

Inevitability 421

Chapter 421 Abnormal Silence

Franca also noticed the footprints and traces. After carefully observing them for a while, she remarked, "At least four people have come together in the past two weeks..."

"Maipú Meyer has accomplices?"

Lumian gazed at the collapse that had been filled in and pondered for a moment before saying, "What's more important isn't whether they have accomplices, but what they're doing here.

"If it's truly Maipú Meyer and not a random team of cave explorers, he long knew that this place had been destroyed by the official Beyonders. There wouldn't be anything valuable left behind. Why did he bring people here recently? To pay homage?"

"It's not impossible," Franca muttered. "What if he achieved something and received a new boon from the Mother Tree of Desire, becoming a Fallen Tree Spirit?

"It's also known as Baby Cupid. There must be a distorted desire in affairs of the heart, just like Susanna Mattise did with Charlie. Therefore, Maipú Meyer coming specially to pay homage to his deceased love fits the characteristics of the pathway."

"But there's no need to bring three or four people to watch him perform, right?" Lumian surveyed his surroundings. "Perhaps he didn't do it on purpose but just happened to pass by?"

Franca quickly caught Lumian's drift.

"Are you suggesting that Maipú Meyer and his accomplices frequent the underground of the market district?"

Lumian offered a curt acknowledgment.

"I now believe that Maipú Meyer didn't return to the market district to deal with me. He might eventually seek revenge, but that's the outcome, not the process."

"Is their target something underground in the market district?" Franca frowned. "But the Tree of Shadow is severely damaged. What's so special about this place? It can't be that the entrance to the Fourth Epoch Trier is beneath the market district..."

Franca stopped abruptly.

That wasn't impossible!

Lumian quickly recalled the situation in the market district and various rumors he knew. Suddenly, he recalled something.

Madam Magician's "doll" messenger had a strong aversion to Salle de Bal Brise, claiming that old bones were buried beneath the area.

This had to refer to a unique situation beneath the market district. Moreover, the building facing Salle de Bal Brise was suspected to be related to Église Saint-Robert's old cemetery.

Lumian promptly shared this insight with Franca before they continued following the traces out of the destroyed sacrificial mine.

“There's really a problem... It's not hard to figure out. Summon that messenger later and ask,” Franca remarked, bemoaning the poor fengshui in the market district. She followed Lumian, providing mysticism support for his pursuit.

The two of them journeyed deeper underground, but they eventually lost the trail of their target. The suspected members of Maipú Meyer's group had traversed several well-known and long-used tunnels frequented by cave explorers, smuggling caravans, and mushroom-growing citizens. Their tracks had been effectively concealed by those who came later after more than ten days.

Lumian, with a crimson fireball above him, came to a halt and stared into the pitch-black mine ahead. He remained silent for an extended moment, his thoughts shrouded in mystery.

Franca was about to suggest leaving when Lumian suddenly spoke.

“Don't you think the market district has been unusually quiet for the past month or so?”

“How do you mean quiet?” Franca retorted involuntarily.

007 certainly didn't think so!

Lumian pondered his words and continued, “Let me put it another way. Apart from the Beyonder problem we caused, isn't the market district oddly quiet regarding mysticism incidents?”

“No, to be more precise, after the Tree of Shadow was severely damaged, the heretics have become extremely inactive!

“Right, no new factions have emerged to devour the remaining smaller mobs, or to engage in conflicts with the Savoie Mob. There have been no suspected sacrificial cases. Even among those that preach secretly, I only encountered a swindler from the Sick Church, and he was just an ordinary person...”

Since the Tree of Shadow incident, the only true heretics Lumian and Franca had encountered were Guillaume Bénet from the Sinners organization and Beatrice Incourt of the Bliss Society. However, they had followed a trail based on former clues which weren't within the market district.

The Rose School of Thought's Werewolf could barely be considered one, but that was an aftermath of the Tree of Shadow incident.

Browns Sauron of the Demoness Sect could only be considered half an element. This organization had a solid history and believed in the evil entity of this world, not alien evil gods.”

Franca was taken aback.

“Isn't that normal? Secret organizations that believe in evil gods must operate in secret. If they were encountered by someone like you every day, they would have been wiped out long ago!

“Look, we didn't notice Maipú Meyer returning to the market district before.”

