

Inevitability 311

Chapter 311 Strange Boy

Lenburg? Baron Brignais's illegitimate son or godchild resides in Lenburg? Lumian was puzzled, his mind racing with playful guesses.

Baron Brignais places a high value on education, entrusting his most beloved child to the kingdom of the God of Knowledge and Wisdom for learning...

Lumian studied the young lad before him and asked in a laid-back tone, "Aren't you supposed to be hitting the books in Lenburg at your age? The education there is leagues ahead of what Trier offers."

...

The boy's face lit up with an oddly animated expression. "Nah, I'm not up for the daily grind of school, burning the midnight oil over homework, and tackling exams every month!"

Sounds a little terrifying... A shiver trickled down Lumian's spine at the thought of such a life.

At the very least, it didn't sit right with him.

Agreeing with a nod, Lumian casually asked, "Are live rats tasty?"

The boy regained his composure. "It's not exactly gourmet, but I can't be choosy when hunger gnaws. Waiting till midday to raid the kitchen doesn't cut it. True bliss is savoring a meal whipped up by a maestro chef. And some mild hunger pangs do add a certain... flair."

After explaining, he must have felt he came across too mature and quickly recalibrated.

"Can't blame me if your kitchen's dragging its feet until noon!"

Well, that's hardly the point, now, is it? When I was wandering about without a proper place to stay, I sure as heck didn't have any notions of munching on live rats. The big issue, of course, was that I couldn't even catch the pesky things. And if by some miracle I did, then I had to somehow figure out how to set up a fire, skin them, and roast them. But this kid right here? He's out here grabbing rats, using nothing but his own bare hands. His strength or maybe just his good luck isn't half bad, I'll give him that. It's not even an hour away from noon, and he's acting like he's got an insatiable hunger? The more Lumian looked at him, the more he was convinced there was something peculiar about this little lad.

Amused, he inquired, "Brignais didn't bother to feed you, then? Need me to escort you to the police headquarters so you can lodge a complaint about his child abuse?"

"Well, aside from pestering me about my studies, he's alright. He makes sure I have a proper meal every two hours. On top of that, he whips up cakes, biscuits, roasted meat, and pies for those midnight hunger pangs." A subtle lick of the lips revealed the boy's longing.

Are you a pig? Lumian had never eaten so much while undergoing puberty.

And yet, the lad didn't appear overweight, only solidly built.

In the blink of an eye, the boy's gaze shifted as he spoke in rapid succession, "Perhaps studying demands a lot of energy. I need all this sustenance to keep my brain firing on all cylinders."

Is there no saying about how “trying to explain is just a cover-up” in Lenburg's education? Your elaborate justification makes me wonder if your appetite is problematic... All this eating hasn't exactly made you a genius, has it? Lumian grinned and quipped, “If Brignais wasn't intentionally starving you, why resort to raw rats and steak?”

In a frustrated tone, the boy retorted, “I managed to slip away without breakfast or morning tea today!”

And yet, you're so famished that you're downing raw rats? If you go hungry for another half day or so, will you start eying pedestrians on the street? With a fluid motion, Lumian produced an iron-gray military flask from his shirt pocket.

His left hand slid into his trouser pocket, deftly unscrewing the cap of the flask before tucking it away.

Lumian raised the iron-gray metal flask, breathing in the fragrance with a satisfied grin. He inquired, his voice light, “Fancy a sip?”

Gulp! The boy's Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed his saliva.

Struggling, he responded, “I'm not of age yet. I'm just a kid!”

He's tasted it before, and he's taken a liking to it... Lumian passed his judgment and swallowed a mouthful of the spirit.

Maintaining the military flask at his lips, he spoke in a casual tone, a question hanging in the air, “Which deity do you believe in?”

“Why're you asking?” the boy inquired cautiously.

Seeing the lack of alarm, Lumian breathed a sigh of relief. He tipped the flask again, the liquid gurgling.

He lowered the military flask, his expression bright as he spoke with clarity, “As a devout follower of the God of Steam and Machinery, I've got to verify the faith of those with uncertain origins.”

“By steam!”

This time, Lumian spoke without the veil of alcohol.

Subconsciously, the boy shook his head.

“Words don't mean much. Just saying I believe in whichever deity doesn't make it true.”

Lumian studied the boy's reaction. “It's true that folks from the orthodox Churches can sometimes claim belief in any deity without much sincerity, but they're harmless. I'm more concerned about worshipers of evil gods. They're fervent and unpredictable. They won't fake it to deceive others, believing that to be against their faith and blasphemous.”

Instinctively, the boy retorted, “Not always. Some followers of evil gods will pose as adherents of the orthodox gods to further their holy missions. They can pray, attend rituals, join Mass, and chant the names of other gods without a second thought—as long as they repent to their own deity afterward, they reckon there's no issue...”

At that moment, the young lad abruptly halted. He exchanged gazes with Lumian and lapsed into a prolonged silence.

After a spell, he took a bite out of his uncooked steak and introduced himself, "I'm a believer of the God of Knowledge and Wisdom. The devoted faithful in our Church have this peculiar knack for pointing out slip-ups in the other party's speech, just like before. Yep, just like before!"

Lumian fixed a piercing gaze on the lad for a few beats before inquiring, "What might be the usual prayers at the God of Knowledge and Wisdom Church?"

Quick as a flash, the boy responded, "Like I was saying earlier, folks who believe in those evil gods can mutter the honorific name of an orthodox god with a heavy heart and toss out those prayers. You can't rightly figure out what's in others' minds unless you're a card-carrying member of the Eternal Blazing Sun Church and you've got it notarized that you won't lie..."

With that, the lad clammed up once more, his gaze fixed vacantly on Lumian.

After a brief pause, he stretched out his empty right hand, and pressed it to his forehead. "May wisdom be with you!"

Such a foolish fellow shouldn't be a spy sent by an evil god... From his intelligence, he's really a child... Lumian struggled to maintain his composure, requiring a concealed deep breath to regain control over his facial muscles.

"Indeed," he concurred, his lips curving into a smile. Mirroring the boy's action, he brushed his head with the base of the iron-gray military flask and uttered with significance, "May wisdom be with you!"

Without affording the boy a chance to reply, Lumian adopted an alluring tone. "Would you care to join me at the café on the second floor? I'll treat you to a proper meal. The chefs here are quite remarkable."

The boy swallowed visibly. "You won't turn against me, will you?"

"You can tail me the entire time. That way, I won't ever get a shot at double-crossing you." Lumian initiated a little trial, testing if the other guy's brains matched his looks and age, or maybe they lagged behind. "And mind you, we only prohibit the God of Knowledge and Wisdom Church from preaching in Intis or setting up a cathedral. We do let their believers cross the border. Trier's got the Lenburg Chamber of Commerce, you see."

The boy pondered for a moment and said, "Okay."

Lumian sized him up, withdrew his left hand, sealed the liquor flask, and tucked the iron-gray flask back in his brown coat.

Then, he pressed his forehead again. "May wisdom be with you!"

With that, Lumian pivoted and ascended the stairs.

The kid stuck to him, politely shutting the cellar's deep-brown door behind him.

Seeing Lumian whirl around, the kid explained earnestly, "If it's left open, the food inside will spoil."

"True enough." Lumian pulled his gaze and climbed up the stairs.

The kid trailed him close, eyes peeled for any odd moves, any signs of betrayal.

Lumian steered him into the kitchen, then upstairs to the café on the second floor and ordered a set meal.

In no time, the spread hit the table: fried veal steak, grilled eel, roasted leg of lamb, chicken pie, red wine, and cream.

Lumian settled in, watching the kid wolfing down like he was bottomless.

Every now and then, he tossed a comment,

"Veal is crisped good, but the meat is nothing special...

"Sweet sauce masks the eel's fishiness, but it makes it greasy...

"Leg of lamb is roasted just right, crispy outside, tender inside. Spices are off a touch, though. Too much fennel...

"..."

Just eat. Why are you so talkative... Lumian silently watched the boy eat the table full of food with a satisfied expression.

Fifteen minutes later, Baron Brignais walked in from the second-floor entrance, donning a half top hat with a diamond ring shining.

The boy turned in surprise and glanced back at Lumian.

Lumian smiled and said, "Did you think I'm the only one here who knows you?"

The boy was startled as he fell silent.

Baron Brignais walked up to Lumian and said with unconcealed relaxation, "Appreciate it, Ciel."

"Just so happened to catch him skulking around in the cellar, munching on something," Lumian responded, his voice warm and friendly.

Baron Brignais gave him a sidelong glance before shifting his attention to the boy. "Time to head back, Ludwig."

Ludwig, the young boy, remained silent. Swiftly, he polished off the last remnants of his meal and rose from his seat.

"Ciel, we'll catch up," Baron Brignais directed a nod at Lumian.

Seated opposite, Lumian observed as Baron Brignais clasped Ludwig's hand, their departure imminent. Lumian's lips curved again before saying, "Don't forget to settle the tab."

Baron Brignais displayed a hint of surprise. His eyes flickered, suggesting a momentary uncertainty in his initial assessment.

Yet without uttering a word, he withdrew a wallet brimming with banknotes and promptly covered the cost of Ludwig's meal.

Lumian maintained a contemplative silence, watching the duo disappear down the stairwell. Leaning back in his chair, he murmured softly, his voice a mere whisper, "Termiboros, where exactly is the stroke of fate you mentioned?"

Chapter 312 Hint

Though Lumian maintained a cautious skepticism toward Termiboros, his curiosity about the enigmatic "stroke of fate" continued to gnaw at him.

The way Termiboros had alluded to the Earth Blood ore as an "encounter" had caught his attention. Could this time involve Ludwig, the young boy?

There was something off about this fellow, something amiss. Yet, as their conversation unfolded, Lumian came to acknowledge Ludwig's intelligence, origins, and apparent devotion to the God of Knowledge and Wisdom. Despite this interaction, Lumian found himself gaining no true insights or foresight. It was unlike his understanding of the Earth Blood ore's potential, which hinged on specific conditions of going underground, finding the right area to encounter something.

...

Once again, Termiboros's powerful voice reverberated through Lumian.

"The moment will reveal itself."

"Can't you people make yourself clear?" Lumian's frustration surged, his blood boiling in his veins..

"I'm unlike what you consider people," Termiboros responded, straightforwardly. "I'm a Mythical Creature."

"..." Lumian was left speechless, taken aback. He forced a scoff and retorted, "I doubt even your sealed form can truly grasp fate's threads. Each time, your answers are mired in vagueness. What sets you apart from amateurs in the Divination Club? If you possess the power, reveal clearly where my next opportunity lies!"

Termiboros responded with a deep tone, "Tonight, at 11 p.m., Rist Docks, Warehouse 3."

Huh? Surprise coursed through Lumian; Termiboros's hint was unexpected.

Yet, within his astonishment, puzzlement persisted.

Inevitability's angel is that kind?

As a high-ranking Alms Monk, He shouldn't have been provoked so easily to interpret my fate...

Could there be an ulterior motive?

Regardless, I'll consult Madam Magician's insight first.

Lumian decided swiftly. He rose, departed Salle de Bal Brise, and embarked on a journey to Rue des Blouses Blanches.

Executing a simple act of arson, he could initiate the initial potion digestion step and contemplate gaining a Contractee boon. Despite his anxiety, Lumian refused to lower his guard against Termiboros.

Within Rue des Blouses Blanches, in the safe house.

Lumian meticulously documented the particulars regarding Ludwig and Termiboros's clue. Subsequently, he conducted a ritual, summoning the doll-like messenger.

As Lumian awaited Madam Magician's response, he delved into a trove of information concerning spirit world creatures. Reading the descriptions of certain knowledge consumed a substantial amount of his spirituality. Some even induced dizziness, nausea, frustration, headache, a burning sensation, and illusions.

Similar to Aurore's grimoires' portrayal of profound knowledge about deities and high-level creatures, this information is fraught with intense corruption and perilous ramifications. If all the knowledge that pursues humans bear such attributes, it's genuinely chilling. The prospect of losing oneself upon hearing it or succumbing to immediate demise is unsettling... Thus, Lumian punctuated his reading to safeguard his mental well-being from plummeting to precarious thresholds.

