

Inevitability 331

Chapter 331 Spirit Channeling

As Lumian's words reverberated, an inexplicable chill settled over Guillaume Bénét, even in his Spirit Body form.

Simultaneously, a peculiar tug gripped him, causing him to involuntarily convolute and plunge towards a specific direction.

There, a colossal, semi-transparent vortex unfurled, ensconced in a wispy gray fog at its nadir. Within this haze materialized a dimly lit village, populated by spectral forms.

...

One of these apparitions gazed skyward, noticing Guillaume Bénét's struggle against the vortex's inexorable pull.

His pale-white face instantly lit up with excitement and fanaticism as he shouted, "Oh, my deity, my lord, you're here too?"

"Quickly, join us! Hasten your approach!"

The figure belonged to Guillaume Bénét's brother, Pons Bénét.

Sensing Pons Bénét's abnormality, the figures lingering in the dim village looked up at Guillaume Bénét.

Among them, Madonna Bénét, Philippa Guillaume, and the others, who had once been Guillaume Bénét's mistresses, extended their pale-white arms to the sky and smiled blankly.

"Quickly, join us! Hasten your approach!"

Immediately after, Shepherd Pierre Berry, Lumian's comrade Guillaume Berry, Azéma Lizier, and more added their supplicating gestures.

In an instant, a peculiar, pallid forest seemingly sprouted from within the village's dim enclave, its spectral denizens directing their palms towards the padre.

Guillaume Bénét's descent escalated, his Spirit Body verging on fragmentation.

Struggling to counteract the vortex's pull, he sought to resist its sway, aiming to evade its dominion and flee Lumian's profoundly perilous vessel.

He couldn't care less about the Rebirth in the other party's body and the corresponding fate.

That was something he couldn't bear!

Lumian's grin expanded, seemingly attuned to the cacophony of terror and anguish echoing within his own body.

Indeed, possessing him via Rebirth and forcing a possession by luring others over via the Summoning Dance were completely different treatments!

The former would form a connection with his fate and, in an attempt to replace it, it would inevitably trigger the seal. Guillaume Bénét's profound corruption by Inevitability meant that the resonance of this seal's potency was inevitable.

Though Lumian remained ignorant of the precise ramifications, he intuited they would bode ill.

Perceiving Guillaume Bénét's vehement longing to extricate himself, Lumian opted to refrain from thwarting his escape, willingly relinquishing any interference.

Post-Rebirth, save for scenarios involving specific domains such as Sun, Lumian lacked the capability to forcibly expel an uncooperative Guillaume Bénét from his body. Mirror Substitution, too, proved ineffectual in such a case. However, should Guillaume Bénét yearn to depart, the course of action was rendered straightforward.

Ultimately, Guillaume Bénét—having expended a considerable amount of his spirituality—struggled to escape from Lumian's body.

Precisely then, Lumian deftly rotated his wrist, enlisting Distortion anew.

A dark-golden glimmer traversed his chest, heralding Guillaume Bénét's emergence within the palm-sized mirror clasped in Franca's grasp.

Franca's palm coalesced an unblemished frost, which she spread over the mirror's surface.

Instantaneously, Guillaume Bénét's form became ensconced within a veneer of ice, ensnared within the mirror's confines.

Concurrently, Franca summoned black flames, which enshrouded the icy enclosure.

Though the ice in itself was inadequate to bar a Spirit Body's escape from the mirror, the shrouding black flames bore that capability. Should Guillaume Bénét dare venture beyond the ice's protection, the flames awaited to engulf him.

With Guillaume Bénét's Spirit Body securely sealed, Franca glanced up at Lumian—who had removed the paper balls—and directed, “Channel his spirit after we're out. Your flames and anesthetic gas are everywhere.”

With her physique and expenditure, holding on for another two or three minutes sans Mirror Substitution posed no undue challenge. Nonetheless, she sensed Lumian reaching his threshold.

Affirming Franca's directive with a nod, Lumian briskly pivoted and surged towards the Bottle of Fiction's exit.

Consequent to Guillaume Bénét's “demise,” the concealed trap had naturally been lifted.

Having returned to the sacrificial hall, Lumian promptly dissipated the Niese Face, reverting his appearance from that of Franca's hooded visage and black robe.

His upper body bore the telltale markings of being charred, yet owing to his skillful management following the initial digestion of the Pyromaniac potion, his trousers remained unscathed.

This approach, evoking pain, stimulating cerebral activity, and rousing his senses, didn't necessitate subjecting his entire form to incineration—localized scorching proved sufficient.

Observing his somewhat unconventional appearance, Franca—torn between concern and amusement—chimed in with an air of teasing, “Do you have a penchant for masochism? You go through this ordeal every time you engage in combat.”

Lumian directed his attention toward the mirror ablaze in Franca's grip and casually responded, “That's how Hunters are.”

“I'd be deluding myself if I bought into your fabrications. I'm an Instigator, after all!” Franca had borne witness to prior Pyromaniac skirmishes.

Witnessing their conversational exchange, Jenna deduced that their adversary had been ensnared and the situation had reached its resolution. Thus, she emerged from the concealment of the shadows.

Franca graced her with a smile before turning her attention back to Lumian, relaying, “Hold on for a moment. Don't fret. Guillaume Bénét isn't entirely dead yet. Once the Rebirth effect wanes, he'll morph into a recently expired spirit, his faculties adrift. At that juncture, channeling his spirit will prove less hazardous, and we can be sure he doesn't lie.”

Lumian calculated the remaining duration of the Decency brooch's efficacy and remarked, “Let's wait here.”

Leveraging the mystical knowledge gleaned from the boon, he discerned that the Rebirth effect endured merely two minutes—its termination was imminent.

Abandoning their current location to embark on a quest for a more secure locale for spirit channeling would necessitate identifying another concealed setting, subjecting Lumian to an additional hour of repulsion before spirit channeling could ensue.

The optimal time frame for spirit channeling would subsequently elapse.

Moreover, Lumian harbored a reluctance to further procrastinate.

Franca nodded in understanding.

Stepping toward the altar, she set the mirror upon the pitch-black ring symbol crafted from thorns, thereby maintaining the enshrouding black flames.

This facilitated Lumian's observation.

Fixated on Guillaume Bénét's pale and ashen visage, ensnared beneath the duality of black flames and ice, Lumian smirked with brilliant satisfaction gradually etched upon his lips. He uttered, “You're truly foolish!

“If I were you, I'd evade and refrain from launching an assault post Steel Body activation, awaiting the adversary's inevitable fatigue.

“Ah, I neglected to apprise you. My spirituality has plummeted below the safety threshold, thereby making spirit world traversal or even utilization of the Spell of Harrumph impossible. I'm barely able to kindle fire, changing my face, and using the brooch. Should you have bided your time, I would've neared my limit and fainted on the spot.

“I acted rashly and reacted relatively slowly towards the end. On the one hand, I didn't want to expend more spirituality and wanted to save them for critical moments. On the other hand, Mirror Substitution consumed Franca's spirituality. On the other hand, heh heh, it was a trap for you.

“Do you remember the flaming flower? Without this 'gift' to complete Bribe, Franca's curse wouldn't have been able to kill you, a Sequence 5...”

Upon hearing the term Spell of Harrumph and recalling Lumian's actions of knocking out two fake Guillaume Bénets in a row, Franca's eyelids twitched in shock and confusion.

Jenna looked at Lumian, who kept mocking the Spirit Body in the mirror, and tugged at Franca with a measure of concern. She whispered, “Perhaps we should attempt to assuage him?”

“No need.” Franca shook her head and took the initiative to distance herself from Lumian, giving him a “private” space to vent.

Jenna tersely acknowledged and followed Franca to the edge of the sacrificial hall, casting a lingering glance at the visage of pallid, pale-white and ashen hues reflected within the mirror.

Guillaume Bénet emanated a mixture of hostility, terror, and ultimately—despair.

Dill brothel, sixth floor.

On a distant balcony, Albus positioned himself in a discreet corner, his concealed gaze unwaveringly fixed upon Room 602.

Once Lumian and his companions had seemingly “teleported” away, Albus stepped out from his concealment, a wry smile tugging at his lips.

To think a mere Sequence 7 individual wields an artifact that enables traversal of the spirit world?

His connection with Red Boots isn't simple. Whether Gardner Martin is privy to this or remains in the dark, I wonder...

As he muttered, Albus's smile carried a hint of ambiguity and playful intrigue.

50 Rue Vincent, underground sacrificial hall.

Lumian's continuous taunting endured until the Rebirth effect gradually subsided, a shadow darkening Guillaume Bénet's eyes.

Meanwhile, Franca, intently calculating the elapsed time, positioned herself near the altar and erected a wall of spirituality, priming herself for the forthcoming endeavor.

With the moment at hand, she softly intoned the incantation, engaging her self-devised Magic Mirror Spirit Channeling Spell.

Yet, just as success appeared imminent, Lumian summoned the Decency brooch's Distortion once again, rerouting the inquiry of the Magic Mirror Spirit Channeling Spell toward himself.

In a final bid for success within a singular attempt, he even invoked the Niese Face, transfiguring into Franca once more.

Almost instantaneously, the mirror's surface dimmed, casting Guillaume Bénét's pale visage into a slightly blurred disposition.

With his capacity to sustain the Niese Face dissipated, Lumian reverted to his original form and shifted his focus back to Guillaume Bénét.

“Who led you to place faith in Inevitability?”

Although Franca harbored a degree of curiosity, she was mindful of the repercussions of Lumian broaching forbidden topics, thus jeopardizing her corruption. Subsequently, she parted the wall of spirituality, positioning herself at a distance from the altar.

Guillaume Bénét, in a somewhat dazed state, responded, “It was Aurore Lee!

“Upon discovering that the faith of an accursed deity was disseminating, she covertly approached me, affirming that I could harness superpowers without supplicating the bishops. Moreover, I was assured of the prospect of obtaining godhood in the future, potentially ascending to the rank of saint and thereby securing eternal life.

“At the time, I remained skeptical. Nevertheless, my curiosity compelled me to withhold judgment. Over time, however, I witnessed her burgeoning might, my reservations gradually subsiding.”

After a brief lull, Lumian inquired, his blue gaze intense, “Who influenced Aurore Lee to embrace Inevitability?”

“I don't know.” Guillaume Bénét's bewilderment was palpable as he shook his head.

Following a moment of contemplation, Lumian continued his line of questioning, “What profound impression did Aurore Lee leave upon you?”

Guillaume Bénét's countenance shifted, a semblance of recollection mingling with apprehension.

“S-she said that she wasn't Aurore Lee!”

Chapter 332 Sinners

She said she wasn't Aurore Lee? Lumian felt as if a bolt of lightning had struck him, his thoughts freezing in their tracks.

In fact, he could deduce that Aurore Lee wasn't his sister's real name. Someone deliberately settling in a border village wouldn't likely use their true identity. Yet, after almost six years together, he could sense that his sister embraced the name “Aurore Lee.” She never spoke of her original identity or her past life in his presence. Moreover, the forged identity documents she possessed seemed increasingly genuine. When she rose to fame as a best-selling author, their authenticity was unquestionable.

Why would she suddenly say that?

...

And how did it tie into her inexplicable faith in the enigmatic existence known as Inevitability?

A sharp ache throbbed in Lumian's head, jolting him back to reality. Anxiously, he inquired, "Did she mention who she was?"

On the mirror-like surface, no longer shrouded in black flames and frost, Guillaume Bénét, pallid and tinged with a bluish hue, responded with a dazed expression, "She claimed to be Roche Louise Sanson."

I've never heard of such a name... Lumian furrowed his brow and probed further, "Did she mention anything else about this identity?"

Guillaume Bénét shook his head.

"Nothing more."

Lumian pressed his left hand against his temple. After a brief silence, he pressed on, "Was Roche Louise Sanson involved in the plot to sacrifice Cordu in exchange for the arrival of the Inevitability angel?"

Guillaume Bénét appeared to wrestle with himself, but ultimately yielded to the sway of the spirit channeling. His response came forth, candid and unfiltered: "No, that was my doing."