If it were anyone else, your explanation wouldn't be a problem, but I have an alien evil god's angel sealed within me. According to Madam Magician's rubbish repulsion convergence theory, there must be an abnormal reason why I haven't encountered a heretic causing trouble for so long... Termiboros has been excessively quiet recently... Lumian's thoughts raced as he said to Franca, “Can you use dream divination on me to help me remember something?”

“No. Perhaps a powerful Seer can, but not me.” Franca shook her head. “What do you want to recall? You can seek Madame Hela's help. She can definitely create a real dreamscape now.”

Lumian nodded slowly and responded, “I'd like to recall an address where suspected heretics reside. I plan to check it out and see if they've vanished, gone into hiding, or fallen silent. Yes, there's no need to trouble Madame Hela for the time being. I know who to ask.”

This was him carefully making confirmation built upon bold assumptions.

Seeing Lumian return to the surface as he spoke, Franca hurriedly asked, “What address? Who are you asking?”

“We'll talk later. Let's head to Rue de Scotch Broom in Quartier de Noel first,” Lumian said without turning around.

Why does this address sound so familiar... Franca mused for a moment as she followed closely behind.

As she neared the surface, she finally remembered.

Madame Pualis's address!

Madame Night from Cordu!

Quartier de Noël, Rue de Scotch Broom.

This suburban area was filled with villllike buildings, each with a lawn facing the street and a garden at the back.

Lumian walked in the shadows where the street lamps couldn't reach, carefully inspecting the lawns and gardens of each building.

Franca did the same. Without knowing Madame Pualis's house number, they had to rely on the unusually vigorous and lively plants to make a judgment.

As they approached the end of the street, Lumian and Franca simultaneously noticed a garden filled with blooming flowers, resembling a lush forest of plants.

The grayish-white building housing the garden appeared unlit, slumbering in the darkness, in stark contrast to the surrounding residences filled with family life.

“It feels like no one has lived here for a long time...” Franca began to understand Lumian's concerns. “Has Madame Pualis, a member of the Nightstalkers, also moved out and hidden herself quietly?”

Lumian observed and listened for a while to confirm that the building was empty. He then took out a piece of wire, opened the door, and entered.

During this process, Franca used Magic Mirror Divination to confirm via mysticism means.

The living room was devoid of furnishings, the linen long gone. Dust had gathered on the table, indicating that no one had lived there in some time.

Lumian proceeded further into the house, and Franca followed him cautiously, not daring to near or touch anything.

Upon reaching the coffee table, Lumian bent down and picked up an abandoned newspaper. Although it was tattered from rat bites, there were still some remnants left.

Lumian examined the newspaper under the moonlight and whispered, “Early July... This means that Madame Pualis didn't leave immediately after I got the address out from Louis Lund, nor did she depart immediately after the Tree of Shadow incident. She resided on Rue de Scotch Broom for a while and chose to abandon this place for unknown reasons.”

“Something is indeed amiss,” Franca noted with a grave expression.

They quickly searched the building and then boarded a rental carriage to their next destination.

Upon receiving an old newspaper advertising the Interstellar Bridge from Laurent, the former tenant of Auberge du Coq Doré and now deputy editor of Le Petit Trierien, Lumian and Franca arrived at 9 Rue Saint-Martin in Quartier 2.

The fifth floor was an office rented by a group of swindlers and suspected heretics. They aimed to raise funds for constructing an interstellar bridge to the crimson moon.

Under the dim starlight, the entire fifth floor lay shrouded in darkness.

Lumian cautiously reached out and pushed open the door to the apartment-like office.

Crimson moonlight filtered through the window, revealing scattered papers on the ground. Complex mechanical symbols and intricate bridge diagrams displayed concepts that appeared both imaginative and plausible.

Many of the drawers were open, devoid of any belongings, as if the swindlers had hastily retreated upon realizing the arrival of the police.

Based on the written information and various traces at the scene, Lumian and Franca concluded that this floor had been vacant for nearly two weeks.

“There's definitely something unusual,” Franca remarked. “Why have the heretics from various organizations suddenly reduced their activities, hidden themselves, and gone quiet?”

Lumian's expression grew solemn as he said in a deep voice, "This abnormality suggests that something significant might be in the works."

Without waiting for Franca's response, he instructed her, "Contact 007 and inquire about any information regarding the Sick Church. Also, find out what problems might be lurking in Église Saint-Robert's old cemetery."