After poring through descriptions of approximately 30 to 40 spirit world creatures, Lumian stumbled upon a figure he recognized.

“Rabbit of Knowledge:

“Weak spirit world creature, friendly to humans and possesses an innate thirst for knowledge. Their summons are rarely declined.

“Diverse experiences yield distinct Rabbits of Knowledge. Shared traits include mastery of various languages, spoken and written communication skills, and adept reading capabilities. Extracting salient information from extensive knowledge is their forte, and their transcription speed outpaces even mechanical typewriters.

“Drawback: Limited communication finesse and inflexible thinking. Some Rabbits of Knowledge have been tainted by anomalous knowledge, evolving into significant hazards. To summon, restrict choices to the friendly and weak.”

So, it goes by the name “Rabbit of Knowledge.” Summoning this entity in the future should be more targeted... Yet, its abilities and attributes are of limited value. If I had gone as per Aurore's vision of university enrollment, I would benefit from its multilingual proficiency and strong reading skills... Noteworthy, the text omits mention of its speed within the spirit realm, implying its negligible worth in that aspect. It moves sluggishly, drains spirituality... Lumian lowered the document, massaged his temples, and embarked on his third respite.

During this juncture, the messenger bore Madam Magician's response:

“I share curiosity regarding what encounter the lad named Ludwig would bring. His appearance in Trier intrigues me; motivations remain nebulous.

“Vigilance is prudent. His existence carries intrigue.

“Proceed. The window of acting presents itself to me as well.”

Can't you people make things clear... Lumian's lips twitched, absorbing the succinct message.

However, a nuanced sense emerged that Madam Magician's opening sentence wasn't an immediate response. It resonated more as a condensed echo of her contemplations.

In essence, Madam Magician, imbued with her astromancy prowess, struggled to glean Ludwig's fate. Her perceptions seemed clouded, suggesting she only harbored conjectures.

The obscurity surrounding Ludwig's destiny, evident in her inability to perceive it, spoke volumes.

At 10:50 p.m., at Rist Docks, outside Warehouse 3.

Lumian took cover in the shadows, poised to seize the much-anticipated opening for action.

Soon enough, two silhouettes approached Warehouse 3, drawing within a mere five to six meters of Lumian.

One of them spoke hushedly, riddled with concern, “Héctor, the accountants arrive tomorrow for an audit. How do we address this? Shall I hire a thief to pilfer the account records?”

“What purpose would that serve? The moment they inspect the warehouse, suspicion will arise. Our remaining stock barely equals a tenth of the required amount.”

Héctor's tone escalated, simmering with intensity. “If we're to proceed, we ought to do so comprehensively by reducing the warehouse to ashes. This way, any discrepancies would remain concealed.”

I see... Listening closely, Lumian deduced his cue to act.

As his companion wavered, Héctor interjected, “Fires are commonplace in Trier, normalized in everyone's mind. Moreover, igniting them ourselves isn't necessary. The market district swarms with miscreants and rogues. Once the time is ripe, we can entice them to vacate Trier with a handsome fee.

“Honoré, we can't wait any longer. You must decide now.”

Honoré paused, then spoke resolutely, “Agreed! We'll locate Guy and recruit him into our plan!”

The duo conducted a swift survey of the warehouse's surroundings before departing for the docks, en route to rendezvous with their comrade, Guy.

After a brief trek, the sky abruptly reddened, casting an incandescent hue across the scene. Simultaneously, the crackle of flames resounded.

Honoré and Héctor instinctively spun around, bearing witness to an inferno emerging. Vermilion flames surged, fierce and ravenous, soaring to engulf the structure.

“Fire, fire...” Héctor mumbled, a glint of realization dawning. “Indeed, fire! Praise the Sun, it's a fire!”

Honoré exhibited a similar reaction, his right hand tracing a triangular Sacred Emblem over his chest, lips moving in muted invocation.

Yet, within the momentary elation, disquiet brewed within Honoré's senses.

Trepidation tinted his voice as he discerned, "The warehouse isn't aflame. It's our office!"

Positioned meters away from the warehouse was their office—a modest gray two-story edifice.

The expanse separating it from the warehouse remained empty, devoid of combustible material.

"..." Héctor's visage contorted in terror. Clenching his jaw, he spoke with grim resolve, "We must set fire to the warehouse now!"

Even as the words left his lips, an explosion erupted from the locus of crimson flames.

Though not seismic, the detonation garnered the attention of dock workers and firefighters.

"Fire! Fire!" The clamor resounded as responders converged. In Trier, a city renowned for frequent conflagrations, firefighters were seasoned in addressing such crises.

Observing the scene, Héctor and Honoré, who hadn't reached Warehouse 3, slumped onto the roadside, their vigor sapped.

At the entrance of the dock.

Albus, his hair now a fiery hue, averted his gaze from the raging blaze to the middle-aged man at his side.

"Monsieur Guy, your colleague seems even more agitated than you."

Guy's complexion paled as he shook his head in bewilderment.

"The warehouse wasn't the target of the fire..."

A pause lingered before Albus sneered.

"I warned you already. Hesitation begets mishaps. Now, ponder your escape. May you be more decisive this time."

Beside the unassuming two-story structure, Lumian gazed upon the soaring flames. The timber and flammable materials metamorphosed into an ephemeral dragon, casting his countenance in fiery red, eyes alight with fervor.

With a grin, he advanced toward the blaze.

The duo's intent to commit arson entailed erasing incriminating evidence by reducing the warehouse to ashes. However, Lumian's purpose was to generate turmoil, inviting scrutiny that would unearth the discrepancies within the warehouse!

Such was the duty of a responsible citizen.

A mantle of flames enveloped Lumian, adhering to his attire obediently—merely a hair's breadth from ignition.

Donning the flaming cloak, Lumian marched into the roaring blaze.

Fire coalesced with fire, repelling smoke. Effortlessly traversing the structure, Lumian exited on the opposite end of the dock.

Following the arson, Lumian acquired a rudimentary mastery over the potion's powers. He tamed it, dispelling the burning sensation on his skin and the trepidation in his heart.

While his potion digestion remained incomplete, Lumian had already adapted to his present state, giving him the capacity to receive an additional Inevitability boon.

After carrying out a few rounds of anti-tracking, Lumian returned to the safe house on Rue des Blouses Blanches.

Initiating the initial step of digesting the Pyromaniac potion prior to tracking down the padre filled him with satisfaction. He maintained a smile, yet his demeanor faltered upon glimpsing the towering pile of dense information within the iron cabinet.

It would take at least a month or two to finish reading them!

How could he identify an apt contracted creature in so brief a span?

Chapter 313 Plans with Different Styles

Lumian stood before the iron cabinet, his mind immersed in contemplation.

With just a handful of days remaining until the date designated by the Prophecy Spell, Lumian earnestly aspired to secure Contractee status, thereby attaining three distinctive abilities. This enhancement was imperative prior to pursuing Guillaume Bénét. The augmentation would tip the odds in his favor.

Relying solely on Pyromaniac, even in collaboration with Franca, now a Demoness of Pleasure, and the support of Anthony Reid and Jenna, prevailing against the padre's uncanny abilities remained tenuous. Victory might be attainable, but apprehending the adversary without incurring losses was a near-impossible endeavor—except if he enlisted the assistance of the Aurora Order Oracle via Mr. K's finger.

...

This assessment solely considered Guillaume Bénét as Lumian's adversary. If the padre had other confederates, alongside a cohort of bestowers or Beyonders, and if he had grown mightier than his state upon departing Cordu, Lumian's undertaking wouldn't assure triumph—even with Mr. K.

Lumian's aspiration was to pinpoint the padre's whereabouts and engineer a snare, drawing him out. Such an approach would markedly simplify the process. Nevertheless, Lumian needed to bolster his strength substantially. Otherwise, the “fishing” operation would entail dire jeopardy.

As Lumian perused the stack of dense information concerning spirit world entities, his mind whirled, seeking avenues to locate a suitable contract partner within a constrained timeframe.

Should I designate a time frame for reading and strive to cover as much ground as feasible? Then, my selection must derive from my existing familiarity?

This proposition falls short of my expectations. It risks bypassing the most fitting opportunity...

Although the circumstances aren't optimal, I must reconcile with reality. Perfection remains elusive; I must confront my own limitations head-on.

Son of a sow, it hasn't reached a juncture necessitating blind acceptance!

For now, I'll withhold any definitive moves until I ascertain the padre's whereabouts next week. I'll bide my time. Following the completion of this information assimilation, a comprehensive strategy will crystallize, right?

It will take approximately a month. The potential for accidents looms large...

Uh, the Rabbit of Knowledge appears to have the ability to read and extract key points. Can I summon one to help me read the information and extract the keywords of every spirit world creature, like when I whistleblowed? Then, I'll carefully study the corresponding spirit world creatures based on the keywords...

It's a creature of the spirit world to begin with. Having come into contact with such knowledge, it will definitely be less affected than me and can last longer...

Lumian gradually grew excited. The more he thought about it, the more he felt that it was feasible to ask the Rabbit of Knowledge to help him do the reading and write a brief summary.

He swiftly perfected the corresponding plan.

That rabbit is quite stupid and silly. I have to design a table in advance and list the 'page number', 'strength', 'whether it's friendly', 'brief description of abilities', and 'points of characteristics'. I'll let it fill in the columns in step and order.

Unfortunately, a person can only summon one Rabbit of Knowledge at a time. Otherwise, if I had ten or twenty, I will be able to complete the summary on spirit world creatures before dawn...

If one person can only summon one, what about having more than one person?

I can have Franca, Jenna, and Anthony Reid summon one each for me!

Uh... Rabbits can read quickly, extract essential points, and fill out summaries. Humans can do the same. Franca, Jenna, and Anthony can help browse through the information and quickly extract keywords from the columns.

I'll contribute knowledge, and they contribute labor, spirituality, and time!

Lumian's eyes grew brighter and brighter. He felt that if he pushed this plan forward, even with frequent breaks to mentally recover and the time to summon a Rabbit of Knowledge again, he should be able to produce a summary on the spirit world creatures in twelve hours.

When the time came, he would browse through the summaries that wouldn't affect his mind and select 20 to 30 suitable ones. He would read the raw information in a targeted fashion and make a final decision.

The only problem now was that the information on these spirit world creatures had been provided by Madam Magician; Lumian hadn't exchanged it using contributions or money. He believed that before "sharing" with others, he had to obtain the approval of the Major Arcana card holder.

This was basic respect.

Lumian sprang into action without hesitation. Swiftly, he composed a letter outlining his inquiry and the comprehensive plan he had crafted.

Soon, Madam Magician responded: "For a moment, I don't know what to say about your idea. It appears you possess an aptitude for such considerations."

“Sharing your knowledge with your friends is permissible, but remember to advise them against engaging with powerful or perilous spirit world creatures. These entities hold no sway over you, thanks to Mr. Fool's seal. It serves as a deterrent in the spirit world, offering you a measure of protection that others lack.”

“Actually, there are simpler and easier ways:

“Take the information to Two of Cups and spread it in every corner of the room. Then, get Two of Cups to recite the divination statement repeatedly and throw out three tarot cards or three coins.

“Choose whichever spirit world creature they land on. Even if it's not the most suitable for you, it's relatively suitable. It might be useful in a future occasion.”

Hiss, what a brilliant charlatan! Madam Magician is indeed skilled in divination. Her style is completely different from mine... Lumian hadn't considered divination.

After careful consideration, he decided to follow his plan. The answer chosen through divination always felt unreliable and unreal. He subconsciously didn't want to rely on it.

By relying on his own intelligence and abilities to filter them out, he would feel more confident and convinced.

Unless there was no other way, Lumian hoped to finish “reading” the information before making a choice.

He burned Madam Magician's reply and carefully wrote up the form. For the time being, he only made five copies.

Immediately after, he set up the altar to see if he could accurately summon the Rabbit of Knowledge.

To this end, the summoning incantation he had devised was: “Rabbit-shaped spirit wandering in the void, a friendly creature that can be communicated with, a weakling who pursues knowledge.”