"I was driven by the desire to attain godhood swiftly, to ascend as a saint. Aurore Lee initially approved, only to oppose my plan mere hours later. She was indecisive. Eventually, I chose to conceal my intentions from her and made covert preparations. Later on, she seemed to tacitly endorse our efforts, offering aid during critical junctures. Occasionally, though, she resisted and engaged in acts of destruction, yet she'd quickly relent."

The Aurore you depict almost seems schizophrenic... Lumian found himself clinging to the image of Aurore, yet he couldn't escape the memory of the lizard-like, diaphanous elf emerging from his sister's mouth. He recalled her sporadic awakenings, her discussions on escaping their predicament.

But even in those moments of "clarity," Aurore's behavior hardly resembled normalcy. She even overlooked the option of summoning Hela's messenger for swift assistance, the most direct solution out of their ordeal.

Lumian shifted the conversation, asking, "When did Aurore begin propagating the faith of Inevitability in Cordu?"

Guillaume Bénét appeared even more muddled than before.

"My initial investigation pointed to around May or June of last year. After that, she paid me a secret visit."

Seems to be consistent with my suspicions... Something must have transpired back then to corrupt Aurore... If she was an original believer in Inevitability, she wouldn't wait five or six years before proselytizing... Lumian's expression flickered with pain, which he quickly suppressed.

"Have you ever come across diaphanous, lizard-like creatures in Cordu?"

"No," Guillaume Bénét answered truthfully.

“Do you have any knowledge of a figure known as the Sufferer in Cordu?” Lumian inquired further.

Guillaume Bénét appeared taken aback.

“I don't know. No.”

Lumian's facial muscles twitched involuntarily.

“Have you observed an owl around Aurore?”

“No,” Guillaume Bénét negated again.

Lumian continued to pose inquiries regarding the Cordu catastrophe, yet the answers offered were far from satisfactory. Finally, he probed, “Is there a secret organization or a heretical Church associated with Roche Louise Sanson?”

Guillaume Bénét, his pallid countenance increasingly diffused, finally nodded.

“Yes, it's called Sinners. I now hold the position of one of the Sinners' archbishops.”

Sinners... The heretical Church which believes in Inevitability? Lumian's intrigue grew as he delved further.

“Who leads the Sinners, and who acts as the intermediary for you?”

“I'm uncertain of the leader's identity, but he's the sole individual among all the sinners who possesses godhood,” Guillaume Bénét's hollow voice responded with an eerie timbre. “The individual responsible for my contact is Bouvard Pont-Péro.”

Sole individual possessing godhood... Could it be the Sufferer lurking in my midst? Lumian's mind raced as he continued his probing.

“How can I establish contact with Bouvard Pont-Péro?”

“It's futile,” Guillaume Bénét's ethereal voice replied, a hollowness to its tone. “Upon my demise, he will sense the shift in fate and preemptively erase all traces.

Transfiguration is one of the abilities granted through a pact. He can become anything, but he is no longer himself.”

Can take on any form, but at the cost of his own identity... Prolonged use of Transfiguration might have driven him to complete madness... Perhaps I can visit the asylum and seek out any patients with similar cognitive impairments... I must be careful with acquiring further contract abilities. If there are only three or four negative effects, that's manageable. However, if the list becomes extensive, it not only invites trouble but also provides enemies with exploitable openings... If the padre had encountered a member of the Bliss Society or a bestowed from the Mother Tree of Desire, he would undoubtedly fall victim easily... Lumian gazed at the altar mirror and posed another question, “Why did the Sinners organization send you to Quartier de la Princesse Rouge?”

Guillaume Bénét's indistinct visage lit up with zealous fervor.

“It satisfies my desires and simultaneously serves as a recruitment ground for believers, all in preparation for the upcoming grand ritual. Only by allowing our lord to tread upon this realm can sinners like us seek redemption and baptism, thus escaping our predetermined fates.”

“Did the Sinners organization provide you financial support, or did you amass funds independently?” Lumian aimed to trace the origins of the money for potential leads.

Guillaume Bénét shook his head.

“It's an anonymous deposit from Aurore Lee—no, Roche Louise Sanson. The sum totals 100,000 verl d'or.”

“Dammit, you swine!” Lumian cursed.

While he had foreseen this, the realization that the padre had been using Aurore's earnings to support a courtesan and sustain a lavish lifestyle for recruiting heretics ignited a seething anger within Lumian.

Suppressing his emotions, Lumian let out a scornful chuckle and stated, “Did the Sinners organization not provide you Beyonder characteristics? Have you never consumed a potion?”

Otherwise, the padre would have been even more formidable and difficult to deal with.

“Beyonder characteristics of the Seer, Monster, Apprentice, and Marauder pathways that Inevitability's bestowed are compatible with aren't easily acquired. I've been searching for them.

“Given the adverse effects those contracted creatures have on me, drinking potions from other pathways would undoubtedly lead to a loss of control on the spot.”

Fortunately, my current negative effects remain minimal and feeble. If they were more potent, it could jeopardize my ability to ingest Hunter pathway potions in the future... Lumian's spirituality was dwindling, so he capitalized on the moment to pose one final inquiry.

“What are Sequences 6 to 0 of the Inevitability pathway?”

Guillaume Bénét's voice hollowed further.

“Sequence 6 is Ascetic, Sequence 5 is Fate Appropriator, Sequence 4 is Circle Inhabitant, and Sequence 3 is Sufferer. Beyond that, I am unaware.”

Ascetic... It seems akin to the advancement of an Alms Monk... Why didn't Termiboros inform me? Right; as a victim, He will likely have the Ascetic boon extracted from Him in the future. It's only natural for Him to evade answering related queries. If He remained utterly impassive and too willing to provide an answer, I would have grown wary and suspected a trap... Lumian's gaze lifted slightly, his countenance involuntarily contorting.

“What abilities does an Ascetic possess?”

Guillaume Bénét's voice drifted as he responded, "An Ascetic is defined by endurance, accumulation, and eruption. After accruing one's usual strength within the body, it can be momentarily unleashed during combat, rendering the Ascetic akin to a giant. Accumulating ritualistic processes permits the simplification of certain special rituals, making them applicable in combat."

Akin to a giant... A momentary outburst... Lumian recollected the confrontation between Shepherd Pierre Berry and the investigator, Ryan, along with the metallic giant the padre had morphed into.

Had the metalized Guillaume Bénét not been overly cautious of the Spell of Harrumph and abstained from close-quarter combat, constantly maintaining a safe distance and shifting positions swiftly, thereby thwarting Franca's Psychic Piercing, by amalgamating Steel Body with Ascetic, the padre could have likely outmatched Lumian, who needed to use his spirituality judiciously.

This corroborated Lumian's rationale for disregarding the strange creatures that came with the boon's knowledge and opting to identify a contract target from the spirit world bestiary. If he hadn't, the padre would have been able to determine if the Spell of Harrumph was still at Lumian's disposal and gauging his remaining combat strength. In that scenario, his adversary's battlefield decisions would probably have starkly diverged from the ultimate outcome.

Guillaume Bénét had earlier "shared" details of the simplified ritual.

By enveloping an individual in sheepskin through ritualistic accumulation and intoning the incantation, they could be transmuted into a sheep. A cumbersome and intricate ceremony was unnecessary.

Just as Lumian was on the cusp of inquiring about the abilities of a Sufferer, an acute pang surged through his head, thwarting his continuation.

A pang of disappointment ensued, albeit one he could accept. Had Franca not devised the Magic Mirror Spirit Channeling Spell, Lumian wouldn't have been able to amass such a wealth of answers through his line of questioning.

Lumian engaged his Spirit Vision and concluded the spirit channeling. He took deep breaths as Guillaume Bénét's spirit drifted out of the mirror.

Having calmed down, Lumian suddenly extended his right palm, capturing the padre's Spirit Body.

Though his grasp couldn't control the intangible entity, crimson flames surged forth from Lumian's palm, immolating the already fragile spirit of Guillaume Bénét.

Amid the flames, which burned fiercer than the noonday sun, Lumian watched the apparition writhe instinctively, a pained visage etched upon it. A faint smile curved Lumian's lips as he proclaimed, "Praise the Sun!"

Momentarily bewildered, Guillaume Bénét's form swiftly disintegrated within the flames.

Chapter 333 Gains

Lumian's smile gradually softened as he watched the Spirit Body writhing and wailing within the flames.

This was one of the ways the padre died as he had predicted.

Certainly, when he initially ignited the Abyss Demon Flowers, transforming the derelict mine within the Bottle of Fiction into a fiery inferno, he hadn't anticipated Guillaume Bénét's direct incineration.

...

During that moment, he had relied on his combat instincts and seasoned experience to create an environment that favored his strengths and mitigated his most vulnerable points. The summoning of the Abyss Demon Flowers by the padre had presented an opportunity.

The anesthetic gas produced by the incineration of the Abyss Demon Flowers wasn't his intention. His aim was to battle within an infernal hell.

During that period, his remaining spirituality had been scarce. Nonetheless, a Pyromaniac's resistance to flames significantly outclassed a Fate Appropriator's. Moreover, this resistance was a physical attribute that didn't deplete his spirituality.

As the Bottle of Fiction transformed into a blazing inferno, even the very air could scorch the trachea and lungs. Lumian believed he would ultimately prevail. He could outlast Guillaume Bénét, enduring until the flames extinguished themselves due to lack of fuel.

With his grasp of the Inevitability pathway, and in the absence of unforeseen deviations for Sequence 6 Beyonders, Guillaume Bénét's constitution was merely more robust than that of an ordinary person. His strength lay in his flexibility and tolerance, rather than fire resistance.

Lumian's observations during the Cordu confrontations validated this point. Both Guillaume Bénét and Pierre Berry, individuals who had clearly progressed beyond Sequence 7, exhibited remarkable combat capabilities, albeit lacking commensurate defensive attributes.

Lumian hadn't anticipated the padre contracting the Steel Body ability. This ability possessed pros and cons. On the one hand, it thwarted Lumian's initial plan for an infernal hell. On the other hand, it curtailed the padre's own capabilities, granting Lumian an opportunity to contend more effectively and unseal the entrance to the Bottle of Fiction. This would permit his accomplice to join the fray and offer assistance. Lumian subsequently exploited Guillaume Bénét's determination to eliminate unnecessary obstructions by dealing with Franca first. He then improvised, crafting a lethal snare.

Amidst the sizzle of burning air, Guillaume Bénét's wailing Spirit Body disintegrated swiftly, gradually dissipating.

With the task accomplished, Lumian pivoted, acknowledging Franca and Jenna with a nod, signifying his completion.

In the ensuing instant, he staggered toward the altar, retrieving the skins of cow, sheep, and dog.

These items were whole, exuding a sinister aura upon closer inspection.

These constituted specialized hides, amassed through the initial half of the Animal Creation Spell ritual, harnessed by leveraging Ascetic powers for accumulation. Upon grasping the corresponding incantation and enveloping individuals and oneself with these skins, the Animal Creation Spell could be executed outright.

Although Lumian hadn't yet deciphered the predetermined incantation for animal creation or its nullification, these obstacles could be surmounted in due course. He could, for instance, detain

Paulina, the padre's butler, and others to determine if they possessed such knowledge. Alternatively, he could engage a Cryptologist of the Marauder pathway to decode the incantation. He could even resort to trial and error, applying his knowledge of the Inevitability domain and his comprehension of Guillaume Bénet's persona. Last of all, he could use divination to get any clarity on success.

Thus, these two sheepskins, a single cowhide, and two dogskins held considerable value. Employed judiciously, they could unleash unparalleled effects. Guillaume Bénet had nearly beguiled Lumian previously by adopting the guise of a massive, brown-furred dog, attempting to flee Rue Vincent and sever their destined encounter. However, his fanaticism in Inevitability's boon and his greed due to his contract had overridden reason. This led him to transition from prey to hunter, setting a trap in reverse.

When Lumian's body began to sway as if he had lost his footing, Franca and Jenna lent their support, each helping him bear a share of the cow, sheep, and dog skins.

In that instant, the Bottle of Fiction quaked.

Stripped of Guillaume Bénet's reinforcement and subjected to the infernal hellfire for a duration, it eventually fractured akin to ice, its fragments plunging into the void.

