, Black, and the others greeted him in unison.

Lumian was slightly slower to respond.

Gardner Martin motioned for everyone to take their seats and smiled.

"We'll officially begin the ritual when the Supervisor arrives.

"Ciel, let me tell you what the core you're about to join represents."

Gardner Martin locked eyes with Lumian, his tone growing more serious.

"We are all members of a secretive organization with a history spanning centuries.

"It's known as the Iron and Blood Cross Order."

Lumian didn't show any intentional surprise or dismay. After all, the name sounded rather ordinary.

Albus, the young man with dark-red hair sitting at the edge of the dining table, seemed about to speak, but Gardner Martin shot him a stern look.

The Commanding Officer of the Iron and Blood Cross Order turned his attention back to Lumian.

“Nearly 300 years ago, a few influential figures established the Iron and Blood Cross Order. They believed that deities were merely powerful Beyonders, and no matter how you look at it, even the weakest Beyer is fundamentally different from ordinary people.

“Our philosophy is that regardless of how one obtains Beyer powers, they should be recognized and treated with a status above ordinary people. However, the two Churches and the government only acknowledge the Beyonders they nurture. They also insist that supernatural powers should be concealed from ordinary folks as much as possible.

“This goes against nature and the course of history. We must change it.

“This also means we have to oppose the government and the two Churches, but there's no need to fear. We possess sufficient strength and true demigods.

“In the future, if the two Churches are willing to accept wild Beyonders and acknowledge their statuses, we might consider cooperating with them.”

In other words, the ultimate goal is to overthrow the government and establish a country where Beyonders hold positions at all levels? Lumian interpreted Gardner Martin's words from his own perspective.

Gardner Martin glanced at the six members of the Iron and Blood Cross Order seated opposite him and smiled once more.

“Our Iron and Blood Cross Order's strength is mainly concentrated in Intis, with over a third of our members based in Trier. As you can see, we have many powerful brothers in the market district alone, and even more Beyonders under our control.

“I am the CO, or Commanding Officer, responsible for leading you and handling various matters in the market district. Above me are several branch presidents, also referred to as 'Deputy Brigade Commanders.' Each of them is a true and powerful demigod.

“Above the branch presidents is our Iron and Blood Cross Order's president, also known as the Brigade Commander. He is a mysterious and formidable figure.

“Below me are NCOs. When we have more than ten brothers in the market district, I'll appoint two NCOs to assist me in management. NCOs receive additional resources and support.”

Is this some kind of military game? Lumian guessed from the titles of the different levels within the Iron and Blood Cross Order.

Gardner Martin turned his gaze to the door and spoke, "Apart from that, we also have many Supervisors. Each Supervisor acts independently and patrols the areas under the jurisdiction of different commanding officers.

"In the future, if anything happens to me and I exhibit any abnormalities, you must find the Supervisor immediately and report the situation to him. Similarly, if you discover that the Supervisor has done something abnormal, inform me immediately."

Gardner Martin grinned playfully at Lumian and said, "Ciel, let me introduce you to Olson, the Supervisor in charge of the market district."

Perplexed, Lumian followed Gardner Martin's finger and looked at the door.

In the next moment, a tall, thin man in a blue vest and black suit entered the room.

The man had short auburn hair, reddish-brown eyes, thick eyebrows, and a wild beard. He resembled a famished bear.

As Lumian recognized Supervisor Olson, his pupils widened.

It was the trader he, Christo, and Simon had encountered underground!

Lumian vividly remembered that he had been nothing but a head and a blood-stained spine. He had been pursued by another headless monster, both of which were extremely dangerous. Yet, here he was, underground and appearing at Gardner Martin's house!

Lumian couldn't help but glance at Olson's hands, noticing his fair skin and the small suitcase he carried.

He has a body again? Has he merged with the headless monster? Lumian's mind raced as he observed Olson approaching Gardner Martin.

He began to suspect that the two monsters they had encountered during the transaction were illusions created by Olson. There was nothing abnormal about him.

Since the transaction had been a test, it wasn't surprising that the monster had been fake.

But was it not too realistic? Lumian watched with suspicion as Gardner Martin and Olson each took a goblet and addressed everyone present, "Load the explosives!"

Albus, Parsifal, and the other members of the Iron and Blood Cross Order placed a goblet in front of them and poured alluring red wine into them.

So this is how you load explosives? Lumian recalled Faustino's words about goblets being weapons or cannons, and wine being explosives.

After filling the "cannons" with "explosives," Gardner Martin called out, "Attention!"

"Port arms!"

In an instant, everyone stood up and placed their right hands on the goblets filled with red wine.

"Present arms!" Gardner Martin gave another command.

In unison, he raised the goblet to his chest.

Lumian marveled and followed suit, imitating the actions of the other members around him.

#### Chapter 284 Entering the Order

Gardner Martin observed the Iron and Blood Cross Order members opposite him and nodded with satisfaction.

“Aim!”

At this command, Faustino and the others raised their goblets to their lips.

Is this what aiming means? Lumian almost laughed, but the seriousness of the other Iron and Blood Cross Order members stopped him.

He had grasped the essence of the ritual and had an idea of what would happen next.

Just then, Gardner Martin issued a new order.

“Fire!”

Almost simultaneously, Parsifal, Black, and the others downed a third of the red wine in their goblets.

“Fire!”

Gardner Martin called out the word again.

Lumian lifted his head slightly and downed another third of the red wine.

Gardner Martin followed suit.

He then continued, “Attack!”

The Iron and Blood Cross Order members present finished the remaining red wine.

Gardner Martin removed the goblet from his mouth with a serious expression.

“Ground arms!”

As he spoke, he raised the goblet above his eyes, pressed it against his forehead, and then placed it back on the dining table.

Vincent Lorraine and the others followed suit.

Then, they straightened their backs, slapped their left chests with their right hands, and shouted together, “War! War! War!”

As they shouted in unison, Lumian felt a subtle shift in the room's atmosphere, as if it had been filled with enthusiasm, excitement, and passion.

The atmosphere infected the Iron and Blood Cross Order members, connecting their hearts and minds, making them feel like true brothers.

Even without being influenced by any abnormality or fanatical thoughts, Lumian couldn't help but be affected by the environment and atmosphere. He felt a surge of excitement[1].

He had previously criticized the initiation ritual of the Iron and Blood Cross Order for lacking mystique and not living up to the title of a secret organization. Now, he realized that it was merely different in quality from the Aurora Order.

Besides, the more mystical part was the vigil at 13 Avenue du Marché.

Gardner Martin gestured with his right hand, prompting Faustino, Albus, and the others to stop and fall silent.

He smiled once again and said, “Let us welcome our new brother, Lumian Lee!”

This time, he used Lumian's real name, indicating that the Iron and Blood Cross Order knew the members' situations very well.

The Iron and Blood Cross Order members, including Supervisor Olson, applauded one after another. Lumian stood up and poured himself a goblet of red wine, which he downed in one gulp as a sign of respect.

This fully showcased his characteristics as a regular customer of Ol' Tavern.

“Very good. We're all brothers. There's no need to stand on ceremony,” Gardner said as he took a seat. While Faustino distributed plates and cut bread, Gardner smiled and continued, “I've already explained the history and philosophy of our Iron and Blood Cross Order. Now, let's talk about what we want to do.”

His smile vanished as he grew more serious.

“The most important thing we've always been working towards is to overthrow the current government, establish a country ruled by Beyonders, and transform this world. For this, we've been plotting and experimenting. We've established multiple branch organizations to prepare for chaos.

“Specifically, as for me, I'll use companies and mobs to control dockworkers, construction workers, porters, handymen, and laborers in the market district. When necessary, I'll let them take to the streets and use barricades to fight the police and army.”

Lumian furrowed his brow and asked in confusion, “Isn't it said that Beyonders are fundamentally different from ordinary people? Beyonders are superior to ordinary people. Why make controlling and using workers a goal?”