"I'll write a letter to Madam Magician and share our findings and speculations."

He planned to also ask the "doll" messenger about the meaning of the old bones.

"Alright," Franca responded promptly.

Auberge du Coq Doré, Room 207.

Lumian set up the ritual and summoned the "doll" messenger donning a light-gold dress.

As he handed the folded letter to her, he managed a smile and inquired, "What did you mean by the old bones underground?"

The "doll" messenger displayed a disgusted expression.

"Filthy, repulsive old bones from the Fourth Epoch!"

Chapter 422 Formula

Old bones from the Fourth Epoch... Lumian disregarded the doll messenger's emotional descriptions and focused on extracting the essential information.

But this didn't provide a deeper insight compared to what he already knew. After all, most of Trier's underground issues had their roots in the Fourth Epoch.

Lumian took a moment to ponder and inquired, "Where does it come from? How do the old bones look like?"

The messenger responded angrily, "I've never seen them before! Their aura alone is so repulsive, disgusting, and filthy!"

So, you're not entirely sure of the situation either... Lumian decided not to press the "doll" messenger further and observed as she vanished, carrying the neatly folded letter.

Only then, as Lumian awaited Madam Magician's response, did he have the opportunity to assess his gains from the night.

A vial of truth serum, a vial of Bliss Society sedatives, a vial of Mysticism Smelling Salts, and 1,500 verl d'or.

Apartment 601, 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches.

"So late? I thought you'd resolve it quickly." Jenna, clad in a light cotton dress, stood up and greeted Franca upon her return.

She believed that Franca and Ciel had a high chance of winning, even if they encountered a Fallen Tree Spirit!

Franca muttered, "We ran into an accident. Uh, just a moment."

Franca looked at Jenna with a serious expression.

"What's wrong?" Jenna sensed something was amiss.

Franca walked to her side and examined her pupils.

There were no signs of her wearing blue contact lenses!

"Phew..." Franca let out a sigh of relief and said, "In the future, we need to continuously verify if we're Actors in disguise."

Actors of the Mother Tree of Desire pathway couldn't alter their bodies or fundamentally change their appearances like Faceless. They relied more on makeup items and various props.

Among these, the color of the eyes was the most challenging for Actors to mimic. They had to use external objects. They could prevent Actors from infiltrating their ranks by checking if anyone around them was wearing colored contact lenses.

Of course, this wasn't foolproof. They could always find actors with the same eye color as the target to act.

In the current situation, Maipú Meyer's eyes were dark brown, Jenna's were blue, and Lumian's were the same. Franca's were a lighter shade, more akin to the blue of a serene lake. For the time being, they had no reason to worry about being impersonated by the former manager of Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons. Maipú Meyer had distanced himself from the Bliss Society, and he couldn't recruit a new Actor anytime soon.

The only person they needed to be concerned about was Anthony Reid, who also had a pair of dark brown eyes.

As an acting apprentice at Théâtre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons, Jenna was particularly attuned to the Bliss Society's activities. She instantly became alert and scrutinized Franca's eyes, fear in her voice as she asked, "Are they targeting the market district again?"

"It's Maipú Meyer. He's back in the market district. We don't know where he's hiding," Franca replied without reservation, recounting the entire incident.

Of the Bliss Society members, the only one Jenna was familiar with was Maipú Meyer. She had a deep-seated fear of him because he had once been her manager and could influence her future.

Unconsciously, she touched the Arrow of the Bloodthirsty concealed in her pocket and nodded solemnly, saying, "I'll be cautious."

Franca didn't offer any additional information. She glanced at the wall clock and retreated to her room. She activated the radio transceiver and prepared to contact 007.

Before long, she used the mechanical typewriter and analyzer to send a telegram.

"007, paging 007!"

Within 20 to 30 seconds, a telegram produced by a machine appeared.

"Hidden Blade, don't do this to me. I'm scared. What's going on now?"

“This could be a significant problem!” Franca honestly warned 007. “Bro, before I disclose the exact situation, help me gather some information. I need to confirm two things: First, if there have been any developments related to the Malady God faith in Quartier du Jardin Botanique, specifically on Rue Pasteur and Rue Evelyn. Second, what lies deep beneath the old cemetery of Église Saint-Robert?”

After a brief pause, a new telegram arrived.