The derelict cavern, encompassed by its confinement, unveiled itself to Lumian and his companions through the secret door. All the Abyss Demon Flowers had been reduced to ashes and strewn across the ground. The flames had exhausted their combustibles, and bereft of Lumian's spirituality, most had dwindled to cinders. Only select regions persisted with a crimson luminescence, which was waning steadily.

Lumian glanced at Franca and said, "I'll head back to Rue des Blouses Blanches through Underground Trier. Carry the Earth Blood ore as you make your way to the surface."

Once the Decency brooch was removed, Lumian would inevitably be scorned by those around him. Should he retrace his steps, numerous mishaps could befall him. Alternatively, if he didn't remove it, an alert would be triggered within two to three minutes, attracting the attention of nearby official Beyonders or concealed factions.

Given the potential complications involved in carrying the Earth Blood ore into the underground, coupled with the possible difficulties Jenna might encounter upon receiving it, Franca nodded, pursing her lips, and turned toward Jenna. "Follow Ciel. He's at his limit. He might not even stand a chance against a dog."

"If it's the same dog as before, I wouldn't be able to defeat it," Lumian muttered.

As the exit on the opposite side of the abandoned mine remained unobstructed, a frigid gust swept into the sacrificial hall, dispersing the anesthetic gas with the fragmentation of the Bottle of Fiction. Lumian staggered onward, arriving at the charred remains of Guillaume Bénet. He kicked the body and turned it over, ensuring nothing was concealed within.

Lumian picked up the iron-gray military alcohol flask and advanced toward the abandoned mine's exit. There, he noticed a brown-furred dog skin that no longer bore a sinister aura.

This particular area had avoided incineration, leaving the dog skin intact. Nevertheless, the process of reconstituting the Animal Creation Spell ritual was mandatory. Only through the application of an Ascetic's ability could it regain its status as a Beyonder item.

Beyond the abandoned mine's exit, two objects were propped against the rocky wall.

One comprised a kerosene-lit lantern, while the other was a dark-green canvas backpack favored by adventurers and mercenaries.

Lumian hoisted the backpack, finding it surprisingly weighty. It was almost too heavy to lift.

Curious, Franca crouched down and unfastened the backpack. Within it lay gratifying gold bars, stacks of banknotes, and golden coins.

“Wow!” Franca exclaimed.

So much money? Lumian's initial thought was: Thank goodness, the padre didn't expend all of Aurore's accrued royalties. This was followed by a rather visceral reaction: F*cking dammit, this man is so sinister!

Evidently, Guillaume Bénét had anticipated the possibility that Paulina and the others might not escape. In such an eventuality, Lumian and his companions could deduce that the padre had chosen an alternate escape route based on the scarce funds carried by these Inevitability believers. Consequently, they would converge on the basement, inadvertently walking into a trap.

“Not too shabby, not at all,” Franca remarked, grinning. “While these heretics might not drop characteristics, they do drop other spoils.”

Indicating upward with her hand, she continued, “I'm heading back up. Pass me this dog skin.”

She relinquished the three ritualistic hides to Jenna and returned to 50 Rue Vincent, clutching Guillaume Bénét's dog skin.

Jenna slung the dark-green canvas bag over her shoulder, gripping the five sinister hides. She observed as Lumian picked up the lantern and kindled it.

After a few strides through the dim tunnel outside the abandoned mine, Lumian promptly removed the Decency brooch and placed it in another military alcohol flask hanging from his waist, sinking it to the bottom of the liquor.

Lumian took a few more steps before suddenly shuddering. He turned around, glancing at Jenna who was trailing behind.

Jenna, clasping the cow, sheep, and dog skins while toting the canvas bag, bore a somber expression, marked by repugnance. She struggled to speak, her voice faltering, “I-I can control myself. Dammit, I won't beat you up!”

Though Lumian was skeptical, he had no choice but to continue his journey.

After seven to eight minutes, he encountered an abandoned tunnel and settled into a corner, awaiting the dissipation of the Decency brooch's adverse effects. He seized the opportunity to rest and recuperate some of his spirituality.

The events that transpired at 50 Rue Vincent remained unknown to anyone as Franca methodically erased all evidence and conducted an anti-divination process in the manner befitting a Demoness.

Throughout this endeavor, she combed through every room. Vigilant against potential corruption, she refrained from delving too deeply, though her explorations yielded neither valuable clues nor significant items of interest.

Ultimately, she returned to the parlor on the ground floor, rousing the unconscious impostor Guillaume Bénét.

The impostor Guillaume Bénét gazed at the cloaked figure adorned in a black robe, a brown dog skin clutched within her grasp. For a fleeting moment, he experienced a sensation akin to being trapped within a dream, unable to awaken.

Franca emitted a soft chuckle.

“As you can see, we've killed that devil.”

In her eyes, the impostor Guillaume Bénét was no longer identical to the padre. He had become very unfamiliar.

Perhaps this was his true appearance.

“I-I...” The impostor Guillaume Bénét stammered in surprise and elation, “Are you here to aid me?”

“We're Demon Hunters,” Franca fabricated. “What else can you tell us about this devil?”

Though her Magic Mirror Spirit Channeling Spell enabled Lumian to glean extensive information from Guillaume Bénét, its reach had limitations. It could not cover every facet. Further inquiry into relevant individuals was imperative to avert the risk of overlooking crucial leads.

The impostor Guillaume Bénét found the shrouded woman before him remarkably affable. He contemplated briefly before responding, “Other than engaging in an affair with my wife and indulging in steak and mutton chops, there's nothing particularly remarkable about that devil.

“Yes... I-it vanishes for one day each week before resurfacing without fanfare.”

Disappearing once a week? Franca acknowledged this detail and pursued further inquiries.

Having exhausted the potential for extracting additional information, she smiled and subtly instigated the impostor Guillaume Bénét.

“If I were in your position, I'd hastily depart this location. Your wife is akin to a devil.

“I would relocate any valuable possessions to regions where my identity remains unknown. I'd purchase a new residence, enter a fresh marriage, and embark on a new chapter.”

Guillaume Bénét's heartbeat hastened, and his resolve to stand his ground waned.

In the ensuing moment, he observed the woman before him liquefy akin to melting ice.

Chapter 334 Clues

In the abandoned tunnel, Lumian's eyes snapped open.

Unintended slumber had overtaken him, but it also served to rejuvenate his spirituality. At the very least, the pounding in his head had ebbed away, and the searing fire coursing through his veins, organs, and flesh had altogether abated.

Lumian's sight plunged into unadulterated darkness. His hands groped for the lantern that had been snuffed out, and after lighting it, he noticed Jenna. Clad in the guise of a female mercenary, she sat diagonally across from him. She reclined against the tunnel's wall, her gaze affixed to the dark-green canvas backpack and the five ritualistic hides splayed before her.

...

Sensing the corresponding motion, Jenna looked up at Lumian.

After scrutinizing him for a few seconds, she playfully jested, "Finally, you're no longer as annoying."

Have the negative effects of the Decency brooch been lifted? Lumian instinctively exhaled a sigh of relief.

Jenna's lips curled into a grin as she rose, hoisting the dark green canvas backpack onto her shoulder. She told Lumian, "Earlier, I entertained notions of beating you up and painting your face with dog poop while you slept. But I managed to restrain myself."

"Much appreciated," Lumian said, his gratitude tinged with sarcasm.

With the backpack slung casually over one shoulder, Jenna stooped to gather the five ritualistic hides. Her smile bore an air of leisure as she uttered, "You're welcome."

And with that, she strode toward the tunnel's exit, a smile dancing on her lips.

"Chalk it up to me treating you as a friend?"

You're mocking me again... Lumian grumbled under his breath, picking up the lantern before following suit.

Apartment 601, 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches.

Franca, now dressed in her usual attire—a blouse and light-colored breeches—awaited Lumian and Jenna's return.

Her eyes traveled over Lumian's scorched upper body, and a grin formed on her lips.

"Jenna didn't take the opportunity to stab you a few times? Decency's negative effects aren't as potent as I'd imagined."

Jenna interjected before Lumian could respond, "For the first half-hour, it was a real struggle. I had to hide outside the tunnel where he was resting. Every few minutes, I checked for potential threats from below ground, the ceiling, or behind the rock walls. But even then, I seriously contemplated collapsing the tunnel and burying him alive."

That's not what you said just now... Lumian couldn't help but glance at Jenna.

For a moment, he couldn't tell if the Instigator was telling the truth in the abandoned tunnel or if she was telling the truth now.

Franca chuckled and gave Jenna a thumbs-up.

“That couldn't have been easy. You maintained your vigilance, even in a semi-enclosed, deserted tunnel. You anticipated attacks from below, the cave's ceiling, and the very walls surrounding him.”

Jenna's brows relaxed, and her smug smile was unmistakable.

“You're always feeding me those horror tales, remember? Like hands emerging from the earth to grab ankles, bloody heads dangling from ceilings, or figures springing from walls to embrace the protagonist.”

Every night's entertainment involves retelling horror stories to Jenna? Lumian glanced at Franca, sensing that her intentions might run deeper.

“See? Those stories have their uses!” Franca beamed.

Then she turned her attention to Lumian.

“Need a doctor?”

The burns appeared quite severe.

“No need. For a Pyromaniac, it's merely a minor scrape.” Lumian refrained from mentioning that he would be fully recovered by 6 a.m. the following morning. “And if things worsen, I can always seek out Rat.”

His nurtured Planter hadn't risen to the ranks of a Sequence 8 Doctor yet, so his assistance was rather limited at the moment.

Observing Lumian's lack of visible discomfort, Franca's concern lessened. She picked up the dark-green canvas backpack Jenna had left on the armchair and prepared to place it on the coffee table to meticulously tally their spoils.

Casually, Lumian pushed aside cups, plates, newspapers, and magazines that cluttered the table, creating enough space.

Glancing around, he noticed the magazine's title: Women.

It was a widely read weekly among middle-class Intisien women, showcasing Trier's latest fashion trends, lifestyle advice, and beauty tips. The Loen Kingdom had its own bootleg version, Ladies Aesthetic.

Lumian raised his head with a smile, and his gaze shifted to Franca, a playful question in his eyes: “Oh, you read such magazines?”

Franca pursed her lips and puffed out her chest in response: “What's wrong with me reading Women?”

After their brief exchange, Franca unzipped the backpack and removed banknotes, coins, and gold bars.

“Roughly 60,000 verl d'or,” she assessed after a moment's calculation.

In a little over two months, the padre had managed to deplete 40,000 verl d'or of Aurore's savings. And all that without acquiring Beyonder characteristics or obtaining any mystical items... The more Lumian pondered, the more vexed he grew.

It wasn't that the padre lacked options for mystical items; rather, suitable ones were proving elusive. On the one hand, his status as a heretic warranted caution, limiting his exposure. He didn't frequent many mysticism gatherings, and thus remained ignorant about numerous aspects. On the other hand, his slew of contracted creatures came with many negative repercussions. Several mystical items would be counterproductive or perilous for him. Some might even bring about abrupt, fatal consequences.

Franca pondered for a moment before addressing Lumian and Jenna, "All the gold is Ciel's share. I'll take half of the remaining assets. Jenna, you and Anthony can divide the rest. Let's decide on the distribution once Anthony returns and we see what he's managed to acquire. Does that sound fair?"

This arrangement would allocate around 30,000 verl d'or to Lumian and 15,000 to Franca.

"I'm fine with that," Jenna responded with a hint of concern. "But Anthony still hasn't come back. Dammit, could something have happened to him?"

"If it were anyone else, I might suspect trouble, but Anthony is a Psychiatrist. He's highly skilled in reading people, so falling into a trap is unlikely for him. Plus, he's an experienced information broker. His tracking abilities are on par with mine or Ciel's," Franca explained with a smile. "Most importantly, while waiting for you two, I used Magic Mirror Divination to ensure his safety. Heh, it might actually be a good sign that he's taking so long. It suggests he hasn't lost his target and might have gained something."

"Why do you have to explain so much instead of just saying you checked through divination?" Lumian quipped, finding amusement in the situation.

Franca made a tongue-clicking sound and chuckled.

"You don't get it. This is about not solely relying on divination."

She gestured toward the five ritualistic hides.

"Are those the components for the Animal Creation Spell? Can we use them?"

