

Inevitability 341

Chapter 341 Branch

On Rue Doyle, nestled between the market district and the solemn Quartier de la Cathédrale Commémorative, stretched a verdant street. Its clean pavements and modern architectural style set it apart from its surroundings. Jenna had deliberately chosen this location to rendezvous with the Purifiers. The individuals frequenting this place had little connection to her former life, and the likelihood of recognition was slim.

Clothed in a pristine white blouse and a light-brown dress, Jenna's attire differed slightly from her previous encounters with the two Purifiers. This strategic variation was intended to thwart any attempts by the other party to decipher her intentions if she were to wear the same ensemble repeatedly.

Nevertheless, her overall presentation remained faithful to a certain style: a portrayal of cleanliness, radiance, and vitality. This image was a composite distilled from the bishop's sermons and the impassioned advocacy she had encountered during her involvement in Church activities.

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A Sun Talisman dangled around her neck, accentuating her brownish-yellow hair that was neatly tied up. She followed the elongated shadows cast by the trees, moving toward Apartment 17.

In the midst of her journey, a brown four-wheeled carriage rumbled by. The window was ajar, revealing an arresting visage.

Adorned in a black court dress, a lady graced the carriage's interior. A dark veil hat adorned with white feathers crowned her head, intricately framing her raven-black hair. Her face boasted soft contours; her chin held a graceful curve. A slender, elevated nose bridge led to plump, subtly upturned crimson lips. Within her dark gray eyes, a glint of brightness coexisted with a hint of melancholy, evoking a pang of sympathy.

How beautiful... Jenna sighed from the bottom of her heart as the carriage passed.

Even though Jenna herself could be considered attractive, she remained capable of appreciating the allure of others. Simultaneously, she acknowledged the stark contrast between her appearance and that of Franca, who had ascended to the rank of Demoness of Pleasure, as well as the lady who had just passed.

Shifting her focus, Jenna ascended to the roof of Apartment 17 on Rue Doyle.

Her wait was brief, for Imre and Valentine soon appeared.

Valentine's demeanor, though frosty, gave way to a proactive inquiry. "Have you obtained crucial intelligence?"

Valentine's gaze swept past Jenna's neck, where the Sun Sacred Emblem was suspended. A subtle nod confirmed his satisfaction.

Jenna shook her head slowly. "No."

Without permitting Imre and Valentine to voice their queries, she bared her emotions in earnest. “I want to repent.”

Repent? Imre exchanged a quizzical glance with Valentine.

Had something gone awry?

Jenna's gaze lowered, a bittersweet smile touching her lips as she regarded the ground.

“My mother haunts my dreams, recurring persistently.

“And each time she appears in my sleep, I find myself grappling with a nagging question: Why did the Church permit someone like Hugues Artois to partake in the elections? Upon uncovering the truth, why did they not promptly apprehend his accomplices and thus forestall the ensuing catastrophe?

“I-I yearn for redemption. The pain gnaws at my heart, sowing doubt in my faith, and causing me to question whether God and the Church still watch over us.”

These sentiments were sincere, albeit less intense than they seemed.

Valentine felt ashamed and didn't know how to respond to Jenna.

Imre, who had experienced many similar situations, sighed and consoled her skillfully, “There's no need to doubt that God is always watching over us. The Sun graces the land each day, yet we understand that the ebb and flow of light and darkness constitutes the essence of our world. Just as the Sun sets inevitably to give rise to night, it's this very cycle that allows us to revel in the radiance of the morning and the ascent of the sun.

“Likewise, the Church isn't all-powerful. In Intis, we remain subject to the constraints imposed by the Church of the God of Steam and Machinery, the National Convention, and the government. Our actions are bound by limitations; we cannot operate without restraint and probe at will.

“Pain and calamity are integral facets of existence. Their presence varies, but they are transient, much like the Sun's emergence after the darkness.”

Jenna fell into contemplative silence for a few seconds before exhaling, a slow release of tension. She extended her arms slightly, proclaiming, “Praise the Sun!”

“Praise the Sun!” both Valentine and Imre echoed in unison.

With her sincere performance, Jenna asked, “Who propelled Hugues Artois to the position of parliament member? And who facilitated his representation for an evil god?”

“We're in the midst of investigating. No substantial breakthroughs have emerged thus far,” Imre replied after measured consideration.

Jenna's expression turned to one of anxiety and concern.

“Why the lack of substantive progress? Is it due to the limitations mentioned earlier, which hinder the acquisition of pivotal leads? Do you require my help? I operate unbound by restrictions and hold no fear of breaching the law!”

Imre and Valentine weren't caught off guard by Jenna's reaction. It echoed the same spirit as her abrupt assassination of Hugues Artois, albeit in a more subdued form.

The two exchanged glances, a wordless deliberation on whether to entrust this matter to an informant bound by contract, thereby affording greater flexibility and latitude.

Drawing upon Franca's counsel, Jenna refrained from invoking Instigation directly. She instead gauged the disposition of the two Purifiers and employed words to accomplish her intent.

“If the Church itself finds its hands tied, could it not delegate the task to capable devotees?”

“Which holds greater importance—the Church's dignity or the well-being of God's children?”

“With each thwarted catastrophe, numerous families and lives are spared. They all stand as devout supplicants to the Sun.

“An evil god was backing Hugues Artois!”

Valentine found himself swayed, and observing Imre's absence of dissent, he addressed Jenna with gravity, “Are you sure you want to help us investigate this matter? It's very dangerous. The odds of forfeiting your life are substantial.”

Jenna responded with a smile suffused with complexity, “I'm afraid of death, but I'm more afraid of becoming a sacrificial lamb for the heretics, much like my mother.”

She didn't hide her hatred at all.

Imre then said, “In the course of our investigations, we've ascertained that Hugues Artois shared close ties with General Philip. Certain covert activities trace back to him. However, General Philip succumbed to illness last year, resulting in the loss of all leads.

“The other backers and supporters of Hugues Artois either owed their allegiance to General Philip or deemed him an asset worthy of support. Their involvement in heretical belief or secret organizations remains unverified.”

Jenna blurted out, “What about Philip's family? What of the heretics who encircled Hugues Artois?”

“There's nothing wrong with Philip's family,” Valentine responded, his tone revealing traces of vexation. “We've apprehended only two heretics affiliated with Hugues Artois's campaign. Their roles were comparatively inconsequential. The individual most knowledgeable opted for suicide when escape became unfeasible. His fanaticism stymied our quest for the sought-after leads. We've effectively eliminated two branches of the secret organization, the Order of All Extinction.”

Order of All Extinction... Jenna recalled the secret organization that believed in an evil god.

Imre supplemented, "The primary source of knowledge is the red-haired woman named Cassandra. She hails from the Sauron lineage, a collateral branch of the former royal family. A Beyonder and a heretic graced with a boon."

"Is there anything wrong with the Sauron family?" Jenna inquired further.

Imre shook his head.

"At present, no concrete conclusions exist. The noble families that supported Hugues Artois maintain standard relations with the Sauron family. Cassandra chose an adventuring life, as she encountered minimal regard within the Sauron family hierarchy. Subsequently, she became a Beyonder, ultimately joining Hugues Artois's team last year."

Quartier de la Maison d'Opéra, Rue Lombard, Mechanical Café.

Mechanical precision guided the King's Pie to Poufer Sauron and his associates within the Black Cat organization. The pie bore the appearance of a brown floral marvel adorned with intricate black motifs.

Poufer looked around and said to Lumian, Anori, and the others, "I suggest that this game of King's Pie serves as a tribute to one of my esteemed forebears. He held the title of the first Count Ardennen and the twenty-seventh Count of Champagne."

In his interactions, Poufer habitually designated himself as Count Ardennen.

"The Count of Champagne, the one who coveted Roselle's ass?" Novelist Anori quipped with a grin.

Over the past year, the most sought-after banned manuscript within Trier's covert book market had been "Emperor Roselle's Secret Chronicles." Within its pages lay a trove of Emperor Roselle-related rumors, intermingled with an array of outlandish, sizzling revelations.

Poufer sighed and said, "That would be the thirtieth Count of Champagne, the great-grandson of my illustrious ancestor. He hails from a distinct Sauron family branch."

"I have no objections." The flaxen-haired painter, Mullen, steered the conversation back on track.

This was merely a game—no one else insisted on allocating the surplus King's Pie to a specific figure, thus prompt consensus was achieved.

Considering Lumian's usual style, he should have objected and angered Count Poufer. However, he recalled that his current role revolved around that of a friend of Gardner Martin, scion of a prosperous merchant family with a penchant for art. He was essentially playing the role of a spendthrift imbecile, a persona that basked in the lavish spending only to incur disdain.

Poufer shifted his attention to the more reticent literary critic, Ernst Young, and instructed, "You shall have the honor of cutting the pie."

Ernst Young, his black curls framing his face, indulged in a self-deprecating smile.

“I despise the absence of waiters in the Mechanical Café. It makes me feel like a waiter.”

“Isn't that a good thing? It signifies the absence of spies,” Novelist Anori muttered.

A puff of cherrywood smoke escaped the pipe held by Iraeta, the poet, as he chuckled in response, “Perhaps the spy is among us.”

At that moment, Ernst Young had already picked up the table knife, slicing the King's Pie into seven equal portions.

Poufer delicately positioned one of the King's Pie slices near the plate's rim, hands clasped, cradling it against his chest. His voice, a soft cadence, invoked an invocation, “To you, member of the mighty Sauron family, the great Vermonda Champagne Sauron.”

Poufer repeated the incantation thrice. Lumian couldn't help but note that Mechanical Café, already bereft of its waiters, descended into an amplified hush, akin to the commencement of the bishops' sermons.

After offering the excess portion of the King's Pie to Vermonda Sauron, Poufer raised his gaze to Lumian and grinned.

“You're the guest. You'll be the first to choose.”

Without observing, Lumian extended his hand to the King's Pie closest to him.

At that moment, Termiboros's resonant voice echoed in Lumian's ears: “Switch.”

Chapter 342 Fright?

Switch? Lumian hadn't anticipated that Termiboros would drop a hint at a moment like this.

Whether this Inevitability angel aimed to use the opportunity to set a trap or had some other intention, or if He simply sought to avert any trouble from befalling His vessel at this particular time and place, it was clear that this seemingly unremarkable game of King's Pie concealed profound hidden hazards. Once triggered, it would plunge all those present into a perilous abyss.

When Count Poufer brought up the mystical aspect, the act of sacrificing a piece of King's Pie to a deity or revered ancestor, Lumian suspected the presence of a Beyonder element. It resembled the divination games favored by many enthusiasts of mysticism. To his astonishment, the issue proved even graver than he had initially imagined. It had prompted an angel to believe that he—Lumian, a dual Sequence 7—was incapable of handling it or could be harmed by it.

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As these thoughts raced through his mind, Lumian struggled to fathom Termiboros's motives. All he could manage was cautiously extending his arm and nonchalantly selecting one of the remaining five slices of King's Pie.

This time, Termiboros didn't intervene.

After Lumian, Anori, Mullen, Ernst Young, and Iraeta each acquired a slice of King's Pie, only the one nearest to Lumian remained.

“Seems like it's mine.” Count Poufer leaned in, grinned, and seized the slice of King's Pie. He brought it to his mouth and delicately took a bite.

Lumian followed suit. The crust was crisp, the filling sweet, its aroma lingering on his palate. The quality was rather impressive.

After a few bites, Count Poufer chuckled and remarked, “Looks like I'm the king today.”

As he uttered the words, he extracted a broad bean from his mouth.

The instant Lumian laid eyes on the broad bean, a faint trace of blood and rust wafted to his senses.

Meanwhile, the atmosphere in the Mechanical Café grew heavy, as if everyone dreaded receiving an order they couldn't bear.