“I’m off-duty tonight, seriously! And now I have to go back to work overtime!

“Give me half an hour to an hour.”

Franca replied: “No problem.” As she conversed with other members of the telegram group, she retrieved the diamond necklace she had acquired from Beatrice Incourt and used various methods to assess the Beyonders accessory’s capabilities and adverse effects.

The diamond corresponds to a total of five desires: lust, appetite, lust, acting, and fulfillment...

It doesn’t seem to have many uses. Usage of each desire shouldn’t exceed two...

With it on, I seem to be better at acting and makeup...

I’ll just keep it in my pocket. Without it coming into direct contact with my skin or flesh, there won’t be any negative effects...

After wearing it, I’ll become more excited than usual, and my various desires will significantly increase. If I encounter Beyonders with similar abilities, I’ll be effectively restrained and even suffer a huge loss...

Among them, the most intense desire is the desire for recognition...

Yes, this thing can’t be used against Beyonders of the Mother Tree of Desire pathway. Its weakness lies in their strengths...

What should I call it? The Seven Emotions and Six Desires Pendant? Uh, the style doesn’t seem right. Forget it, I’ll call it Beatrice’s Necklace. It’s simple, convenient, and clear!

007’s response arrived faster than Franca had anticipated. In less than half an hour, he provided the relevant information.

“According to the heretic database shared by various official factions, the Malady God’s envoy hasn’t been located. He appears to have sensed danger in advance and hasn’t resurfaced.

“The situation at Église Saint-Robert’s old cemetery is extremely classified. I can’t investigate it for the time being.”

Extremely classified? Franca inwardly hissed and relayed to 007 the eerie quietness from organizations devoted to evil gods.

Rue Anarchie, Auberge du Coq Doré.

Madam Magician’s slow response arrived after an hour of waiting:

“After the death of a bestowed, the return of power to the source is deducible, but typically, you wouldn't be able to sense it.

“This time, it was due to your wearing the Flog boxing gloves. They are made from the Tree of Shadow and are closely related to the one that the Bliss Society believes in, the source of the boon powers. Therefore, when Beatrice's boon power returned and the connection was strengthened, that entity indirectly noticed you and the Two of Cups, which caused the corpse to exhibit an abnormality. This abnormality allowed the flow of the boon power to become visible.

“To retain the boon power and prevent it from returning, you require the corresponding ability or a unique environment. Sometimes, these two elements are one and the same. In simple terms, you need to advance to Sequence 4 and become a demigod or obtain something at this level. Only then can you have a chance of preserving the remaining boon's power and forming a Beyonder item. Of course, in specific underground environments, such as near the Samaritan Women's Spring, you can achieve this without a high Sequence.”

Lumian now had a clear understanding of the anomaly of the night.

Unlike his previous killings of members of the Bliss Society, he now possessed the Flog boxing gloves, bringing about a different development.

The use of the Flog boxing gloves attracted the attention of hidden entities to begin with, and its connection to the Mother Tree of Desire through Beatrice's belief had influenced the return of boon power, causing the abnormality.

Understanding the situation and how to prevent it in the future, Lumian continued reading Madam Magician's reply.

“We have already noticed Trier's anomaly and are monitoring one of the leads. However, it is unclear when we will find any answers. What we can say for certain is that changes will occur, with a timeframe ranging from as short as two months to as long as half a year.

“I cannot provide a definitive answer regarding what lies beneath Salle de Bal Brise as it is challenging for me to approach. All I can tell you is that it is certainly more than just the corruption left behind by Blood Emperor Alista Tudor.

“Don't dwell too much on this matter. It is beyond your capabilities to handle. Your focus should be on accumulating strength and biding your time.”

Accumulate strength and bide my time... Lumian repeated these words to himself as he absorbed the advice.

The next morning, Lumian had a conversation with Franca and Jenna. Afterward, he gathered all his funds and went directly to 11 Rue des Fontaines in Quartier de la Cathédrale Commémorative.

“Boss, here are 30,000 gold and 30,000 verl d'or banknotes,” Lumian said with a smile as he placed the heavy leather bag on Gardner Martin's desk.

He still had 1,000 gold and nominal funds of 1,500 verl d'or.

Gardner Martin glanced at Lumian, unzipped the bag, and began counting the money.

He didn't inquire about Lumian's remaining funds. With a smile, he retrieved a faux goatskin that appeared to have been prepared in advance.