He found it ironic that the Iron and Blood Cross Order's philosophy and actions were completely inconsistent.

Although this could be considered normal—concepts were concepts and slogans were slogans—and they couldn't be equated to reality, Gardner Martin could always address these matters at a later time. It didn't feel right for his words to contradict himself just seconds later.

If he hadn't just joined this secret organization, Lumian's tone would have been even more mocking.

Gardner Martin grinned.

“Very perceptive. You've noticed a very important problem.

“Before this, only Albus suggested it. Everyone else naturally accepted it.”

Not only is he using ordinary people to create chaos, but he also has other intentions? Lumian turned his head to glance at Albus, who was sitting at the edge of the dining table. He realized that the dark-red-haired young man's posture was rather casual. His right leg was crossed, and he kept shaking his ankle.

Gardner Martin explained simply, “First, you need to understand something. Why did those deities establish Churches and spread Their teachings?”

“You probably don't buy the words 'God loves the world.' If They truly had love, the market district wouldn't be like this, and Intis wouldn't have so many tramps.”

Lumian agreed with this. He nodded slightly and didn't interrupt the Commanding Officer.

Gardner Martin smiled and said, “We reckon that deities require believers, and we've proven this over the centuries.

“The more common folk we influence, the greater our resources to strike fear into the hearts of the Eternal Blazing Sun Church and the Church of the God of Steam and Machinery. This'll weaken their support for the current government and boost our chances during the riots.

“Eventually, it'll become a crucial bargaining chip to make them agree to us, if not outright support us.”

“They're all just bargaining chips...” Lumian's eyes flickered.

The people he knew and interacted with were distinct individuals—unique families.

Gardner Martin let out a sigh.

“If we aim to control more workers and citizens, we need the government and the National Convention to cooperate with us.

“I've always known what kind of person Hugues Artois is and the forces behind him, but I still decided to support his bid for parliament. I knew he'd inevitably create plenty of chaos in the market district. Being associated with the National Convention and the government, the worse he performed, the more people would flock to our side. Unfortunately, this piece of trash was assassinated just a few days after being elected.”

So, that's why the Savoie Mob supports Hugues Artois... I thought there was an evil god backing you, and the evil gods all support Hugues Artois... Lumian realized.

Without Gardner Martin's personal explanation and a proper understanding of the Iron and Blood Cross Order's philosophy, Lumian couldn't possibly fathom the secret organization's true intentions behind supporting Hugues Artois's candidacy for parliament.

Gardner Martin summarized, "Hence, in the market district, we place great importance on docks, depots, warehouses, freight companies, and construction firms. The Savoie Mob's purpose is to interact with various individuals and gather crucial information, all while contributing to the organization's funds.

"Naturally, mobs also serve as a vital tool to control ordinary people."

No wonder he poured so many resources into the Savoie Mob... Lumian glanced at the intense "Blood Glove" Black and inwardly mocked him for being better at acting than himself.

Haven't you heard the Boss's words countless times? Why are you still looking so focused?

Look at Albus, constantly eating, drinking, and shaking his leg.

After Lumian nodded, Gardner Martin took a sip of red wine and said, "One more thing we're doing is exploring the underground to find the entrance to Fourth Epoch Trier."

Lumian couldn't help but glance at the silent Supervisor Olson.

The lanky man, looking like a hungry bear, was slicing a medium-rare steak and devouring the juicy meat.

Lumian's eyes scanned Olson's neck several times, but there were no signs of sutures. Could it be that the state of having only his head and spine is just an illusion created by some power? Lumian wondered to himself.

However, this was in line with the legend of Bansy Harbor!

Either Olson has a deep understanding of the unforeseen events in Bansy Harbor, or he encountered similar monsters elsewhere...

Even if it's an illusion, it can't be something he imagined. It must be based on his experience and knowledge...

Madam Magician said most of his words were likely true. She even suspected that he disappeared for a few months because he entered Fourth Epoch Trier...

Where did he encounter a monster with only its head and spine?

If he already entered Fourth Epoch Trier, why is Gardner Martin still searching for the entrance? Is Madam Magician's suspicion off? Lumian's thoughts raced as he made a series of guesses.

Looking at Gardner Martin, he asked in confusion, "Why search for Fourth Epoch Trier's entrance?"

Gardner Martin grinned.

"To other Beyonders, it's hell, an abyss. It's a calamity they can't approach, but to Hunters, it represents a massive treasure trove.

"And our Iron and Blood Cross Order is dominated by Beyonders of the Hunter pathway."

"A treasure trove?" Lumian thought of the Tree of Shadow and the invisible sea of flames that could incinerate a portion of the tree roots.



Gardner Martin continued, speaking solemnly, "I don't know how much you know about the history of the Fourth Epoch, but I can tell you that in that era, deities once walked the earth, and angels often appeared. It was known as the Age of the Gods.

"In the Northern Continent, there were three powerful countries during the Age of the Gods, and one of them was the Tudor Empire. Its capital, Trier, had sunk underground.

"The Tudor Empire's Emperor, Alista Tudor, was known as the Blood Emperor. He was a true deity who controlled the Hunter pathway!

"He perished in a battle of gods. His remains are in Fourth Epoch Trier!"

Blood Emperor Tudor's remains? Lumian instantly recalled some of the contents of Aurore's grimoires. Aurore didn't delve deeply into the history of the Fourth Epoch, only having a rough understanding. She mentioned the Solomon Empire, the Trunsoest Empire, and the Tudor Empire. She also mentioned titles like the Blood Emperor, the Night Emperor, the Emperor of the Underworld, the Black Emperor, and the War of the Four Emperors.

According to Aurore's description, the Blood Emperor was as powerful as a deity.

Chapter 285 Maxim

The Blood Emperor's remains, the remains of a deity... Does it hold the Beyonder characteristic of Sequence 0? No wonder the Iron and Blood Cross Order dreams of entering Fourth Epoch Trier...

But what's this got to do with me? As a Sequence 7, I don't even dare think about becoming a demigod. Advancing to a Sequence 6 Conspirer is beyond my consideration for now. All I can focus on is digesting the Pyromaniac potion. I've got nothing better to do than contemplate High-Sequences or deity-related items!

Besides, Madam Magician warned that such items always come with negative effects. Tsk, negative effects involving godhood can easily kill me...

...

Lumian, with vast knowledge of high-end mysticism, remained unfazed by Gardner Martin's provocation. Thoughts raced through his mind, and he sneered inwardly.

Looking at Gardner Martin, he asked innocently, "If Fourth Epoch Trier truly contains the remains of The Blood Emperor Tudor, why didn't the Eternal Blazing Sun and God of Steam and Machinery Church take it away instead of leaving it for our Iron and Blood Cross Order?"

"Even if only Hunters can enter safely, it's just a matter of time before they nurture a High-Sequence Hunter with the resources they have. The Fifth Epoch has been around for over 1,300 years."

Gardner Martin fell silent for two seconds before responding, "There are other factors restraining them, but they won't be a problem for us.

"I'll tell you all the details once we find the entrance to Fourth Epoch Trier."

Isn't that just saying, "I don't know why, but we have to give it a try?" Uh, maybe the Boss knows the reason, but he's afraid of scaring us if he reveals it. He can't directly tell the present members that there are many dangers hidden underground that even deities can't resolve—the kind that requires rebuilding a Trier above the Fourth Epoch ruins as a seal. That's why the two Churches won't attempt to enter. Heh heh, who would dare to go underground when they're not seriously corrupted? Lumian tried his best to control his gaze and posture, so as not to show any air of superiority.

Compared to the members of the Iron and Blood Cross Order here, him having a rough understanding of the underground situation and having seen the Invisible Sea of Fire, the Tree of Shadow, and the bizarre catacombs indeed made him qualified to be superior.