Count Poufer rose from his seat, his back to the window that faced the street, blotting out the sunlight, which cast a faint shadow over his face. His smile seemed somewhat dark.

Count Poufer's gaze fixed upon the novelist Anori, a mischievous smile dancing on his lips.

“Step outside the café and declare to the passersby, 'I'm dog sh*t.'”

Anori, who had been on edge, let out a sigh of relief and responded with a grin, “Sure thing.”

The portly man rose from his seat and hastened to the door, grasping the handle nestled in the side wall.

Amidst a grinding noise and faint clatters, the mechanical arm suddenly tightened, its grip “dragging” the weighty wooden door ajar.

Anori ventured outside and onto the street. He directed his voice at the pedestrians, “I'm dogsh*t!

“I'm a piece of dogsh*t raised by a sow!

“My whole family is dogsh*t raised by sows!”

The passersby stared in astonishment before erupting into laughter.

After cursing himself, Anori returned to Lumian and the others in high spirits.

“You've got an impressive mental fortitude.” Lumian compelled himself to rephrase “you're really thick-skinned” in a more polished manner.

Novelist Anori chuckled and said, “Whenever I'm stuck in my writing, I'll curse myself out on the balcony. It's the simplest method.”

“You writers do have your peculiarities.” Lumian was reminded of his sister, who fancied herself afflicted by an advanced stage of procrastination syndrome.

Anori took a sip of absinthe and resettled himself. His attention turned to Count Poufer, who, with his back to the light, cast his gaze upon Mullen, the pale and handsome painter.

“Slap Iraeta.”

Mullen relaxed in his seat, opting not to rise. He leaned forward and delivered a slap to Poet Iraeta.

Iraeta, his hair thinning and his facial muscles slightly sagging, remained unperturbed. He merely drew another puff from his pipe.

Noticing Lumian's scrutiny, he offered a casual smile.

“As a poet, I must learn to relish the malice around me.”

Finding joy in malice... What a poetic youth. Well, more accurately, a poetic middle-aged man... Lumian surveyed the participants of the game, realizing that aside from Count Poufer, who had consumed the broad bean, nothing else appeared amiss.

Count Poufer shifted his posture slightly, his features still shaded by the backlight.

He said to Ernst Young, “Express your loyalty to me.”

When the Black Cats convened, they often engaged in a variety of audacious acts. In a more contemporary characterization, they were avant-gardes of performance art. Hence, Ernst Young felt no qualms about kneeling on one knee and professing loyalty. He even considered it insufficient, sensing that it lacked excitement or humiliation.

Count Poufer then turned to the poet, Iraeta, and dictated, “Give all your money to the beggar across the street.”

Iraeta was taken aback. His heart ached as he responded, “Alright.

“As you know, I'm a pauper. Over the past five years, I've scarcely earned 3,000 verl d'or from my poetry. Each day, I ponder which friend might organize an event and offer me a free drink.”

Quite the honest poet... Lumian pondered whether he should sponsor this individual and witness what kind of verses he could produce. After all, the “sponsorship fee” was supplied by Gardner Martin. Not employing it would result in it going unused. Conversely, by sponsoring certain artists, he could potentially pocket a portion for himself.

Before Count Poufer could reply, Iraeta suddenly burst into laughter. He fumbled in his pocket and exclaimed with excitement, “That's why I only brought 5 verl d'or!”

“5 verl d'or? At the Vichy Café, that'd barely cover half a bottle of mineral water and two boiled eggs,” Novelist Anori murmured as he watched Poet Iraeta hastily depart. He tossed the 5 verl d'or to the beggar opposite.

Vichy Café resided in an alley off Avenue du Boulevard. It drew parliament members, high-ranking government officials, bankers, industrialists, financiers, famed courtesans, and esteemed authors, painters, poets, and sculptors from the upper echelons of society.

By this juncture, every participant had taken their turn, leaving Lumian as the last.

Count Poufer fixed his gaze on Lumian, his look profound as he spoke, “This is your inaugural time attending our Black Cat gathering. I'll assign you a simple task. Take your slice of King's Pie and proceed to the last room in the café's basement. Exchange the pie for a sheet of white paper.”

This bears a hint of mystique... If anything goes awry, I'll just burn down that basement... Lumian mumbled to himself as he clutched the partially-eaten King's Pie. As per Novelist Anori's guidance, he located a staircase leading to the basement close to the kitchen.

Before venturing forth, he ignited the gas wall lamps in the vicinity. Under their faint yellow radiance, he navigated a corridor cluttered with various items until he reached the last room.

The vermilion door stood tightly sealed. Lumian listened attentively but detected no movements from within.

There were no suspicious signs around the door either.

Lumian extended his right palm, gripped the handle, gave it a gentle twist, and gradually pushed inward.

As the gas lamps in the basement's corridor illuminated the space, objects came into view. These objects were heads, clustered within the dusky shadows, their gazes devoid of emotion, fixed on the "intruder" at the entrance.

Lumian's pupils dilated as he recognized a few familiar heads.

They belonged to Novelist Anori, Painter Mullen, Critic Ernst Young, and Poet Iraeta!

Just before conjuring a fireball, Lumian, experienced and resilient, forced himself to steady his nerves and discern the situation.

The heads lacked the pallor of the deceased, and the room was bereft of the distinct scent of preservatives.

Lumian reined in his initial reaction and scrutinized the scene. He realized that these were wax heads that had been taken down.

Resembling melons, they were stashed within compartments on a wooden frame.

Is this mission intended to startle me? Were it not for Termiboros's forewarning, how could such a prank perturb me? What's so mystical about this? Lumian ruminated for a moment before placing his King's Pie on a wooden shelf and extracting a sheet of white paper from one of the wax heads.

Upon returning to the Mechanical Café with the white paper in hand, he was met with smiles from Anori, Iraeta, and the others, as though gauging any lingering trepidation.

Count Poufer nodded in satisfaction.

"You executed the mission admirably."

What if I hadn't executed it admirably? What would have transpired? Lumian simulated residual unease and inquired,

"Those wax heads seemed so lifelike that they nearly stopped my heart!"

"Haha," Anori chortled. "This serves as Count's welcome gesture to every newcomer. He's rather fond of collecting wax figurine heads. Each individual he acknowledges receives an invitation from a wax sculptor to immortalize their heads as art and place them in the basement of the Mechanical Café."

It's almost as if your heads have been given to Count Poufer... Lumian eyed Anori and the others' necks, yet found no trace of sutures.

After delving into various rumors circulating within the novelists' circle and offering 2,000 verl d'or to sponsor the Black Cat, Lumian took his leave.

As he departed, his gaze inadvertently swept over the two-legged tables.

Abruptly, Lumian's pupils constricted.

He observed that Count Poufer, Anori, and the others still had unfinished King's Pie on their plates, while the white-glazed porcelain plate that had previously held the pie now sat empty.

There should have been a slice of King's Pie intended for the Sauron family ancestor!

It was gone!

Lumian's perplexity couldn't be concealed. He gestured toward the snack plate and remarked,

“I recall there being a slice of King's Pie left.”

Count Poufer chuckled and sipped his coffee.

“I ate it.”

“Is that so...” Lumian smiled in realization.

Turning away, he exited the Mechanical Café, the smile on his face gradually waning.

Count Poufer had only taken two bites of his slice of King's Pie!

Chapter 343 Feedback

As Lumian strode down Rue Lombar toward the nearest public carriage stop, a sense of unease settled over him. Observing the deserted street, he dropped his voice to a hushed tone as he muttered, “Temiboros, why did you make me choose the King's Pie slice without the broad bean?”

What if he had consumed that fateful broad bean and ascended to the role of the “king”?

But Termiboros remained silent, withholding any response.

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Lumian pondered for a moment, then rephrased his question.

“Though the entire incident held a few unsettling details, the outcome appeared unremarkable. It's hard to discern whether it's tied to mysticism or Beyonder powers.”

After a brief pause, Termiboros's deep voice echoed in Lumian's ears.

“Next time, you could consider defying the king's orders.”

What if I chose to disregard the king's commands? What if I indulged in my King's Pie instead of placing it in the room of wax figurines or even walking away with the paper? Lumian's mind plunged into contemplation.

Rather than heading directly back to the market district, he hailed a public carriage bound for Rue Scheer on Avenue du Boulevard.

As an official member of the Aurora Order, he bore the responsibility of promptly reporting his execution of Guillaume Bénét and the latest developments within the Iron and Blood Cross Order to Mr. K. Simultaneously, he hoped to fleece something out of them.

Participating in three secret organizations came with the potential of receiving triple rewards, but it also entailed making three reports per mission.

19 Rue Scheer, underground of Psychic's headquarters.

Mr. K, perpetually unchanging, sat in the red armchair, attentively listening as Lumian recounted his strategic utilization of the Iron and Blood Cross Order's resources to pinpoint and eliminate Guillaume Bénét, the heretic.

When Lumian mentioned how the former padre of the Eternal Blazing Sun Church had embraced the entity known as Inevitability in pursuit of power and strength, Mr. K lowered his head and traced a cross upon his chest in a deliberate up-and-down, left-to-right motion. His voice, hoarse and subdued, chanted a prayer, "Merciful Father, forgive the world's transgressions."

Lumian's lips twitched, mirroring Mr. K's penance, although he couldn't fathom the necessity of such repentance.

Post-repentance, he succinctly recounted Aurore's dual nature and the sinister Sinners organization that underpinned Roche Louise Sanson. Finally, he said, "Mr. K, I request your aid in locating the original family of Aurore—or rather, Roche Louise Sanson. They may well be tied to the Sinners, a heretical group devoted to Inevitability."

Mr. K's face, obscured beneath a voluminous hood, remained shrouded in shadow. His words, tinged with satisfaction, hoarsely resonated. "I understand your desire to avenge Aurore. There is no problem in that. The benevolent Father and the omnipotent God do not bar believers from securing their own futures. If they can intertwine personal matters with the sacred crusade against heresy, all the better.

"In this endeavor, leveraging your assets and harnessing the resources of the Iron and Blood Cross Order to fulfill your objective is a strategy I admire. Strive for more of such feats.

"I'll investigate the Sinners."

He agreed to Lumian's request as it aligned perfectly with his own aspirations.

By unearthing Roche Louise Sanson's family, he could deal with the Sinners, a faction devoted to the evil god, Inevitability!

"Thank you, Mr. K," Lumian said sincerely.

He pondered for a moment before proceeding, "The death of Guillaume Bénét might trigger an intensified pursuit from the official Beyonders. I'm wondering if there exists a mystical item that would suit my needs, enabling me to alter my appearance and stature at will?"

He was seeking a means to assume Aurore's identity, infiltrating the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society as Muggle.

Mr. K's tone shifted abruptly, infused with zeal.

“Only the Lifeblood I possess can accomplish what you seek. So long as you can master your flesh and blood, altering your height and appearance becomes attainable. While it may not provide an exact replica of your desires, it suffices to veil your true identity. The caveat lies in the necessity for early injection and its limited duration. You won't possess the liberty to transform at your whim.”

Precision isn't required; members of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society assume disguises, masking their true selves during gatherings... Yet, that falls short. A perceptive Spectator might notice something from Aurore's eyes or the contour of the chin. To fully pass off as Muggle and dupe everyone, the masked face must mirror Aurore's flawlessly... Plus, the adverse effects of Lifeblood are beyond my tolerance... Lumian's thoughts coalesced, and he articulated his response.

“I'm concerned that administering Lifeblood could revert me to the most primordial human archetype. Despite the Lord's protection mitigating severe physical and mental consequences, the Iron and Blood Cross Order could easily detect the anomaly and discern my true allegiance.”

Mr. K sighed in disappointment.

“That's a problem. Though I believe the Lord will safeguard you, preserving your devout persona from exposure, your concerns bear merit.”

Having declined the offer of Lifeblood, Lumian continued, “Recently, the Iron and Blood Cross Order tasked me with an interaction...”