“You need to promise two things. First, memorize this formula before burning the piece of paper. Second, you cannot resell the Conspirer potion formula without my or the Supervisor's permission,” Gardner Martin stated these terms without requesting a notarized pledge, as if issuing an order.

Lumian agreed to these terms without hesitation, saying, “No problem.”

Gardner Martin nodded in satisfaction and handed over the faux goatskin to Lumian.

Lumian took it and began reading:

“Conspirer potion formula:

“Main ingredient: Black Hunting Spider's composite eye, Sphinx's brain;

“Supplementary ingredients: One Black Hunting Spider's poison gland, 80 milliliters of Sphinx blood, 10 grams of amber powder, and two white oak fruits.”

After reading and memorizing the formula, Lumian's right hand trembled, allowing the crimson flames to engulf the faux goatskin.

Time passed in an eerie silence. Unbeknownst to them, the heat in Trier began to wane, and the temperature gradually dropped.

One mid-September day, Franca stood before the window of Apartment 601 and cursed Browns Sauron for what felt like the hundredth time.

She had already passed the Demoness Sect's audit and informed Browns that she had joined the Savoie Mob to infiltrate the Iron and Blood Cross Order. However, she never anticipated there would be an assessment period. Only after this evaluation could she officially become a member of the Demoness Sect.

Her current liaison, Browns Sauron, used this as an excuse to prevent her from participating in the Red House Café's female orgies. This left her with no option but to endure tormenting Gardner Martin and his lovers for the past month or so.

Franca turned her attention to Jenna, who appeared lost in thought, and couldn't help but sigh at her companion's fortune.

The Demoness Sect remained oblivious to Jenna's true identity as a Beyonder of the Assassin pathway.

“What's troubling you?” Franca inquired.

Jenna responded with a hint of distress, “My Instigator potion has completely digested.”

Franca exclaimed in pleasant surprise, “That's a good thing!”

Jenna scratched her head and let out a sigh. “I haven't even paid you back for the money I owe you, and now I have to consider the Witch potion formula and its ingredients. Dammit, why does it feel like the more I advance, the poorer I become?”

Chapter 423 Unexpected Encounter

Franca chuckled at Jenna's complaint and replied, “That's typical. As long as you master the acting method, progress comes quickly before reaching the mid Sequences. The pace at which you save money often falls short of the expenses for purchasing the potion formula and the necessary ingredients.

“Don't fret about the money. Sequence 7 in the Assassin pathway is a game-changer. It significantly boosts your combat prowess and survival skills. You're aware of the potential catastrophe on the horizon. Only by becoming a Witch and wielding the Arrow of the Bloodthirsty will you stand a chance at survival and protecting the people you care about.”

Jenna fell silent for a moment, then she swore, “You instigated me without using your abilities!”

“Haha, it's just the way things are. I'll share the Witch potion formula with you now. Let's start gathering,” Franca said as she returned to the coffee table, spread out a piece of paper, and swiftly jotted down the instructions.

Jenna stood beside her, examining the Intisian words taking shape.

Meanwhile, Jenna silently tallied her debts.

Including the Purifier reward and the earnings from my underground singing, I've saved nearly 10,000 verl d'or.

According to Franca and Ciel, a Sequence 7 potion formula can go for between 30,000 and 40,000 verl d'or, depending on its rarity. At the very least, I owe Franca another 30,000 verl d'or, bringing the total to 60,000...

Even if I sell the Arrow of the Bloodthirsty, I won't be able to make up for it. In the future, I'll have to purchase various ingredients for the Witch potion, costing me over 30,000 verl d'or... Dammit! It's no wonder why so many Beyonders at those mysticism gatherings seem strapped for cash and penny-pinching!

The more Jenna calculated, the more her head throbbed.

If it weren't for the potion's tangible transformation and the clear, visible abilities it grants, she would have suspected she'd fallen into a scam. Why did her debts keep increasing as she worked harder?

In the past, her whole family had often felt hopeless when dealing with a debt of a few thousand verl d'or. But now, she owed Franca 60,000, and there was no end in sight.

Even with her cash and assets, she still fell short by 10,000 verl d'or.

Gritting her teeth, Jenna decided to put these worries aside for now and deal with them after advancing to Sequence 7 as a Witch.