The choice to avoid using the human-coined “Rabbit of Knowledge” as its name spoke of Lumian's respect for the enigmatic nature of these creatures.

Having carefully considered his approach, Lumian ignited a solitary candle and made a summoning in his own name.

His incantation concluded, and the candle's flame transformed into a deep shade of green, expanding to resemble a human head in size.

From within the luminous green flame, a translucent creature emerged, its appearance reminiscent of an amusingly awkward rabbit.

Relief washed over Lumian as the ritual proved successful. The creature's presence signaled a triumph, and Lumian's experienced voice addressed it, “I wish to share knowledge with you, seeking your assistance in distilling key points and completing a form.”

The rabbit's eyes brightened, and in a tone that mimicked Lumian's voice and Trier's Intisian accent, it inquired, “Where is the knowledge?”

This was the first time Lumian had heard such a creature speak. He didn't expect it to imitate his tone and pronunciation.

With purpose, Lumian retrieved a stack of information about spirit world creatures he had yet to delve into. He gestured towards the form on the table, articulating the task's parameters in a manner befitting a creature of limited intellect.

The rabbit absorbed Lumian's guidance, its long ears drooping as it committed the instructions to memory. Eventually, it nodded in comprehension.

Seated at Lumian's desk, the rabbit's eyes sparkled as it engaged with the information.

Lumian noted with satisfaction that, despite its unwilling nature, the rabbit demonstrated proficiency in its repetitive task. It diligently extracted pertinent details and methodically filled out the form with words like “powerful” and “dangerous.”

Although it's not very smart, doing such repetitive work isn't a problem for it... It's at least twice as fast as my reading... Lumian nodded in satisfaction and lay on the bed, preparing to close his eyes and rest while the Rabbit of Knowledge was busy working to alleviate his fatigue.

After an unknown period of time, he suddenly sensed danger and hurriedly sat up.

He saw that the transparent rabbit had grown to two meters tall, constantly flipping through the information and extracting.

“Stop!” Lumian didn't understand what was happening and instinctively stopped the other party from coming into contact with the knowledge.

The rabbit turned its head, its eyes bloodshot.

After staring at Lumian for a few seconds, it reluctantly halted its work.

Lumian's introspection led him to deduce the cause behind this transformation.

As a creature of the spirit world, the Rabbit of Knowledge was similarly affected by that knowledge, albeit to a relatively mild extent. However, it wasn't like ordinary humans due to its lacking intelligence. It didn't know to stop and rest after an abnormality unless it directly endangered its life.

As it accumulated, it inevitably underwent a certain mutation.

Phew, it's useful—that's true, but not having much intelligence is a huge problem... Lumian ended the summoning and allowed the Rabbit of Knowledge to return to the spirit world and slowly recover.

He washed up briefly, lay on the bed, and prepared to rest.

An idea surfaced just before sleep claimed him. Lumian summoned the rabbit once more and directed it to replicate a hundred copies of the form he had devised.

Only then did he truly relax and fall asleep.

The following morning, Lumian was brimming with vigor as he set off for Rue Anarchie. His first stop was to locate Anthony Reid, the information broker, and discuss the potential of his assistance.

As he approached Auberge du Coq Doré, a figure emerged from a nearby side alley.

It was Baron Brignais, adorned in a half top hat and a formal black suit, mahogany-colored pipe in hand.

“I promised to catch up with you and express my gratitude for aiding me in finding Ludwig,” Baron Brignais began with a smile. “It's quite surprising to find you neither at Salle de Bal Brise nor Auberge du Coq Doré.”

Gratitude? Then help me read and write a summary! Lumian muttered subconsciously before swiftly dismissing the notion.

Compared to Anthony Reid, an information broker with a mental illness, Baron Brignais was not only a member of the Savoie Mob, but his background also seemed problematic. It was best not to let him discover that his relationship with Franca didn't rely solely on Jenna.

A smile tugged at Lumian's lips.

“The night offers its own beauty. It's pointless to remain confined within one's room. How do you intend to express your gratitude?”

Rather than providing a direct answer, Baron Brignais diverted the conversation. “I may not have mentioned this earlier, but I converted to the worship of the God of Knowledge and Wisdom a few years back.”

Chapter 314 Crowd-Sourcing

Did you communicate with your godson and come to me to confirm the situation? Lumian maintained his smile.

“What you believe has no bearing on me, as long as you don't subscribe to an evil god. Furthermore, devotees of the God of Knowledge and Wisdom are not wanted criminals in Trier.”

His implication was clear: “I'm still a wanted criminal. Believe what you will.”

...

Baron Brignais had always been astute. He changed the subject and continued, “Thank you for aiding me in locating Ludwig. I'm unsure how to adequately express my gratitude.”

He refrained from specifying a thank-you gift, hoping to gauge Lumian's stance and thoughts.

Lumian pondered briefly before recalling the idea he had set aside.

Getting Baron Brignais to assist with reading and summarizing didn't necessitate his presence alongside Franca, Jenna, and Anthony Reid. He could impart some information, clarify what he needed to focus on, and allow him to return home to peruse and transcribe.

Likewise, before Anthony Reid committed to joining the pursuit of Padre Guillaume Bénet, direct contact with Jenna and Franca couldn't be allowed. An isolated “office” could be arranged for him at a later time.

Lumian glanced at Baron Brignais and inquired deliberately, “Are you proficient in reading and drafting notes?”

Aurore's grimoires had denoted that the pathway under the Church of the God of Knowledge and Wisdom was labeled Reader. This was also the title of Sequence 9 potion. Sequence 8 was Student of Ratiocination, and Sequence 7 was Detective.

Given Baron Brignais rarely exhibited special abilities and mostly leveraged his exceptional intellect, above-average combat skills, and sharp marksmanship to lead the Savoie Mob, coupled with his present faith, Lumian speculated he was a Beyonder of the Reader path.

From the potion's nomenclature alone, one could infer such an individual excelled in reading.

Baron Brignais drew from his pipe and responded, "In contrast to the illiterate, my reading and learning aptitude is rather commendable."

He couldn't entirely fathom Ciel's intentions, yet he suspected Ciel was prying into his Beyonder pathway.

And it wasn't confidential. Gardner Martin had long been privy to this.

Lumian unveiled a genuine smile.

"Of late, I've acquired a trove of information concerning creatures from the spirit world. However, as you're aware—you should be aware, correct? Delving into such knowledge extensively exerts a significant toll on the mind. As a Beyonder of the Hunter path, I shan't require this information for an extended period. Nevertheless, I wish to have access to the pertinent knowledge when necessity arises, without squandering precious time. Therefore, I intend to furnish you with a portion of the data. Kindly assist me in reading and extracting the key terms."

"Much akin to constructing an index for a library." Baron Brignais promptly grasped.

He grinned and remarked, "Truthfully, this would prove advantageous to me. That knowledge holds considerable value."

Library index... As anticipated of an adherent of the God of Knowledge and Wisdom. How professional... Lumian rejoiced, sensing Baron Brignais was roughly on par with Anthony Reid combined with a Rabbit of Knowledge.

Simultaneously, he harbored a cautious sentiment toward Baron Brignais. For instance, he would furnish this God of Knowledge and Wisdom follower with ten pages of information. He would peruse them in advance and jot down notes. Subsequently, he would cross-reference them with the index submitted by Baron Brignais to discern any deliberate omissions or alterations.

Of course, this was Lumian's unrefined approach. He could alternatively beseech Franca to verify via divination, but the potential for interference still existed.

Lumian slid his hands into his pockets and surveyed Baron Brignais, akin to an artisan observing a laborer. He beamed and uttered, "I'm indifferent to who benefits, as long as I accomplish my objective."

Baron Brignais nodded faintly, refraining from further commentary. He solely apprised Lumian of his whereabouts the following morning and requested the information to be conveyed there.

Auberge du Coq Doré, Room 305.

Facing Anthony Reid, Lumian eased back and reiterated his words to Baron Brignais. Concluding, he voiced, "This knowledge serves as your compensation. Furthermore, I shall impart to you the knowledge of ritualistic magic. You'll be able to summon a unique spirit world creature to peruse the information alongside you and distill the essential points. How does that proposition strike you? Are you inclined to accept this assignment?"

Anthony Reid's deep brown eyes mirrored Lumian's form as he contemplated and responded, "You're pressed for time. This matter bears added weight for you. It carries great significance."

Lumian had no intention of concealing this. He seized the opportunity and conveyed, "I'm confronted with the need to face a formidable adversary soon, and I seek to secure a fitting contracted creature. When the moment arrives, I might extend you an invitation, primarily in a supportive role. You can consider whether to agree and what form of compensation you desire. Heh, there's no rush for an answer. Think over it for the next two days."

"You're paving the way for me to be mentally prepared and foster appropriate expectations." Anthony Reid deciphered Lumian's thoughts.

Instantly, Lumian felt a twinge of embarrassment, but he was never one to blush easily. He maintained a composed smile and articulated, "Can you not tell that being honest will put your life in danger?"

Anthony Reid offered a slight nod, affirming certain aspects prior to committing to aid in perusing the information and crafting the "summary."

On the second floor of Salle de Bal Brise, in the room adjacent to Lumian's quarters.

Lumian surveyed Anthony Reid and the Rabbit of Knowledge, seated in tandem, diligently sifting through the information and completing forms. He subtly nodded in relief.

Once more, he reiterated the caution not to delve deeply into the spirit world creature knowledge marked as "powerful" and "dangerous." Exiting the room, he entered the office at the corridor's end.

Franca cozied up in Lumian's armchair, her red-booted feet propped on the desk's edge.

Baffled and intrigued, she inquired, "What exactly do you need our help with? Why are you being so mysterious?"

Jenna settled into the chair across from her, turning her body as her gaze drifted to the door.

Lumian nonchalantly shut the door and recounted the scenario, elucidating his need to secure a contracted creature prior to confronting the padre.

"Wouldn't a simple divination suffice?" Franca pondered as she acquiesced to Lumian's entreaty, while Jenna simmered with curiosity about the spirit world creatures.

Before long, Franca gazed up at the trio of Rabbits of Knowledge and Jenna, as well as Lumian, each absorbed in their respective tasks of poring over documents. Amusement laced her voice as she quipped, "Why does this feel like a miniature workshop, and we're the toiling transcribers?"

Congratulations, your instincts are on point... Lumian retorted in jest, "Am I not also perusing the information and completing forms?"

Franca mulled it over and conceded. She resumed her “labors.”

And so, they persisted until well past 10 p.m., punctuating their efforts with numerous breaks—meals, siestas, catnaps—to mitigate the strain. Brief reprieves preceded the summoning of the Rabbits of Knowledge once more.

Intermittently, during his short intervals, Lumian observed Franca, Jenna, Anthony Reid, and the quartet of Rabbits of Knowledge. He remained vigilant to prevent them from becoming too engrossed and to detect any anomalies they might experience.

Jenna reached her threshold first. Having newly ascended to Instigator, she hadn't fully acclimated to the potion's effects and was grappling with containing the surge of power. Her state was less than optimal.

Anthony Reid followed suit. His psychological scars ran deep, rendering him susceptible to certain deviations.

Lumian, Franca, and the seventh set of Rabbits of Knowledge soldiered on till the end.

Baron Brignais concluded his task around 6 p.m. and delivered the documents and forms to the café.

After dismissing the summons and seeing off the fatigued “assistants,” Lumian returned to the safehouse on Rue des Blouses Blanches, arranging the forms in a neat stack.

Perusing the papers briefly, he confirmed the general state of affairs. A sense of accomplishment swelled within him as he casually tossed the forms onto the table.

The immediate selection wasn't on his agenda. His plan was to first establish a Contractee status and sort out the specifics of the contract. Only afterward would he consult the index, thereby preventing the likelihood of stumbling upon a spirit world creature that matched his criteria in all respects but failed to meet the contract stipulations.

Lumian rested for a spell before summoning a Rabbit of Knowledge and tasking it with duplicating two more forms.

Storing the three indices separately, Lumian's weariness was palpable. The prospect of cleansing himself seemed distant as he tumbled onto the bed and surrendered to sleep.