"At the moment, only I can utilize them," Lumian replied, shaking his head. "And I haven't obtained Guillaume Bénét's preset incantation yet."

Franca's expression showed a tinge of disappointment as she settled into her recliner.

After a few seconds, her smile returned.

"By the way, I've discreetly informed the authorities using my contacts that a wanted criminal is hiding at 50 Rue Vincent. Once Guillaume Bénét's death is confirmed, we should be eligible for a bounty of around 20,000. Should we stick to our initial plan for distributing that?"

Entrusting this task to Jenna wasn't feasible. It could raise suspicions that Lumian Lee was among the people she associated with.

Anthony Reid, the information broker, was the most suitable choice, but his absence raised concerns. Franca worried that further delays might lead the police to uncover the situation at 50 Rue Vincent before they could claim the bounty.

Once Lumian and Jenna acknowledged the plan without objections, the trio settled in to await Anthony Reid's return.

After a few minutes, the seated Lumian leaned forward, fixing his gaze on Franca and Jenna. In a measured tone, he said, "There's a matter I need your analysis on."

With Aurore's affairs, he often found himself grappling with his emotions and straying from rationality. This was why he wanted to hear perspectives from Franca and Jenna.

One of them shared a connection with Aurore, yet their bond was markedly different from Lumian's deep tie with Aurore. The other had no direct involvement, making their viewpoints invaluable in approaching the situation from diverse angles.

"Sure," both Franca and Jenna responded in unison, adopting a professional demeanor by shifting their postures.

For the first time, Lumian recounted the events in Cordu. While he omitted certain details such as the Inevitability angel and anything related to the dreamscape, he provided an overview of the catastrophe. This encompassed Aurore's unusual behavior, Louis Lund, Madame Pualis, Guillaume Bénét, and the rest.

Franca had some prior knowledge, but Jenna was largely unfamiliar with this narrative. As Lumian spoke, the underground singer of Salle de Bal Brise and apprentice actress at Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons found herself transported into a world that seemed both distant and strangely familiar.

While the notion of the Animal Creation Spell was already unnerving, they weren't prepared for concepts like "men giving birth" and "babies scaling walls like birds."

It was madness, utter madness!

Franca's primary concern, however, revolved around Aurore's transformation. She had harbored curiosity about Muggle's death in Cordu but hadn't dared to probe too deeply, fearing it might agitate Lumian.

Franca couldn't believe it when she realized the source of the problem was Aurore. This didn't match her impression of Muggle at all.

Aurore's revelation that she wasn't Aurore Lee in the presence of Guillaume Bénét caught Franca off guard. Her initial surprise morphed into a grave expression.

Soon, Lumian narrated the concluding sacrificial ritual. Aurore's sudden awakening within the altar and her act of shoving him to safety allowed him to survive.

In response to this account, Franca abruptly rose from her seat.

Baffling Lumian and Jenna with her actions, she hurried to her bedroom, returning with a stack of papers in hand.

These were Aurore's grimoires, transcribed by Lumian who harbored a suspicion that something might be awry. He had hoped Franca could offer insights.

The papers were spread across the coffee table, and Franca extracted one sheet, her expression morphing into a blend of trepidation and seriousness. She began, "I think I know what's wrong."

Lumian looked over in surprise and saw that the notebook had a copy of the Warlock spell known as Soul Summoning.

A supplementary spell designed to aid spirits in separating from the flesh or to help Astral Projections find their spirits when adrift in the spirit realm.

Having previously studied the spell structure, Lumian had discerned no problematic elements. It wasn't associated with any evil god.

However, Franca's words carried a weight that demanded attention. Lumian directed his gaze to the spell once more, focusing on the date and its origin.

Chapter 335 Another World

Lumian withdrew his focus from the grimoire and turned his attention to Franca.

"Is there a problem with that?"

He had meticulously studied the Soul Summoning Spell on numerous occasions. If there had been a problem, he should have uncovered it sooner.

...

His limitation lay in his inability to learn the spell and discern its ultimate effects. However, as a Pyromaniac, he didn't possess the necessary capacity for such learnings, being incompatible with the corresponding Sequence.

Franca remained silent for a few seconds before speaking up, "What happens when the Soul Summoning Spell is used on others?"

"It enables a spirit to reunite with the body from which it was separated, providing a means to call back Astral Projections lost in the spirit world, thus offering an opportunity for reconnection with their physical forms," Lumian began, describing the spell based on Aurore's grimoire before offering a personal example for clarity. "In the previous battle, if I had been afflicted by Guillaume Bénet's Soul Assimilation Mystic Spell, resulting in severe disorientation, the Soul Summoning Spell might have roused me from unconsciousness. Naturally, the premise here is that there exist Beyonders with the ability to learn and employ this spell."

Franca disregarded Lumian's answer and inquired with gravitas, "What if one were to employ it on oneself?"

What kind of question is that? Lumian pondered for a moment and asked, "It would be ineffective. If no signs of separation between spirit and body are evident, the spell would have no impact when

cast on oneself. If there's already a problem resembling such a condition, then one wouldn't be able to employ any spells at all.”

“But what if, hypothetically...” Franca began before her words trailed off.

Jenna, observant and quick-witted, glanced at Franca, then at Lumian before rising from her seat and flashing a smile.

“We've been engrossed in discussion for quite a while. Aren't you both feeling hungry? How about I get some afternoon tea?”

“Sure,” Lumian agreed on Franca's behalf.

He sensed that Franca was on the brink of revealing something that might be problematic if Jenna caught wind of it. This was why she stopped short in the midst of speaking.

Lumian had already contemplated introducing Jenna to Mr. Fool's faith. They were comrades now, destined for numerous joint endeavors. In such scenarios, certain secrets couldn't be concealed, and in constantly doing so, would inevitably hinder collaboration.

As for whether to share information about the Tarot Club and Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society, Lumian hadn't reached a conclusion.

After careful consideration, he determined that preaching to Jenna would be more fitting once she became a Witch. Her Sequence was still too low, and she lacked the strength to shoulder the weight of such knowledge. Too much information could make her vulnerable and inadvertently divulge secrets. However, Sequence 7 Witches of the Assassin pathway represented a qualitative transformation below the demigod tier, empowering Jenna to fend for herself.

While Lumian remained unfamiliar with the Sequence 5 of this particular pathway—its name and the Beyonder powers it encompassed—he believed that a Sequence 6 Demoness of Pleasure didn't manifest a drastic metamorphosis compared to a Witch. The latter could even alter an individual's gender, illustrating the considerable gap in their capabilities.

Franca's gaze followed Jenna's retreating figure until the sound of her gradually fading footsteps reached her ears. She settled into a cross-legged position on the recliner, emitting a soft sigh.

“It's not that Jenna couldn't know about this, but I'm concerned that it might make her fearful of me, that she'll distance herself and view me in a different way.”

Lumian didn't pose the question: “Aren't you worried I might react similarly?” He retook his seat, patience etched on his features as he awaited Franca's explanation about the Soul Summoning Spell.

Franca's lips pursed, her demeanor wavering between hesitation and apprehension. After a beat, she chuckled self-mockingly.

“It's also why I sensed a dangerous aura in this matter—otherwise, I wouldn't have even thought about sharing this with you. I would have kept it to my grave. Uh, there's another reason too—your Spell of Harrumph's origins are of great significance to me. I hope you'll lay bare all the details with me, just as I'm about to disclose my secret to you.

“Sigh, we, members of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society, share one commonality—we all come from another world!”

With that, Franca slouched further into the recliner, seemingly drained of energy.

Observing a Demoness of Pleasure adopt such a posture inadvertently fueled a subtle warmth within Lumian, despite his thoughts being directed elsewhere.

“Another world?” Lumian echoed, genuine surprise coloring his voice.

This was an outcome that hadn't even crossed his mind.

Such a possibility was one that ordinary individuals would scarcely contemplate and a rarity even within the confines of fiction.

In a fleeting moment, he sensed an odd alignment with this notion.

With a conscious effort to rein in his emotions, he inquired thoughtfully, “Is this the ‘home’ my sister often speaks of—the place she claims she can never return to?”

Initially, Lumian had surmised that his sister's homeland had been ravaged by conflict or catastrophe, hence her assertion of being unable to return. Otherwise, armed with her Warlock strength, she could have surreptitiously revisited, even if she was being pursued by the entire world.

Subsequently, Lumian discovered Aurore's status as a Trierien, causing him to find her references to an enigmatic “home” perplexing.

Franca's expression shifted into one of complex emotions upon hearing Lumian's question. Her countenance was a blend of wistfulness, melancholy, and sorrow.

“Does she frequently speak of ‘home’?” Franca inquired, her eyes briefly shuttered to mask the shifting emotions within.

Without awaiting Lumian's reply, Franca's lips pursed, and she continued, “Think of it as another planet or alternate dimension.”

Lumian dipped into his memories, muttering to himself, “No wonder she enjoys climbing up to the rooftop to gaze at the cosmos...”

“The cosmos...” Franca echoed with a sigh.

A hushed ambiance enshrouded Apartment 601 as Lumian and Franca delved into their introspective reveries.

After a pause, a memory resurfaced within Lumian's mind.

Madam Magician had mentioned evil gods like the Mother Tree of Desire existing outside our world, separated by a barrier. These entities perpetually seek methods to breach that boundary.

Lumian's gaze shifted toward Franca, and he voiced his thoughts, “Could it be that all of you are spawn of an evil god released into this world?”

“Pfft!” Franca immediately shook off her contemplative state. “Do we look anything like that to you?”

“No,” Lumian responded after a brief pondering, “You're far too weak for the efforts of the evil gods to be expended in sending you here. They could have instead focused on sending more of Their saints. Or perhaps They are pinning Their hopes on your potential growth?”

After all, being weak had its own advantages. Infiltration through the barrier would be less likely to be detected.

Amused and slightly annoyed, Franca was tempted to refute his words, but tangible evidence eluded her grasp, leaving her with little recourse.

“In any case, I've come to believe in Mr. Fool. Not one member of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society whom I've encountered shares faith in an evil god.”

“Even if they did, they might not reveal it to you...” Lumian muttered.

Franca ignored his comment and continued, “I also remain uncertain about the why behind our transmigration. I've been seeking an answer for quite some time. What I do know is that we arrived in this world as spirits and found ourselves reborn within other individuals' bodies. It's comparable to Guillaume Bénét's process of Rebirth.”

Drawing on this analogy, Lumian effortlessly comprehended the situation of Franca and her companions in the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society.

“In other words, you inhabit the bodies of other people?”

“Yes.” Franca cast a sidelong glance at Lumian, remarking, “Are you disheartened to learn that the sister you hold dear is essentially a wandering spirit occupying another's body?”

“Why would I be disheartened?” Lumian responded casually. “Aurore Lee, the person who took me in and shared my life in Cordu for nearly six years, is my sister. I care not for the past of that body or its history.”

Franca seemed to seek Lumian's perspective on her own behalf, “Don't you find this situation morally dubious? Do you not consider your sister and me as thieves who appropriate the corpses and lives of others? Does this not present you with moral dilemmas or conflicts?”

“I have no morals,” Lumian replied calmly.

Expanding upon his statement, he added, “I show kindness to those who are kind to me.”

Franca's mouth slightly agape, she struggled to find an immediate rejoinder.

Lumian glanced at her and said, “That person is already deceased. It's a pragmatic use of available resources. If guilt weighs on you, treat her—no, his family well. Perhaps even fulfill some of his unfulfilled desires.”

“True.” Franca pressed her lips together, nodding in agreement.

Steering the conversation back to its initial trajectory, she inquired, “What might occur if individuals like us were to employ the Soul Summoning Spell on ourselves?”

“Could it summon a departed spirit? And if there's an underlying issue with the spirit itself...” Lumian's train of thought expanded abruptly.

Simultaneously, he recalled a line of inquiry introduced by Madame Hela, the vice president of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society.

“Muggle's parents and other relatives likely remain alive in this world. For some reason, she distanced herself from them and refrains from returning to Trier. It's unclear whether there's something amiss with them or if they've come into contact with heretics...”

Did Madame Hela already harbor suspicions? Lumian's brows furrowed as he whispered,

“Could Roche Louise Sanson be the original boyd's spirit? Is she and some of her family members associated with Inevitability, perhaps even linked to the Sinners organization?”