Of course, he had no idea how well Commanding Officer Gardner Martin and Supervisor Olson knew about the underground situation.

Perhaps the latter, suspected to have entered Fourth Epoch Trier, knew more secrets.

Gardner Martin didn't continue discussing the Blood Emperor and the Fourth Epoch. Instead, he turned to Lumian and asked, "Is there anything you need these days?"

Oh, are you about to hand out the membership perks? Lumian's spirits lifted as he replied with sincerity, "I'm in need of a mystical item with peculiar properties to compensate for my deficiencies in Beyonder powers.

"And if there are no relevant mystical items available, perhaps you could provide me with the corresponding Beyonder... ingredients. I'll try to find an Artisan to craft them."

He had almost mentioned the term "Beyonder characteristics" but quickly changed it to "Beyonder ingredients" after a pause, feigning embarrassment.

Though people often spoke of Beyonder characteristics at Trier's mysticism gathering, they usually referred to the fusion of two main potion ingredients.

Of course, some people had long discovered that Beyonders were also Beyonder creatures, capable of producing ingredients for potion concoction, hinting at the Law of Beyonder Characteristics Indestructibility.

Typically, Lumian's mention of Beyonder characteristics wouldn't attract suspicion or attention, but he needed to be cautious not to arouse suspicion from a Conspirer like Gardner Martin.

"Heh, you really dare to ask?" Albus mocked Lumian, shaking his feet with crossed legs.

Even Parsifal, Vincent Lorraine, and the others wore strange expressions.

None of them had dared to make such a bold request when they joined the Iron and Blood Cross Order.

Undeterred, Lumian sneered back at Albus, "Why not? I'm not like some piece of trash who can't handle a reward. What the organization gives me today, I'll repay tenfold in the future!"

With a whoosh, Albus lowered his right leg and glared at Lumian with fiery intensity, clearly displeased with his response.

The others, except for Faustino who maintained his butler demeanor, also showed discontent. Lumian's snide remark had included them as well.

“Enough,” Gardner Martin intervened, smiling at Lumian. “As the Commanding Officer, I must be fair. I can't grant you a mystical item right now, as others will protest. But don't worry; our Iron and Blood Cross Order is not stingy. Once you complete a few missions and accumulate enough merit, I'll provide you with a few mystical items to choose from.

“Meanwhile, before each mission, suitable mystical items will be temporarily provided to the participating members, ensuring their safety and mission completion.”

Lumian nodded, accepting the response. He hadn't expected much, but he still made the request in case Gardner Martin was in a generous mood.

After a brief consideration, Gardner Martin added, “I'll inform René that the advance you received was my reward to you. You'll still get your share from Salle de Bal Brise in the future.”

“Thank you, CO Sir,” Lumian expressed his joy openly.

This meant his membership door gift was 12,000 verl d'or, a significant sum.

Hence, most of the money he spent on advancing to Pyromaniac came from the Aurora Order and the Iron and Blood Cross Order's “financing.” His gratitude was genuine, as he had only contributed less than a third of the expenses himself.

Gardner Martin cut into a medium steak, chewing and swallowing before asking, “Any other questions?”

Deliberately, Lumian inquired, “How can I quickly master the Pyromaniac potion?”

He wanted to see if the acting method was common knowledge within the Iron and Blood Cross Order.

Gardner Martin chuckled and replied, “That's an excellent question.

“To master a potion, you need to start with its name. Get close to it, understand it, and embody it. In addition, I have to tell you a maxim: flames can both incinerate others and harm yourself.”

Lumian listened attentively and got a rough idea of the situation.

The Iron and Blood Cross Order kept the precise interpretation of the acting method hidden from ordinary members, using vague descriptions, regulations, warnings, and maxims to guide them without revealing everything.

This approach allowed ordinary members to avoid certain risks while gradually gaining insights by sticking close to the potion's name. They could speed up their progress but couldn't fully grasp a more suitable acting principle for themselves,

In other words, it was easier for them to “master” the potion than wild Beyonders and advance in shorter periods. However, other than the talented, those who stuck close to the acting requirements couldn't compare to Beyonders who knew the acting method.

Lumian suspected that he would only learn the entire acting method once he became an NCO and received greater attention from the Iron and Blood Cross Order.

He believed that such a secretive organization spanning centuries must possess the acting method.

In contrast, Madam Magician of the Tarot Club had already given him extensive high-end mysticism knowledge, including the acting method.

As for Mr. K, Lumian was unsure if he had forgotten to teach the method due to devotion to his prayers and work or if he believed Lumian would naturally encounter it at the Iron and Blood Cross Order and exposing him to this knowledge too early would put him at risk of exposure.

“Pyromaniac is all about setting fires! Just go to the National Convention building and set it ablaze. You'll master the potion in no time,” Albus taunted Lumian, pushing the matter.

Lumian scoffed and replied, “I'm a Pyromaniac, not an Arsonist. Meaningless acts of arson will only harm myself.”

Albus sneered, “How do you know it's meaningless? Burning is the meaning.”

Lumian clicked his tongue.

“Then why don't I burn your hair too?”

After engaging each other for a while in an argumentative manner, Gardner Martin intervened in the conversation, which was becoming increasingly meaningless and close to a personal attack.

Lumian shifted the conversation to probe the Iron and Blood Cross Order's knowledge of the underground.

“I went to the catacombs some time ago and sensed something amiss, but I couldn't figure out what it was. CO Sir, do you know anything about it?”

Gardner Martin glanced at Supervisor Olson beside him and finally replied, “That has nothing to do with our actions. You don't need to know.

“All I can say is that the danger lurking there is as serious as that in the Fourth Epoch Trier.”

Lumian nodded thoughtfully and continued asking questions while enjoying the delicacies. During the process, he noticed that Vincent Lorraine remained relatively quiet, and Parsifal and “Blood Palm” Black were amiable but guarded with their words, revealing little valuable information. Faustino seemed to play the role of a butler instead of the secret organization's official member.

Only the dark-red-haired Albus, despite his malicious and mocking comments, gave Lumian some useful insights.

By 10 p.m., the initiation concluded, and Lumian was the last to leave 11 Rue des Fontaines, boarding the carriage belonging to Salle de Bal Brise.

As the carriage moved, Lumian's heart skipped a beat as he looked up at the seat opposite him. At some point in time, another person had joined him—Supervisor Olson, who looked like a hungry bear.

The trader who played the underground monster!

#### Chapter 286 Magic Mirror Divination

Ignoring Lumian's tense state, Olson spoke in a deep, raspy voice, “As per tradition, I must speak to you in private as Supervisor.”

Lumian let out a relieved breath. “About what?”

Olson placed the brown suitcase beside his left leg.

...

“If you discover anything suspicious about your Commanding Officer, Gardner Martin, or any abnormal occurrences, report them to me immediately.”

That's only right. A spot will be vacated only if something happens to the Boss... Lumian thought silently with a hint of mockery before asking, “How do I contact you?”

Olson looked into Lumian's eyes and said, “Leave the information in the basement of 13 Avenue du Marché.”

13 Avenue du Marché... The Iron and Blood Cross Order is indeed linked to the burned-down building... Olson might have entered Fourth Epoch Trier and is likely seriously corrupted. Does he have a way to exploit the anomaly at 13 Avenue du Marché? Lumian recalled the previous night and felt that Supervisor Olson was even more mysterious than Commanding Officer Gardner Martin.

He suspected that Olson was secretly monitoring his movements at 13 Avenue du Marché. Gardner Martin was clearly unwilling to enter unless necessary.

Combined with the burning of 13 Avenue du Marché over a decade ago, Mr. K had mentioned that the Iron and Blood Cross Order had drifted from the other organizations that believed in that entity in recent years. Madam Magician had mentioned that the current vigil ritual wasn't the Iron and Blood Cross Order's usual test. Lumian vaguely formulated an incomplete sequence of events in his mind.