At 6 a.m., Lumian brimmed with vigor, showing no haste to descend underground, arrange an altar, and beseech for a boon. Instead, he engaged in his usual regimen: jogging, practicing boxing, and cultivating his mental equilibrium.

By nearly 8 a.m., he stood before the doorway to Room 207 at Auberge du Coq Doré, ingredients at the ready.

After a brief internal debate, Lumian ultimately seized the carbide lamp—although he no longer required specialized illumination equipment; he was, in essence, a paragon of such abilities.

His aspiration rested on his foes' initial assumption that he lacked night vision and was inept at generating light.

In Underground Trier, within the quarry cavern that had once borne witness to Inevitability-linked rituals on several occasions.

Lumian briefly tidied the dank, lightless setting, positioning a blood-infused candle upon the altar stone.

Just as he concluded the sanctification of the ritual silver dagger and readied to cast a spiritual barrier, faint footfalls reached his ears.

The sounds reverberated within the subterranean passage, seemingly not distant from the present mine.

Someone is passing by? Lumian's pulse quickened, his intent fixated on swiftly restoring the area to order and concealing himself.

Yet, as he neared the altar before him and before he could extinguish the carbide lamp, soft footsteps drew close, manifesting at the cave entrance.

Aware that concealment was futile, Lumian promptly swiveled around, one hand nestled in his pocket, his gaze converging on the source of the sound.

A slender man of brownish-black complexion stood there, clutching a carbide lamp. His black hair bore a slight curl, and his eyes held a profound allure. He sported a black seer's cloak reminiscent of those seen in a circus.

Monette... Lumian recognized the figure.

He was an Islander swindler who had duped Charlie and been hoodwinked by the con artists in Salle de Bal Unique.

Monette, too, saw Lumian.

A smirk tugged at the corners of his lips as he greeted with palpable cheer, "What a coincidence."

In tandem with his words, the swindler produced a crystalline monocle, inserting it into his right eye socket.

Chapter 315 Anxious Termiboros

What a coincidence? Lumian knew better than to consider it mere coincidence.

Deep within the expansive underground of Trier, unexpected encounters were not uncommon, given the diverse cast of characters that frequented its depths—quarry police, smugglers, cave adventurers, mineral researchers, wandering university students, members of secret organizations, wanted criminals, mobsters, heretics, and anti-government militants were active here. However, the odds of stumbling upon familiar faces in such a dark domain were almost negligible.

This wasn't like the time he had rescued Jenna—Lumian had doggedly followed the trail.

...

Monette's presence, monocle affixed, roused Lumian's caution. He mustered a semblance of a smile and replied, "Indeed. What a coincidence."

With one hand casually slipped into his pocket, Lumian played his role, pretending to secure the candles and materials on the stone surface. The intention was to convey that the ritual was complete and he could depart whenever he pleased. There was nothing of value to plunder or destroy.

Monette adjusted his monocle and with a wave of his hand, offered a departing smile.

“See you aboveground.”

And just like that, he withdrew, his footsteps fading into the depths.

Lumian was caught off guard.

He's leaving just like that?

Could it really have been a coincidence?

Judging from Monette's familiarity with Underground Trier, it is evident he has traversed these passages countless times. Yet, that level of familiarity should have taught him that barging into a well-lit spot amidst the darkness could easily trigger conflict...

Common sense dictates that a stranger's presence in the quarry cave warrants cautious observation for any approach. The abrupt, nonchalant “appearance” seemed off...

Does he truly possess that much confidence in his prowess?

It can't be just to scare me!

As Lumian's thoughts raced, he shifted his gaze from the cave entrance to the candles and materials neatly arranged on the rocks.

The question arose whether to persist with the boon ritual.

In that instant, the voice of Termiboros reverberated within him: “You'd best relocate.”

Uh... Lumian's senses tingled, catching a note of unease in Termiboros's tone.

It was subtle, almost elusive, making Lumian doubt his judgment.

This was the first time Lumian had perceived emotional fluctuations in this Inevitability angel.

In previous interactions, no matter how much Lumian goaded and prodded, Termiboros merely maintained silence.

And yet, something about this encounter had stirred anxiety and apprehension within the angel!

As his heart quickened, Lumian blurted out, “Is this person truly dangerous?”

“He isn't inherently dangerous, but I sense a looming threat,” Termiboros responded.

This confirmed Lumian's guess.

The angel had sensed a looming problem through the strings of fate, a predicament that could jeopardize His very essence.

“Why does a seemingly less formidable individual trigger such unease? What's his motive?” Lumian pressed on.

Termiboros reverted to His usual depth as He intoned, “I'm sealed. I can only perceive the outside world through you, so I lack ample information. To uncover the answers to these queries, the seal must first be weakened.”

Do I look like an idiot to you? I even suspect that your anxiety and worry might be fabricated to exert pressure and intimidate... But given Termiboros's previous conduct, even if progress hadn't been made, such overt intentions should not have been revealed so swiftly... Monette's appearance was indeed oddly coincidental, his actions shrouded in inexplicable bizarreness. If possible, I must evade him. It's safer to assume he poses considerable danger rather than underestimate and expose myself... With a brisk pace, Lumian gathered his belongings, clutched the carbide lamp, and exited the quarry cave.

Drawing upon the subterranean map meticulously memorized from Gardner Martin's records, Lumian navigated closer to Quartier de la Cathédrale Commémorative, discreetly delving a few meters below ground level to stumble upon another somber, soundless quarry cave. He incorporated no fewer than three evasive maneuvers along the way to evade potential trackers.

Phew... Exhaling a breath of relief, Lumian surveyed his surroundings and rested his carbide lamp upon the ground. On a moderately level rock, he arranged the candles and ritual components, ensuring their proper alignment.

Abruptly, a flicker of motion in the shadows at the quarry's edge pricked his senses.

Hiss... Lumian's heart skipped a beat. Clasping the carbide lamp cautiously, he directed its beam toward the source.

A bluish-yellow radiance pierced the obscurity, unveiling a black rat partially concealed by gravel.

The rat made no effort to evade the light; it stood still. After a few heartbeats, it pivoted languidly and vanished into a minuscule crevice at the rock wall's base.

For some reason, Lumian sensed a disproportion between the rat's right and left eyes.

Gripping the carbide lamp, tension once again coursed through Lumian. He hushed, "Termiboros, is there a problem here too?"

Termiboros's voice resonated within Lumian's being, emanating a regal aura.

"It's best if you pray to The Fool immediately for angelic protection before moving elsewhere."

Could the situation be that grave? Lumian's pupils dilated. Swiftly producing an additional candle, he hastily constructed the altar.

Not a shred of concern lingered regarding Termiboros potentially manipulating him into a detrimental choice. After all, supplicating The Fool was Lumian's last resort, and it undeniably served his interests.

From a different vantage, the very fact that circumstances compelled an Inevitability angel to indirectly beseech The Fool's protection implied that something far amiss was afoot. Unleashed, the peril would prove unfathomable!

Being both mentally and physically optimal, Lumian's adept hands fashioned the candles, a process lasting just over ten seconds. He sanctified the dagger and forged a wall of spirituality that enshrouded solely him and the altar.

Methodically, he ignited the three candles sequentially, from deity to humanity, from left to right, punctuating with drops of essential oil and extract.

Amidst the haze and wisps of fog, Lumian exhaled, reciting gravely, “The Fool that doesn't belong to this era, the mysterious ruler above the gray fog; the King of Yellow and Black who wields good luck.

“I implore you,

“I implore your protection...”

As the ritual unfolded, Lumian surrendered to the mist's embrace, the prickle of his skin, the lassitude of his mind. Once more, he glimpsed the twelve-winged seraph, pure luminescence descending from infinite heights to envelop him.

As the radiant wings receded and dissolved, Lumian's senses jolted back to him. Gauging his state, he hastened to pack up the altar items and hastily exited the mine's confines.

Descending beneath the bustling market district, Lumian maintained his vigilant, practiced evasiveness, pushing forward with meticulous attention.

Almost twenty minutes elapsed before Lumian stumbled upon another concealed quarry cave, secured by its discreet location, courtesy of his map.

Stepping inside, he assessed the surroundings. His voice hushed, he inquired, “Termiboros, is there any issue here?”

“Presently, none,” Termiboros responded.

Lumian shut his eyes, a newfound calm settling over him.

He mulled over his options.

Should I surface and await the anomaly's dissipation before seeking out a secluded haven for the boon-praying ritual? Or should I seize the moment, briefly escape the abnormality, and hasten my progression to Contractee, capitalizing on The Fool's angelic protection?

In keeping with Lumian's disposition, he leaned towards the risk. The scenario wouldn't change later. He couldn't ascertain if the anomaly had genuinely dissipated. He needed the counsel of someone higher in rank.

In that case, he might as well seek that counsel now!

The altar was reinstated. Yet, this time, he bypassed protection or boons, summoning instead Madam Magician's messenger.

The “doll” messenger, clad in a gown of light gold, coalesced above the flickering candle flame.

Observing Lumian, it grumbled, “This isn't a good place.”

With that, it retrieved the hastily inscribed letter from Lumian's hand.

The letter briefly recounted Monette's behavior and Termiboros's response, querying the possibility of initiating the boon prayer ritual at present.

Lumian exercised some cunning here. He didn't outright solicit Madam Magician's protection, merely inquired about feasibility.

Hiring a demigod came at a steep price. Lumian deemed it currently unaffordable. Instead, he aimed to draw her attention by inquiring.

Of course, if push came to shove, he'd consider it. Debts could be repaid. Or if the person was deceased, repayment became moot.

This isn't a good place... Does this pertain to the current quarry cave or the entirety of Underground Trier? Lumian contemplated the messenger's words.

Swiftly, the messenger returned, bearing Madam Magician's response: "That's a big problem."

Madam Magician's opening remark twitched Lumian's eyelids.

"Of course, the situation isn't dire—at least, I haven't discovered the gravest entity's return to this world yet.

"What we must ascertain is His true intent. Termiboros's reaction implies He's the target, but this individual excels at concealing motives. This may well be a calculated illusion meant to deceive us or another party.

"For the time being and the foreseeable future, anomalies should be absent. Stabilize yourself and proceed with the boon prayer.

His? That's an angel? The entity whose hostility Monette exhibited is an angel? Lumian hissed involuntarily, engulfed by a renewed surge of trepidation.

This brought to mind the uniqueness of Salle de Bal Unique. He suspected that confronting them to reclaim a debt might entangle him with a host of angelic Blessed!

Seeing Madam Magician's assessment align with Termiboros's, Lumian composed himself and reconfigured the altar.

Before long, he focused on the pair of gray-white candles symbolizing Inevitability's power and himself. Amidst the intricate fragrance of gray amber perfume, he retreated slightly and intoned deeply, "Power of Inevitability!

"You are the past, the present, and the future;

"You are the cause, the effect, and the process."

Chapter 316 "Invitation Letter"

In a repetition of events, the silver-black candle flame once again solidified into a beam of light, striking Lumian's left chest, already wracked with agony and turmoil.

Amidst the pervading gray fog and the unsettling black wind, a silvery-black illusionary liquid began to trickle out.

At some elusive point in time, Lumian's pain and vertigo faded into insignificance. He felt as though he had transformed into an entirely different entity.

...

Standing in the wilderness, he gripped a wooden bow in his hand and released an arrow that gleamed with a blue radiance toward his aerial target.

Lumian vaguely remembered who he was, but he felt that everything was extremely real and he was experiencing it.

The keen, spectral-blue arrow cut through the sky, finding its mark in the belly of a dusky vulture.

An acute agony surged into Lumian's consciousness. He observed himself beating his wings, descending with an arrow lodged perilously close to his abdomen.

No, why have I become a vulture... Amidst the present experience, Lumian maintained a fragment of awareness about his own state and condition.

Bang!

He collided brutally with the ground, each bone fracturing with excruciating force. Agony pierced his core.

Lumian teetered on the brink of unconsciousness as a hyena lunged, its sights set on him.

Warm, repulsively scented flesh filled his mouth. He found himself ravaging the lifeless form of the grayish-black vulture. The bluish-tinged arrowhead had snapped within the avian creature.