“Continuing our investigation in that direction is indeed a possibility,” Franca admitted after a moment's contemplation. “Two other questions arise. Why did Muggle resort to the Soul Summoning Spell for herself? Did the April Fool's member who sold her the spell foresee this outcome?”

Franca had chosen to share the secret of their transmigration with Lumian, sensing that something might be awry within the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society and discerning an impending threat.

Lumian offered a subdued nod, his expression void of emotion. A subtle smile played upon his lips as he ventured, “You mentioned that April Fool's Day was formed by members of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society who are disheartened by the future and seek only joy. Could it be that the individual who sold Aurore the Soul Summoning Spell hoped to experience such amusement?”

Franca fell into a brief contemplative silence before replying, “I don't know. I'll take charge of locating the April Fool's member and delve into their motivations.”

Lumian offered a curt acknowledgment. “I'll follow the trail of Roche Louise Sanson.”

With the conversation surrounding the Soul Summoning Spell concluded, an interim quiet settled within the living room of Apartment 601.

After a pause, Franca exhaled softly and told Lumian, “You can now tell me about the Spell of Harrumph.”

Chapter 336 Armored Shadow's Origins

Lumian shifted his focus away from thoughts of Roche Louise Sanson, the Soul Summoning Spell, and April Fool's. He began recounting the tale from the very beginning, all at the behest of Franca.

“In the wake of the Cordu disaster, I found myself tainted by the corruption of the evil god, Inevitability. Fortunately, the protection granted to me by Mr. Fool allowed me to retain my sanity, preventing me from transforming into a monster.

“This corruption, a curse and yet a blessing, is now being extracted in stages, as per the instructions of Madam Magician. The aim is to channel this corruption into my own power, finding equilibrium with the corresponding Sequence Beyonder characteristic.”

Franca was enlightened.

“So, what you were referring to as a 'special contract' is essentially the power of a Contractee? No wonder you mentioned it's impossible for me to learn it.”

Since Lumian didn't know the powers of a Sequence 6 of the Inevitability pathway, she deduced his current state as a dual Sequence 7 Pyromaniac and Contractee.

Lumian nodded.

“That's why Guillaume Bénét doesn't dare to meddle with my fate recklessly. The degree of corruption within me is rather substantial.”

A sudden revelation crossed Franca's mind. “To require Mr. Fool's safeguard, it means there must be godhood involved. Could there be a chance for me to receive similar boons?”

Do you want to give everything a shot? Lumian clicked his tongue and asked, “Are you prepared to seek out the Great Mother, engaging in daily cycles of pregnancy, childbirth, and breastfeeding? Alternatively, do you wish to put faith in the Mother Tree of Desire and drag stray dogs to bed?”

“Hiss...” Franca gasped and said, “I was merely musing. Engaging in the risky business of following an evil god is out of the question for me. The immediacy of gaining Mr. Fool's protection by merely brushing against the power of an evil god, much like you, is a rarity indeed.”

“This isn't a mere brush against power.” To dispel Franca's unrealistic thoughts, Lumian divulged a little more. “The power of Inevitability is sealed within me. In essence, I beseech Mr. Fool and the corruption within me, for a boon instead of the entity known as Inevitability. This approach is pivotal for ensuring my very survival. Otherwise, I risk becoming unrecognizable or just dying abruptly.”

Franca instinctively exhaled and said, “Just tell me about the Spell of Harrumph.”

Lumian restructured his narrative, stating, “To prevent any indirect influences from Inevitability, I gave up the strange creatures that accompanied the knowledge bestowed by the boon. Instead, I obtained a wealth of information about creatures from the spirit world through Madam Magician. You know the rest.

“The Spell of Harrumph originates from a creature of the spirit world that I summoned. Initially, I aimed to summon the Shadow of Shriek. However, whether due to my invocation being witnessed by Mr. Fool or my summoning incantation lacking precision, I can't say for certain, but the entity I summoned greatly diverged from the description of the Shadow of Shriek...”

Lumian delineated the relevant summoning incantation, the concept driving its formulation, the Armored Shadow's visual attributes, and its array of capabilities, all in meticulous detail. He even used his barely-passable drawing skills to illustrate a rudimentary schematic.

Fish Scale Armor... Spell of Harrumph... Night Parade of Ten Thousand Demons... Soul Devouring Scream... Franca softly uttered these names to herself while gazing at the sketch on the coffee table, her gaze seemingly distant.

Lumian probed, "Is there an issue?"

Were Aurore present, would she also react in a similar fashion?

Franca snapped back to the present, her expression a blend of solemnity and exhilaration.

"That Armored Shadow might very well be from our world!"

"The world that you guys come from?" Lumian hadn't expected such an answer.

Yet, it made sense. The armor's design and the ability names bore a distinctive uniqueness, setting them apart from the present world.

Franca confirmed tersely.

"There are many countries in our world, and the culture and language of each country are different. The Armored Shadow is very similar to some entity in the myths and legends of the country your sister and I hail from."

"Are you from the same country as Aurore?" Lumian was most concerned about this.

He paused a beat before continuing, "Did Mr. Fool's might, combined with my imprecise incantation, summon the Armored Shadow from your world? Or did he transmigrate long ago, much like you, eventually transforming into a spirit world shadow after his demise?"

Franca said excitedly, "If it's the former, it could signify a bridge between our two worlds. This implies the potential for our return! If it's the latter, the question arises: how did he use the capabilities of our original world? Did he bring these skills along, or did he acquire them at a later time?"

Resolving these mysteries would inch her closer to the truth of transmigration, potentially paving the path back home!

Franca rose from her seat, her eyes gleaming with intrigue as she faced Lumian.

"Can you summon the Armored Shadow? I'm keen to witness it firsthand."

"I have a pact with him. The need to invoke Mr. Fool's intervention is eliminated for precise summoning," Lumian observed Franca's evident enthusiasm, as though she was readying to assist in setting up the altar. Steering the conversation, he added, "Nonetheless, I perceive him to be immensely dangerous. While under Mr. Fool's aegis, the danger is mitigated. However, if that protection wanes, we could well find ourselves killed by the shadow. Yet, should we remain sheltered by Mr. Fool, direct

communication remains an impossibility, precluding spirit channeling. We can solely execute the summoning rite."

Franca frowned in disappointment.

"What's our course of action then?"

Lumian pondered for a moment and said, "Wait till I gather 100,000 verl d'or worth of gold and fulfill the contract.

"By doing so, the pact's power shall act as our shield, enabling us to figure out why the Armored Shadow demands such a substantial sum."

After a thoughtful pause that spanned nearly a minute, Franca finally exhaled.

"That's all we can do for now."

Initially, her intention had been to promptly corroborate the situation concerning the Armored Shadow and extract pertinent insights from it. Subsequently, she planned to inform the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society, pooling their collective effort to unearth viable solutions. However, for the time being, she had no choice but to defer these actions.

After a period of immersion in the summoning incantation, it became evident that Franca's success rate in summoning was rather low, presumably due to an imprecise methodology. While it was possible that a Shadow of Shriek could be summoned, Lumian surmised that by omitting a particular descriptive line and using "Lumian Lee's contracted creature," the target could be pinpointed more precisely.

After a while, Jenna returned with a spread of coffee, treats, and meatloaf. The ravenous appetites that had ensued from their prior battle now found their solace in afternoon tea.

As evening approached, Anthony Reid, masquerading as a clerk, made his return to Apartment 601 at 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches.

"How did it go?" Lumian's concern was evident, unabashedly displayed.

With his weathered top hat set aside, Anthony nodded slightly.

"I trailed the lady, her butler, valet, maid, and carriage driver to 20 Rue de la Terrasse, within the library district.

"It appears to be an alternate residence of sorts, akin to a safe house."

Franca turned her gaze towards Lumian, inquiring, "Should we maintain surveillance?"

Lumian ruminated for a beat and then grinned.

"No need. Periodic checks to ensure they haven't left will suffice."

"Why?" Jenna had expected Ciel to rush to deal with them to gather more information.

Lumian's smile was radiant.

“Behind them stands an organization known as the Sinners. Their point of contact is likely aware of Guillaume Bénét's demise, prompting them to disengage and erase any traces, making investigation thorny.

“Yet, if the Sinners find that they had managed to evade our pursuit and that there's no surveillance, what might come to pass?

“Perhaps a connection will be reestablished!

“Only authentic non-surveillance can convince the Sinners that the issue has faded. They could then become active anew, crawling out from their rat's nest!”

Dammit... Jenna cursed silently.

Ciel is so sinister!

Anthony, having garnered significant intel, claimed two-thirds of the final 15,000 verl d'or, leaving Jenna with a share of 5,000.

As banknotes were deftly stowed away within assorted pockets, Anthony Reid turned his attention to Lumian.

“I'm eager to delve into the secrets surrounding Hugues Artois and the truth behind his treachery. I hope to begin the investigation soon.”

This was the primary reason for his involvement in the operation.

“Very well.” Lumian had already discussed this matter with Jenna and Franca.

Jenna was set to glean relevant details from the Purifiers.

As Franca was highly excited about the Armored Shadow matter, she took the initiative to suggest,

“I have acquaintances from Loen. I'll see if I can obtain a battle record from the Loen military. It might shed new light on the situation.”

“That's a good idea.” Anthony Reid's eyes lit up.

The notion of soliciting the truth directly from the attacker had not previously crossed his mind.

On Rue Anarchie's forever-bustling nights, Lumian, relinquishing the task of divining the incantations to Franca, walked towards Auberge du Coq Doré. There, his intent was to summon the messenger of Madam Magician, intending to relay matters regarding Guillaume Bénét, the Sinners organization, and the Armored Shadow. Concurrently, he hoped she could relay to Madam Justice and Madam Susie his readiness for their final therapy session.

Under the cool embrace of the night breeze, Lumian's thoughts unfurled languidly.

After learning from Franca about the shared trait among members of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society, Lumian's impression of Aurore crystallized.

Of course, the vagueness was something he didn't understand at first, but he deemed it of little consequence. Investigations were unwarranted.

It's no wonder that Aurore severed her familial ties to reside in Cordu, a frontier village. It's no wonder that she harbors a disinclination towards Trier. It's no wonder she always says strange words and likes to explain to me what they mean. It's no wonder her novels were different from the contemporary ones. It's no wonder she likes to say 'a certain philosopher from home once said' only to substitute it with 'Emperor Roselle once said'... Lumian ruminated in a wordless, contemplative cadence, a sensation of calm washing over him, as if he wasn't strolling on Rue Anarchie but Cordu.

It was a place he could never return to.

Simultaneously, Lumian gained an understanding of the symbolic elements in the dream.

Aurore's acquisition of the land previously occupied by a deceased Warlock—could this embody her possession of Roche Louise Sanson's body?

Consequently, might the legendary Warlock, Roche Louise Sanson, symbolize the original adherents of Inevitability?

Mr. Poet failed to interpret the dual symbolic meanings because he lacked crucial information previously. He had solely indicated to Lumian that they likely bore their own significance.

As his thoughts raced, Lumian returned to Room 207 and saw a simple folded letter on the table.

Letter? This doesn't seem like Madam Magician's... Lumian walked over, alarmed and suspicious. He picked up the letter and unfolded it.

Two lines of elegant Intisian script graced the parchment:

“I have arrived in Trier.

“Hela.”

Chapter 337 Magician's Speculation

Madame Hela has arrived in Trier? Lumian held the letter with a countenance etched in complexity.

In essence, nothing seemed awry about this development. After all, the vice president of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society, codenamed Hela, had alluded to her impending visit to Trier beforehand. However, Lumian's introduction to Roche Louise Sanson had occurred merely that afternoon, sparking suspicions of Aurore's original body harboring beliefs in Inevitability and hinting at a potential anomaly within the April Fool's team. Strikingly, this very evening saw the arrival of this woman in Trier, soliciting a meeting.

She had advised Lumian to keep a vigilant watch over Muggle's familial roots, surmising it to be a promising avenue of investigation.

...

Sheer coincidence, or is there another reason? Lumian pondered briefly before easing into his seat. Beneath the carbide lamp's glow, he set pen to paper, commencing correspondence with Madam Magician.