He believed that 13 Avenue du Marché hadn't been burned down by the Iron and Blood Cross Order. However, they had subsequently discovered the secret there and suffered the corresponding corruption, evoking an abnormality.

Of course, it could be the other way around: perhaps some members of the Iron and Blood Cross Order had been corrupted elsewhere, allowing them to grasp the anomaly at 13 Avenue du Marché.

“Alright.” Lumian nodded in agreement.

As Lumian's mind raced with questions, he turned to Supervisor Olson, a look of puzzlement on his face.

“Was the trader I saw in the Albert Mines really you? Can your head leave your body and survive autonomously? Or was that an illusion you created?”

Olson let out a husky chuckle before responding, “Coincidentally, as Supervisor, I have three things to tell you. Firstly, what the eyes see may not be true. Secondly, we will eventually enter the Fourth Epoch's Trier. It is an inevitability. And thirdly, don't readily trust in the words of others.”

Don't readily trust in the words of others... Interesting. Should I believe your first point? What I saw in the Albert Mines was actually real? Heh heh, it's fine to talk about inevitability in front of me, but will Termiboros tolerate it? Lumian pondered, resisting the urge to place his right hand on his left chest.

Seeing Olson pick up the small brown suitcase again, Lumian couldn't help but ask,

“What's in there? Why do you keep carrying it?”

Olson smiled.

“If I were you, I'd pray I never find out the answer.”

With that, Supervisor Olson opened the carriage door and leaped into the darkness, disappearing instantly, without intentionally concealing himself as he had done when he first arrived.

“Acting all mysterious...” Lumian muttered under his breath.

Taking the carriage back to the bustling market district, he resisted the urge to hurry to Auberge du Coq Doré or the safe house on Rue des Blouses Blanches to contact Madam Magician's messenger and report his official admission into the Iron and Blood Cross Order. Instead, he made his way to Salle de Bal Brise.

His concern grew as he suspected that the treacherous members of the Iron and Blood Cross Order might be taking advantage of his relaxed state to continue their final, clandestine surveillance.

Although they couldn't locate Madam Magician's messenger, Lumian knew better than to return to Room 207 or the safe house at this time; it would surely raise suspicions.

Taking a seat at the bar counter, Lumian ordered a glass of Kirsch. As he savored the drink, he immersed himself in the lively song and dance happening on the stage.

Jenna had the night off, and the performers tonight were two other Showy Divas and a male underground singer known for his high-energy songs.

Hill District, outside the Deep Valley Cloister.

Wearing a silver-white half-mask, Jenna regarded Franca, who had donned an assassin's outfit, with concern.

“What are we going to do tonight?”

“Don't tell me you're thinking of infiltrating the cloister for an investigation?”

“Of course not!” Franca denied vehemently. “The Deep Valley Cloister is one of the most well-known cloisters of the Church of the God of Steam and Machinery. They have powerful Beyonders and hide mysterious artifacts crafted by Artisan monks. With our abilities, we'd only be walking into a trap... or worse.”

Franca couldn't help her mind from wandering.

She had heard rumors that though the monks in the cloister were focused on steam and machinery and didn't marry or have children, it didn't mean they refrained from sex with others.

The Church of the God of Steam and Machinery didn't prohibit such interactions!

Some said that some monks would seek out street girls from time to time to relax, while others engaged in affairs with colleagues or men who sold their bodies.

There were still a large number of people who had mechanical fetishes or were truly undergoing ascetic training, capable of controlling themselves.

Of course, Trieriens tended to exaggerate and embellish these rumors with their own ideas. It likely strayed far from the truth. Franca didn't entirely believe it, but she couldn't dismiss it entirely either.

She believed that some monks might have such inclinations, but they were likely not the majority. Nonetheless, infiltrating a cloister as a wild Beyonder was dangerous. They could be accidentally killed by machinery, used as experimental subjects, or become playthings for a select few monks. The chances of success were slim.

In short, whether male or female, anyone below Sequence 4 or lacking enough confidence ought to forget about infiltrating the Deep Valley Cloister.

Behind her hood, Franca smiled and explained in a good mood, “We scoured the area today, but found no clues. But there's one place we haven't checked.”

Jenna thought for a moment and asked, “That Deep Valley Quarry?”

“That's right,” Franca affirmed with a grin. “Tonight, we'll infiltrate it and conduct a search.”

In truth, she didn't expect they would find anything since the official Beyonders had likely completed their investigations. Franca wanted to guide Jenna through the process and acquaint her with such matters.

“Okay.” Jenna nodded slightly.

Franca saw this as an opportunity to instruct her, “Before we officially infiltrate, there's some preparatory work we must do.”

“For Assassins, it's about familiarizing themselves with the environment, gathering information, and observing locations and routes. As for Witches, they must perform divinations beforehand.”

With that, Franca took out a palm-sized mirror she always carried.

Jenna immediately focused.

She had long been intrigued by mirror-related Witch abilities.

Previously, after she assassinated Hugues Artois and fled to Auberge du Coq Doré, Franca heard that she had left blood at the scene. Franca had swiftly used Mirror Substitution to sever the mystical connection between Jenna's true self and the spilled blood.

Franca surveyed the area and spoke in hushed tones under the cover of evening shadows.

“When you become a Witch, you'll naturally master Magic Mirror Divination and Staff Divination. Learning other divination methods is easy for Witches.

“The key to successful Magic Mirror Divination is choosing the right entity to pray to. The mystical symbol of the mirror connects you to an unknown being, and their answers can be obtained through this connection. However, if the unknown entity holds malice or is in a state of madness, they may influence the divination or provide a result that traps you, putting you in danger.

“When the time comes, I'll give you a few relatively safe entities to pray to. These have been verified. Among them, the one with the most accurate divination results will require you to pay a corresponding price. Unless the matter is extremely critical and urgent, I usually avoid praying to him.”

“What price?” Jenna's curiosity was piqued.

Franca cleared her throat awkwardly and said, “The price could lead to you experiencing social embarrassment or something not as severe, but it will certainly be uncomfortable.”

She recalled the first time she prayed to that entity for Magic Mirror Divination. In front of Madam Judgment, she was asked, “When you're masturbating, do you occasionally fantasize about certain men and feel tempted to try new experiences?”

That question almost made her shatter the intermediary mirror. At the time, she had recently become a Witch and still identified fully as a man, even though her body had already transformed into a woman's. It was natural that she would occasionally fantasize, but this revelation made her feel guilty and ashamed. Yet, she was forced to answer honestly in front of a demigod.

Even now, Franca couldn't help but cringe at the memory, wanting to bury her head in the sand and avoid any recollection.

What was social death? This was it!

Franca believed that this incident had affected her when she subsequently approached Gardner Martin to give it a shot. This caused a crack in her psychological defense and make her give up on herself.

Embarrassment... Social death... Jenna understood the implication behind Franca's words. Though Jenna had her thoughts, she chose not to voice them aloud.

Franca provided a brief explanation of Magic Mirror Divination, concluding with a demonstration. She gently caressed the surface of the mirror and recited the name of a safe entity.



As an aqueous light shimmered in the mirror, she posed a serious question, "Will exploring Trier's Deep Valley Quarry tonight be dangerous?"

Since it was a question-based divination, the requirements for the statements weren't too stringent.

Under Jenna's curious and hopeful gaze, a deep, old voice emanated from the mirror, as if it had emerged from the depths of a river. "There is a certain level of danger."

#### Chapter 287 Key

Franca finished the Magic Mirror Divination and then turned to Jenna, giving her interpretation of the answer.

"Normally, this means it's dangerous, but we can handle it. If we're careful, we should be fine."

Jenna asked in surprise, "I thought the divination results would be straightforward."

...

Surprisingly, such a brief sentence came with such a long explanation.

"It's straightforward!" Franca emphasized with a smile. "If you visit the Divination Club in Quartier de la Cathédrale Commémorative and find amateurs, their readings will be even vaguer. It makes it easier for them to interpret any result. Oh, have you never had anyone do divination for you before?"