This taste is nauseating... I'm no Ludwig, the monstrous child... Lumian's internal complaint resounded.

He didn't completely mistake himself for a hyena, but he continued to bite and devour his prey uncontrollably, not letting go of the poisoned parts.

Abruptly, a searing pain stabbed into his back, and he was thrust onto the ground by razor-sharp claws.

His attacker: an uncanny lion marred by decay, oozing blood-yellow pus from its wounds.

Lumian tore the hyena's throat apart and retreated with it into the nearby underbrush.

As he witnessed the scene through an observer's lens, he systematically dismantled the hyena.

Amidst a mix of satisfaction and revulsion, Lumian's abdomen seethed. His Beyonder powers, teetering on the edge of control, were fully ignited by the venom, resulting in a chaotic anomaly.

His sanity waned, spiraling into insanity. All that remained was an insatiable urge to obliterate the beings before him, to unleash chaos.

No, I mustn't succumb... The paramount objective remains incomplete... Lumian drew in the faint, sweet aroma of gray amber, resisting complete surrender to madness.

In the midst of his cathartic sprint, his attention fixed on a hunter, and he lunged at the figure.

With a wooden bow in his grasp, Lumian caught a whiff of a repugnant odor and sighted a decaying lion, two wart-like growths on its shoulders.

Its mouth, adorned with remnants of vibrant red flesh and blood, stretched to its limit.

A jolt of alarm coursed through Lumian as his full self-awareness returned. He discerned that the hunter's "form" had turned ethereal, akin to the vulture, hyena, and lion, morphing into intricate silver-black words and bizarre symbols.

The words linked with the symbol, weaving a ring that abruptly contracted into his body.

Lumian's eyes opened, and he confronted the flickering silver-black candle flame. A half-meter-tall stone, functioning as an altar, met his gaze.

The encounter felt tangibly authentic... As if I had been the vulture, the hyena, the lion, and another human... Lumian massaged his throbbing head and gradually rose to his feet. Reflecting on his prior experiences, he assimilated the newfound knowledge within his mind.

He couldn't remember when he rolled on the ground in pain.

Phew... Exhaling deeply, Lumian affirmed that he had acquired a fresh boon and transformed into a Contractee.

He swiftly tidied up the altar, dismantled the wall of spirituality, and grabbed the carbide lamp, ready to leave the quarry cave at any moment.

Simultaneously, Lumian assessed his transformation and the Contractee's abilities.

His spirituality had seen a marked increase.

His Dancer flexibility and the Alms Monk's endurance in harsh environments had shown modest improvement, though not substantial.

His intuitive sense for luck had also seen a slight upgrade. However, upon recognizing that Termiboros could sway his fate and judgment, he refrained from frequently relying on this ability for protection.

Summoning Dance now exerted a broader sphere of influence, and his ability to forcefully possess the bizarre creatures had extended further.

The Contractee status bestowed upon him just a single fresh ability—the power to enter into a contract with a summoned creature, directly borrowing a distinctive characteristic skill.

Contrary to Lumian's anticipations, this unique contract had merged with his body and soul during his advancement. Its transfer to others was impossible.

In essence, he had become an indivisible part of the contract, the most pivotal aspect. In time, he would need to rely on this element to compose the remaining sections of the contract and offer them to the target creature for "signing."

After musing for a time, Lumian had a rudimentary understanding of the specifics of the Contract ability.

The agreement could solely be formed with the consent of the target creature.

Once the contract was sealed, he could handpick the traits he desired, guided by his volition.

With each ratified contract, not only would he acquire a skill, but he'd also assimilate a measure of influence from the contracted being. The higher its rank, the greater the adverse impact.

The count of contracts inked depended on his resilience. Perhaps he could endure just one high-level or exceedingly potent attribute. Several ordinary traits might be borne, keeping pace with his standing. Particularly feeble ones could be pursued more liberally.

Upon signing a contract, a cost was entailed. Part was a tribute to the contracted entity, and the remainder was a tribute to the witness. The cost could encompass life, limbs, kin, loved ones, offerings, one's spirituality maximum, a fraction of reason, and so on. The precise demand hinged on the desires of the contracted creature.

Hence, much of the intelligence Lumian gleaned from this boon concerned the corresponding creature. This encompassed specific abilities and the “compensation” the counterpart sought.

Nevertheless, most of these odd creatures were sinister and uncanny, and the price he'd need to pay was consistent. Lumian didn't wish to select from their ranks.

Of course, this wasn't the prime rationale. Conceivably, these creatures harboring the mystical knowledge interwoven with the power of Inevitability had ties to the entity known as Inevitability. Lumian dreaded that forging a contract with them might covertly manipulate him, propelling his destiny into the abyss.

Consequently, Lumian had no intention of designating the entity as the object of prayer and witness while entering into a pact.

A superior choice was at hand: Mr. Fool!

According to the sermons in The Fool's cathedral that Lumian had heard, this great entity reigned over the spirit world. The Angel of the Holy Spirit by His throne presided over the spirit world on His behalf.

Even if embellished, this testified to Mr. Fool's considerable sway in the spirit world.

In such a situation, Lumian—marked by The Fool's seal and enlisting The Fool as an intermediary and pact witness—could potentially yield substantial advantages and concealed benefits when attempting to forge a pact with a spirit world creature. It was just like other Contractees signing contracts with strange creatures that came with knowledge.

Lumian promptly sorted through the recently acquired knowledge and discerned that certain aspects remained quite ambiguous, as if they encompassed myriad possibilities.

For instance, the stipulation of obtaining the target creature's consent before signing a contract did not specify the methodology of obtaining consent. Securing agreement through offerings as a bribe constituted consent, but so did beating them into unreserved submission. Similarly, the “compensation” demanded by the latter should be negotiable.

Additionally, the deleterious impacts that the acquired knowledge from contracted creatures brought along, along with the limits of one's endurance, precluded the prospect of Lumian circumventing the system to forge a pact with a high-ranking creature and attaining godlike power at a reasonable price via Mr. Fool's seal, the sovereign of the spirit world.

Nonetheless, the liberty to cherry-pick any amalgamation of skills within a defined spectrum imposed a considerable upper boundary on the potential of a Contractee. Naturally, the floor was equally low. Opting for an ill-suited skill and exacting an erroneous price could render one subpar even in comparison to an elite non-Beyonder individual's aptitudes.

Lumian steadied himself and murmured with a sense of contentment, “Termiboros, do you have anything to add?”

To be candid, Lumian's foremost apprehension upon descending into the underground was whether Termiboros would exploit the boon-seeking ritual to instigate harm. After all, the potency of the boon he was acquiring was escalating, posing a genuine threat to the angel of Inevitability. Even if securely sealed, He would unearth a method to stir up discord. It was improbable for Him to remain inert, permitting His strength to wane.

Furthermore, during the boon ritual, the seal would inevitably crack slightly, permitting the essence of Inevitability to trickle out. This would afford Termiboros a distinct opportunity.

Initially, Lumian had intended to solicit safeguards before officially beseeching a boon. Unexpectedly, Monette's bizarre appearance and the angel backing him had expedited the need for a blessing. Termiboros had turned more tractable, abstaining from conspicuous interference.

Termiboros's voice resounded with His response, “The mine entrance.”

The mine entrance... What does that imply? Lumian clutched the carbide lamp and advanced toward the entrance of the quarry cave, mired in bewilderment.

A bluish-yellow luminescence cast light over the debris-strewn expanse, revealing a meticulously trimmed piece of stiff paper.

It wasn't present when I entered... Lumian tensed and cautiously drew closer. On the ebony paper, a monocle had been meticulously drawn, almost replicating reality. Four lines of bold, vibrant red Intisian words graced the page:

“Salle de Bal Unique

“Night of Lovers

“7 p.m. on the last night of every month

“You're invited.”

Salle de Bal Unique... Monocle... Night of Lovers... Lumian's thoughts instantly summoned an image of Monette donning a monocle in his right eye socket.

He had earnestly invoked The Fool's angelic safeguard and expended considerable effort to elude detection, yet he had failed to shake off the enigmatic trickster?

No, Mr. Fool's angelic blessing exudes a high-tier anti-divination and anti-prophecy influence. Unless Monette has been lurking in my vicinity without being thrown off, it's implausible for him to regain proximity! Lumian's heart skipped a beat as he instinctively surveyed the surroundings.

Silence reigned within the obscurity bordering the quarry cave. Yet, Lumian's skin prickled, as though an abundance of eyes remained concealed within the air.

Chapter 317 Summoning Target

In the Cordu days, Lumian might have snatched up that invitation and made his way to the Salle de Bal Unique by month's end, all to unleash a prank to return the shock.

However, this time around, Lumian's grip on the mystical world was firmer, a result of his brush with countless otherworldly aberrations. He conjured a flicker with the snap of his fingers, sending forth a crimson spark that alighted on the ebony paper before him.

Amidst the swiftly burgeoning flames, Lumian departed the quarry cavern, his carbide lamp casting its light, guiding him towards the nearest exit of the Underground Trier.

...

Yet, on this journey, an unshakable paranoia seized him. The moss on the rocky walls, the unseen insects within the shadows, even the intangible entities that traversed the air—it was as if Monette's eyes bore into him from all angles.

It wasn't mere illusion but rather a reality that wound Lumian's mind taut, each heartbeat a gallop of unease.

Termiboros's unwavering quiet provided the lone solace, a lack of agitation hinting that the quandary hadn't escalated—yet.

A quarter-hour's passage led Lumian to ascend the steel stairs, emerging onto solid ground once more.

As sunbeams pierced the sky, penetrating a sea of white clouds and bathing his visage in their glow, he felt as though he'd been reborn.

Phew, no wonder Madam Magician said to live under the sun in Trier as much as possible... Exhaling a sigh, Lumian snuffed the carbide lamp, locked in his bearings, and charted his course back to Rue des Blouses Blanches.

Upon reentering the safe house, he immediately summoned Madam Magician's messenger, apprising the holder of the Major Arcana card of the developments that unfolded.

Madam Magician's reply was simple:

“Exemplary work. Steer clear of Salle de Bal Unique.

“The Lord's Angel of Time shall keep vigilant watch over this affair.”

Why would Mr. Fool's Angel of Time direct His attention toward Salle de Bal Unique? Is there indeed an Angel of Time? The angelic entity whom the charlatans of Salle de Bal Unique revere bears a link to Mr. Fool's Angel of Time. Or perhaps, an animosity? Lumian ruminated, momentarily adrift in the murk of comprehension.

With a measure of relief prevailing, he reclined upon the bed, surrendering himself to sleep's embrace—an interlude wherein his mental fortitude and vitality underwent reinvigoration.

At noon, Lumian ate two savory meat pies and drank a glass of Apple Whiskey Sour. Seated at the table, he engaged in earnest perusal of the bestiary chronicling the spirit world creatures.

As he raced through the pages, a sleek black fountain pen danced in his hand, crafting purposeful circles on the paper to accentuate potential candidates.

After over an hour of intense scrutiny, Lumian distilled a preliminary list of 50 to 60 spirit world entities boasting suitable attributes and modest threat levels. Following the breadcrumbs of indicated page numbers, he retrieved the source manuscripts and embarked on meticulous research.

Intermittent breaks punctuated his reading. As evening painted the sky in hues of twilight, Lumian at last concluded his meticulous perusal of the source materials, now in possession of their profound knowledge. A final selection had been forged.

First in line was the Abscessed Hand. This enigmatic spirit, once shrouded in legend across the southern and central parts of the world, had been conjured by aficionados of mysticism, leaving a trail of lifeless bodies in its wake.

From crime scene accounts, the fallen were strewn across the forest expanse. With the exception of those initially claimed within a hunter's lodge, the remaining deaths occurred nearly simultaneously. This revelation hinted at the Abscessed Hand's swift transitions between victims, throttling one soul and in a heartbeat, lunging towards its next quarry.

Dream divinations unveiled a bluish-black, gangrenous hand, swollen and oozing with putrescence. Its appearance was always abrupt, snapping a victim's neck within two to three seconds before vanishing to assail another, irrespective of the distance.

Based on the hand's traits, Lumian inferred its considerable aptitude for traversing the spirit world.