In succinct prose, he relayed the day's occurrences, his discourse with Franca, and the conundrum of the Armored Shadow. While he withheld no mention of Hela's arrival, he refrained from

disclosing the fact that the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society's members hailed from an alternate world.

Approximately half an hour later, Lumian received a response from Magician:

“Giving up on the creature accompanying the boon and autonomously choosing a contract partner from the spirit world was a prudent choice. Your transition into an Inevitability Hunter, with the bestowed of the Inevitability pathway as your objective, proves that my subtle guidance bore fruit after all.”

At this point, Lumian was a little puzzled.

When had Madam Magician ever hinted at forgoing the strange creatures that came with the boon?

Suddenly, a realization surged forth.

Before praying for a Contractee boon, unaware that the mystical knowledge it brought would encompass contract targets, Madam Magician had offered him information on creatures from the spirit world for his consideration.

It was indeed a hint, but did it have to be so subtle? Lumian mused that those skilled in divination or enamored with astromancy seemed averse to straightforward elucidation. Instead, they favored dropping crumbs of insight or weaving riddles imperceptible to others.

After figuring this out, Lumian lowered his head and resumed poring over Madam Magician's response.

“Sinners, a secret organization that venerates Inevitability, has been around for more than six years. Its origins can be traced back to the closing stages of the Loen Kingdom, the Feysac Empire, and the Intis Republic's war. Roche Louise Sanson, the name you mentioned, might have been an adherent of Inevitability, though perhaps not granted its corresponding boons. In sum, that war provided evil gods more crevices for invading our world.

“You've likely discerned the close connection between Roche Louise Sanson and your sister Aurore. To a certain extent, they're one, yet not wholly distinct personas. Much like the Rebirth ability, your sister carried a prior background, resurrecting within the departed body of Roche Louise Sanson. According to the normative progression, your sister should've taken such a path:

“Integration of Roche's memories and sentiments→internal conflict→a prelude to dissociative identity disorder→self-harmony→embracing a fresh existence.

“If self-reconciliation fell short, engaging a genuine Psychiatrist was requisite.

“Judging by your sister's behavior during the first five years, even if her self-harmony remained incomplete, she fared reasonably well. Likely, her disquiet was manageable. Yet, she found Roche's association with an evil god unacceptable. This unresolved matter provided an opening for the Soul Summoning Spell.

“Just as you're puzzled, why would she want to use the Soul Summoning Spell on herself? It's a crucial question...

“I suspect that Sinners is not only the secret organization's name, but also a Sequence 2 or Sequence 1 of the Inevitability pathway.

“The entity known as Inevitability does have authority over the past, present, and future. You glimpsed this in your dream, did you not? Sinners of the past and Sufferers of the present, do they not harmonize splendidly? But what befits the future?”

Sinners of the past, Sufferers of the present... I wonder if Termiboros signifies the past or the future... Yes, Madam Magician's guess is similar to Franca's, but she doesn't seem to agree that it's purely the resurgence of a wraith. It rather appears a fusion of dissociative identity and lingering spirit... Lumian meticulously pondered the message's depictions, wary of omitting any hints.

He was relatively calm now. Be it the real Roche Louise Sanson's revival or Aurore's dissociative identity and the vestige of spirit unveiled through the Soul Summoning Spell, he could embrace either without much hardship.

One was an evil person doing evil deeds, and the other was his sister being sick—what was so unacceptable?

Lumian released a deliberate, slow breath, shifting his gaze towards the letter behind.

“The Armored Shadow problem is very complicated. Neither you nor the Two of Cups should be privy to the specifics at this juncture. In fact, prior to your summoning of such a shadow, I'd only heard of analogous entities from Mr. Hanged Man. He's come across them only three or four times, one instance even within a dream.

“In the future, as you summon the Armored Shadow again and fulfill your commitment, remember to write to me and inform me of any noted changes.”

Mr. Hanged Man... The holder of the Hanged Man card in the Tarot Club? Responsible for addressing the problem with the other world? Lumian's mind engaged earnestly, realizing Madam Magician's implicit message: This entails a matter of high caliber. Details are beyond your grasp for now, but you can investigate and follow leads within your capabilities.

This implies the Tarot Club's vested interest in the world represented by the Armored Shadow... Lumian tacitly nodded, his focus returning to the remnants of the letter.

“I'll notify you when the timing for the final psychiatric treatment is confirmed...

“Your mystical item should be ready within the upcoming week...

“Meet Hela. No glaring concerns on my end. You might even hint that Aurore's anomaly might have stemmed from the sale of the Soul Summoning Spell by an April Fool's member, gauging her reaction. As for telling her about the Armored Shadow, it's up to you and the Two of Cups.”

Lumian lightly brushed his fingertips, causing the crimson flames to set the letter alight.

After completing this task, he composed a response to Hela.

“Honorable Madame Hela, if it suits you, let's meet tomorrow at 10 a.m. at Quartier de l'Observatoire's Little Cow Café on Rue Ancienne.”

Lumian had initially planned to choose a meeting spot in the market district he knew well. But the risk of the Iron and Blood Cross Order spotting him with a stranger was too high.

His second option was to pick a café or beer house near a cathedral. However, he felt that this might come off as overly cautious. It would seem as if he could seek refuge in the cathedral if anything went awry. But the truth was, he didn't dare to hide there.

In the end, he settled on Rue Ancienne, the street where Salle de Bal Unique was situated.

When the time came, if there was something amiss with Hela, he would draw the danger to the dance hall that set his nerves on edge. He wanted to see if he could manipulate the troublemakers into turning against each other.

After receiving Hela's response and confirming the time and place, Lumian returned to Rue des Blouses Blanches with the Earth Blood ore. He knocked on Franca and Jenna's door once more.

Franca was still dressed in her usual attire, not having changed into her nightwear. She looked at Lumian with a puzzled expression and asked, “Why are you here again?”

Instead of answering, Lumian inquired, “Where's Jenna?”

“Why do you need to know? She received a payment from you and left to visit her brother,” Franca replied, sensing that Lumian had serious matters to discuss.

Only then did Lumian bring up his meeting with Hela the next day. Finally, he posed the question, “Should I mention Armored Shadow?”

“Not yet. We'll wait until we have a clearer picture,” Franca said after careful consideration. “For now, don't mention me. Act as if we've never met.”

A chuckle escaped Lumian's lips. “You're suspicious of everyone.”

“It's better to be cautious,” Franca sighed. “The Soul Summoning Spell has made me excessively vigilant.”

Once the details were confirmed, Lumian glanced at Franca. “Are you heading out?”

“Yes, I'm going to Rue des Fontaines to find Gardner,” Franca replied openly, a mischievous grin on her face. “I'm going to introduce him to some real pleasure.”

Lumian was momentarily speechless.

Franca let out a soft laugh.

“I don't have much of a choice. Since neither you nor Jenna are helping me, I need to find someone else to share in the pleasure.”

Without waiting for Lumian's response, she added with a smile, "I'll also tell Gardner that I took part in your operation against your enemy at Jenna's request, and that I received a substantial share of the spoils."

Lumian was surprised. "I thought you'd keep it a secret from him."

Franca chuckled and explained, "That guy is actually a very suspicious person. In most cases, telling him the truth works better than keeping things from him."

As Lumian nodded in agreement, Franca recalled something.

"The ritualistic incantations have been divined. The dispelling incantation is 'His Grace,' and the usage incantations are 'Cow,' 'Sheep,' and 'Dog.' It depends on the type of hide used. Everything's in Hermes."

With that, the Demoness waved her hand and left with a joyful demeanor.

The dispelling incantation is 'His Grace'... The padre sure has a taste for power... Lumian entered Apartment 601, grabbed the five ritualistic hides, and made his way to his safe house.

Of course, he didn't forget to lock the door for Franca.

The following morning, on Rue Ancienne, Quartier de l'Observatoire.

Lumian walked among the vintage buildings, realizing that Salle de Bal Unique and the Alone bar remained closed at this hour.

Ding ding ding. A postman pedaled by in a blue floral coat.

Lumian diverted his gaze from the firmly shut door of Salle de Bal Unique and continued his stroll, heading towards the café named Little Cow.

Chapter 338 Hela

Little Cow Café served the working-class folks of the nearby streets, offering them affordable breakfast and lunch options. Even amidst the bustling night market, patrons could enjoy a hearty and satisfying meal for just 1 verl d'or. Many individuals with modest incomes, such as motel attendants, restaurant handymen, and cleaning staff earning between 60 to 80 verl d'or per month, frequented the café either alone or with their families every couple of weeks to treat themselves.

When Lumian finally arrived, the bustling breakfast rush had subsided. The café had only a handful of customers, and the staff seemed somewhat fatigued, lacking any enthusiasm.

After placing an order for a cup of Macael coffee brewed from ground coffee beans, Lumian settled into the designated spot, patiently awaiting Hela's arrival.

As the cuckoo wall clock in the café struck the hour, a woman pushed open the door and stepped inside.

Clad in an intriguing black dress, she emitted an enigmatic allure, reminiscent of the attire one might expect from a widow.

Upon spotting the woman approaching, Lumian straightened up and scrutinized her intently.

Her skin possessed an unnaturally pale complexion, as though she had been shielded from sunlight for an extended period. Light golden hair cascaded naturally over her shoulders, soft yet lacking in luster. Her eyes seemed to absorb all available light, rendering them dark and impervious to revealing their true color. Though her facial features were rather attractive, they didn't leave a distinct impression on Lumian. It was almost as though her cold demeanor had cast a shadow, preventing him from forming a complete assessment.

Her icy demeanor didn't merely create distance; it seemed to emanate from within her, causing the ambient temperature to dip slightly.

Before Lumian could discern more details, the woman seated herself across from him and inquired in a chilly tone, "Muggle's brother?"

Although Lumian had already surmised that this was Madame Hela, her directness caught him slightly off guard.

He hadn't expected her to appear without any attempt at disguise, seemingly unconcerned about potential betrayal.

Lumian didn't use the Niese Face or the Mystery Prying Glasses, but he usually employed basic disguises. Relying on his distinctive golden-black hair and simple makeup, he maintained enough divergence from the Lumian Lee depicted in the wanted posters.

Perhaps this is a form of disguise that I can't detect... Lumian offered a polite smile and nodded. "Madame Hela?"

The lady nodded slightly, acknowledging her identity.

"May I offer you something to drink?" Lumian asked politely.

Hela didn't stand on ceremony.

"A glass of absinthe, and a triple espresso shot."

Drinking liquor at 10 a.m., quite the match for my habits... And she even goes for a triple shot of Reem espresso... Did she have a sleepless night? Or perhaps a night of drinking, seeking absinthe to clear her senses? Lumian lifted his right hand and snapped his fingers, signaling the waiter.

Once the light-green absinthe and the strong Reem espresso arrived in front of Hela, Lumian surveyed his surroundings to ensure a secure environment for their conversation.

Gulp... Hela downed half the glass of absinthe in one swift motion, her pale face gradually regaining some color.

Setting the glass down, she turned a ring on her right middle finger using her left thumb and index finger.

The ring possessed an elegant simplicity, a black diamond with numerous facets set into a base of pure silver.

As Hela rotated the ring gently, Lumian experienced a subtle shift in the surroundings, as if the ambient light had dimmed.

"No one can eavesdrop on us now." Hela's voice retained its chilly demeanor.

Impressive... This mastery goes beyond Franca's abilities. Truly befitting of a member of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society who has ventured farthest along the paths of the divine... Lumian maintained his gaze on Hela's black eyes that possessed a light-swallowing intensity. He proceeded with calm composure.

"I've made some new discoveries recently."

Hela remained silent, her gaze fixed on Lumian, awaiting further disclosure.

"I've caught Guillaume Bénét." Lumian conveyed this without an air of boastfulness; it was akin to a bartender at Salle de Bal Brise mentioning the concoction of a new cocktail.

Hela's response was a nod, displaying scant interest in the specifics of Guillaume Bénét's capture.

Commencing with Guillaume Bénét, Lumian recounted the transformations of Muggle—Aurore—detailing the peculiarities that arose, including the appearance of the lizard-like elf and the name Roche Louise Sanson.