He detailed Gardner Martin's summons, narrating until the culmination of the King's Pie game.

The sole omission was Termiboros's warning, the reason subtly placed on his intricate grasp of mysticism. A niggling suspicion prodded him to sidestep the matter, avoiding any potential anomalies.

Mr. K listened attentively, refraining from interjection. As Lumian concluded, Mr. K stood and paced the room.

“Your next objective is to figure out the Iron and Blood Cross Order's rationale for engaging the Sauron family. Are they coveting the Saurons' inheritance or considering collaboration?”

“Yes, Mr. K.” Lumian recognized the need for him to remain well-informed, irrespective of Mr. K's order.

Mr. K halted his pacing, fixing his gaze on Lumian.

“Your intuition is sound. Should any mishap occur within that game, it could set off a mystical catastrophe.”

“The central figure of Poufer's sacrifice, Vermonda Sauron, held significant standing within the Sauron royal family of that era. Born into the Champagne lineage, he was adopted into the main family by King Odo the 12th, who invested resources in his upbringing.

“Vermonda began auspiciously but met a negative end. His later years saw him vanish without a trace, dealing a heavy blow to the Sauron dynasty. In the ensuing two decades, several prominent Sauron family members met untimely and mysterious deaths, or succumbed to sudden insanity. The family's power dwindled, paving the way for Roselle's eventual overthrow.”

Emperor Roselle's successful usurpation of the Sauron Dynasty was partly facilitated by the apparent decline of the ancient royal line? Vermonda's inexplicable disappearance spanned two to three centuries. How could today's sacrifice catalyze a dangerous mystical shift? Lumian's thoughts raced, absorbing the details recounted by Mr. K.

Apartment 601, 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches.

Jenna, having gleaned some insights from the Purifiers, sought out Franca in hopes of sharing her findings.

As her gaze roamed the room, Jenna's attention was drawn to the slightly ajar master bedroom door, from which emanated a rhythmic tapping sound.

“Franca?” she called.

Franca's clear voice resounded.

“I'm here! Come inside.”

Jenna, who had never entered Franca's bedroom, hesitated for a moment before walking over and pushing open the door.

A burst of amazement brightened her blue eyes as they fell upon an intricate apparatus nestled against the wall, distant from the window.

The contraption consisted of a myriad of interlocking gears encircling brass cylinders, interconnected through levers, crankshafts, and screws.

In awe, Jenna regarded the towering device and inquired, “What is this?”

Seated before the elaborate mechanism, Franca's fingers danced across a state-of-the-art mechanical typewriter as she proudly introduced it to her companion, “This is a third-generation difference engine, cleverly modified—a sort of analyzer. It's a truncated version, simplified and miniaturized. The complete model wouldn't fit in my room.”

“Are you really a believer of the God of Steam and Machinery?” Jenna blurted out.

Franca chuckled and explained, “Sometimes.”

Jenna's scrutiny lingered on the so-called analyzer, revealing the connection of a telegraph machine and two metallic mechanical typewriters at its lower end.

It wasn't long before Franca ceased her typing, and the analyzer's mechanical appendage set the second typewriter into motion, producing letters upon pristine paper. The energy and information seemed to flow from the radio transceiver.

“What... what are you doing?” Jenna felt illiterate.

Franca happily pointed at the analyzer and said, “When the coding remains consistent, this contraption can automatically decode telegrams and codes for me. Through the metallic fingers linked to the mechanical typewriter's keypad, it types the corresponding letters, shaping the intended words.

“In essence, I can directly read the content of telegrams. No need to laboriously decode the encrypted messages I receive. It saves me considerable time and effort.

“Likewise, I can draft telegrams in standard language. The machine will autonomously encode them and transmit them via a predetermined radio frequency.”

Studying the gears as they turned in their various states, Jenna struggled to grasp Franca's intent.

“But what's the purpose?” she asked, befuddled.

Franca was caught off guard.

“Purpose? Well, the purpose is to simplify telegram conversations. Make it something mundane and routine. Though admittedly, it does consume quite a bit of paper.”

“Telegram conversations?” Jenna felt a touch of perplexity.

Franca had constructed such an intricate apparatus and embarked on such an elaborate matter simply for conversation?

The late-night typewriter sounds were Franca engaged in casual chatting?

“Exactly,” Franca affirmed with a self-satisfied grin. “A friend of mine in the Loen military agreed to share the information Anthony Reid seeks during that timeframe. We just had a brief exchange.”

While Franca could easily request the pertinent information from Madam Judgment, she preferred not to burden her Major Arcana cardholder unless absolutely necessary.

As Franca finished speaking, the analyzer completed its task of typewriting, and the telegram materialized in Intisian.

Snatching the paper, Franca's countenance darkened as she scanned its contents.

At night, in Apartment 601.

Lumian, Anthony Reid, Franca, and Jenna reassembled.

Waving the paper in her grip, Franca addressed Anthony Reid, stating, “I've received a response. The Loen military's official report on the encounter states: No such battle occurred!”

“No such battle occurred?” Anthony Reid's eyes widened as he jolted to his feet.

No battle at all? Lumian arched an eyebrow.

Such a response was undeniably unexpected.

Franca nodded gently, her gaze fixed on Anthony Reid.

“To put it simply, it's highly probable that the assault against you and your companions was not executed by the Loen army!”

Chapter 344 Boxing Gloves

“Not by the Loen army...” Anthony Reid muttered under his breath, his eyes distant.

The night of the attack had haunted his dreams, replaying over and over, each iteration etching the brutality and mercilessness of the Loen soldiers into his consciousness. These nightmares had grown, evolving into an inescapable nightmare. And now, shockingly, someone was telling him that they were not Loen soldiers!

Franca's demeanor, the subtle shifts in her expressions and body language—it all told him that Franca wasn't lying; she wasn't bluffing him!

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This revelation rendered his years of suffering, of misattributed blame, into a cruel jest.

As a Psychiatrist, Anthony Reid was acutely attuned to the waves of disillusionment that crashed through his psyche. His emotional stability quivered, struck by a potent aftershock.

Instinctively, he used Placate on himself.

As Anthony Reid struggled to “save” himself, Franca elaborated, “Either the battle's secrecy is of the highest order, barring my Loenese friend from obtaining the truth for now, or a different faction entirely orchestrated the assault on your unit.”

Her inclination leaned toward the latter possibility. In the grand scheme of the Loen Kingdom, this skirmish was a minor one. Anthony's company held no strategic value, no pivotal figures, so there was no reason for a high-level concealment.

“Who could it be?” Jenna had already raised this question after reading the telegram, but both of them couldn't come up with a reasonable answer.

She even speculated that an Instigator might have sowed seeds of internal discord amidst the Intis army to digest a potion. This made one of the companies impersonate as Loenese soldiers, launching a deadly nocturnal assault on Anthony Reid and his comrades.

However, this was far too difficult. No matter how formidable an Instigator was, there was no hope of success unless Anthony Reid's company had discovered evidence of someone's serious crimes or formed a deep feud with other companies due to conflicts on the battlefield.

“Indeed, who could it be...” Anthony Reid, now more composed thanks to his Placate, intoned with a voice etched in determination.

He understood why the Loen army would attack him and his comrades—their animosity, though intense, was comprehensible within the context of war. But an attack from an unknown faction? That puzzled him.

Franca pondered for a moment and said, “Did your unit forsake allies on the battlefield? Or perhaps lay claim to spoils of war that weren't rightfully yours?”

Anthony Reid ruminated briefly before shaking his head resolutely. “No.”

Lumian chimed in with conviction, “Absolutely not. This ties back to Hugues Artois. It can't be a squabble between comrades or external rivals.”

Jenna, absorbed in contemplation, posed another question, “Did you defy Hugues Artois's orders? Or did your actions inadvertently cost him something?”

Anthony Reid shook his head again.

“If I had, I wouldn't have grappled with years of puzzlement.”

Silence enveloped Apartment 601, a contemplative hush broken only by Lumian's recollection. A shard of Madam Magician's prior words tugged at his thoughts, and he ventured,

“Could it be a sacrificial rite? A blood offering to an evil god?”

Madam Magician had mentioned that Sinners, a secret organization devoted to evil gods, emerged in the war's later phases. The conflict had unwittingly provided opportunities for these evil gods to infiltrate the realm. Could Anthony Reid and his comrades have stumbled upon one of these opportunities?

“Blood sacrifice...” Franca and Jenna recalled the support various evil god factions had given Hugues Artois.

Had he forged an alliance with these heretics? Did he sacrifice his own company?

Anthony Reid fell silent for a moment before saying, “The heretics, disguised as the Loen army, orchestrated our annihilation with Hugues Artois's complicity?”

Franca said insightfully, “It's the most logical explanation, though the question remains—who gains? Certainly not Hugues Artois. He reaped no boons, not even in death.”

For a moment, no one could answer Franca's question.

After a few seconds, Lumian said, “That's one of the avenues we must delve into as we proceed. It might intertwine with Hugues Artois's ascent to power and his parliamentary role.”

Upon hearing this, Jenna recounted the information she had obtained from the Purifiers and concluded, “The pressing issue lies in the fact that General Philip, who seems the most suspicious, is already deceased. It's as if all the threads converge at a sudden dead-end.”

“He died just in time.” Franca chuckled. “A pre-emptive elimination, perhaps?”

Lumian stroked his chin and spoke slowly, “In the world of mysticism, certain deaths don't necessarily mean true demise.”

Madam Justice had mentioned that an evil god's boon had a Deceased Sequence. They could use death to escape their original fate.

Similarly, if General Philip had used the Substitution Spell, the one who died might not be the real him.

Franca, who had previously helped with finishing Guillaume Bénét, immediately understood.

“Substitution Spell?”

“We cannot dismiss the possibility.” Lumian smiled. “Our immediate objective remains the investigation of General Philip, ascertaining the truth of his demise. Even if he is truly dead, there may be traces he left behind, undiscovered by the Purifiers due to the constraints imposed on them.”

Anthony Reid, though still grappling with the shattering revelations, felt the warmth of unity and purpose in his companions' discourse. It bolstered his resolve, a spark of renewed determination igniting within him.

He nodded slightly and said, “There's no need to rush. This matter must be very complicated. I'll first gather preliminary information about General Philip, his family, and friends.”

After Anthony Reid took his leave, Lumian observed Franca preparing to head to Rue des Fontaines in search of Gardner Martin, so he left Apartment 601 with her.

As they walked down the stairs, Lumian broached the subject of his conversation with Hela, sharing the details with Franca.

Her excitement burgeoned as she absorbed his words, a fervor building within her.

“Great! Great! Quickly transform into Muggle. Let's make contact with April Fool's together!”

“Why are you so excited?” Lumian glanced at him.

Franca made a tongue-clicking sound and chuckled.

“Back home, there's a saying that goes— if you get drenched in the rain, rip up someone else's umbrella. Haha, it's all in jest, but isn't it interesting? Even though your appearance leans towards masculinity, a few simple adjustments can render you strikingly beautiful. Once the Pyromaniac potion has been digested, have you not considered having a potion of Pleasure? Sigh, forget it. There's still some risk before reaching Sequence 4.”

Laughter and jesting flowed between them, Franca's demeanor then taking a more serious turn as they reached the street

“Furthermore, you're one of the few people I can trust now. If I could obtain your direct collaboration in our probe of the April Fool's conundrum, I'd feel significantly more secure. Unfortunately...”

“Unfortunately...” Lumian echoed the sentiment, a tinge of regret shading his words.

His curiosity then led him to inquire about Emperor Roselle and the perplexing attitudes of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society members.

Franca's expression turned strange, as if she struggled to suppress a bout of laughter.

After a moment, she exhaled and said, “This matter is quite complicated. It's difficult to explain in a few words. I'll explain in detail tomorrow or the day after tomorrow when I'm free. In short, be mentally prepared.”