Jenna nodded frankly.

Performing a divination cost a fortune!

Franca looked thoughtful, her eyes darting around.

"You can subscribe to Psychic, Lotus, Arcane, and Hidden Veil. While they have their problems and errors in specific applications, they offer valuable basic knowledge about mysticism.

"Ah, right. Ciel often buys those magazines. You can... Uh, I'll help you borrow them!"

"Alright." Jenna had only heard of mysticism magazines but had never bought one.

Having obtained satisfactory divination results, the duo, who had observed the route and surroundings during the day, swiftly arrived at the entrance of Deep Valley Quarry under the cover of the night.

The gatekeeper, who seemed to be in his forties, was sleeping in a small hut made of rocks. Wrapped in a dirty, old, and thin felt cloth, he leaned against the mountain wall.

Suddenly, a slender, smooth palm reached out from the shadow beside him, covering his mouth with a white handkerchief.

The gatekeeper didn't struggle. Within seconds, he went from slumbering to unconsciousness.

Franca, wearing a black hood, emerged from the shadows and clicked her tongue, sighing.

“The Bliss Society's sedative is really effective. It saves me a lot of trouble.”

For this operation, she had borrowed Rentas's sedative from Lumian.

Jenna couldn't understand. “Couldn't we just knock him out?”

“That would work,” Franca explained casually, “but that would leave traces. It won't be easy to make it seem like he's still asleep. Many bounty hunters and private detectives are involved in this mission. We shouldn't be the only ones targeting this quarry. So, it's better to be cautious and avoid leaving any loose ends.”

Jenna, who had lived in Quartier du Jardin Botanique and the market district for many years, roughly understood Franca's point. She pondered for a moment and asked, “Are you worried that the bounty hunters and private detectives will have ill intentions if they find us entering the quarry ahead of them in the dead of night?”

Franca nodded, satisfied with her response.

“That's right. Many bounty hunters and private detectives switch to becoming bandits, robbers, and even murderers, depending on the situation and their surroundings.

“They take risks for money, not for justice. Since there are no leads for this mission and the current environment is suitable, it's in line with their style to steal from their peers and eliminate competition. After all, there's no one else here.

“Of course, with our strength, we don't have to fear bounty hunters and private detectives. But what if we make a similar mistake in another situation or face something more dangerous? That's why we have to be mindful from the beginning.” What Franca didn't say was that, being women, they might likely suffer more.

Jenna nodded slowly, agreeing with the reasoning.

She had seen criminals kill an old man living alone for just 5 verl d'or.

Franca smiled and teased, “Did you want me to knock him out to get back at him for asking if you wanted to join the street girl business this morning?”

“Dammit! Am I such a petty person?” Jenna couldn't help but curse.

Whether it was during her years helping her mother with chores or when she was a local singer in the market district, she had been asked if she wanted to be involved in the street girl business so many times that she was used to it. She was a little angry, but not too much.

To show her magnanimity, Jenna exhaled and said, “When you use that sedative on others, it reminds me of what happened to me.”

She had also been drugged and nearly became a victim that disappeared. Fortunately, she had encountered Lumian.

Franca simply acknowledged her words.

“I understand your feelings, but since you've embarked on the path of the divine and intend to become stronger, you'll have to use various means to deal with your enemies in the future. You can't give up on a better option just because you feel a little repulsed.”

Jenna knew Franca had a point, but she couldn't help asking, “Can't a Beyonder lead a quiet, ordinary life without being drawn into conflicts and battles while protecting loved ones?”

“In the past, maybe it was feasible, but nowadays it's exceedingly challenging. The more you advance, the harder it gets until it's virtually impossible,” Franca replied with a sigh.

Jenna fell silent for a moment before saying, “Could it ever be possible in the distant future, I wonder?”

Franca glanced at the “slumbering” gatekeeper and answered, “That prominent figure once told me that such a life might be attainable at the end of the Fifth Epoch and the beginning of the Sixth Epoch, if there's even a Sixth Epoch at all.”

Sixth Epoch... Those words made Jenna reflect for a few seconds before she burst into laughter at herself.

“I guess it's just wishful thinking on my part. Achieving that kind of life is simply an illusion. At least, it is for me. With superpowers and a history of attempted assassination, I know I'd be unable to stand idly by if my family and friends faced hardship. I'd feel compelled to use my abilities to tackle problems that go beyond what the law and police can handle.”

Franca nodded in agreement. “That's just the way it is.”

She hadn't simply digested the Assassin and Instigator potions hoping her attire alone would do the trick, nor had she only encouraged her friends by instigating them.

Without much ado, Franca bent down and picked up the brass key from the gatekeeper.

“There's just one door. Why are there so many keys? Are they all for his house?”

Franca muttered as she exited the hut and walked toward the entrance of Deep Valley Quarry. She tried each key, one after the other.

In the end, she muttered to herself in shock and suspicion, “None of it is right...”

“None of them are right?” Jenna hadn't expected such a possibility.

If not a single key could unlock the entrance to Deep Valley Quarry, what was the point of watching the door?

Franca said, partly instructing and partly thinking aloud, “Perhaps this set of keys is a decoy. The real key must be hidden somewhere else.”

She then said to Jenna, “Search the area. I'll take a look at the gatekeeper.”

Jenna didn't object. With her Night Vision, she began searching the nearby bushes and crevices starting from the hut.

Franca squatted beside the gatekeeper and meticulously searched his body from head to toe.

When she reached his crotch, she bent her finger and flicked it firmly. She sneered and whispered, "Jenna may not be petty, but I am!"

After their search, the two of them met at the heavy wooden door, shaking their heads to signal they had found nothing.

Franca clicked her tongue and said, "There's definitely something wrong with this quarry.

"That guy is truly a gatekeeper. He's only meant to watch the door but lacks the ability to open it!"

"Are we still going in?" Jenna asked hesitantly.

"I'll give it another shot." Franca extended her right hand to the copper lock embedded in the heavy wooden door.

Thick frost emerged from her palm, filling the keyhole.

The frost continued to accumulate and compress until it finally solidified into ice.

Franca skillfully extracted the ice block, revealing a transparent key.

That works? Jenna was surprised and eager to see what happened next.

Sensing her gaze, Franca said smugly, "I have a friend, you see—I really have a friend—one who's quite skilled at picking locks. We had a conversation about using a Witch's power for such purposes."

Once she made the ice more solid, Franca inserted it into the keyhole again and twisted it gently.

With a click, the heavy wooden door swung open.

Franca retracted the ice key and allowed it to melt, erasing all traces.

Before venturing into Deep Valley Quarry, the Witch hung the brass key back on the gatekeeper's waist and adjusted his posture to make him appear asleep.

With that done, Franca fetched a pouch of coins and took out a thick iron-colored ring adorned with tiny spikes.

"This is the Ring of Punishment I mentioned before. You'll wear it today. I've already explained how to use it and its taboos. One thing to remember: you can't use it more than three times within an hour. Also, take it off immediately after the operation and put it back in this coin bag."

"Alright." Jenna extended her left hand and allowed Franca to put the iron-colored ring on her middle finger, keeping their skin in contact.

Franca couldn't contain her inexplicable joy as she adjusted her hood, confidently pushed open the creaky wooden door, and stepped into Deep Valley Quarry.

Once Jenna joined her inside, she made sure to close and lock the wooden door behind them.

This made it nearly impossible for anyone outside to detect their presence within the quarry.

As skilled Assassins with night vision, Franca and Jenna didn't rely on carbide lamps, yet they could easily see everything within the tunnel.

The passageway was in a state of disrepair, covered in moss, and with cracks running along the stone walls, giving an ominous feeling that any moment, a piece might collapse.

A short distance ahead, they noticed an empty hole, no different from the other underground ones they had seen before.