In conclusion, he presented a stack of papers.

"This is the grimoire my sister penned three months prior to the spread of Inevitability's faith in Cordu. Please review it and ascertain any irregularities."

Throughout the narrative, Hela remained an attentive listener. Yet, her emotional fluctuations and facial expressions remained limited. Only when Lumian mentioned the second appearance of the lizard-like elf and uttered the name "Roche Louise Sanson," did she exhibit a slight frown.

Hela, who had maintained silence, swiftly perused the grimoire, her pace almost supernatural, as though she could glean mystical insights from its pages with each flip, detecting any anomalies.

After a span of five to six minutes, she extracted a page from her notebook.

It bore the Soul Summoning Spell that Aurore had documented.

Only members of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society and those sharing common experiences would detect the issue at a glance... Lumian found himself stirred by a sudden wave of emotion.

Hela raised the absinthe once more, finishing the rest of the dreamy green liquid in a single gulp.

After finishing it, she turned her gaze to Lumian and spoke, "What are your thoughts on the matter of the lizard-like elf?"

"I've heard rumors that Heaven has banished a group of elves in recent times. Among them are some who bear resemblance to diaphanous lizards," Lumian responded. He refrained from delving into the symbolic interpretations that Mr. Poet had provided, instead opting to present the account provided by the official investigator, Ryan.

Hela's complexion took on a slightly rosier hue, the chill in her demeanor diminishing.

“I possess certain insights into these elves and have conducted a degree of study on them.

“They were not banished from Heaven. It's plausible that they originated from an alternate realm. Aligning certain folklore and events in the alternate realm, coupled with the passage of time, may have allowed elements from the alternate realm to permeate the spirit world and enter our world.

“At present, this is a hypothesis I personally have. I haven't substantiated it as yet. I simply wish to convey that I've studied the phenomenon of these elves in recent years and have personally encountered the diaphanous lizard-like elves you described. However, they differ from the diaphanous lizard-like beings you've mentioned.”

“Not true elves?” Lumian expressed no surprise at this assertion. After all, Ryan and his colleagues had been theorizing, and Mr. Poet's perspective leaned towards an affiliation with a different faction.

Hela chose not to elaborate, confirming Lumian's suspicion with a nod.

“I will continue to search for similar motifs in elf legends from various sources.”

Having said that, she spun the grimoire containing the Soul Summoning Spell and pushed it toward Lumian.

“This is likely where your sister's problem originates.”

Lumian's eyes conveyed his anticipation for an explanation.

He was genuinely curious to hear Hela's perspective. However, he didn't expect her to reveal the most closely guarded secret of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society, as Franca had done.

Hela's tone remained as cold as ice as she began, “I've had numerous interactions with your sister and have discerned that she had been grappling with psychological turmoil rooted in her original family.

“Something is amiss with her biological family. Consequently, your sister had no recourse but to distance herself from them and seek refuge in the border village. It mirrors your gradual realization of Cordu's growing abnormality, prompting your desire to escape. That's why I directed your attention to this avenue of investigation.

“And should one employ the Soul Summoning Spell detailed in this notebook upon themselves, it's highly likely that your sister's psychological distress will escalate into a mental ailment, potentially leading to true dissociation of her personality.”

Lumian pondered for a moment before inquiring, “Are you suggesting that Roche Louise Sanson is a dissociated persona of my sister? That the foundation of Inevitability's faith originates from her biological family?”

This deduction, while refraining from disclosing the most guarded secret of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society, seemed to be the most logical conclusion. Yet, Madame Magician had also entertained the notion of dissociative identity disorder as one potential cause.

Hela took a sip of her triple-shot Reem espresso.

“The situation might be more complicated than a case of dissociative identity disorder. There seems to be some bizarre mystical phenomenon involved. That, however, remains contingent upon your future investigations.”

Lumian acknowledged her response with a nod and posed his question with a serious demeanor,

“Is there any issue with the April Fool's member who sold the Soul Summoning Spell to my sister? Did they foresee a scenario involving dissociative identity disorder?”

Hela remained silent for a few seconds before responding, “It's suspicious, but I cannot definitively be sure. I intend to probe further, although it might take a considerable duration of time. As you're aware, the organizational structure of the Research Society is quite informal, and my connections with the individuals from April Fool's are limited.”

“I understand.” Lumian had heard a similar sentiment from Franca.

Hela glanced at him and pondered for a moment.

“In reality, you are the most suitable candidate to investigate this matter. Unfortunately, you lack the necessary prerequisites.”

“Why do you say that?” Lumian questioned, genuine surprise lacing his words.

For someone known for wit and mischief in Cordu, the prospect of heading the investigation was unexpected. He had assumed that his role would merely entail supporting Franca.

Hela's tone retained its chilliness.

“If you possessed a Beyonder power to physically alter your appearance, you could transform into Muggle and participate in various Research Society Gatherings as her.

“Then, when the occasion arises, you could observe any April Fool's member who reacts oddly to Muggle's presence and displays signs of abnormal behavior. You could even employ yourself as bait to draw out any individual harboring hidden motives.”

Me assuming Aurore and using the code name Muggle to become a member of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society? Lumian had never envisioned such a scenario.

His brow furrowed as he remarked, “Can I really pull off being my sister even with a transformation item? Especially within your Research Society?”

He wasn't familiar with their world and its intricacies. How could he effectively bridge the communication gap?

Just a sentence or two could potentially blow his cover!

Chapter 339 Purpose of Visit

Hela continued in her cold voice, “Don't worry, there's no reason to fret. Our Research Society operates rather informally. Except for a handful of members who maintain close private communication, the rest only convene two to four times a year, all while in disguise.

“Your sister behaves quite relaxed at these gatherings. Her interactions would resemble her usual demeanor with you. However, she'll take care to guard her genuine information. You can certainly play the part.

“And many of the coded terms and expressions we employ for communication are familiar to you. Given your relationship with your sister, she won't intentionally keep them from you or abstain from using them.”

...

“Understood.” Lumian's mood suddenly soured. “She'll also explain the exact significance to me and attribute it to a philosopher from back home or even Emperor Roselle.”

Upon hearing this, Hela responded, “If you truly possess the potential to masquerade as Muggle and engage with the Research Society members, there's no need to forcibly cite philosophers from back home. Simply allude to the latter portion of the content.”

“Then, should I incorporate ‘Emperor Roselle once said’?” Lumian deliberated the specifics earnestly.

He lacked a key item and couldn't authentically impersonate Aurore. And even though the Niese Face was primarily an illusion, it could be instantly deciphered by Beyonders equipped with the corresponding abilities—whether the other party held a rank as low as Sequence 9 Mystery Pryer, they'd discern his non-female identity at a glance. Yet, he remained determined to give his utmost. Who knew if a chance for Transfiguration with diminished negative effects would arise in the future?

Regarding mystic makeup achieved through the use of the Mystery Prying Glasses, it wouldn't provide psychological suggestions, given that attendees concealed their faces at the gathering. Furthermore, it couldn't alter his gender.

Hela lapsed into silence, her facial muscles twitching subtly.

“In the event that you're presented with an opportunity to enact such a role, make sure to avoid these mentions. You might not possess precise discernment about when such references are suitable.

“Just keep in mind, other members frequently employ the phrase ‘Emperor Roselle once said’ to liven the mood or offer amusement.”

Why does it feel like Emperor Roselle's image in the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society isn't too favorable... It's not that it's unfavorable. Instead, it assumes a comedic quality... Speaking of which, Aurore appears to do the same. Whenever her spirits dip, as long as I deliberately reference Emperor Roselle's words, she tends to loosen up and finds herself chuckling involuntarily...

Lumian struggled to fully grasp the rationale of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society members, but he refrained from further probing, recognizing the necessity to feign ignorance concerning their most profound secret.

If the opportunity arose, he intended to seek Franca's insights on the matter.

Hela continued, "While participating in the gathering, keep in mind to listen more than you speak. If you lack confidence, avoid delving into profound discussions. Should others delve into the past, if possible, shift the focus and maintain a patronizing tone. Emulating Muggle's traits and characteristics will aid in effectively acting as her."

Lumian pondered for a moment.

"This guise, however, remains merely a surface-level ruse. Your Research Society houses Beyonders adept in divination and possessing keen intuition. They could readily discern that I'm not my sister."

"No, quite the contrary. They might prove you to be the genuine Muggle," Hela furnished an unforeseen response to Lumian's expectation.

In the midst of his unveiled astonishment, Hela expounded, "To begin with, most of us remain unaware of the realities of our fellow members, impeding our capacity for efficacious divination or prophecy.

"Additionally, with my understanding of your sister, I employed an artifact to divine her state. Yet, I couldn't ascertain her life or death status. It was akin to confronting a formidable anti-divination barrier."

Wh— Lumian was caught off guard before grasping the underlying rationale.

As per Madam Magician, Aurore hadn't entirely died. A possibility of revival persisted, her soul shard sealed by Mr. Fool, thereby rendering conventional divination unable to circumvent the seal and ascertain Aurore's genuine condition. A potent anti-divination effect was at play.

Hela took another sip of her triple shot Reem espresso.

"Most crucially, subsequent to our meeting today, my spiritual intuition tells me that when I confront you, divination or prophecy regarding Aurore will point toward you."

What? Lumian nearly blurted out the question.

Before long, he cast his gaze downwards to his left chest and offered a wry smile.

"Perhaps this stems from the fact that a fragment of my sister's soul has been specially preserved within me."

Lumian let out a long sigh.

"What a pity..."

Post Hela's analysis, he harbored the conviction that he could seamlessly stand in for his sister within the folds of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society without incurring exposure.

He yearned to do so. This way, he could not only aid Franca in her operation but also safeguard her from solitary risks. Together, they could operate—one in plain sight, the other in the shadows—ensnaring their adversary in a carefully orchestrated trap.

Simultaneously, Lumian recognized the potential of utilizing the society's gatherings to gather invaluable information about Aurore.

Regrettably, his one hindrance was his lack of Transfiguration abilities. The power to alter his gender, stature, or physique eluded him.

A brief silence hung in the air before Hela reiterated her commitment to investigating the April Fool's predicament.

Following that, she spoke candidly, "I've come to Trier this time to delve deeper past the catacombs. Do you have any information about that place?"

Deeper into the catacombs? Lumian's heart skipped a beat as he took the initiative to remind her, "It's very dangerous there."

Madame Hela's guidance from her letters and prior suggestion had been invaluable. With deep appreciation, he recounted his grasp of the catacombs and the bizarre phenomena he had borne witness to. Finally, he said, "For some inexplicable reason, I alone retain memories of the ill-fated couple. The rest feign ignorance, as though they never existed. True, Kendall, the administrator of the tomb, ought to have sensed it as well, yet he feigned ignorance."

Hela listened in quiet contemplation. Without astonishment or consternation, she inquired, "Have you heard of the Samaritan Women's Spring?"

"I have, though from the mouth of a charlatan..." Lumian mused, his brow furrowing as he tried to recall Osta Trul's narrative. "He claimed that the Samaritan Women's Spring on the upper level of the catacombs is a sham. Just a puddle left behind due to a construction error back then. The administrators spun it into a legend. But deep in the underground world, within an ancient tomb, there lies the real Fountain of Oblivion."

Hela refrained from commenting on Lumian's account and simply nodded.

"Thank you."

With her gratitude expressed, she downed the last of her three-shot espresso, rose from her seat, and made her way toward the café's exit.

As she rose from her seat, the heavy silence was shattered, and the sunlight once again flooded the area with its radiance.

Lumian remained seated a while longer, savoring the last sips of his Macael coffee. Afterwards, he strode along Rue Ancienne, his destination being Place du Purgatoire. There, he planned to catch a public carriage back to the market district.

Passing by Salle de Bal Unique and the Alone bar, a sudden, crystalline tinkle reached Lumian's ears.

His heart skipped a beat, and he swiftly turned around. He saw a figure he knew well, who had just entered the newly opened Alone bar.

Draped in a delicate, pale-white fishnet dress, the figure sported a small, circular hat adorned with silk flowers. Two dainty silver bells dangled from the intricate hair buns, complementing the similar accessories on the figure's dark-hued boots.