“How complicated can it be?” Lumian muttered. He bade Franca farewell and commenced his journey toward Rue Anarchie.

Upon reaching Room 207 at Auberge du Coq Doré, despite having already deciphered the issue with Aurore's grimoires and no longer needing to delve into them, Lumian's habits dictated that he retrieve the copies and skim through their contents, his thoughts wandering amidst the scattered pages.

Approaching midnight, a stirring within Lumian's heart drew his gaze toward the carbide lamp. The light it emitted bore a dark green hue.

The “doll” messenger, clad in a light-gold dress, suddenly materialized. It glared coldly at Lumian, as if striving to contain its emotions.

With twin thuds, a pair of iron-black boxing gloves, adorned with multiple short thorns, landed soundlessly on the table. The impact carried a resonance more akin to wood meeting wood than metal striking wood.

Simultaneously, a folded sheet of paper drifted toward Lumian.

“Thank you.” Although the “doll” messenger quickly vanished, Lumian still expressed his gratitude politely.

He refrained from touching the boxing gloves for now, opting to unfold the piece of paper and peruse the contents of Madam Magician's message.

“The Shadow Branch and the Lucky One Beyonder characteristic have been made into a mystical item.

“How does it fare? Has its form been modified, rendering it more convenient for transport? This is a masterpiece forged by a master.

“It remains nameless for now. With common words, you could dub it the ‘Lucky Shadow Boxing Glove.’ For a touch of panache, ‘Flog’ could be a stylish choice. The name is yours to determine.

“Any target struck by this glove, regardless of creating injuries, whether they defend with a weapon or not, will undergo a surge of desire or emotion. The specific emotion hinges on your luck. Yet, with the presence of Lucky One, you can envision or

simulate the corresponding desires and emotions ahead of time, guiding the target's reaction. The success rate stands impressively high—around 70 to 80%.

“Following the trigger of a target's desires or emotions, a second strike won't engender new feelings. Instead, there's a likelihood of causing the pre-existing desires or emotions to erupt. This unleashes an overwhelming tidal wave on most targets, inflicting significant harm, even rendering them temporarily incapacitated.

“While the likelihood of invoking desire or emotion with each hit isn't substantial, repetitive blows will eventually yield the desired outcome—unless you are cursed with bad luck that counteracts the influence of Lucky One.

“However, the glove's most exceptional facet isn't its offensive potential, but its defensive capabilities. It possesses unparalleled sturdiness, capable of withstanding an assault from a Reaper without incurring any damage. (Note: Reaper refers to Sequence 5 of the Hunter pathway.) Naturally, this hinges on the attack squarely targeting the glove. In such a scenario, there's even a possibility of taking a strike infused with godhood, at the expense of shattering or fracturing the glove. This probably places the glove at Sequence 4.

“On the downside, carrying the glove will erode your self-control, intensifying the oscillations of various desires and emotions. Withstanding this requires exceptional endurance. Moreover, while donning the glove, you will attract the attention of a hidden entity since it originated from the Tree of Shadow. While They cannot directly harm you for various reasons, They can summon dangerous entities to your vicinity, influencing or attacking you.

“Hence, each use of the boxing gloves should be accompanied by a change of location, and their usage should not be for extended periods. Failure to adhere to these guidelines may attract hidden dangers. However, should you maintain your composure and endure one or two attacks, the world will expel those dangerous entities who can't truly descend here.

“Ah, one last detail—your two Psychiatrists request a final follow-up consultation at the usual time tomorrow afternoon.”

Chapter 345 Dream

I need exceptional endurance to withstand the weakening of self-control brought about by carrying the Flog. The waves of various desires and emotions surge stronger... Alms Monk excels in handling such situations... While reading Madam Magician's letter, Lumian swiftly considered if he could fulfill the conditions for using the mystical item.

Naturally, he didn't have to keep the Flog boxing gloves with him to employ them. Lumian could position them in advance and entice the enemy into an ambush before revealing them. Alternatively, he could accumulate enough resources to purchase a steam robot and have emotionless tools carry the gloves for him. Nevertheless, thanks to Alms Monk's abilities in managing adverse effects, he didn't need to resort to such complicated strategies.

With this in mind, Lumian recollected the adverse effects of Contractee contracts.

...

A substantial portion of them seemed to be mitigated by Alms Monk's resilience and self-restraint.

First acquiring the Alms Monk boon prior to becoming a Contractee. Could it be that one must bolster their endurance to endure a contract? Otherwise, the padre with over ten negative effects would have self-destructed long ago...

Yes, Guillaume Bénét's utilization of Alms Monk and Ascetic powers wasn't overly adept. Could this stem from his ingrained indulgence, making change difficult? Or did he leap directly into being a Contractee before evolving into a Fate Appropriator? His grasp of the Alms Monk and Ascetic boons seemed inadequate, relying largely on instinct. Lumian murmured to himself.

Recalling how the padre in the dream transformed from an ordinary individual to a Fate Appropriator within a day, Lumian was more inclined to believe the latter possibility. He surmised that the events in the dream marked Guillaume Bénét's advancement to a Fate Appropriator with only two to three boons.

Lumian redirected his attention to the letter in his hand and read through the remainder in one go.

Concerning the utilization of the Flog boxing gloves to attract perilous creatures, he intended to seize an opportunity and approach Franca for assistance to verify the precise circumstances.

If indeed hazardous, he would need to contemplate reserving one usage of spirit world traversal to escape any future influence or attack.

Crimson flames silently surged, setting the letter ablaze, its words turning to ash.

Amidst the dispersed ashes, Lumian reached out his hand toward the iron-black boxing gloves.

Although they lacked the metallic texture and chilliness, they were exceptionally rigid.

Almost in unison, two voices resonated in Lumian's mind:

One was the voice of the eloping couple, casting curses; the other was the voice of inebriated individuals shattering bottles and clamoring in the street.

The former set Lumian's imagination ablaze, while the latter spurred him to draw his revolver and open fire.

The sensations weren't overpowering and could be endured and repressed.

After confirming the fit of the boxing gloves, Lumian set them beside the pillow.

In the depths of night, in a hazy state, Lumian felt as though he had stepped into an ancient beige castle. Its exterior bore numerous dark and crimson stains, as if drenched in a copious amount of blood.

Hysterical laughter and shouts reverberated from within the castle. Lumian instinctively raised his gaze and spotted a deep-red visage peering at him through a narrow window on the third floor.

Their eyes met, and suddenly, the man raised his right hand and cruelly gouged out his reddish-brown eyes.

Fine blood vessels detached from their sockets, leaving behind a pair of inky-black, blood-soaked cavities.

“Hahaha! Hahaha!” The eyeless man chortled with a maddened demeanor.

Lumian's thoughts blurred as he involuntarily stepped into the ancient castle.

What unfurled before his eyes were gruesome scenes: The maid rent her abdomen with a dining knife, drawing forth pallid intestines marred by blood. The valets ascended the staircase to the second floor, only to throw themselves back into the hall, repeating their falls in a macabre cycle. The butler clutched a comely female head, his lower body severed. He dragged himself with his elbows, leaving behind a broad and extended trail of blood. The headless mistress sat in an armchair, lifted her cup of coffee, and poured it into the gash on her neck...

The pungent stench of blood and the frenzied ambiance pierced Lumian's mind, snapping his eyes open.

He beheld the familiar, squalid ceiling and caught the ceaseless nocturnal clamor of Rue Anarchie.

Had it all been a dream? The scene from his dream lingered in Lumian's memory, a residual unease remaining.

As a Beyonder seasoned with the world of mysticism, he didn't underestimate such a dream.

It likely bore the marks of a revelation through Astral Projection or an external influence.

Swiftly reviewing the day's occurrences, Lumian zeroed in on two potential “culprits.”

Could it be the lingering effects of the King's Pie game from earlier, or perhaps linked to the impact of the Flog boxing gloves?

He cast a glance at the iron-black spiked boxing gloves, left untouched beside his pillow, sensing that the game was the likely trigger.

An attempt to commune with Termiboros yielded no response.

After securing the Flog boxing gloves within a drawer in his wooden table, Lumian drifted back into slumber.

Throughout that night, nightmares plagued him repeatedly. Each instance, he encountered the bizarre ancient castle.

Fortunately, the dream's lucidity waned progressively, eventually melding into a commonplace nightmare.

The following morning, Lumian adhered to his routine of jogging and practicing boxing, then set out in search of a distinctive breakfast in the bustling market district.

After spending nearly the entirety of the morning at Salle de Bal Brise, he eventually found himself standing before Apartment 601 at 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches.

With a flush on her face and a lively demeanor, Franca answered the door. "You're quite the eager one."

Lumian was forthright about his intentions.

"Remember you mentioned wanting to discuss Emperor Roselle with me?"

"Well, well..." Franca's expression shifted oddly once more.

She grumbled, "I'm feeling unwell!"

"What sort of ailment?" Lumian found it hard to believe that the Demoness of Pleasure could fall ill.

As Franca led him to the living room, she muttered, "It's empathetic embarrassment!" Lumian shut the door and took a seat on the sofa. After a moment's thought, he inquired, "Is this embarrassment on behalf of Emperor Roselle?"

"Exactly." Franca, seated cross-legged in a recliner, scratched her flaxen hair. "I'm seriously concerned that he might be so mortified that he'll rise from the grave to strangle anyone who's privy to the information!"

After a rather odd comment, Franca sighed and explained, "In simpler terms, Emperor Roselle, like us, hails from another world."

"Emperor Roselle is also one of the transmigrators you mentioned?" Lumian blurted out in astonishment.

Franca confirmed succinctly, "Many of his inventions, beliefs, and ideas originated in our world. What's more significant, his diary was penned in the language of the nation your sister and I come from. That's why it remained undeciphered for so long until our transmigration."

Lumian's mind was a whirlwind of confusion. It all seemed too fantastical, like something out of fiction. However, Aurore's attitude toward Emperor Roselle and his diary lent credence to Franca's words.

Seeing his silence, Franca added with understanding, "Nonetheless, he's an extraordinary individual. Progressing from a mere Sequence 9 individual, he ascended the paths of the divine step by step, overthrowing the Sauron Dynasty and enacting monumental changes upon Intis and the world. His impact on the history of the past two to three centuries and generations of humanity is profound."

That's true. Emperor Roselle once said that a hero is a hero, irrespective of their origins... Where Emperor Roselle came from was immaterial... Lumian quickly collected his thoughts and asked with curiosity, "Did Emperor Roselle's famous quotations originate from philosophers in your world?"

"Many of them did." Franca, in a way, supported her fellow countryman's public image. "But some are genuinely his own. Consider this: a person who's undergone so much, tasted both triumph and failure, must possess unique insights across various domains. He's not lacking in memorable sayings."

Now I understand why Aurore chuckles whenever I mention something Emperor Roselle said... A realization dawned on Lumian. He grasped his sister's sentiments at that moment and the jesting tone the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society adopted toward the Emperor.

He then inquired, "Did one of you write Emperor Roselle's Secret Chronicles?"

"Yes, but I'm unsure who the author is," Franca honestly admitted. "The writer possesses quite the literary talent."

"Is everything in there accurate?" Lumian contemplated seeking out an underground bookseller to procure a copy.

Franca chuckled. "About half of it. Even among the portions based on actual events, half of that is a sensationalized expansion of a couple sentences from the Emperor's diary into a narrative rife with explicit details. For instance, the Emperor once shared more than just friendship with a Demoness..."

Franca suddenly paused.

Realization dawned upon her that she herself was now a Demoness.

A worthwhile addition to my collection... Emperor Roselle does seem to live up to the legendary reputation of being a flirt... Lumian's anticipation for the underground book grew.

He opted not to delve further into the topic of the Emperor and the Demoness. Instead, he brought up the King's Pie game from the prior day and the subsequent nightmarish dreams. He then sought Franca's insights as an adept practitioner of divination.