Franca quickly finished writing down the Witch potion formula:

“Sequence 7: Witch;

“Main ingredient: Every drop of an Abyss Demonic Fish's blood and an Agate Peacock's egg;

“Supplementary ingredients: 80 ml of purified water, five drops of Jimsonweed juice, 3 scales of a Shadow Lizard, and 10 drops of Daffodil Juice.”

She handed the paper with the formula to Jenna and added in thought, “Avoid gathering these materials at the mysticism gathering we attend. Acquire them from the gathering you discovered and joined, as well as from the Purifiers. Oh, ask Ciel for assistance too.”

Franca was still in the Demoness Sect's assessment period and worried about potential spies from the secret organization in the mysticism gatherings. If participants gathered the ingredients for the Witch potion, it could raise suspicions.

In contrast, the Purifiers were a more secure source of these ingredients, given their history of dealing with Demonesses. They definitely had the corresponding characteristics in reserve.

Of course, Franca would also help inquire and gather information at the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society, but she couldn't inform Jenna about it.

“Alright.” Jenna was well aware of the Demoness Sect's hostility toward wild Assassins like her.

As Jenna memorized the Witch potion formula, Franca inquired with concern, “Has your brother left Trier?”

Recognizing that the heretics were oddly quiet and then receiving confirmation from a Major Arcana card holder, Lumian and Franca had suggested that Jenna and her brother Julien relocate from Trier to another city in Intis for six months to monitor the situation.

Jenna had insisted on staying to spend time with her comrades and had promised to advance her Sequence quickly.

This was the primary reason she had accepted Franca's gift without hesitation.

As for her brother Julien, Jenna genuinely wanted to keep him away from another mysticism disaster. She wanted him to live a safe and happy life, and she had been busy instigating him to leave Trier.

Jenna couldn't help but smile. “I went to Port LeSeur last weekend.”

Port LeSeur, situated at the estuary of the Srenzo River, was one of Trier's primary ports for shipping goods out to sea.

Franca was surprised and pleased for her friend.

“Did you manage to instigate that stubborn fellow?”

Without divulging the truth, Jenna shook her head and said, “No. I shifted my instigation efforts to a different target. I discovered that the shipyard where Julien works has a branch in Port LeSeur, so I used my Instigation ability to convince their supervisor to propose a six-month technical exchange program between the factories. I also paid to include Julien in the list.

“I only digested the potion after successfully instigating this. Dogsh*t, no matter what I told Julien, he refused to listen. He even reneged on his word the next day after the Instigation. As soon as his supervisor issued the order, he started packing!”

After venting her frustration about her brother, Jenna glanced at Franca and added with a sly grin,

“The skilled workers from Trier arrived in Port LeSeur last weekend. The return leg from LeSeur to Trier will be half a year later to avoid the potential disaster.

“Franca, why don't we figure out a way to get more people to leave Trier and lay low for a while?”

“They won't believe us even if we tell them,” Franca sighed. “Moreover, if more people leave, those evil god organizations might sense it and act prematurely. If the official Beyonders aren't prepared, it could lead to more casualties.”

Unspoken was the fact that, combined with Madam Judgment's words and Ciel's intel, the surface Trier served to seal the underground Trier. Everyone in the city contributed their strength, and if too many left, the seal might weaken, putting the remaining citizens in danger.

Jenna fell silent for a moment, choosing not to dwell on the topic.

Her upbringing and six months of experience had taught her to accept the harsh reality. All she could do was save as many as she could within reasonable bounds.

After a pause of about ten seconds, Jenna said thoughtfully, “When I Instigated the supervisor to propose the exchange program, I noticed that many neighboring factories had similar arrangements. That's why I had an example to raise and succeeded without much difficulty.

“Now that I think about it, could it be a covert effort by official Beyonders to reduce the population in the market district?”

“It's certainly possible,” Franca considered for a moment before hesitating to add more.

What she wanted to say was that it might also be orchestrated by the Tarot Club or Church of The Fool. Madam Justice, a Major Arcana card in the Spectator domain, was well-suited for such matters.

Franca refrained from saying this because she hadn't yet told Jenna about her and Ciel's belief in Mr. Fool.

She had initially planned to “visit” The Fool's cathedral at Lavigny Docks with Jenna, but she dared not do so once she came under the scrutiny of the Demoness Sect.