For almost half an hour, Jenna and Franca diligently searched the small area, looking for any signs of suspicious activity, but their efforts yielded no results.

“Something's definitely not right,” Franca whispered, her voice barely audible, as they returned to the spot near the tunnel entrance.

The complete absence of anything unusual happening made them even more suspicious about the gatekeeper not having the key to unlock the door.

Jenna pondered for a moment and then suggested, “Maybe he's afraid that someone might storm in and cause the mine to collapse, so he decided to keep the key away. A gatekeeper's job is only to intercept, not to open the door.”

Before Franca could say something, they heard a distinct click.

It was the sound of the Deep Valley Quarry's door opening!

Franca and Jenna exchanged glances and quickly found cover not far from the exit of the tunnel.

The quarry door creaked open, and the soft bluish glow of a carbide lamp spilled out, pushing back the darkness in the tunnel.

Franca and Jenna peeked out and caught sight of a man in a gray robe.

The man had a white apron wrapped around his waist, a typical garment worn by ancient stonemasons. The hood of his robe rested at the back of his neck, not covering his head.

Such attire was commonly associated with ascetics or monks of the God of Steam and Machinery Church.

Holding a lit carbide lamp, the monk had dark, short hair. His left eye was a mesmerizing combination of iron-gray gears, screws, and springs, all supporting an emerald-green crystalline false eye.

## Chapter 288 Self-Recommendation

In the city of Trier, prosthetic eyes were not a common sight, but there were still a fair number of people who wore them. But Jenna and Franca had never seen anyone take mechanizing a quarter of their faces for a prosthetic eye to this extent.

However, when they recalled that the monk was suspected to be from the Church of the God of Steam and Machinery, it made sense. Fanatical devotion to machinery was their hallmark!

Carrying a carbide lamp and wearing a white apron like a stonemason, the monk entered the tunnel step by step. His emerald-green prosthetic eye, surrounded by gears and springs, seemed to possess a life of its own as it rotated left and right, scanning the surroundings.

Franca tugged at Jenna, signaling for her not to look towards the tunnel. She was to quickly avert her gaze to avoid detection.

The two of them slunk deeper into the shadows, hiding beyond the reach of the carbide lamp's light.

The gray-robed, hooded monk from the Church of the God of Steam and Machinery advanced slowly, surveying his surroundings as he approached the bottom of Deep Valley Quarry, the area that had collapsed and been buried.

Thanks to their Assassin abilities and the cover of darkness, Jenna and Franca remained undetected. They waited until the monk was far away before quietly peeking out from their hiding spot, eyes fixed on his back.

The monk stopped beside the collapsed area, extending his right palm which glinted with an iron-like metallic sheen, grasping a protrusion on the wall.

A grinding sound echoed as if multiple massive gears were slowly rotating and meshing.

The stone wall cracked open as metal chains extended out from behind each rock. The rocks bloomed like flowers, revealing a dark cave behind.

With the help of the monk's carbide lamp and their eagle-eyed Assassin vision, Franca and Jenna could see a thin white fog inside the cave and arms and legs embedded in the rock walls—human arms and legs!

Some were still fresh while others had shriveled, but there were no signs of decay.

Jenna and Franca exchanged shocked and fearful looks.

As the monk entered the cave and triggered a mechanism, the metal chains relaxed, allowing the rocks to return to their original positions, leaving only faint cracks as signs of the hidden entrance.

So that's how it is... I assumed the cracks were from a collapse, so I didn't inspect them... Franca realized why they hadn't noticed anything amiss before.

She tugged Jenna's arm and whispered, "Let's get out of here first and come back another time."

Having discovered the secret and knowing how to open it, there was no need to confront the monk from the God of Steam and Machinery Church directly. They could return later!

Jenna nodded slightly, twirled the Ring of Punishment on her finger, and crouched down. She followed Franca away from their hiding spot and back through the tunnel to the entrance of Deep Valley Quarry.

Seeing Jenna about to open the door, Franca quickly stopped her and whispered, "No hurry."

"Why?" Jenna asked, puzzled.

Franca straightened instinctively and smiled.

“Just because one monk went in doesn't mean he's alone. Perhaps there are two companions outside, guarding against intruders. If we stroll out casually, we might expose ourselves and get attacked! Besides, the gatekeeper could be awake already.”

Jenna looked a little abashed. “You're right.”

Franca consoled her immediately, “It's just experience. Now you know better for the future.”

She took out a palm-sized mirror and handed it to Jenna. “Help me carry this. I'll scout ahead. If I get ambushed, take the chance to hide in the shadows by the door and sneak out with the mirror.”

Realizing Franca intended to use Mirror Substitution, Jenna agreed without hesitation.

Franca carefully opened the heavy wooden door a crack and peeked out.

The only sounds were chirping insects and frogs. All was still otherwise.

The door opened wider and Franca slipped out into the darkness beyond the crimson moonlight's reach.

Jenna gripped the mirror tightly, tense and ready.

After more than ten seconds, Franca returned and whispered, “It's clear, let's go.”

Jenna exhaled in relief and darted out, closing the door silently behind them.

As they left the quarry, they glanced at the rock-walled “hut” and saw the gatekeeper still asleep, but in a different posture.

From a distance, Franca noticed a red and swollen mark under his ear. “He was knocked out, not drugged...” she murmured with a frown.

Jenna recalled the cybernetic-eyed monk and pointed at the quarry door. “The one inside did it?”

Franca nodded gently. “Very likely. He doesn't want the gatekeeper to know he's here. Poor man, he probably fainted again before the sedative wore off.”

Jenna smiled. “Or someone else knocked him out before we got here. Someone might have used some other method to knock him out.”

“...” Franca paused, then sighed sympathetically. “If so, I feel bad for him.”

Oblivious to each other, every group had dealt with the gatekeeper their own way. As a result, the poor man remained unconscious repeatedly.

Wasting no time, Jenna and Franca slipped away under the cover of the night.

Avenue du Marché, Salle de Bal Brise.

Lumian returned to the café upstairs, ordered a glass of red wine, and sipped it slowly.

After a while, Louis came up and whispered, “Boss, some bounty hunters are causing trouble at Salle de Gristmill, demanding a cut of the profits.”

With the Poison Spur Mob's upper ranks destroyed, some remnants had been arrested, some had fled, some joined other mobs, and some found legitimate work. Their former businesses had been taken over at low prices by various factions.

The Savoie Mob got the largest share but now lacked manpower. Some industries operated fairly independently. Occasionally, opportunists tried to take advantage of the “power vacuum.”

Lumian cracked his knuckles and grinned. “Send word asking if they want to be my enemies or my dogs.”

He realized that after becoming a Pyromaniac, he had grown more aggressive. Itching for a fight after so long, his hands twitched in anticipation.

Furthermore, for someone to dare challenge a dance hall nominally belonging to the Savoie Mob, there might be one or two Beyonders among the bounty hunters. Lumian's Shadow Branch lacked a corresponding Beyonders characteristic.

“Yes, Boss!” Louis replied eagerly before hurrying downstairs to send the “invitation.”

Lumian had planned to return to Auberge du Coq Doré to write Madam Magician but now waited patiently.

In less than half an hour, Louis returned with a man.

He appeared to be in his mid-thirties, wearing a cheap suit and black top hat. With brown hair, brown eyes, refined features, and a burly build, he could have been a protagonist at the Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons

Seeing Lumian, the man smiled, doffed his hat, and greeted, “Good evening, Boss.”

“Who are you?” Lumian asked with an amiable smile.

The man replied solemnly, “Boss, didn't you ask me to be your dog?”

“...” Momentarily stunned, even the quick-witted Lumian needed a few seconds to respond.

He had said it purely to provoke them and see if they would retaliate.

After recovering, Lumian chuckled. “I told you to be a dog, and you'll really do it?”