"What revelations are hidden in that dream?"

"I can't decipher it," Franca said after a prolonged pause. "It conveys a sense of danger and advises to stay away. Also, those nightmares appear to be lingering effects from some form of insanity."

Lumian contemplated for a moment, deciding not to probe deeper for the time being. He planned to consult the two Psychiatrists later in the day.

At 3:20 p.m., Lumian reached Mason Café in Quartier du Jardin Botanique and took a seat in Booth D. He requested a cup of aromatic Intis coffee and two cream-filled cupcakes.

Once the coffee and confections were served, he patiently waited for a minute or so before catching the sound of Susie's gentle, feminine voice.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Lumian Lee."

Lumian responded with an easy smile.

"Good afternoon, Madam Susie. Good afternoon, Madam Justice."

Chapter 346 Follow-Up Visit

"How did you know I was here?" Madam Justice's voice held a smile.

Lumian gazed at the chair across from him and responded, a grin tugging at his lips, "Can't hurt to extend a greeting."

Susie steered the conversation forward, "Congratulations on completing the initial phase of your vendetta. Care for a brief discussion?"

...

"No problem." Lumian's composure remained unshaken, not even flinching at the mention of "vendetta."

Of course, part of his calm demeanor stemmed from the fact that he hadn't brought along the Flog boxing gloves. This was a psychological evaluation, after all. He couldn't allow external influences to taint his thoughts and skew the doctor's judgment.

From the point of seeking assistance and crafting a strategy, he recounted his experiences of the past two days. He glossed over the secret of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society but provided a concise account of everything else.

Following a momentary silence, Susie's soothing voice resumed its course.

"Your mental state has held up admirably. A certain degree of overreaction in specific scenarios is par for the course. Psychiatric therapy doesn't strip a person of their emotions or feelings. Instead, it aids in unburdening oneself, fostering reconciliation, and discovering inner resilience. Nightmares won't deal a devastating blow to you any longer. Otherwise, according to the more dubious therapists who advocate severing the frontal lobe for eternal tranquility, you'll forever be at peace."

"Removing the frontal lobe?" Lumian's ears caught wind of this concept for the first time.

Susie's tone tinged with revulsion.

"It's a notion that has cropped up in the last couple of years. It doesn't yield the intended outcomes; rather, it inflicts grave harm upon the patient. There's an evident malevolence behind this treatment proposal. It's as if some callous individual propagated it with the sole intention of making a mockery out of medical professionals and those seeking solace."

A prank that toys with the lives of others? Lumian shifted gears, steering the conversation onto a different course.

"Madam Susie, you haven't even delved into my emotions or analyzed my thoughts, yet you've already deduced that I've made some strides towards recovery, and a follow-up might not be necessary?"

Susie's demeanor lifted rapidly, and she replied with a grin, "At times, a person's actions can be more telling of their psychological state than their thoughts. Understand that humans excel at deceiving themselves. They concoct a slew of rationales for their actions, which often stand less grounded in reality than their deeds. To decipher an accurate psychological portrait from this

labyrinth of complex and contradictory thoughts requires meticulous analysis. But such scrutiny can easily unearth problems. Hence, I chose to commence with an examination of your actions.

“Evidently, whether you're willing to admit it or not, you've successfully reestablished social connections and fostered a level of trust in others. You've also exhibited a willingness to extend your trust to others.

“Prior to your ambush of Guillaume Bénét, you demonstrated the capacity for calm contemplation and thorough preparation. While there were impulsive undertones and hints of macabre inclinations in your operation, they were inevitable. Their absence would only have hinted at more severe psychological turmoil. And once the affair concluded, you swiftly reverted to your norm and dived right back into life, embarking on another investigation.

“Grounded in the sequence of actions you've undertaken, I extend my congratulations. The pronounced self-destructive tendencies have lost their grip, and you've truly extricated yourself from the abyss of agony.

“Naturally, the pain won't dissipate entirely. It will wane and recede. Perhaps it might resurge abruptly in the future, once again occupying your mind. Yet, there's no need to succumb to panic. Armed with this period of experience, I trust you're equipped to navigate it adeptly. Psychologically speaking, this signals a path to recovery.

“In similar fashion, the past invariably leaves its imprints upon us. Your self-destructive propensities, your extremities, your pathological behaviors—no doubt they're more potent than in most individuals, but they all abide by the bounds of reason and normalcy.”

In response, Lumian let out a slow exhale and murmured, “I sense it myself, honestly. The present me is an entirely different person from the one who initially set foot in Trier.

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

He realized that his transformation from an initial state of apathy was thanks to the efforts of these two psychiatrists and his escapades in the market district. The prospect of death itself had lost its sting. He had shifted from a vindictive malevolent specter to an individual fueled by an ardent thirst for retribution, driven by a potent desire for action.

“In essence, this is your own redemption.” Susie's tone brimmed with a delight not present before. “The primary contributors to this turnaround are none other than yourself and your sister, Aurore. Were it not for the tiniest ember of hope that you harbored, coupled with your will to persist, and were it not for Miss Aurore gifting you nearly six years of cherished moments to savor and to mold your thoughts, we might not have been able to reel you back in.”

As Lumian processed these words, a montage of scenes flickered across his mind: Aurore inhaling deeply, using the breaths to temper the vexation derived from instructing him. The tempestuous storms of combat training, coupled with her impromptu “attacks.” The two of them ensconced in the study, each absorbed in their respective books, relishing the tranquility of the night. And, as the number one experimental subject, he was obligated to consume the culinary reproductions of food back home that his sister conjured, be they successes or failures...

Lumian's expression softened as he recollected a line from his sister's novel: The joy and pain of days past are equal to the me of the present.

After a pause lasting more than ten seconds, he straightened in his seat and queried, “Were last night's nightmares all rooted in the King's Pie game?”

This time, it was Madam Justice who responded, her voice soft with understanding, “Indeed. Considering the current situation, it's likely that you were mentally corrupted during that time.”

“Mental corruption? Does it actually involve Beyonder powers?” Lumian asked with genuine curiosity.

Madam Justice replied, “Ordinarily, the simple act of sacrificing a King's Pie wouldn't have yielded any results. Otherwise, the game wouldn't have remained a popular tradition in Intis for centuries, fading into obscurity only after the establishment of the Republic. Only a handful of families still recall it.”

“Yes, that's what I assumed back then. Poufer didn't employ any mystical language or invoke a complete honorific name. It's implausible for the sacrifice to succeed,” Lumian concurred.

Madam Justice continued, “Nevertheless, exceptions exist—sacrificers who share blood ties with the subject of the sacrifice and exhibit numerous similarities.

“If you participate frequently in Poufer's King's Pie game and repeatedly endure the mental corruption it entails, the ramifications won't dissolve with a mere spate of nightmares. Rather, before they fully dissipate, they'll progressively warp your psyche and lead you into madness.”

“Could the content of these nightmares be symbolic?” Lumian inquired succinctly.

Madam Justice's response flowed measuredly.

“It's highly probable that they're a fusion of specific deranged occurrences from your past, projected into your dreamscape through the taint of corruption.”

“So, that ancient castle and those deranged individuals could really exist...” Lumian mused, nodding in contemplation.

As Lumian engaged in a conversation with Justice and Susie for a while, he intuited that the day's follow-up session was drawing to a close.

In that instance, Madam Justice took the lead, saying, “Didn't I mention previously that I might require your assistance with something?”

“Of course, no problem,” Lumian swiftly agreed.

Consider it the cost of the psychiatric treatment!

Moreover, he held the belief that Madam Justice wouldn't have entrusted him with the task without assessing his capabilities. The endeavor couldn't be excessively dangerous.

Madam Justice chuckled and said, “Should you succeed, I shall bestow an additional reward upon you, one that will cater to your requirements in a specific manner.”

“Something capable of altering my appearance?” Lumian's heart skipped a beat with excitement.

“Something along those lines.” Madam Justice's initially gentle tone turned solemn. “I'm hoping you can venture to an ancient tomb situated on the fourth floor of Trier's catacombs, specifically to retrieve a vial of the Samaritan Women's Spring for me.”

Samaritan Women's Spring? Lumian was taken aback.

Madame Hela had previously mentioned that she had journeyed to Trier in pursuit of an artifact hidden deep within the catacombs. Concurrently, she had inquired about the legend surrounding the Samaritan Women's Spring!

Wasn't this too much of a coincidence?

Almost as if she sensed his thoughts, Madam Justice chimed in with a smile, “Don't you find it too coincidental?”

“Yes, what I'm hoping for is that you can leverage Madame Hela's exploration to assist me in securing some Samaritan Women's Spring water. Doing so yourself might yield slim chances of success.

“In truth, I could 'arrange' for you to undertake this task in a more clandestine manner, but that approach contradicts my philosophy and principles. I still require face-to-face communication with you and your explicit consent for such matters. I'm disinclined to ensnare you passively through covert cues to fulfill my objectives.

“For me, indulging in the manipulation of others' minds is a treacherous endeavor.

“Of course, honesty is also an effective way at influencing others' thoughts.”

Lumian's skepticism and doubts gradually ebbed away. He inquired, perplexed, “Madam Justice, given that you possess a general awareness of the Samaritan Women's Spring's approximate location, why wouldn't you retrieve it yourself? Why involve a Sequence 7 Beyonder like me?”

The Tarot Club's Major Arcana card was definitely a demigod, countless times stronger than him!

Madam Justice laughed.

“To put it succinctly, certain locales become progressively hazardous with an increase in Sequence.”

A location where higher Sequences meet with increased danger? Lumian found this notion confounding.

Madam Justice added, “As Sequences rise, proximity to the Oldest One increases, accumulating more madness along the way. Consequently, individuals in higher Sequences are more susceptible to particular forms of corruption.

“Hela is also beneficial in this matter. At the very least, this approach will save her time and permit her to narrow down her search to a designated area.”

After a brief contemplation, Lumian agreed to Madam Justice's request. From her, he gleaned the approximate location of the Samaritan Women's Spring—situated within the westernmost ancient tomb on the fourth floor of the catacombs.

Following the session, Lumian made his way back to Rue des Blouses Blanches in the market district, his objective being the retrieval of the Flog boxing gloves from the iron cabinet.

Upon his arrival at the safe house, an odd inkling settled upon him.

Intrusion!

Someone had infiltrated his safe house!

Lumian's heart tightened as he advanced with purpose, unlatching the iron cabinet.

While observing that Aurore's grimoires and the Flog boxing gloves remained, a sigh of relief escaped him involuntarily.

However, he proceeded to conduct a thorough inspection, and his scrutiny bore fruit. One article was conspicuously absent—the Earth Blood ore was gone!

Chapter 347 Strange Theft

Looking at the open iron cabinet, Lumian found it absurd and surreal.

The thief had entered the house without taking the most valuable Flog boxing glove, nor did they flip through Aurore's grimoires to see if there were any banknotes inside. They had only taken a mineral specimen that didn't look like a gem at all.

Disregarding the traps, if the thief were truly a Marauder with Beyonder powers, he wouldn't have given up on the boxing gloves made of unique materials and capable of powerful abilities. If he were just an ordinary thief, he wouldn't have just taken the Earth Blood ore. He might have even casually thrown the seemingly worthless item to the ground.

...

All of this led Lumian to suspect that the thieving intruder had only one motive: take away the Earth Blood ore!

The other party clearly knew what was special about the mineral specimen and was attempting to exploit it!

“Termiboros, who stole the Earth Blood ore?” Lumian couldn't identify any suspect no matter how hard he thought.

Apart from dealing with Guillaume Bénét a few days ago when he retrieved the Earth Blood ore and handed it to Franca, he kept the mineral specimen in the safe house. He never carried it with him to avoid being targeted.

Of course, the thief might have divined or prophesied to narrow down the area. He searched every room and finally found the target item.