As for its danger level, Madam Magician's accounts deemed it commonplace, bound by the constraints of the summoning ritual.

Nevertheless, a significant detail stood out from the Major Arcana card holder: "It's suspected to be a fragment of something greater."

Severed hand? Could its kindred comprise severed legs, heads, torsos, and innards? What would happen when these fragments converge? If reassembled, what would manifest? Lumian scoured the index in vain, failing to unearth analogous entities. His focus rested on abilities, traits, and threat levels, with little heed to nomenclature.

An alternative theory remained afoot. The remaining Abscessed Hand counterparts might reside within the powerful and dangerous categories, evading the scrutiny of Franca, Jenna, and the Rabbits of Knowledge.

Should the anticipated spirit world traversal prowess prove elusive, or if the cost demanded an untenable toll, Lumian had an arsenal of alternatives at his disposal.

With regards to disguising abilities, he found a peculiar fondness for a spirit world creature known as the Headless Bride.

This mythical tale was woven within the heart of the Haagenti Kingdom in the Southern Continent. It began with the story of a young girl who dared to elope with her beloved.

In the shadowed chambers of their hidden nuptials, her kin unveiled the shrouded ceremony. Amidst the assembly of family and kin, her own brother exacted a swift, brutal end, severing her head in the name of matrimonial transgression and ancestral decree.

Perhaps this girl was special to begin with, or perhaps she had come into contact with something related to the spirit world during her elopement. Thus, ignited by the agony, fury, and rancor that gripped her before her demise, she imbibed the essence of the spirit world, transmuting into a creature akin to an evil spirit.

Dressed in scarlet bridal raiment adorned with gilded motifs, she hunted and hexed her lineage, subjecting them to an unending torrent of catastrophes spanning three decades, until the tapestry of their lineage was all but erased.

In the present, the Headless Bride prowled the spirit world, shape-shifting with calculated artistry. Its transformations beguiled unwary beings and unsuspecting travelers, drawing them closer to their doom in its relentless embrace.

For a Pyromaniac, this was an easy target with the protection of a ritual.

Headless Bride's alternative was Human-Faced Mantis:

“This is a unique creature from the spirit world. When he was alive, he was a playboy with elegance and good looks.

“As an educator in Sion within the Intis Republic's Hornacis Province, he was embraced by admiration and ardor from both distinguished dames and youthful maidens.

“He was gifted in literature, skilled in poetry, and had numerous lovers.

“This idyllic existence found an abrupt termination when a spurned spouse denounced him to the Church as a Warlock, accusing him of employing sorcery to control his wife.

“Agents dispatched by the Eternal Blazing Sun Church probed into the matter, gathering accounts from a multitude of local men. Astonishingly, their testimonies echoed the allegations in the complaint letter. Strangers to one another, these men's narratives converged in unsettling symmetry.

“In contrast, the dames and young maidens adamantly attested to their willing involvement, fervently defending the playboy's actions.

“Amid simmering resentment from the local men, the trial raced to a conclusion. The playboy met his end at the stake.

“Upon later investigation, officials confirmed his innocence, unveiling the accusations as a construct of collective envy and enmity.

“It's suggested that an Instigator was behind the scenes.

“In the spirit world, the playboy's essence metamorphosed into a mantis bearing a human visage. Festering within him was an all-consuming loathing, mingling with a mastery over metamorphosis and relentless predation...”

Lumian turned emotional as he read the two pieces of information.

Six years in the countryside had acquainted him with the ignorance that shadowed village life.

From this, he deduced that not all spirit world denizens sprang from nature's womb. Rather, under exceptional circumstances, the souls of departed humans could transmute into enduring spirit creatures. A plausible explanation for hauntings.

Pondering meticulously, Lumian relinquished his aspiration for invisibility and concealment. Instead, he earmarked his final contract slot for traits with direct influence over his Spirit Body.

His choices boiled down to the Thousand-Eyed Evil and the Shadow of Shriek.

These two entities were quintessential 'natives' of the spirit world, venturing forth only in the realms of nightmares and tomes of authentic Warlock craft.

The Thousand-Eyed Evil comprised fleshy forms, exuding a pink ichor, each adorned with an eye bereft of lashes.

Gazing into the ebony pupils of these multitudes, whether human, beast, or mere Spirit Bodies, led to swift slumber.

Their connection to dreams was palpable; they occasionally manifested in the darkest recesses of the most harrowing nightmares.

The Shadow of Shriek, on the other hand, manifested as a confluence of translucent shadows. With frequent outbursts of shrieks, they induced unconsciousness in those who dared to draw near.

Beyond their shrieks, they bore the attributes of ordinary shadows.

Lumian meticulously transcribed all the details concerning the alternative contenders onto fresh paper, folding it as he slipped the paper into his pocket.

He lingered within the precincts of Salle de Bal Brise for a period, eventually departing from Avenue du Marché around 10 p.m. Navigating the pathways along Rist docks, he ultimately gained entry into the two-story edifice he had once reduced to smoldering ruins.

Though the inferno that had previously ravaged the building had long since been quelled, the structure now stood cloaked in inky darkness and utter desolation.

Recognizing that his intended audience was none other than Mr. Fool, rather than the entity called Inevitability, Lumian had no intentions of executing the summoning ritual underground. This strategic choice was to avoid any potential encounters with the odd and dangerous swindlers of Salle de Bal Unique.

His primary objective was to locate a secluded enclave, far removed from prying eyes. This calculated approach would ensure that even in the event of an unforeseen mishap during the conjuration, should the summoned entity lose control, the collateral damage would be contained, thereby facilitating a swift resolution.

Having meticulously arranged a relatively unscathed chamber ensconced within the obsidian heart of the decrepit building, Lumian proceeded to meticulously arrange the altar.

Relying on the insights gleaned from his role as a Contractee, Lumian diverged from the norm by invoking two additional candles, each symbolizing a deity.

In this ritual, Mr. Fool was both the focal point of supplication and the solemn observer.

With a wall of spirituality set in place and candles aglow, Lumian didn't rush to commence the incantation. Instead, he extracted an iron-gray flask from the inner pocket of his worn brown jacket.

Within this flask, Lumian had ingeniously affixed a slender thread, its counterpart connected to the Decency brooch that lay submerged within a pool of absinthe.

This ingenious design facilitated Lumian's swift and precise retrieval of the Sealed Artifact. No clumsy maneuvering was required; a simple hook of his index finger and the Scotch Broom brooch was within his grasp.

As he tugged at the brooch, a burst of crimson sparks erupted, severing the knot binding the Sealed Artifact.

Without a moment's hesitation, Lumian adorned the resplendent Decency brooch upon his chest.

He harbored the belief that brokering a contract with a denizen of the spirit world carried an inherent cost, akin to a form of bribery. In this context, Lumian hoped the Decency brooch would assume a role of significance.

Securely fastening the brooch, Lumian's gaze shifted to the trio of candles, silently ablaze before him. Drawing a deep breath, he steeled himself for the upcoming ritual.

Chapter 318 Price

Lumian recited in ancient Hermes, following the precise summoning ritual as described in Aurore's grimoire and the mystical knowledge of Contractees.

“The Fool that doesn't belong to this era;

“You are the ruler above the gray fog;

...

“You are the King of Yellow and Black who wields good luck.

“I beseech your shelter.

“I pray for your attention.

“I!

“In the name of The Fool, I summon:

“A peculiar creature that roams the upper realm, the enigmatic severed hand, the bluish-black throat crusher.”

Lumian crafted this summoning incantation based on insights from the Abscessed Hand's data. As the ritual afforded some degree of protection to the subject of the invocation, and since the Abscessed Hand was not deemed perilous, he omitted the terms “weak” and “friendly,” infusing it instead with other phrases that would effectively pinpoint the target creature.

The bluish-black candle flames surged, intertwining to shape an ethereal doorway adorned with cryptic symbols. A faint gray mist filled the surroundings, instilling an eerie atmosphere.

Gradually, the door creaked open, and a decaying bluish-black severed hand emerged. It loomed twice the size of Lumian's palm, with the potential to crush a human skull.

The afflicted severed hand hovered before the enigmatic illusory entrance. Its fingers extended toward Lumian's throat, yet it abstained from aggression.

Lumian retrieved a flask of military-grade alcohol, differing in hue, unscrewed the cap, and drizzled a few drops towards the altar where the Abscessed Hand stood.

The liquid struck the ground midway, but with a glint from the Scotch Broom-shaped brooch, the Bribe was discreetly consummated.

Only then did Lumian speak. His voice resonated within his throat and chest as he enunciated alien syllables.

These were words he had never encountered, sourced from the mystical knowledge of Contractees, empowering him to master their pronunciation and essence.

They fell under the Mystical Language of Fate, an integral part of this arcane tongue.

Lumian's vocal resonance coalesced into silvery-black glyphs, akin to symbols, materializing from thin air.

They descended upon the faux goatskin resting on the altar, melding into a brief yet uncanny covenant.

As the pact solidified, Lumian established an intricate connection with the Abscessed Hand, akin to utilizing the Summoning Dance to anchor it to his very being.

Through this conduit, Lumian gleaned the rudimentary abilities and traits of the Abscessed Hand, sensing its yearnings in the process.

These yearnings were the price Lumian had to pay.

“Locate my body, or godhood shall elude you forever!”

An advance payment and a debt to be settled later... Could this be the unfolding of the Bribe? No, that's not it. Upon sealing a contract, the price is promptly remitted—manifesting as my inexorable fate of ascending to demigodhood. Once I uncover the remaining segments of the Abscessed Hand, the reward shall naturally replace the price... Presently, it's akin to providing ample collateral... Lumian's musings raced as he gleaned the crux of the pact.

Concurrently, he found the coveted spirit world traversal ability from the Abscessed Hand's attributes and qualities, inclusive of its anti-divination, quasi-invincibility, and the skill to snap the necks of those without godhood.

A trait intrinsic to the Abscessed Hand, not a mere ability. Its effects marginally deviated from Lumian's expectations, yet remained within tolerable thresholds.

With Decency's utilization window limited to fifteen minutes, the cost was bearable, and its attributes neared sufficiency. Lumian squandered no time, summoning the other candidates and vowing in ancient Hermes.

“I shall aid you in finding your body. Until then, godhood shall elude me.”

These words fused with the surroundings, morphing into wisps of bluish-black mist that seeped into the faux goatskin parchment.

The Abscessed Hand descended, leaving a tincture of yellow-tinged, sanguineous pus within the contract's vacant space.

Spontaneously, the covenant ignited, yielding myriad silvery-black symbols and words.

They interlinked, configuring an intricate and enigmatic pattern, abruptly condensing onto Lumian's shoulder.

Though concealed beneath his attire, Lumian's psyche conjured an image of his right shoulder.

A curious black seal-like emblem materialized there.

Instinctively, Lumian apprehended that upon activating the contract sigil, he could harness the Abscessed Hand's attributes to traverse the spirit world. Dissolution of the contract was only conceivable upon the demise of either party—a destiny preordained.

Without bothering to experiment with spirit world traversal, Lumian terminated the summoning and embarked on a fresh ritual.

“In the name of The Fool, I summon:

“The vengeful spirit that wanders the void, the headless bride in her eternal plight, and the wellspring of a bloodline's malevolence.”

Once again, the enigmatic illusory portal manifested, enshrouded in bluish-black flames interweaving. A frigid wind swept forth, transforming the summer night into a wintry chill.

Lumian observed a form materialize from within the illusory entrance. Adorned in a vibrant red festive gown, meticulously threaded with gold, the figure stood before him.

Without question, the figure lacked a head, exuding an aura of deep-seated malice and resentment.

Lumian meticulously followed the prescribed procedure—utilizing the liquor as a “bribe,” reciting the contractual pledge. He discerned the price demanded by the Headless Bride.

“Sacrifice a kin or friend.”

“Thank you for your presence,” Lumian murmured with a sardonic smile, concluding the summoning.

From this seemingly fruitless summoning, he gleaned valuable insights. He confirmed that Bribe wielded a degree of influence.

The original demand from the Headless Bride entailed a kin's sacrifice; however, Bribe had managed to expand the scope to encompass friends.