Yes, I'll have to get Ciel to take Jenna to Lavigny Docks. If she embraces the faith of Mr. Fool, she'll be safer in the future... Franca's thoughts drifted to Lumian.

In a four-wheeled four-seater carriage, navigating through the forest and farmland, Lumian, dressed in a casual formal suit, looked out the window at the golden harvest, his mind drifting.

The past month had been his most leisurely period in the past six months, but he didn't find this leisure enjoyable. He seized every opportunity to digest the Pyromaniac potion.

This included visits to the large morgue in the island district to help "cremate" corpses, "bury" abandoned large-sized trash, venturing underground to use flames to intimidate passing smuggling teams, successfully securing insurance compensation for small distressed merchants through fires, tracking down and incinerating a few wanted criminals, and igniting a desire among many to leave Trier and explore opportunities in neighboring cities...

This string of actions had brought Lumian to the brink of fully digesting the Pyromaniac potion. It might only take another half a month, a week, or perhaps even less.

Today, Lumian had received an invitation from Count Poufer to visit his Red Swan Castle as a guest.

Over the past month, the Sauron family had hosted five gatherings—one at the castle, one for hunting, two for casual chats at a café, and one for a masquerade ball in an abandoned house.

Lumian had participated in all of them, but nothing significant had occurred. The only notable exception was that Poufer Sauron hadn't played King's Pie again.

Where's the probe Gardner Martin mentioned? Could it be a probe this time? The Cave Association hasn't made another appearance. Do they believe me? He redirected his thoughts from the near-harvest farmland and contemplated the invitation for the day.

What intrigued him even more was Gardner Martin's promise to secretly monitor every gathering hosted by Count Poufer. So, where might Gardner be concealed at this moment?

Under the afternoon sun, the carriage arrived at its destination.

Lumian gazed up at the beige castle, tainted with the stains of ancient blood. Passing through the imposing door and the vast atrium, he reached the elegant living room on the first floor, adorned with a dark-red, plush carpet.

Poufer Sauron, dressed in a red velvet coat, was engaged in conversation at the entrance with another guest when Lumian arrived.

Lumian's gaze froze.

The guest standing beside Count Poufer was not someone he had expected to see.

Clad in hunting attire, with what appeared to be reddish-dyed hair, sharp brown eyebrows, and piercing eyes, it was Albus, another member of the Iron and Blood Cross Order.

As a member of the Iron and Blood Cross Order under the command of Commanding Officer Gardner Martin, Lumian was well aware of their identities and objectives. However, Albus was enigmatic and seldom seen in the market district, only making appearances at gatherings for a free meal.

“Who is this?” Lumian didn't conceal his confusion.

Is he here to assist me in completing my mission?

Poufer Sauron introduced with a smile, “A new friend. He'll be joining us at our gatherings more frequently.”

At this point, Poufer turned to Albus, whose expression appeared rather unlikable, maintaining his smile.

“His full name is: Albus Medici.”

Chapter 424 Underground Maze

Albus Medici... Lumian repeated the name to himself, glancing at the member of the Iron and Blood Cross Order who had suddenly appeared.

During Gardner Martin's gathering, Albus had never revealed his last name, and Gardner Martin had never introduced him. Now, he had actually given his full name to Poufer Sauron.

Is he trying to make it more realistic? Lumian's gaze swept across Albus's face, and he realized that when Count Poufer mentioned the surname Medici, he didn't hide his mockery at all, as if mocking the Sauron family member.

“Ciel Dubois,” Lumian extended his right hand and politely introduced himself.

Albus casually shook his hand, a smile evident in his eyes.

He said, “I've heard your name before, a generous patron of art.”

The member of the Iron and Blood Cross Order emphasized “generous.”

“That's mainly thanks to my sponsor,” Lumian said with a double entendre.

In the ears of the other guests, he was referring to his father—his wealthy family. As a member of the Iron and Blood Cross Order, Albus caught the subtle message.

Poufer Sauron exchanged a few pleasantries with Lumian before escorting him to the sofa.

The gathering was intimate, with familiar faces all around, including Poufer's cousin, Elros, Novelist Anori, Painter Mullen, Critic Ernst Young, and Poet Iraeta.

After some casual conversation and nibbling on snacks accompanied by black tea, Count Poufer glanced around and suggested with a mischievous smile, “How about we embark on an adventure today?”