Termiboros's magnificent voice suddenly resounded.

“I don't know.”

Don't know... Lumian was alarmed.

This answer was meaningless, but coming from Termiboros meant many things.

While Termiboros, sealed within Lumian's body, couldn't exert any direct power, his angelic nature granted Him unique insights. As an angel of the Inevitability domain, He possessed an uncanny ability to detect problems and traces that eluded many Low-Sequence Beyonders through Low-Sequence Beyonders's eyes and fate.

But now, He claimed ignorance!

This revelation carried significant weight, suggesting that whoever had stolen the Earth Blood ore was no ordinary individual. It hinted at the involvement of a high-level power, possibly tied to a secret organization or cult.

Hiss, I have to write a letter and inform Madam Magician about this. After all, she once predicted that the Earth Blood ore would bring me some misfortune. However, the item is lost before the misfortune arrived... Lumian had initially hesitated to burden his Major Arcana card holder with this matter, as he didn't attach much value to the mineral specimen. Its applications were limited, and its loss seemed inconsequential. However, with the situation taking a bizarre turn, he couldn't simply dismiss it.

In the world of mysticism, negligence often led to painful lessons.

Truth be told, Lumian didn't harbor anger over the loss of his possession, nor did he feel compelled to retrieve it. Though the Earth Blood ore might lead to fortuitous encounters, it remained an abstract concept, difficult to quantify or cherish.

Moreover, Madam Magician's warning of potential misfortune made him view its loss as a means to mitigate risk.

Lumian meticulously inspected the safe house once more, confirming that none of the traps had been triggered. Only the Earth Blood ore had vanished. He settled down to compose a letter.

This time, the summoned puppet messenger displayed a less frigid demeanor, no longer suppressing intense emotions.

In mere minutes, Madam Magician's response arrived, concise and to the point: “There's indeed something amiss in this matter. I can't identify the thief of the Earth Blood ore either. If you're not fearful, you can venture to the entrance of Salle de Bal Unique and seek anyone with a monocle in

their right eye. Even if they aren't the culprits, they should possess knowledge of the suspect. If you find it too risky, exercise patience. Someone will inquire on your behalf.”

Salle de Bal Unique... That makes sense. The Sequence preceding a swindler is Marauder. Could those monocle-wearing individuals hold sway over all the thieves wielding Beyond powers in Trier? Lumian pondered this in silence.

Aurore's grimoires had mentioned that Marauder occupied Sequence 9 on one of the paths of the divine. Above Marauder was Swindler, and further up was Cryptologist.

After careful consideration, Lumian opted to wait for someone to inquire on his behalf. He had no immediate need for the Earth Blood ore.

The thought of Salle de Bal Unique, Monette, the monocle-wearing Islander swindler, and the swindlers who emulated his style sent shivers down his spine. He preferred to avoid any unnecessary contact for the time being.

After burning the letter, Lumian shifted his attention to the iron cabinet, the repository of Aurore's grimoires, Flog boxing gloves, and various other items.

The once-secure safe house had become compromised, and he needed to find a new location for these possessions.

I'll take Flog with me. I'll carry the rest if I can, and sell what's sellable. If not, I'll secure another safe house... For Aurore's grimoires and the gold, I'll rent an anonymous safe deposit box at a large bank for their safekeeping... When this property's current lease expires, I wouldn't renew it... Lumian had a clear strategy in mind.

His plan encompassed the items he couldn't easily transport or wished to part with, which primarily included the five ritualistic hides, in addition to Aurore's grimoires and his accumulated gold. Finding a new home for these items was a priority, along with securing another safe house for himself.

With these considerations in mind, Lumian began drafting a letter addressed to Hela.

In the letter, he revealed that he had acquired information about the approximate location of the Samaritan Women's Spring through a secretive channel. The information source had tasked him with venturing underground to retrieve a genuine bottle of water from the spring.

However, as Lumian was writing, he felt a sense of puzzlement.

It seemed unnecessary for him to be directly involved when he could have entrusted Hela with the task of obtaining the spring water on his behalf.

Madam Justice should have considered this. Why am I required to descend into the fourth level of the catacombs personally? Is it because of the perceived difficulty Hela might encounter in procuring the water by herself? She needs my assistance?

What's so special about me? Apart from the angel sealed within me, my Sequence isn't high...

Madame Hela's Sequence is relatively high. It's relatively dangerous for her to approach the Samaritan Women's Spring and she will be prone to madness. Am I responsible for monitoring her condition and awaken her if needed?

I previously believed that Madame Hela was at least a Sequence 4. She claimed she could resolve the Cordu problem before the descent ritual, but now it appears she hasn't ascended to a demigod. Otherwise, she wouldn't be able to enter the fourth level of the catacombs, let alone approach the Samaritan Women's Spring... Does she possess a Grade 1 Sealed Artifact or a mystical item equivalent to a saint? Lumian combed through the entire situation and made some guesses and judgments.

Continuing to write, Lumian used the information provider's request as a pretext to express his personal desire to enter the ancient tomb.

After the summoning ritual, the skull, crafted from pure silver and radiating a gentle glow, retrieved the letter and departed.

Before long, a messenger returned with Hela's response: "No problem. I'll meet you at the gates of the Death Empire at 4 p.m. tomorrow."

Phew... Lumian exhaled a sigh of relief, his body trembling with a mix of excitement and trepidation.

His adventurous spirit and penchant for experimentation had always defined him. The bizarre vanishing of the couple in the catacombs had etched a profound mark on his psyche.

The next morning, at 11 Rue des Fontaines.

Lumian dutifully arrived at Gardner Martin's villa and reported the details of his meeting with Count Poufer and the other Black Cat members.

Inside, Gardner Martin, unusually excited, sat behind his desk and spoke with a hint of joy, "Despite your claim of lacking artistic inclination, your background allows you to converse with them effectively. That's precisely why I chose you instead of Albus.

"I was concerned you might not exhibit enough generosity, but you handled it admirably. You even sponsored them with 4,000 verl d'or on your first visit."

Gardner Martin, the Commanding Officer of the Iron and Blood Cross Order, implied that Lumian's status as the younger brother of best-selling author Aurore Lee, even without artistic inclination, provided him with a wealth of insider knowledge about the scandals, grudges, and grievances within the literary and artistic circles.

Lumian, however, didn't waste any time and cut straight to the point. "What I don't understand is why the King's Pie game gave me a sense of danger. I even had a few nightmares last night."

Gardner Martin nodded thoughtfully.

"That's because Poufer is quite unique. He bears a striking resemblance to his ancestor, Vermonda. They share a strong blood connection, which allows them to bypass many crucial steps during a ritual."

"Has his ancestor turned into an evil spirit? How can he still accept sacrifices after centuries?" Lumian asked, basing his question on logical reasoning, without mentioning Mr. K's account.

Gardner Martin responded with solemnity, “That's something you should investigate when you approach Poufer. Don't worry; as long as you don't participate in the King's Pie game every two or three days, the only aftereffect you'll experience is those nightmares. Keep that sense of danger intact and resist becoming a king. It's easier for you to become a king than anyone else, except for Poufer himself. If you're uncertain about making the right choice, let Poufer choose first.”

The Iron and Blood Cross Order wants to uncover the whereabouts of the mysterious Vermonda Sauron, who has been missing for centuries? Heh heh, why didn't they warn me about the dangers of the King's Pie game beforehand and advise me to be the last to make a choice? Lumian suspected that Gardner Martin hadn't mentioned it to confirm a crucial matter.

In the afternoon, near the Trier Opera House, within a concealed quarry cave, Franca and Jenna, wearing half-masks, once again met the Warlock in the black robe.

He was the same client who had previously commissioned the investigation of the disappearance of the Deep Valley Cloister's gatekeeper.

Franca scanned their surroundings, her voice intentionally hoarse as she spoke,

“We've made some progress in our investigation regarding the disappearance of the Deep Valley Cloister's gatekeeper. We wish to discuss it with you privately.”

The man fell silent for over ten seconds before finally nodding. “Very well.”

Their iron-masked skeletal escort led them, along with the client, into a secluded “conversation room” within the quarry cave.

With an hour left until their agreed meeting time, Lumian equipped himself with a carbide lamp and entered the market district's corresponding entrance to Underground Trier.

Chapter 348 The Bustling Underground

The carbide lamp emitted a bluish-yellow light, casting an eerie glow over the tunnel, which was divided by stone pillars.

Lumian strolled casually, carrying a black canvas bag that had become popular among university students in recent years. Inside, he had stashed the Flog boxing gloves and a stack of white candles.

After conducting numerous experiments, Lumian had discovered that carrying them in his bag was less risky than tucking them into his shirt or pants pockets. While it didn't make a significant difference, it was still better than the alternative.

...

As he followed the route marked on Gardner Martin's map, leading him toward the underground of Quartier de l'Observatoire, Lumian suddenly perked up his ears, listening for signs of approaching footsteps.

A cacophony of faint footsteps echoed in the air, barely audible.

Lumian scanned the path ahead and to his right, unsure which route the unidentified group would take. To remain inconspicuous, he clambered up to a stone pillar supporting the tunnel's ceiling, extinguishing his carbide lamp, and disappeared into the shadows.

Before long, a group of men emerged.

Most of them wore tattered jackets or were shirtless, hunched over while carrying heavy crates. Over a dozen burly men, dressed in well-worn attire with sinister expressions, held various firearms and carbide lamps, interspersed throughout the group.

Smugglers... Lumian peered out, examining the crates illuminated by the smugglers' lights. They appeared to emit a metallic gleam.

Firearms or something else? He mumbled silently, observing the smuggling caravan as it entered the right tunnel.

As they advanced, possibly due to a shadow that moved too much like a human, one of the smugglers raised his gun, took aim, and fired.

With a resounding bang, the alarm ceased, and the group pressed onward.

Lumian clicked his tongue and shook his head, finding their reaction overly tense and excessive.

In Underground Trier, such actions could easily lead to trouble!

It was well known that aside from university students exploring and citizens cultivating mushrooms to eke out a living, most individuals venturing underground were not to be underestimated. The chances of encountering Beyonders were significantly higher below ground than on the surface. Firing upon any passerby could potentially provoke members of secret organizations, bestowed of evil gods, anti-government militants, or formidable cave adventurers.

With this in mind, Lumian drew his revolver and squeezed the trigger in the direction of the smuggling caravan, which was about to disappear at the end of the tunnel to his right.

He wasn't aiming at anyone, just firing into the air.

Bang! The armed smugglers either spun around or scrambled for cover, unleashing a barrage of bullets at the crossroads.

However, Lumian was no longer concerned. He was already scaling the rock wall, almost reaching the top.

After exchanging gunfire with the empty air for a brief moment, the smugglers shifted their positions nervously, puzzled and flustered.

Lumian observed their backs and couldn't help but smile.

No need for thanks. Consider it a free lesson!

He leaped to the ground and relit his carbide lamp.

Smelling the lingering scent of gunpowder, Lumian grinned and holstered his revolver before continuing along his planned route.

A few minutes later, he came across a group of quarry police officers dressed in dark uniforms, armed with semi-automatic revolvers.

The officer leading the group, upon seeing Lumian's youthful appearance, backpack slung diagonally, and well-dressed attire, muttered under his breath, "Son of a bitch, why is it another college student!?"

He then exhaled loudly and asked, "Did you hear anything just now?"

"There was a gunfight over there. Bang, bang, bang. I wanted to go over and take a look, but I didn't dare," Lumian replied, concealing nothing about the smuggling caravan.

The quarry police officers exchanged glances and swiftly passed Lumian, sprinting toward the intersection.

In the "conversation" room.

Observing the iron-masked skeletal host's departure, the man dressed in Warlock attire turned his attention to Franca and Jenna and said,

"What did you discover? As I mentioned, you need to find the gatekeeper or his remains to claim your reward."