Lumian's sights next shifted to the Human-Faced Mantis. He had formulated a summoning phrase: “The vindictive spirit that wanders the void, a hunter adopting mantis guise, a shapeshifter adept at donning human semblance.”

Amidst a peculiar swooshing sound, an immense, translucent cyan mantis emerged from beyond the illusory door.

Its head bore the visage of youth, handsome and radiant, inadvertently lowering one's guard.

Sensing the summoner's presence and gender, the mantis swiftly transformed into a resplendent woman attired in a black evening gown.

Internally scoffing, Lumian meticulously fulfilled the entire sequence: Bribe, recitation, and perception.

The Human-Faced Mantis delineated three categories of offerings, requiring solely one to be met: "Contractor's reproductive organs; Contractor's capacity for lying; Contractor's immolation at the stake."

Post-Bribe, the stipulations underwent some relaxation, affording an additional choice or two. This entity seeks but a single thing—human anguish... The first aligns with his malevolence towards men. If I were of the female gender, this option likely wouldn't surface... The second corresponds to slanderers and false accusers, while the third aligns with the stake he himself endured... Lumian swiftly concluded.

As a Pyromaniac, the third demand posed no grave challenge. On one hand, he exhibited formidable resistance to flames, and on the other, enduring agony was his forte.

Were this choice absent, Lumian intended to forfeit and subsequently summon several comparable spirit world beings later. Depriving him of the power to lie would markedly undermine his capabilities, rendering survival in a place like Trier implausible. He also wasn't certain if his reproductive organs would return at 6 a.m. after sacrificing them; he didn't want to take the risk.

Without delay, he found the Niese Face he sought from the arsenal of the Human-Faced Mantis's abilities.

"Niese" had been the name of the Human-Faced Mantis during its living days. The essence of this ability leaned more toward illusion than corporeal transformation. Nevertheless, absent the means to nullify it or godhood, piercing through the illusion remained beyond reach.

This occasion saw the black insignia affix to Lumian's left shoulder, accompanied by surges of crimson flames welling from his feet.

Unperturbed by Lumian's actions, they ignited his attire and charred his flesh.

Sensations reminiscent yet distinct from his encounter with Susanna Mattise enveloped him. An amalgamation of familiar and unfamiliar torment coursed through his consciousness, assailing his senses.

Swiftly forsaking his cherished belongings, Lumian clutched the Decency brooch in his palm.

The conflagration endured for a full three minutes. Lumian's skin charred, his clothes imprinting scorched marks onto his body.

For a Pyromaniac, such wounds posed no mortal peril—they scarcely even qualified as severe. He maintained the vitality to prepare for the ensuing summoning.

“The enigmatic entity that roams the upper realm, a mass of flesh bedecked with myriad eyes, a participant in the abyssal realms of nightmares.”

As the chant resonated, a creature of flesh and sinew rolled forth through the illusory door. Each flesh fragment sported a white eye, its pupil veiled in obsidian.

Clasping the aluminum-white military flask, Lumian's grip faltered, and he abruptly descended into a profound slumber, ensnared by the myriad gazes.

After an indeterminate stretch, he snapped back to consciousness, realization dawning that the ritual had concluded on its own accord. The Thousand-Eyed Evil had retreated to the spirit world, forgoing a genuine assault.

I was lulled to sleep by mere sight. Communication is impossible... Also, this level of influence lies beyond the ritual's inherent protection... Lumian exhaled, seizing the Salle de Bal Brise pocket watch to ascertain the time.

Thankfully, I only slept for a few minutes. There's still about three minutes left... Lumian focused, initiating afresh, summoning forth the Shadow of Shriek.

“The spirit that wanders in the void, a confluence of myriad silhouettes, the progenitor of incapacitating shrieks.”

Once more, the mysterious illusory entrance swung ajar. Yet, what met Lumian's gaze wasn't an anomalous shadow coiled into a blob, but a nebulous silhouette draped in a pitch-black armor resembling fish scales.

Distinct from all armors documented in newspapers and magazines, this suit bore scales each akin to miniature, writhing shadows.

Hmmm... Could the summoning incantation have been imprecise, yielding a kindred spirit world creature? It seemingly boasts an incapacitating shriek. Let's first gauge the prospects of cementing a pact... Lumian fathomed the situation and embarked upon another cycle of Bribe, utterance, and apprehension.

The armored shadow stipulated an offering: “A blood tribute of ten or more lives or gold amounting to 100,000 verl d'or.”

Courtesy of Bribe, the prerequisites exhibited leniency, demanding the sacrifices be rendered within three months. Failing to comply would precipitate contract retribution, a potentiality encompassing control loss or, worse yet, fatality.

A sum of 100,000 verl d'or... Lumian discerned this to be modestly manageable, thereby delving into the ability roster and traits of the armored shadow to locate the coveted incapacitating shriek.

While scouring, he happened upon an ability bearing an intriguing nomenclature: “Spell of Harrumph.”

Chapter 319 “Travel”

The Spell of Harrumph derived its name from a combination of a snort from the nose and a harrumph from the mouth, giving it a distinct quality that Lumian found intriguing.

Moreover, the enigmatic armored shadow, while alive, was believed to be either human or a humanoid intelligent creature. Many of its distinct attributes and abilities had been given their own names. These attributes weren't like the dense individuals who relied on Lumian to simplify and assign labels for their ease of remembrance.

Information channeled through the unique connection revealed to Lumian that the Spell of Harrumph was a spell-like ability capable of affecting a Spirit Body.

...

Through the dual sounds, it stirred one's consciousness to induce a mystical transformation, generating a unique fluctuation that surged towards its designated target.

Any creature touched by such a fluctuation would experience severe dizziness at a minimum or even a Psychic Piercing assault at its worst, potentially rendering the target unconscious.

This ability would grow in potency as the user advanced in levels. In essence, it possessed the potential to influence divine entities, provided Lumian also ascended to Sequence 4 or temporarily elevated his level in some fashion.

Impressive. It's on par with the incapacitating shriek. Moreover, harrumphing seems more dignified than indiscriminate shouting... Realizing time was of the essence, Lumian made a commitment and formalized the agreement.

He harbored a genuine curiosity about the additional attributes and capabilities of the armored shadow. Their names held a certain uncanny quality, such as the Night Parade of Ten Thousand Demons and the Soul Devouring Scream.

This instance, the seal-like object descended onto Lumian's right chest, marking the conclusion of the ritual.

Swiftly, he secured a thread around the Decency brooch and returned it to the iron-gray military flask. Dismissing the spiritual barrier, he cleared the altar and retrieved the objects he had laid out.

Subsequently, a ghostly light emanated from Lumian's right shoulder, and he abruptly vanished, traversing into a mystical realm drenched in layers of hues and peculiar creatures.

In the subsequent moment, he exited the spirit world, dazed, reappearing in his bedroom on the second story of Salle de Bal Brise.

As Lumian massaged his throbbing head, he surveyed his surroundings and nodded approvingly.

It's indeed true spirit world traversal. This ability is very useful...

The only problem rested in its exorbitant spirituality cost. With Lumian's Contractee and Pyromaniac enhancements, he could only execute it three to four times. Considering the consumption of flames and the contingency allocation for safety measures, he could employ it once or twice in a relatively intense confrontation.

For a pure Contractee, they could merely "teleport" twice as standard procedure, excluding any other expenditure.

Furthermore, this was contingent on selecting a proximate coordinate. Of course, proximity didn't exclusively signify the immediate vicinity.

The spirit world encompassed a realm of mystique and peculiarity. Up, down, left, right, front, back—even time—intermingled there. It intersected with the real world, governed by its distinct chaos. Beyond concepts linked in nature, everything else seemed scattered without deliberate arrangement.

In essence, Trier as a holistic notion held sway. It boasted a corresponding domain in the spirit world, unsullied by fragmentation or dispersal. Nonetheless, its surroundings extended beyond neighboring towns and villages. It might correlate to a river's conceptual presence in the Southern Continent, or manifest as a settlement projection for undersea beings.

Minus precise coordinates, Lumian could solely “teleport” within Trier's immediate ambit. Otherwise, he risked straying into the spirit world's treacherous realm, a hazardous endeavor indeed.

When he had endeavored to traverse the spirit world previously, all of Trier's locations had materialized within his consciousness as unfamiliar coordinates. This granted him the capacity to “teleport” back to Salle de Bal Brise instead of venturing to remote corners of the metropolis.

Concurrently, Lumian faintly perceived the Highlands Kingdom's City of White, Rapus—his former destination. It wasn't overtly distant in the spirit world from Trier, but neither was it nearby. Directly “teleporting” there remained infeasible for Lumian. He needed to ascertain one or two intermediate coordinates between the two locations.

Remarkable. Lumian acknowledged with satisfaction.

Inclusive of limited uses and range, his spirit world traversal from Abscessed Hand perfectly met his expectations.

Lumian proceeded to the full-length mirror. Activating the black mark on his left shoulder, he observed his charred form transition into that of a middle-aged man, featuring a few strands of silver at his temples. His cheeks were rounded, eyes amber-red, and facial contours dignified. The features were sharp, radiating an approachable aura.

Gardner Martin!

It can replicate one's appearance, physique, and demeanor. Yet actions and mannerisms must stem solely from myself... Lumian evaluated Niese Face's potential.

The transformation had expended a notable degree of spirituality, but its maintenance necessitated but a fraction. He could adopt Gardner Martin's likeness for more than ten hours.

Dispelling Niese Face, Lumian retreated a few paces. Gazing upon the mirror, he opened his mouth. “Ha!”

In response, his spirit surged into the black mark on his right chest. His Spirit Body quivered, releasing an almost imperceptible yellow light from his mouth.

The radiance penetrated the mirror, traversing the wall, vanishing after a span of nearly ten meters.

Effective solely at close quarters... Consuming less spirituality than spirit world traversal yet surpassing Niese Face in expenditure. Applicable four or five times within combat... Lumian, his body marred by burns, exhaled leisurely. He donned his attire, settled onto the bed, and surrendered to sleep.

Temporarily shelving thoughts of the gold he owed the armored shadow and the commitment to locate Abscessed Hand's body, Lumian had ample time for these matters. Current requisites centered on recuperation and rest, alongside allowing the repugnant aura accompanying the Decency brooch to dissipate.

The next morning.

Lumian, clad in a black felt hat, shirt, sweater, and sturdy jacket, pressed the doorbell of Apartment 601 at 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches.

Franca greeted him with a downcast countenance, seemingly taken aback by Lumian's outfit.

"Is your sense of temperature playing tricks on you?"

Lumian inquired, "Have you gotten your hands on genuine mummy ashes?"

"Didn't you ask that very question just yesterday?" Franca snapped.

The answer was no.

A smile tugged at Lumian's lips.

"I'll take you to find a real mummy."

"Where?" Franca was puzzled and curious.

Lumian stepped into the room and replied nonchalantly, "The Southern Continent's Star Highlands."

"How will we get there?" Franca glanced toward the washroom before lowering her voice. "Are you suggesting we bother your Major Arcana card holder?"

"I've merely penned a letter to inquire about a transit junction," Lumian responded with a smile.

"Transit junction..." Franca combined her understanding of the mystical arts and swiftly formulated a hypothesis. "Have you obtained a mystical artifact capable of teleportation?"

Lumian shook his head and elaborated succinctly, "Through my contracted creature."

"What sort of contract yields such extraordinary results?" Franca exclaimed, genuine surprise tinging her words.

She had been wondering over Lumian's haste in filtering contracted creatures. Typically, those amenable to a Sequence 7 contract were fairly commonplace. Moreover, their summoning typically necessitated a ritual, rendering them rather impractical for most confrontations.

Lumian let out a chuckle.

"A unique kind of contract."

"Uh..." Franca studied Lumian carefully, circling around him.

The pants-wearing, shirt-clad Witch cleared her throat and remarked, "Are we considered brothers?"

"Not quite," Lumian answered promptly. "We hold different beliefs!"

Franca lowered her voice again. "Isn't it just superficially Steamed, but actually, it's Mr. Fool?"

Lumian replied piously, "I still maintain some faith in the Eternal Blazing Sun."