“This is my big chance!” The man didn't seem ashamed at all, rather honored. “I believe following you will let me achieve my true worth. In time, I could even become your godson!”

How old are you? You're more fawning than “Giant” Simon... Interested, Lumian asked, “Why do you think I'll give you a chance?”

The man didn't answer immediately but glanced meaningfully at Louis and Sarkota, hinting for them to leave.

Unworried about assassination attempts, Lumian had them exit before smiling at the man. “Go on.”

The man cleared his throat. “My name is Lugano Toscano, a Beyonders.”

“Which pathway? What Sequence?” Lumian's eyebrows rose.

Lugano forced a smile. “I'm a Planter, Sequence 9.”

Earth Mother Church's pathway? Lumian nodded thoughtfully. “From Feynapotter?”



“No, Riston Province,” Lugano replied, smiling. “A few years ago, some friends and I became bounty hunters. I got to know a Feynapotter Beyonder and later acquired his belongings when he passed away.”

A fellow countryman... Did you kill him or just conveniently profit from his death? Lumian gestured for him to continue.

Lugano chuckled. “I can now advance to Sequence 8 Doctor but lack funds for the potion ingredients. I've heard of your exploits, Boss, and believe you to be a powerful Beyonder. I also know the Savoie Mob lacks manpower, so I caused some trouble to meet you. I hope to work for you, help manage your estates, and earn money through hard work. Doctors are useful for ordinary people and Beyonders alike.”

## Chapter 289 Late Night Visitors

“Doctor?” Lumian recalled the two canisters of Healing Agent obtained from the Poison Spur Mob.

Their healing effects were quite impressive indeed.

Leaning back in his chair, Lumian gazed intently into Lugano Toscano's eyes, pondering silently for some time.

Gradually Lugano grew uneasy, his body tensing up.

Finally Lumian smiled.

“Salle de Gristmill isn't my property. I'm just managing it for the Boss.

“I'm not sure you can handle it, but I'll give you a chance.”

Lugano visibly relaxed and smiled. “Boss, I won't let you down!”

Lumian raised his voice to call Louis over.

“From now on, you'll be Lugano's deputy at the Gristmill. Manage it together.”

Is this for real? But why give an untested new recruit such an important post? Before Louis could react, Lumian had already turned to Lugano.

“You have two months. You and your friends will be the dance hall's protectors for now. Take a portion of the profits; negotiate the details with the manager.”

He deliberately left the profit distribution vague, especially his own cut. He wanted to see what Lugano would do.

“Thank you, Boss!” Lugano's joy was unconcealed.

He nearly blurted out, “Once I'm a Doctor, I'll treat any illness or injury you have.” But that felt like cursing misfortune upon Lumian, so he quickly sealed his lips.

Watching them leave while discussing the dance hall, Lumian's smile faded.

Lugano's fawning and zeal made him suspect ulterior motives, like him with Baron Brignais and the fake diamond necklace.

But Lumian had cowed the Baron by showing his might and madness. The key was proving the value of exploiting him. Lugano was more focused on ingratiation. Of course, he had revealed his usefulness too.

That's why Lumian decided to give him Salle de Gristmill for two months—to monitor any abnormalities and act quickly if the bounty hunter had hidden motives. Or gain a Doctor cheaply if he was clean.

Either way, it wouldn't cost Lumian anything. Salle de Gristmill belonged to the Savoie Mob; he would just lose some of his own share. That could be offset by Lugano stabilizing the unruly dance hall.

After sitting awhile, Lumian left for Room 207 at Auberge du Coq Doré. Drawing the curtains, he sat at the table and began writing.

“Esteemed Madam Magician,

“I've officially joined the Iron Blood Cross Order.

“The initiation ritual was...

“I'm puzzled. The Order has members clearly not from the Hunter pathway. How did they pass the vigil? Assassins? Or did Gardner confirm their trustworthiness some other way, bypassing corruption?”

He almost asked about entering 13 Avenue du Marché at special times, but that was surely monitored by official Beyonders. It was unlikely anyone could approach then.

After neatly folding the letter, Lumian summoned the doll messenger on the altar.

Wary, he asked, “Am I still being watched?”

“No,” the doll slowly shook her head.

Relieved, Lumian scheduled reporting to Mr. K and heading to The Fool's cathedral for a sermon.

After nearly fifteen minutes, Madam Magician replied:

“I once heard from Mr. Fool's Oracle that a friend of his was originally in the Iron and Blood Cross Order but couldn't stand it and fled to sea.

“I didn't understand at first, but now I see—it's been hard on you.”

It wasn't so bad. Watching them perform was rather interesting, a study in human diversity... Lumian didn't see an issue with it.

Something else concerned him more.

When mentioning the Oracle, Madam Magician didn't say “one of.”

Lumian suspected Mr. Fool had only a single Oracle!

Meaning the Major Arcana card holders of the Divine Council weren't considered Oracles.

Pondering this, Lumian read on:

“They might be Assassins or used another corruption method.

“Remind the Two of Cups—if accepting the vigil, bring the ancient underground mirror. Other than keeping in mind not to respond, it's best to bring the ancient mirror that provides entry into the underground mirror world. Hunter/Demoness corruption likely differs. It may help.”

That mirror... Mulling it over, Lumian swiftly burned the letter in crimson flames.

Just as he was about to wash up, he sensed something and glanced at the door.

A series of knocks promptly came.

“Who is it?” he called.

A strained voice answered, “Guess who I am.”

Seated, Lumian looked helplessly at the bedbug-free ceiling. “Come in.”

As expected, it was Franca and Jenna, dressed as Assassins.

“Here to play Fighting Evil?” he joked.

Franca scoffed, “I don't play cards with sore losers like you.”

Having tricked many into drinking excessively over card games recently, Lumian had been winning at Fighting Evil with the ladies and mocking their poor skills. Suspecting cheating, Franca had intensely coached her dancers the past few days.

Entering, Franca added, “We're here to borrow mysticism magazines.”

Lumian sneered. “Nice try. Why come so late just for that? Is waiting till morning not an option? Jenna doesn't seem the studying type.”

He smiled. “What's really going on?”

The two gritted their teeth in sync.

After Franca shut the door, Jenna glanced around and whispered, “Are the walls too thin here? Could neighbors overhear us?”

Lumian smiled approvingly. “You're learning—thinking about eavesdroppers now. Not like before, blabbing recklessly without a care.”

Before... Franca's suspicious gaze shifted from Jenna to Lumian, then from Lumian to Jenna.

“Dammit! “We didn't discuss anything important!” Jenna defended. “Why not mention Charlie? He spills secrets immediately.”

Charlie? Franca's frown faded.

“It was fine—others were asleep or gone. That's why I didn't stop him.” Lumian stood, ritual dagger in hand. Letting spirituality flow from the blade, he enveloped the room in a wall of spirituality.

The singing and rowdiness on the streets and the inn's noises instantly grew distant and muted.

Jenna was amazed. Franca pursed her lips and said to Jenna, “A basic wall of spirituality ritual. Once you become a Witch, you'll naturally master it.”

At this point, she couldn't help but imagine what Witch Jenna would look like.

The two ladies sat side by side by Lumian's bed and discussed the missing Deep Valley Cloister gatekeeper, focused on their quarry findings tonight.

“What's down there? What should we do?” Franca returned Lumian's sedative.

Lumian smiled at his companion who wasn't wearing red boots. “Don't you have an answer already?”

With Franca's experience, she surely had a plan by now.

Franca smiled awkwardly. “Just wanted your thoughts.”

“My thoughts?” Lumian joked, “Sneak in while the monk's away for that 20,000 verli d'or!”

Jenna looked around warily. “Meaning it's too dangerous to investigate further?”

Having heard Lumian's mockery countless times now, she could distinguish sarcasm, well-meaning teasing, and jokes.

“Right,” said Franca. “Recalling the client, there seems to be an internal Deep Valley Cloister conflict—someone hiding, someone exposing. Meddling in an orthodox Church's internal conflict is dangerous for any Beyonder.”