Jenna replied calmly, "We haven't really thought about payment yet. We believe the situation is more complex than you described.

"One night, we infiltrated the Deep Valley Quarry..."

Upon hearing the term "Deep Valley Quarry," the man, hidden under a hooded shadow, subtly lifted his gaze.

Franca keenly observed his body language.

She had consulted with Anthony Reid and knew the kind of subconscious reactions ordinary humans would exhibit in such situations.

The man's actions suggested he was highly sensitive to the mention of Deep Valley Quarry.

Only someone aware of the issue would react in such a way.

Jenna continued to recount their discoveries, including the cybernetic-eyed monk and the secret cave adorned with limbs.

The Warlock-dressed man remained composed, making no unnecessary movements. However, to Franca, this indicated that he understood the abnormality within Deep Valley Quarry.

After hearing Jenna's account, the man deliberately raised his voice and said, "I can't confirm if it's related to the gatekeeper's disappearance, but if you can enter the secret cave, capture a few photographs, or retrieve valuable items, I'm willing to offer half the payment upfront. Perhaps you'll find clues about the gatekeeper's whereabouts inside."

Do you take us for fools? Are you expecting us to take such a risk for a mere 10,000 verl d'or?
Franca muttered silently.

Had this mysticism gathering not been organized by her friend, she would have found a way to tail the client and uncover his true identity. She could then extract more detailed information from him and have Jenna sell it to the Purifiers.

"Halt!

"The Death Empire lies ahead!"

Lumian once again found himself standing in front of the natural arch, adorned with a peculiar mix of white bones, sunflowers, and steam symbols carved into the stone.

Before he could reach for the pocket watch he had borrowed from Salle de Bal Brise to check the time, Hela, dressed in a mysterious widow's black robe with withered blonde hair, approached from the other side.

The woman nodded slightly and said, "Since you're already here, let's proceed ahead of schedule."

"Very well." Lumian opened his bag and produced two white candles.

After lighting them and handing one to Hela, he grinned and remarked, "Aren't you worried that the information I obtained about the Samaritan Women's Spring might be incorrect?"

"Success comes after numerous failures," Hela replied with icy detachment.

A chuckle escaped Lumian's lips.

"I thought you might say that failure is the mother of success."

"This isn't the Research Society," Hela replied tersely.

Lumian didn't waste any more time. He extinguished his carbide lamp and advanced toward the rocky arch, clutching the white candle, its flame now an intense orange.

As expected, a figure emerged from the shadows beyond the door.

The figure sported a blue vest and yellow pants, with gray hair and few wrinkles. His light-yellow eyes held a faint cloudiness, marking him as an elderly man.

The old man cast a disapproving look at the white candle in Lumian's hand and asked with a furrowed brow, "Didn't you find a guide?"

You... Not you guys? Lumian glanced at Hela out of the corner of his eye and realized that the candlelight around her had dimmed, as if it had been corroded by the underground darkness or shrouded in dense fog.

In this state, she appeared to have vanished from the tomb administrator's view.

Lumian flashed a smile at the old man.

"I don't require a guide. I've been to the tomb many times, though I'm more accustomed to entering through the Quartier de la Cathédrale Commémorative entrance. Don't worry, I remember all the taboos, and I won't deliberately break them."

The old man snapped, "You college students! Remember, exit before your candles burn out!"

With that, he stepped aside and disappeared into the darkness behind the door.

As Lumian passed through the rocky passage and entered the Death Empire, he turned to the aged tomb administrator and asked curiously, "Why can you hold a lit white candle?"

The tomb administrator's faintly turbid light-yellow eyes suddenly darkened, and an icy aura emanated from him.

In a deep voice, he replied, "I'm just stationed by the entrance, not venturing too deep."

Is that so? Lumian, who had already entered the catacombs, rationally abandoned any further inquiry. He focused on the chill in his heart and the unseen gazes from the surrounding darkness.

He couldn't help but sense a resemblance between the tomb administrator's current aura and Hela's presence.

Under the ever-watchful gaze of the corpses in the stone pit and the heaps of bones lining the sides of the passage, Lumian pressed on through the musty air. He walked alongside Hela, passing landmarks like the chapel tomb and the memorial pillar tomb.

Hela broke the silence, her tone frosty. "Which level are we heading to?"

"The fourth level," Lumian replied, holding the white candle aloft and pointing to a nearby tomb sign, not withholding any information.

Hela nodded once more and picked up her pace, striding ahead of Lumian.

She seemed intimately familiar with the first level of the catacombs. After a few twists and turns, she led Lumian to a staircase that descended to the second level.

Compared to the previous level, there were far fewer tourists here. Occasionally, they encountered university students singing, dancing, or testing their courage under the "gaze" of the candlelit corpses.

Hela showed no signs of slowing down. Soon, Lumian spotted a weathered stone door.

With the candle's flickering yellow glow illuminating the way, he read the Intisian inscription on the stone door: "Entrance to the Old Ossuary."

"Down here, we enter the third level. Just beyond the door is the Sun and Steam altar. Keep walking until you reach the Krismona Night Pillar, and that's where we enter the fourth level," Hela explained, her voice still cold.

"Do you have a complete map of the catacombs?" Lumian couldn't help but inquire, aware that only the map of the first level was readily available on the market.

Hela shook her head.

"I know less the deeper we go. From the third level onward, you have to rely on the road signs and the guiding black line on the cave ceiling."

Lumian chose not to press the matter further. With Hela leading the way, they crossed the threshold of the Old Ossuary and descended a wide stone staircase, imbued with a palpable sense of history.

Upon reaching the third level of the tomb, they encountered a flickering candlelight and a makeshift altar composed of two weathered boulders.

The candle's flame belonged to a young man with black hair, brown eyes, and a pale complexion.

Upon spotting Lumian and Hela, he rushed toward them as if grasping at a lifeline.

As he ran, he shouted, “M-my friends vanished! Just like that!”

Chapter 349 Sacrificial Square

His friends had vanished? Lumian, clutching a white candle, watched as the young man dashed over, his eyebrows twitching slightly.

In the catacombs, it was common for people to disappear. What was unusual was that this guy still remembered his friends and their strange disappearance.

He wasn't a tomb administrator, nor did he have an angel sealed within him!

...

Any anomaly that occurred meant that something was wrong!

“Stop!” Lumian drew his revolver with his free right hand and pointed it at the black-haired, brown-eyed, and pale-faced young man.

In the flickering candlelight, the lad shook his head frantically and said, “Help! Save me! They've all vanished!”

He slowed down slightly but didn't stop.

Bang!

Lumian pulled the trigger of the revolver, sending the yellow bullet grazing the lad's body into the distance, disappearing into the darkness that couldn't be illuminated by candlelight.

Sensing Lumian's determination to stop him, the lad finally halted and revealed a pleading expression.

“Save me! Save me!”

Observing Hela's silence with no intention of making conversation, Lumian had no choice but to inquire, “What happened?”

As he spoke, he used the yellow candle flames in the trio's hands to survey the environment on the third level of the catacombs.

Unlike the first two levels of the tomb, which were surrounded by white bones and had corpses lining both sides of the path, this level had a small square devoid of corpses.

The square was paved with mottled cobblestones, with no moss or soil in the crevices. It was unbelievably clean.

Two grayish-white pillars made of boulders stood on either side of it. Their surfaces were severely weathered, leaving peeling marks.

Even so, Lumian, with his keen eyesight, discerned the Sun Sacred Emblem and Triangular Sacred Emblem engraved on the two pillars. Surrounding them were symbols like Sun Flowers, crankshafts, and connecting rods.

Around the square, where candlelight couldn't penetrate, the darkness was dense, as if countless figures stood there, casting gazes that made Lumian's skin prickle.

The young man with black hair, brown eyes, and a pale face replied fearfully,

“I don't know. We were just about to leave the square where the altars of the Eternal Blazing Sun and the God of Steam and Machinery stand to explore the ancient tomb on the third level. Suddenly, they stumbled over something and fell, one by one. Even the candles in their hands fell to the ground and went out.

“I-I was at the back and saw them vanish just like that!”

“Vanish?” Lumian asked deliberately, probing for more information.

To him, the most pressing question wasn't how they vanished but why the witness still remembered their disappearance.

“Yes, they vanished!” The young man nodded fervently. “It was as if they evaporated right in front of me at an incredibly fast speed. I-I was so scared that I didn't dare look for them or return to the surface. I could only wait in this sacrificial square, praying to the Sun. Just as my candle was about to burn out, someone finally arrived!”

It's clear that if you aren't affected by the strangeness and manage to escape, your faith in the Eternal Blazing Sun would surge... Lumian couldn't discern anything amiss with the other party, so he casually posed another question.

“Are you college students?”

The lad nodded again.

“Yes, we're students from Trier Normal College. We formed a team to adventure here. My—my name is Gérard.”

Lumian couldn't help but chuckle. He even considered inviting Gérard to join him and Hela in their search for the Samaritan Women's Spring. After all, the chances of a student like him surviving until graduation seemed slim. He might be more useful as bait.

As he contemplated how to determine if there was anything wrong with Gérard, Hela suddenly spoke with a cold tone, “We'll escort you back.”

Surprisingly kind? Lumian turned to Hela, taken aback.

His impression of this lady was that even her blood ran cold.

Gérard was so grateful that tears and snot streamed down his face. He continued to thank them profusely as he approached.

Lumian observed his every move. He retrieved a white candle from his canvas bag and tossed it over.

Desperately, Gérard caught it and lit the new candle with the old one, which had only a small segment left.

Seeing the flickering candlelight, the college student breathed a sigh of relief and followed Hela and Lumian down the stone staircase leading to the second level.

Just as he took ten steps up, Gérard was suddenly stunned.

Lumian looked over and noticed that the lingering fear on his face had disappeared.

“Will it be a problem for you to return to the surface by yourself?” Hela asked again, but her words were entirely different from before.

Gérard chuckled.

“No problem. Thank you for the candle. Sigh, losing the spare candle is troublesome.”

Uh... Lumian's heart stirred as he probed, “Did you venture to the third level of the tomb alone?”

Gérard nodded proudly. “Of course, I possess enough courage and experience.”

He has finally forgotten about his schoolmates... Did he not forget because he was at the sacrificial square? Did Madame Hela notice that, thereby suggesting escorting him? Lumian nodded in enlightenment.

After watching Gérard ascend the stairs and leave through the entrance of the Old Ossuary, Lumian and Hela returned to the sacrificial square.

This time, when Lumian looked at the two sacrificial pillars representing the Eternal Blazing Sun and the God of Steam and Machinery, his feelings for them were entirely different.

Perhaps they symbolized the protection of a deity!

However, even with the deity's gaze and protection, the two stone pillars inevitably showed signs of weathering and corrosion after countless years in the depths of the catacombs.

Lumian believed that more protection meant greater confidence. He wouldn't lose anything by giving it a try. Facing the sacrificial pillar engraved with the Sun Sacred Emblem, he raised his body slightly and spread his arms.

“Praise the Sun!”

Hela watched silently, not interrupting his prayer.

After Lumian finished his concise praise, the two of them made their way toward the Krismona Night Pillar to the north, following the black line above their heads and the road sign at the edge of the square.

Lumian, holding a white candle, had only taken a few steps away from the sacrificial square when his heart stirred. He cast his gaze forward.

At some point, a skeleton, covered in dark-green mold, had collapsed by the road. The bones of its hands lay across the road, as if it wanted to grab a passerby's ankle.

If Lumian had walked faster and failed to carefully observe the environment, he might have tripped over the corpse!

This instantly reminded him of Gérard's description: The college student's companions stumbled over something and fell to the ground, extinguishing their candles. Only then were they “swallowed” by the catacombs, leaving no trace of their existence!

Did they trip over these fallen bones? Lumian thoughtfully kicked the hand bone away.