Leah... Bureau 8's Leah... Lumian recognized the person as Leah, the official investigator who had entered his dream.

Once affiliated with Bureau 8's Riston Province branch, she had now appeared in Trier and entered the somewhat peculiar Alone bar.

Salle de Bal Unique is perilous. Could the Alone bar be used by Bureau 8 to monitor the opposing stronghold? After retracting his gaze, Lumian continued forward as if nothing had happened.

Returning to Salle de Bal Brise, Lumian found himself summoned to 11 Rue des Fontaines in Quartier de la Cathédrale Commémorative by Gardner Martin, just when he was hoping for some rest.

Inside a room adorned with bookshelves, Gardner Martin, donned in a light-colored shirt and dark trousers, greeted him with an energetic smile.

“Franca mentioned that your vengeance is complete?”

Lumian detected an odd thrill emanating from the Boss, as if he had indulged in immense pleasure and hadn't fully calmed down.

He responded candidly, “Yes, I've already killed Guillaume Bénét. Thankfully, Red Boots, Jenna, and Anthony Reid, the information broker I hired, assisted me.”

He spared no details about the participants—there was no use concealing anything. They relied on “Rat” Christo and his pets to communicate, after all.

Gardner Martin nodded slightly and commented, “You've exceeded my expectations in terms of efficiency. Franca didn't delve into the specifics. Can you give me an overview of the overall situation?”

Lumian held nothing back when it came to the Sinners organization. He elucidated Guillaume Bénét's various abilities, detailing their specific impacts.

Gardner Martin listened intently and asked in thought, “What do you reckon is Guillaume Bénét's strength equivalent to in Sequence?”

Lumian replied without hesitation, “Sequence 5.”

A brief pause ensued as Gardner Martin fell into contemplative silence before he uttered, “I've summoned you for a purpose, a mission.”

“What mission?” Lumian didn't hide his curiosity.

Gardner Martin's smile reappeared.

“It's quite straightforward. Make your way to the Mechanical Café in Quartier de l'Opéra and establish contact with a literary and arts group named ‘Black Cat.’”

“I lack any artistic inclination,” Lumian honestly admitted.

Gardner Martin smiled and said, “No artistic inclination is necessary. Your primary role will involve sponsoring and befriending one of the members of Black Cat.

“His ancestor boasted an aristocratic title of a count, a fact he's quite fond of calling himself that.

“Right, his name is Poufer Sauron.”

Chapter 340 Black Cat

Quartier de la Maison d'Opéra, Rue Lombar.

The street was famous for its array of sweets, and colorful candies adorned every corner.

At the end of Rue Lombar stood the Mechanical Café, nestled next to a small confectionery factory.

...

From the outside, it looked like an ordinary place, and even peering through the glass windows, there was no hint of its mechanical nature. The black Triangular Sacred Emblem on the weighty wooden door was the only reminder of its true identity.

Lumian pushed the dark-brown door, but it resisted as if locked from within.

After a moment's observation, he pulled the doorbell hanging by the secondary window.

Amidst the tinkling chimes, Lumian caught the soft clink of metal and watched as the door inched open.

A mechanical arm extended from its rear, reaching all the way to the bar counter like an ornamental display.

Surveying the surroundings, Lumian made his way to a corner of the café. Two single-legged tables were placed there, hosting five individuals.

Among them, a middle-aged man with fiery red hair stood out. Fair-skinned from cosmetics, with dark circles accentuating his brownish-red eyes, he was a captivating figure.

Clean-shaven, he sported an open brown velvet coat and a red shirt sans bow tie, exuding an air of refinement and casual elegance.

This was “Count” Poufer, the member of Intis's former royal Sauron family whom Lumian sought.

Having inherited a substantial fortune from his father, he hadn't ventured into politics, military service, or trade. Instead, he moved within various artistic circles as a literary critic and frequented “Black Cat” gatherings.

Approaching with a smile, Lumian inquired, “Are you Count Poufer?”

Poufer Sauron looked up casually, his tone relaxed as he asked, “Are you the friend Martin mentioned?”

“Yes, Ciel Dubois.” Lumian responded without any reservation, claiming a seat by pulling up a chair.

Poufer gave him a measured once-over, a satisfied smile playing on his lips.

“Not bad at all; you're quite the beautiful friend.”

“Among literature, oil paintings, sculptures, poetry, and music, what's your preference?”

“Novels,” Lumian replied without hesitation.

Poufer leaned back, gesturing towards the plump middle-aged man diagonally across from him.

“Anori, the author with the most literary eloquence in recent times.”

The author who delved into the realm of erotica, forgetting that the essence of writing is to explore human nature? Lumian naturally recollected Aurore's assessment of this novelist.

Initially, Anori's works had explored love as a means to understand humanity. But over time, the focus shifted, consumed by the former. Aurore believed that if not for restrictions, Anori might have penned something akin to ‘Monks Chasing Dogs’—a risqué novel.

Of course, Lumian cared little for probing human nature; he simply enjoyed the engaging parts.

“Your novels have certainly broadened my horizons,” he said to Anori genuinely.

With black hair and blue eyes, Arnaud puffed on his pipe and remarked, “Luckily, you didn't mention appreciating my ‘Death of a Herald.’”

Death of a Herald... Isn't that Adri's work? Right, Aurore had mentioned the similarity in names, leading to frequent confusion. Enlightenment dawned as Lumian inquired, “You mean the Adri who's backed by the government, earning a five-figure fortune yearly, yet only manages to produce dogsh*t?”

Anori erupted in laughter.

“That's worth a glass of absinthe!”

With that, he tapped the silver-gray metal button on the single-legged table before him, thrice.

Count Poufer took pleasure in Lumian's reception and proceeded to introduce the other members of the Black Cat organization.

Among them were Mullen, a painter with a pale and weary complexion, Ernst Young, a slightly stern-looking literary critic, and Iraeta, a poet who held a cherrywood pipe.

Just as Lumian was wrapping up his greetings, he witnessed the iron-colored surface of Anori's one-legged table split open unexpectedly, unfolding like a blossoming flower.

Within the “stamen,” a glass of emerald absinthe, radiating a dreamlike sheen, appeared on a tray that ascended through a mechanical lift.

Author Anori picked up the glass of absinthe and tossed a silver coin worth 1 verl d'or onto the tray.

Gradually, the mechanical elevator descended, causing the parted metal surface to seal shut, restoring the one-legged table to its original state.

Anori slid the absinthe toward Lumian, a smile gracing his features.

“Cheers to what you just said!”

It's really a Mechanical Café... Lumian reacquainted himself with this place.

His gaze drifted to the table's broad and sturdy leg, suspecting it to be hollow and linked to an underground conduit.

Taking a sip of the absinthe and savoring its familiar bitterness, Lumian directed his attention to the one-legged table.

“No change?”

“Here, a glass of absinthe costs 1 verl d'or,” Anori responded with a grin.

Isn't that rather steep? Salle de Bal Brise and the basement bar only charge seven licks. Their quality is nearly identical... Lumian critiqued inwardly.

1 verl d'or was equivalent to 20 licks.

At that instant, Mullen, the pale-faced painter who seemed perpetually fatigued but was a handsome man, took a sip of his coffee and shared, “I heard that an elephant has arrived at Trier Zoo. Quite an uncommon sight.”

The pudgy Anori muttered, “What's so intriguing about an elephant? It strikes me as utterly mundane.”

Count Poufer let out a soft chuckle.

“Shall we then discuss the ongoing clash between the parliament and the two Churches, the high-ranking government officials perpetually stumbling, the detestable censorship of publications, and the covert agents shadowing us like hyenas?”

Anori sighed in resignation.

“Let's just stick to that elephant.”

Amidst the laughter of the Black Cat members, Count Poufer crossed his right leg and proposed, “Since we have a new friend, how about engaging in a game of mysticism?”

A game involving mysticism? Lumian's eyebrows twitched.

“What sort of game?” inquired Iraeta, the poet, puffing contemplatively on his pipe.

Count Poufer smiled and said, “A game known as King's Pie.”

Observing the perplexed expressions around the table, Count Poufer chuckled and continued, “Don't any of you have a childhood or a family? Haven't you played this game?”

“The rule is to divide the King's Pie into portions equal to the number of participants plus 1. The larger piece is ritually dedicated to a deity or esteemed ancestor we hold in reverence. Among the remaining portions, one contains a broad bean or coin, hidden. Whoever discovers it becomes the 'king' for the day, empowered to issue

commands to the others. Naturally, these commands must remain within the bounds of reason.”

The mysticism aspect involves offering up the excess King's Pie in sacrifice? Lumian cast a glance at Anori, Mullen, and the rest, intrigued by the idea and curious whether any Beyonders were part of the group.

Of course, none of them appeared to be.

In just over ten seconds, Count Poufer's proposal garnered agreement from everyone except Lumian.

He commenced by pressing the corresponding button on his one-legged table, hitting it the appropriate number of times to signal the kitchen to dispatch a King's Pie.

Reportedly, this dessert had been a favorite since the era of the Sauron Dynasty.

In the underground of Église Saint-Robert, within the confines of the Inquisition, a gathering of Purifiers was underway. Valentine, Imre, and their fellow Purifiers congregated in the office of Deacon Angoulême.

Dressed in a light-gold shirt and pale-white pants, Angoulême raised the dossier in his hand and addressed the group, “We've verified the body found at 50 Rue Vincent in Quartier de la Princesse Rouge to be that of Guillaume Bénét, the former wanted padre. Ensure that the police headquarters takes down the wanted posters from the market district.”

The market district case wasn't under the Purifiers' jurisdiction, but Valentine had heard about it. Finally, there was confirmation.

Sporting a formal blue coat, Valentine glanced at Angoulême and asked, “Deacon, have there been any developments in the investigation into Guillaume Bénét's killer?”

“At the moment, no suspects,” responded Angoulême, his golden hair, eyebrows, and beard lending him an imposing aura. He continued, “What we can ascertain is that there were clear signs of incineration at the scene, and it's likely that Guillaume Bénét succumbed to a Demoness's curse.”

“At least a Sequence 7 Hunter and a Demoness? That's an uncommon combination,” Imre remarked, clearly taken aback.

To his knowledge, most who followed the Demoness pathway were affiliated with the Demoness family, a formidable secret organization that seldom required collaboration.

“Uncommon doesn't mean impossible,” retorted Angoulême.

As a Purifier deacon, he had access to more confidential information and experience compared to Imre, Valentine, and the others. He had even personally executed two members of the Demoness family.

Valentine furrowed his brow, ruminating for a moment before suggesting, “Could Lumian Lee be involved? He does have a solid motive.”

“But he lacks the power,” Imre objected. “How could he advance to Pyromaniac so quickly after leaving Cordu? Isn't he concerned about losing control? Furthermore, based on your description, not even a Pyromaniac would be a match for Guillaume Bénét.”

Valentine clung to his conjecture.

“That's why he might have sought help from a Demoness.

“Could he have joined the Demoness family to seek revenge and then transition into becoming a Demoness himself?

“If that's true, this could become a major issue. Lumian Lee carries significant problems with him. And you mentioned the Demoness family's penchant for sowing chaos.”

Angoulême nodded. “We must keep a close eye on this. I'll report this matter. Meanwhile, intensify the scrutiny of suspicious individuals in the market district.”

Having made up his mind, he reassured Valentine, “Don't be overly anxious. Lumian Lee isn't the only one with a reason to eliminate Guillaume Bénét. There are powerful bounty hunters, official members of the Aurora Order, and the bestowed of other evil gods.”

Valentine acknowledged concisely, signifying his comprehension.

Following their discussion on recent Beyond cases, Valentine and Imre exited the deacon's office, passing by Charlie who was acquainting himself with a mechanical typewriter, before heading towards the tunnel leading to Église Saint-Robert.

“Why do you think the quasi-Demoness is seeking us? Has she uncovered crucial information?” Imre inquired curiously, conversing with his fellow teammate.

Valentine ruminated briefly before responding, “Could it be related to Guillaume Bénét's death?”

Imre was caught off guard.

“Are you suggesting she had contact with the Demoness family?”

Before Valentine could reply, Imre shook his head.

“That's impossible. The Demoness family despises female Assassins. If they encounter one, they'll surely eliminate them.”