“Internal conflict?” Jenna was startled.

Lumian chuckled. “A missing gatekeeper, and some random person offers 20,000 to find him, even just the corpse? And said corpse needs to be carried to the Deep Valley Cloister. Clearly wants someone to see it.”

Jenna was almost convinced, but she still had a lot of doubts. “B-but the limbs in the cave seem too sinister for an orthodox Church.”

## Chapter 290 Lavigny Docks

“Er...” Franca deliberated briefly before telling Jenna, “When it comes to losing control and madness, orthodox or wild Beyonder—all are equal. Those monks can become monsters too, or have mental problems and walk the abyss.”

Jenna grew grave as she listened.

It wasn't the first time Franca had said something similar, but without personal experience, the full cruelty and horror of those words never quite sunk in. Seeing the limbs in the dark cave had driven home the visceral reality of losing control and madness.

...

Lumian added meaningfully, "That's why the acting method is so important."

"But never forget you're only acting. You should know very well being a theater actress—you mustn't lose yourself in a role. Even without being a Beyonder, that path leads to mental issues." Franca and Lumian educated the newcomer one after another.

Jenna nodded solemnly.

Franca returned to the missing gatekeeper. "My plan is this—reveal the cave anonymously to the Eternal Blazing Sun Church via my sources. How they handle it is their affair. Even if they suppress it, they'll be vigilant against trouble now. I'll also inform the client and see his reaction. We might get paid for our work."

She chose the Eternal Blazing Sun Church over the God of Steam and Machinery Church Bypassers, unsure which side was trustworthy in this internal conflict.

"No objections here," Jenna conceded after hearing their advice, shelving her longing for the 20,000 verl d'or reward.

Franca turned to Lumian. "I've found a buyer for Harvest Sacrifice, but the deal isn't finalized yet. Offer is 10,000 verl d'or. I gave you 4,000 already, and can give you another 1,000 in two days."

"Very efficient." Lumian smiled approvingly.

"Can't tell if that's praise or mockery," Franca muttered.

Jenna listened enviously. 10,000 verl d'or was casual business for them, while her family struggled to pay 7,000-8,000 for the treatment of her mother.

This is what it means to be a Beyonder... Her understanding grew clearer.

Glancing at the curtains, Lumian didn't get Jenna to leave. "Last night, I completed the test and officially joined the Boss's inner circle."

"What kind of test?" Still aggrieved, Franca had already vented her anger once, leaving mostly curiosity.

Lumian described Gardner's late visit to Salle de Bal Brise, how he was requested to stay the night at 13 Avenue du Marché, and him overcoming the abnormal corruption until sunrise.

He concealed Termiboros, portraying himself as intelligent, decisive, perceptive and steadfast—grasping the crux with just a few details and adhering to the principle of no response despite the influences.

Lumian excelled at fabrication.

Franca still felt lingering fear and suspicion. "You really didn't waver at all?"

Jenna agreed—she would have responded the moment the door opened. Franca might have lasted until her face bled.

Lumian chuckled. “I definitely felt some uncertainty, but I trusted my judgment more.”

Franca sized him up doubtfully. “You really thought of not responding by yourself?”

“No.” Lumian ended the fiction honestly.

“...” The ladies were stunned.

Lumian seized the chance to divert attention, smiling. “Don't be daft. A recently graduated mysticism novice like me could never think of that. I got intelligence beforehand of course. If you do the vigil, remember—do not respond, and take the mirror that provides entry into the underground mirror world. 13 Avenue du Marché's abnormalities may differ by pathway.”

Enlightened, Franca grasped his source. She muttered, “No girlfriend for you with that attitude!”

She had almost been provoked just now, let alone a real woman. Relieved, Franca thought the rascal Ciel had no romantic prospects currently.

While still irked by the mockery, Jenna also regained confidence.

She had thought her intelligence irredeemably inferior to Ciel's.

Admirably, he had firmly trusted the intelligence and not wavered.

She pursed her lips and said, “I'm seeing more of the mysticism world's horrors.”

The 13 Avenue du Marché abnormality was even more terrifying than the Deep Valley Quarry's secret cave scene. By comparison, her underground ordeal with Hedsey seemed just a criminal case.

“There will be more such occurrences in the coming years.” Franca seized every chance to motivate Jenna's advancement.

Lumian then mentioned his guess that Avenue du Marché 13 only affected Beyonders of the Hunter and Demoness pathways at specific times.

Discussing a while longer, the ladies left with a stack of mysticism magazines, returning to Rue des Blouses Blanches.

At 3 p.m. the next day, Lumian, who had been playing the part at Salle de Bal Brise all day, arrived at Lavigny Docks in the square district by taking multiple public carriages, ready to hear The Fool bishop's sermon.

It was a lively inland river port, teeming with steam ships emitting white fog. Countless dockworkers used various tools and their strength to move crates of goods and stack them on flat surfaces along the tracks.

Massive machines towered over the docks, some standing more than ten to twenty meters tall, made entirely of steel components. Operated by massive steam engines and controlled by technicians, they effortlessly lifted steel crates that would be impossible for humans to move.

Lumian observed the chaotic and bustling scene, a mix of spectacular sights and grimy realities.

He strolled around the dock, acting like a carefree tourist rather than inquiring about The Fool cathedral's location from suspicious foreigners.

Buildings surrounded the harbor, housing bars, motels, warehouses, beer houses, cafés, restaurants, and dance halls. Street vendors loudly peddled their goods along the paths.

Lumian also noticed frosted glass windows with green shutters, indicating licensed brothels.

After taking a long detour, Lumian finally arrived at Mr. Fool's cathedral.

It looked like an ordinary four-story house with a bell tower and pointed roof, completely black. Engraved on the outer wall was the familiar mystical symbol: Mr. Fool's symbol, a silvery-white symbol composed of an incomplete Pupil-less Eye and a portion of Contorted Lines.

Before entering, Lumian took his time, continuing to explore the area as if he were casually shopping.

As a Hunter, it was second nature for him to assess his surroundings when he had the chance.

After walking for a while, Lumian chose a bar called Sea Breeze to gather information about The Fool cathedral from merchants, sailors, and locals.

The interior of Sea Breeze was decorated like a cabin, with taxidermied fish, rudders, and sail fragments adorning the walls. The air was thick with the scent of liquor and cheap cosmetics.

Some sailors sat together, engrossed in a card game, while others were seen in the company of street girls. At the bar counter, a few were enjoying drinks and boasting.

Lumian scanned the area and noticed a man who immediately caught his attention.

This man sat in an armchair near the bar, exuding an air of arrogance as he casually rested his hands on the chair's back. He occasionally sipped his wheat beer, propping his legs up on the small round table.

It wasn't just the man's demeanor that intrigued Lumian, but the way the other sailors behaved around him.

They either kept their distance, giving the area a wide berth, or approached with deferential expressions. Even if they were teased by the man, they seemed honored to be in his presence.

A significant figure from the sea, perhaps? Lumian speculated silently as he subtly studied the man.

The man appeared to be in his thirties, dressed in a linen shirt, a brown vest, dark brown pants, and sturdy black leather boots. His eyebrows and hair were charred yellow, like they had been kissed by flames. His bright, dark blue eyes and facial features hinted at a southern Intis heritage.

Feeling Lumian's gaze on him, the man smiled and lifted his wheat beer in a toast.

Returning the smile, Lumian made his way to the bar counter, ordering a glass of Lanti Proof, a favorite among pirates and sailors.

Taking a sip of the flavorful and potent malt liquor, Lumian couldn't contain his curiosity. He nodded towards the nearby armchair and asked the bartender in a hushed tone,

“Who is that?”

The bartender's expression turned serious as he responded in a deep voice, “You don't know him?”

To him, not recognizing that individual was rather surprising.