Amidst the clanking sounds, he and Hela continued forward. However, after a few steps, they encountered another white skeleton with half its body lying on the road.

Lumian frowned and instinctively looked back at the spot where he had almost tripped.

The dim candlelight barely reached there, but Lumian could barely make out the details with his Hunter's eyesight.

His pupils dilated as he realized that the pale-white hand bone he had kicked had returned to its original position, still serving as an obstacle for passersby!

“They're still alive? Undead creatures?” Lumian asked, his nerves on edge.

“No, but it's a possibility,” Hela replied succinctly.

Seeing Lumian's puzzled expression, she explained, “They must have been affected by the environment deep within the tomb and are exhibiting certain abnormalities. When the hidden dangers and horrors in the environment erupt, it's likely that they will all turn into undead creatures.”

All of them turning into undead creatures... Lumian instinctively shuddered as he imagined such a scenario.

Whether complete or incomplete, there were at least a million skeletons on this level. It might even be an order of magnitude more. If they all became undead creatures with a hatred for the living, the situation would be terrifying to the extreme!

Seeing that Hela had no intention of turning back, Lumian followed. They relied on the guidance of the road sign and the black lines above their heads to navigate through the bones that were trying to obstruct them and slowly made their way toward their destination.

After an unknown amount of time, they finally reached the Krismona Night Pillar without encountering another living person.

It was a colossal pillar made of black marble, its upper end reaching the cave ceiling. There were no patterns or symbols engraved on its surface, nor were there any signs of weathering or corrosion.

Lumian was taken aback.

In the sacrificial square, the two stone pillars symbolizing the Eternal Blazing Sun and the God of Steam and Machinery had been weathered and corroded!

Is this pillar more special than the sacrificial ones?

As if sensing Lumian's thoughts, Hela spoke coldly, “Krismona is a member of the Demoness Sect, which can also be called the Demoness family.

“She was a Sequence 2 Demoness of Catastrophe. She perished in the War of the Four Emperors in the previous epoch, dying inside Fourth Epoch Trier. However, her characteristics were retrieved by the Demoness family.

“Apart from the Krismona Night Pillar, there are also the Marianne Night Pillar and Lius Night Pillar on the third or fourth level.”

“Who are these two?” Lumian believed they were angels as well. Otherwise, they wouldn't be on par with Krismona.

“Marianne was the pope of the Church of Evernight back then, and Lius was a Blessed of ancient Death, a Death Consul. Their characteristics were also retrieved by their respective factions. As for whether other angels perished here, I'm not sure, but many of the angels who followed the Blood Emperor must have perished.” After Hela briefly explained, she pointed at the stone staircase behind the Krismona Night Pillar. “Let's go to the fourth level.”

Lumian tersely agreed, and they quickly replaced their rapidly burning white candles before ascending to the fourth level.

...

After attending the mysticism gathering, Franca and Jenna retraced their steps to the underground area corresponding to the arcade of the opera house.

As they turned a corner at a fork of the road, Franca leaned over and whispered into Jenna's ear, “Someone's following us.”

Someone is following us? Jenna's heart skipped a beat.

Chapter 350 Negative Effects

“How can that be?” Jenna exclaimed, her surprise and confusion evident.

She recollected the mysticism gathering's conclusion, where participants dispersed through various routes at sporadic intervals. The two of them had been cautious, ensuring they left no clues. So, how had they been followed?

Observing Jenna's restraint from looking back, Franca calmly moved ahead and whispered,

“Who knows? Perhaps another participant chose this route and stumbled upon someone ahead. They might want to tail us, hoping for an opportunity to strike it big. Or maybe someone with unusual skills tracked us in an unexpected way.

“Let's keep moving forward as if nothing's amiss. We'll be safe once we reach the street under the arcade.

“If our pursuer strikes before then, drop the carbide lamp immediately and hide in the nearby shadows. Depending on the situation, you can decide how to join the fight.”

Jenna nodded subtly, indicating her willingness to follow Franca's instructions.

Unintentionally, she tightened her grip on the carbide lamp.

After traversing the dark, damp tunnel for a hundred to two hundred meters, Franca slowed down and glanced back with confusion.

“The stalker has vanished...”

“It's also possible that he found a way to bypass the spider silk I left behind...”

As she finished speaking, a figure emerged from the darkness ahead, illuminated by the carbide lamp's glow.

Jenna reacted swiftly, dropping the carbide lamp in her left hand and blending into the shadows.

Relying on her Mirror Substitution technique, Franca didn't rush to evade. Instead, she fixed her gaze on the stalker who had circled around to confront them.

It was the man masquerading as a Warlock, his face concealed beneath a hooded shadow.

The entrustee!

He gazed at Franca and deliberately spoke in a high-pitched voice, “I want to strike a deal with you guys.”

Behind the Krismona Night Pillar, Lumian trailed behind Hela, clutching a new white candle that flickered in the dim light. They followed the worn stone steps, seemingly descending into the depths of hell.

The stone walls on either side slowly gave way, revealing intricate reliefs of human heads. Dark gray figures clustered together, reminiscent of the countless bones piled high in the upper tomb.

As Lumian completed the descent and stepped onto the hushed fourth level of the catacombs, an overwhelming restlessness overcame him. It was as if he had been imprisoned for a long time, yearning for freedom.

This sensation wasn't unfamiliar; it was a side effect of the Armored Shadow contract, but it had never been this intense before!

It was as if his spirit felt trapped within his body, finally becoming cognizant of the truth.

It sought to break free from this “cage,” to shatter this world and gain true freedom.

Phew... Lumian exhaled slowly, calming himself down.

Even without the Alms Monk boon, he believed he could manage these turbulent emotions. With the Alms Monk's power, he could control them even better.

According to Madam Justice, the higher one's Sequence, the more susceptible they are to madness and the hidden corruption of the fourth level of the catacombs. Is that what I'm experiencing? Is it because my Sequence isn't high that I could endure and control it? Lumian quickly made a guess about the current situation. He instinctively looked up and cast his gaze diagonally at Hela.

Her neck is slender, mostly concealed in the widow-like attire's collar, a suitable target for snapping...

Just as this thought crossed Lumian's mind, he hurriedly shook his head, dismissing the negative effects of the Abscessed Hand's contract.

Simultaneously, he noticed that Hela's face had turned pale-whiter, resembling a corpse that had been dead for many days rather than a living human.

In an instant, Hela produced a military flask, unscrewed the cap, and downed its contents.

Lumian caught a whiff of the strong scent of alcohol.

Silently, he muttered, It should be liquor... Could Hela be like the alcoholics in Feysac, carrying multiple flasks with her?

After finishing a third of the bottle in a single gulp, Hela's complexion flushed slightly as she inquired, "Which way should we go?"

Lumian responded honestly, "It's in an ancient tomb on the westernmost side. We have a general idea of the area, but not the exact location."

Hela nodded and glanced at the top of the tomb, where a thick black line was drawn with arrows pointing in various directions.

Combining this with the signs near the entrance, Lumian could roughly discern the route leading west.

Nevertheless, he pulled out a compass he had prepared beforehand to confirm.

Under the feeble candlelight, the compass needle oscillated continuously, erratic and unceasing.

"It's acting crazy," Lumian commented, attempting to alleviate his pent-up irritation with humor.

"We'll have to rely on the road signs and black lines," Hela responded, seemingly expecting this.

Lumian sighed, eyeing the erratically moving compass. He chuckled self-deprecatingly.

"If it never stops, could it power a perpetual motion machine?"

Hela glanced at him.

"Aren't you a believer in the Eternal Blazing Sun?"

Lumian replied sincerely, "At least for now, I am."

Hela didn't press the topic further. Following the road sign beside her and the black lines above, she stepped to the right.

"The Marianne Night Pillar and Lius Night Pillar are both on this floor. There's also François's Tomb, the Blood Order Hall, and Crazy Shrooms Cave... Uh, the style of this name is completely different from the others," Lumian rambled, diverting his attention from the road sign.

The most noticeable difference between the fourth and third levels was the absence of corpses lining the path. It appeared wider and cleaner, yet it was eerie in its silence.

The ancient tombs had sealed entrances, concealing their contents from prying eyes.

Without turning around, Hela remarked, "Does your mental unrest manifest in talking and rambling more?"

“Not exactly. Talking just helps me cope with the irritation,” Lumian admitted.

They continued to navigate, using the road signs and black lines to adjust their direction as they went along.

As Lumian passed by the partially natural tomb cave named the Order Hall, the outer soil tinged with a hint of blood, he suddenly spotted someone.

It was a woman in a plain white robe, her black hair flowing down her back, and her features extraordinarily exquisite, perfectly harmonious. Her aura was so pure that she seemed out of place in this silent and filthy tomb.

Despite having seen a Demoness of Pleasure frequently, Lumian couldn't help but be amazed. He even felt an unholy urge to ravage her.

This wasn't just a drawback of Flog's boxing gloves; it was a dark impulse from the depths of his heart.

Lumian snapped out of it. The woman had sparkling blue eyes, cold and lifeless, and her hands were empty, holding an unlit white candle!

In the catacombs, the living would vanish without the protection of the white candle's flames!

Lumian's body tensed as the woman slipped into the surrounding darkness, blocked by the outer wall of the Blood Order Hall, and disappeared without a trace.

“What are you looking at?” Hela's cold voice cut through the silence.

“Didn't you see?” Lumian recounted the scene he had witnessed in detail.

Hela fell silent for a few seconds before saying, “I didn't see it indeed. However, as soon as you stopped moving, I cast my gaze in that direction.”

“Was I the only one who could see it? Or was I the only one allowed to see it?” Lumian couldn't be certain if it was due to Termiboros's influence, his Sequence, or his gender.

Hela pondered for a moment and replied, “Don't concern yourself with such matters. It's normal for special wraiths and evil spirits to linger in the depths of the catacombs, but this place is like a powerful seal. As long as you don't break the rules and trigger an anomaly, you should be safe.”

Lumian nodded.

“I was just thinking,” Lumian began, “Ordinary tourists and adventurous college students wouldn't be able to pass through the third level of the tomb to reach this place. Why did they produce the guiding black line and accurate road signs? Who are they for?”

Hela answered as she took another step forward, “Official Beyonders who come here regularly to clean up and tomb administrators who patrol the area every day.”

She then offered a simple reminder. “Based on your description, the female figure you saw earlier resembles a high-ranking Demoness.”

Lumian's heart skipped a beat.

“Could it be the lingering vengeful spirit of the Demoness of Catastrophe, Krismona?”

“I'm not sure,” Hela replied, taking another sip from her military flask.

Lumian casually glanced around, his eyelids twitching.

He noticed a purplish-red patch on the back of Hela's right hand.

It hadn't been there before.

It resembled the livor mortis seen on the deceased!

Is this the effect of the corruption on the fourth level of the catacombs? Is Madame Hela using alcohol to resist it? Lumian continued his small talk.

Amidst his babbling, they meandered through the unmarked ancient tombs and eventually reached the westernmost area of the floor.

At the edge of the rock wall, dozens or possibly hundreds of ancient tombs stretched out of sight.

Just as Lumian was about to ask Hela if she could expedite the search for their target, he heard knocking from an ancient tomb nearby.

Both Hela and Lumian tensed, their eyes fixed on the tomb as more of its damaged stone walls crumbled, revealing a dark cavern that humans could enter and exit.

A figure emerged, hunched over.

Lumian, filled with tension, wanted to unleash a Giant Fireball, but he restrained himself, opting to observe first.

The man who crawled out of the ancient tomb held a lit white candle, dusted off his clothes, and slowly straightened up.

Dressed in a black seer's robe commonly seen in circuses, he had brownish-black skin, a slender build, curly black hair, and deep-set eyes. A crystal-like monocle adorned his right eye. He was none other than the Islander swindler, Monette.

Monette flashed a smile at Lumian and Hela.

“What a coincidence!”