After all, he had upheld this faith for nearly six years.

Franca found herself momentarily speechless. After a few seconds, she inquired, "Could we be considered friends?"

"Yes." Lumian now spoke in accordance with his true feelings.

Franca's brows eased.

"Could you teach me that unique contract? Name the price."

She made her request straightforwardly.

Lumian shook his head again.

"I can only employ that contract due to unique circumstances."

"Alright." Franca refrained from pressing further, though a tinge of disappointment lingered.

At that moment, Jenna emerged from the washroom. Lumian asked half-teasingly, "Are you interested in journeying to the Southern Continent?"

"Travel? Why would I want to travel?" Jenna appeared perplexed.

Franca swiftly recounted her need for genuine mummy ashes and Lumian's method of "teleporting" to the Star Highlands. Ultimately, she queried, "Do you wish to come along and observe?"

Jenna deliberated briefly and responded, "Okay."

She recognized her need for greater experience in the realm of Beyonder powers, a necessity for observation, learning, and training.

Furthermore, her maximum geographical range had been confined to Trier's Quartier de la Maison d'Opéra. For a while, she had been captivated by tales of the Southern Continent circulating in the taverns and dance halls.

Lumian assessed his two companions and offered a gentle reminder with a smile, "I'd advise you to don thicker garments. The altitude is considerable, and it's currently winter there."

"Oh..." Franca looked at Lumian and understood why he had bundled up for winter.

Before long, Franca changed into a black coat resembling leather armor and donned dark knee-length pants with plush interiors, adopting the guise of a female mercenary or bounty hunter. Jenna hadn't yet transported her thick clothes, thus she borrowed Franca's clothing. Though their appearances matched, Jenna was shorter, necessitating a tightened belt, secured sleeves, and rolled-up pant legs to prevent impeded mobility.

Lumian reached out and grabbed their shoulders, activating the contract mark on his right shoulder.

A spectral light danced along the seams of his clothing, enveloping Jenna and Franca in a surreal realm, awash with vibrant overlapping hues and enigmatic creatures retreating in every direction.

In an instant, they departed the spirit world, materializing on a desolate island.

Before Jenna and Franca could fully adjust, Lumian initiated spirit world traversal once more.

Upon their return to reality, the Assassins found themselves facing a distant snow-clad mountain peak and an adjacent foreign city dominated by a white edifice.

Jenna soon regained her composure and involuntarily exclaimed, "How magical..."

If she were compelled to encapsulate the magic and articulate her sentiments, a choice of expletives might have been used.

Although not certain if this location was indeed the Southern Continent's Star Highlands, the fact that she could translocate swiftly from Rue des Blouses Blanches to this wilderness underscored the mystical potential of teleportation!

Lumian endured the pulsing headache and the substantial drain on his spiritual energy as he pointed toward the City of White, seemingly unperturbed.

"Proceed inside."

Chapter 320 Mummy

Franca and Jenna couldn't tear their eyes away from the grazing herd of cows, sheep, and horses. The swarthy men donned felt hats and thick blue or red robes, while the local women flaunted their colorful, multi-layered gowns. Numerous white buildings and shops peddling leather products dotted the scene. It was a captivating and unfamiliar sight.

Franca stepped aside as a wooden carriage, drawn by a long-haired bull, trundled by in the biting wind. She glanced at Lumian and Jenna before speaking up.

"Why the silence? Let's engage with the locals."

...

After all, what was the point of wandering without interacting?

Lumian fell momentarily quiet before responding, "I lack sufficient information."

Jenna felt a pang of embarrassment. "I don't know enough either."

All she was acquainted with were tales of romantic exploits featuring Pharaoh queens and adventurers unearthing treasures within rainforests.

"Uh..." Franca gestured dismissively with her right hand. "I'm not much better."

How much is not much? Lumian didn't pry further. He ushered his companions into a shop named Highland Mystic Potion.

The proprietor, Sallent Empaya, an Intisian dressed in a blue coat adorned with gold accents, recognized Lumian right away. After all, his distinctive hair color and appearance set him apart. Moreover, only a few days had passed since their last encounter.

Sallent assessed Franca and Jenna, extending a warm smile to Lumian. "What brings you here this time?"

Lumian, struggling with a headache from expending too much spirituality, got straight to the point. "Real mummy's ashes. I want to see the mummy!"

Sallent's eyes flickered briefly, but he refrained from probing. "Very well, I'll show you."

Being a seasoned purveyor of mummy ashes, he knew these products didn't bestow virility; they were combined with genuinely efficacious medicine before hitting the shelves. However, since the clients didn't inquire about the practicality of real mummy ashes, he saw no need to divulge that information.

Furthermore, he suspected Lumian and the two women intended to purchase a mummy for resale and profit. This was a substantial transaction.

Sallent temporarily closed his shop and guided Lumian, Franca, and Jenna to the rear warehouse, where ordinary herbs were stored. They descended a narrow staircase, reaching the basement door.

Turning to face Lumian and the others, he sought confirmation. "Do you really want to see it?"

It wasn't so much a guilty conscience as a cautionary note.

"Absolutely," Lumian responded without a moment's hesitation.

In the midst of his words, his gaze fixated on the basement's pitch-black wooden door.

It bore a mystical symbol, its form a distortion of dark-green and pale-white hues.

Within, a mix of rudimentary skulls, intertwined arms and vines, and inverted triangles melded to create an enigmatic pattern.

Threads of the same hues radiated outward from these symbols, infiltrating walls, floor, and ceiling alike.

Sallent brought forth a golden key, advancing toward the door. Franca's voice dipped to a hush as she addressed Lumian and Jenna. "Those arcane symbols appear rooted in the domain of Death."

Jenna furrowed her brow. "What significance do they hold?"

Franca's head shook gently as she replied, "I'm uncertain. Generally, these would play a pivotal role in ritualistic magic. Yet, without a wellspring of power, such magic can falter.

"As I understand, the cathedrals of orthodox Churches feature akin arrangements. The devout believers who pray daily lend their spirits and spirituality to sustain the ritualistic magic. While individual contributions may seem modest, their accumulation wields ample strength."

“Perhaps this location holds the power necessary for sustaining ritualistic magic.” Lumian grinned at Franca. “You might have a reason to rejoice. This perspective heightens the likelihood of finding a genuine mummy.”

A relieved sigh escaped Franca's lips. “Hopefully, counterfeits aren't as rampant here as in Trier.”

Perplexed, she inquired, “But why the need to bring us here to see a real mummy? My divination could discern the authenticity of the ashes.”

“To broaden your horizons,” Lumian replied confidently.

Before Franca could curse, he added, “Directly requesting mummy's ashes might tempt him to provide counterfeits. When your divination results manifest on the spot, should I then smash his cabinet or engage in a scuffle? Such violence is hardly ideal.”

Lumian drew on an adage often uttered by Aurore.

Of course, he left out the adverse effects of the three contracts. The Abscessed Hand stoked a yearning to snap a target's neck. The Human-Faced Mantis fueled a heightened disdain for those who unjustly maligned the innocent. The armored shadow goaded him to break free from the shackles of life's confines.

Perhaps Mr. Fool's witness or the boon of Bribe rendered these effects relatively manageable. They were detriments he could subdue with focus, yet their collective might occasionally sparked such impulses.

Simultaneously, Franca and Jenna scoffed, unified in their disdain.

Only Hunters harbored an affection for violence!

At that juncture, after a brief struggle with the lock, Sallent triumphantly swung open the pitch-black wooden door, its surface adorned with a cryptic symbol.

Within the basement passageway, Lumian's eyes landed on wall-embedded oil lamps, forever alight.

Drenched in the dancing hues of dark-green firelight, Franca and her companions trailed behind Sallent, the shopkeeper of concealed curatives, as they ventured into the corridor that lay beyond the portal.

Light permeated the space, yet an illusion of advancing into darkness seized them step by step.

The already cold atmosphere seemed to plummet several degrees Celsius lower.

Sallent proceeded seven to eight meters ahead, navigating past firmly shut grayish-white stone doors. He halted before a chamber positioned at the corridor's midpoint.

These stone doors and the encompassing walls bore symbols akin to those at the basement entrance.

Sallent nudged open the stone door confronting him, unveiling a diminutive sepulcher to Lumian and his comrades.

In the chamber's heart rested an exotic humanoid sarcophagus adorned with a golden base and a kaleidoscope of colors.

“This mummy hails from five centuries ago,” Sallent introduced, drawing near the stone casket and pressing down its lid.

“He seems rather unconcerned about us making off with the mummy...” Lumian mused under his breath.

Franca emitted a soft chuckle, her voice hushed. “Perhaps he simply thinks nothing of us.”

Jenna remained silent during their exchange, her curiosity and trepidation fixated on the innards of the golden sarcophagus.

Within, a corpse swathed in yellowish-brown fabric lay. Its lips were slightly parted, while faint voids marked the spots where eyes once resided. Hints of seeped oil stained its form.

Unrestrained by the foreign surroundings, Franca extracted a mirror and initiated a divination before Sallent's presence.

His eyes flickered momentarily, swiftly reverting to their prior state, as if he'd encountered such phenomena too frequently.

Before long, an aged voice resonated from Franca's mirror, its cadence accompanied by the gentle rush of water.

“A bona fide mummy, albeit not ancient in origin.”

Franca's gaze snapped up at Sallent, the proprietor of the mystic potion store.

Sallent offered an awkward smile in return.

“I fibbed earlier. This mummy isn't a relic from five centuries past. Truth be told, it was crafted just a fortnight ago and dispatched here. However, regardless of origin, it underwent a comprehensive and protracted mummification process. The sole disparity from ancient mummies is the brevity of its interment.”

An “ancient” mummy born a mere fortnight prior? Lumian quirked an eyebrow at Sallent, his tone casual. “Do you hunt down the living to fashion mummies?”

Sallent gently shook his head.

“No need for such methods. The Southern Continent witnesses countless daily deaths. Procuring fresh cadavers requires only a nominal fee. Hiring hunters to track and capture would entail far greater expenses. Undertaking the task personally would exact an exorbitant temporal toll.”

He involuntarily assessed the advantages and drawbacks of multiple strategies.

Post this explanation, Jenna regarded the mummy with a newfound perspective.

It was the body of someone who hadn't long been dead.

His motionless form stood exhibited as a tradable commodity.

Though the two-week-old mummy served its purpose and met the requisites, Franca yearned for superior specimens.

With a sigh, she averted her gaze from the recently minted mummy, prompting Sallent with a question. “Are there older mummies available?”

Sallent hesitated momentarily before treading cautiously. “How about those from last year?”

This constituted the most “ancient” mummy within the basement.

Franca emitted a rueful sigh. “That works too.”

Less enthused, Sallent led the trio to another sepulcher.

Initially presuming Lumian and his companions intended to purchase an entire mummy, Sallent had showcased the most well-preserved specimen. Now, it seemed Lumian merely sought a segment.

The yellowish-brown mummy dating back to the prior year already displayed signs of fragmentation. Not only were lower extremities absent, but its chest and abdomen also sported gaping voids.

With Franca's divination validating its authenticity, Sallent posed his inquiry with diminished enthusiasm. “How much do you require?”

“50 grams,” Franca responded, intending to amass a larger reserve.

Sallent mulled over the request before pronouncing, “500 verl d'or.”

Promptly, Franca remitted the payment, her eyes fixed as Sallent procured a hammer and dirk, employing them to sever a portion of the mummy's arm, akin to extracting ore.

Jenna stood dumbfounded. To her, it seemed somewhat gruesome and brutal.

Though she'd witnessed mob fights and personally taken a life, she'd never encountered someone treating human remains as inexpensive commodities.

Internally, Franca sighed and suppressed her emotions.

This was the stark reality of the Beyonder world and its potion system, yet compared to the boons, it was strangely appealing.

With the fraction of a mummy's arm now in her possession, Franca wordlessly led Jenna out of the tomb, trailed by Lumian and Sallent.

They had traversed scarcely three meters when the kerosene lamps lining the corridor receded, casting an eerie dimness.

Sallent swiveled his head, his demeanor a mix of surprise and uncertainty.