“Adventure?” Albus raised an eyebrow and couldn't resist a playful quip, “An adventure in the bedroom?”

His insinuation was clear. Red Swan Castle might be spacious, with room for a key family member and even hundreds of soldiers at its zenith, but it hardly seemed like a place fit for adventure. Were they supposed to reenact a Trier-like adventure under a bedroom's plush sheets?

The jest lightened the atmosphere, and Poufer Sauron cleared his throat before continuing,

“Perhaps you're unaware, but Red Swan Castle harbors an extensive underground area.

“In the era of its construction, its primary function was war. It had to boast a cavernous cellar and a tunnel for escape during dire situations, or it would be deemed inadequate.

“Throughout the centuries, my forebears expanded and modified the underground, turning it into a labyrinth resembling something out of a horror story. Even though I grew up in Red Swan Castle, my knowledge of that place is limited to the areas I frequently use.

“Our objective today is to venture deep into this subterranean maze and locate a Count's crown that one of my ancestors misplaced in one of its chambers. The crown is adorned with numerous rubies, making it easily distinguishable.

“The one who retrieves the Count's crown will be crowned today's king.”

Deep into the underground maze... Scenes suddenly flashed through Lumian's mind.

The constant self-mutilating people in Red Swan Castle...

Screams of unknown origin...

A bronze coffin, surrounded by countless white candles...

A palm with dark-red, nearly-black blood vessels...

And a withered, black heart with a trickle of crimson seeping out...

These latter objects seemed to be concealed somewhere in the depths of the underground hall!

In an instant, Lumian comprehended the gravity of Poufer Sauron's proposal.

Poufer Sauron's probing was here!

Suppressing the urge to scan his surroundings and possibly catch a glimpse of Gardner Martin, who might be lurking, Lumian turned his attention to Albus Medici.

The member of the Iron and Blood Cross Order clicked his tongue and chuckled.

“Sounds intriguing. This is a game for the courageous!”

As if to quell any doubts or reluctance among the group, doing so meant: Those who decline to participate are merely cowards!

Count Poufer seized the opportunity to reassure them, “Worry not. If you lose your way and cannot find your path back, just pull the bell rope in your chamber. The servants will be dispatched to search for you and bring you back from below.”

“No problem,” Anori, the short and plump novelist, quipped with a mischievous glint in his eye. “I'm quite looking forward to something happening. After all, it will provide me with excellent material for my writing.”

“Like Anori's Last Day?” Lumian joked.

Having attended numerous gatherings hosted by the Black Cat art organization, Lumian was well aware of Novelist Anori and Poet Iraeta's unique quirks. Anori had a taboo for never praising fellow authors, while Iraeta's ire was only stirred by the current social realities in Intis.

Anori took a sip of his black tea and mumbled, “Those old fogeys from the Intis Faculty of Arts will absolutely love this theme.”

Seeing no objections, Count Poufer rose from his seat and addressed the assembled guests,

“Let's divide into two groups and begin this adventure. We'll set out individually along the way.

“One group will follow me, and the other will accompany Ciel. These individuals have all been kings in the past three months.

“Those willing to join Ciel, raise your hands.”

“Me!” Albus Medici was the first to raise his hand. Lumian had expected him to follow Poufer Sauron closely to complete the Iron and Blood Cross Order's mission.

Count Poufer appeared unfazed, as if this was the anticipated course of events.

The second to raise her hand was Elros, the cousin of the host.

With her long auburn hair, soft features, and bright brown eyes, she smiled at Lumian and said, “I've always been Monsieur Ciel's companion in the past. I see no reason to change that now.”

Lumian nodded and returned her smile.

He was aware that beneath her youthful appearance, Elros possessed a complexity that belied her innocence.

In one of his unsettling dreams, most participants in the King's Pie game had descended into madness, inflicting self-harm or harm on others. Only three individuals remained unaffected: Lumian himself, Poufer Sauron, and Miss Elros.

Lumian couldn't help but wonder about her true motivations for choosing to accompany him into the underground maze.

The third to raise his hand was the poet, Iraeta.

Holding his cherrywood pipe, he offered a straightforward reason, “He's my sponsor!”

The remaining guests, including Novelist Anori, Painter Mullen, and Critic Ernst Young, formed a team with Poufer Sauron.

They left the comfort of the living room and found themselves standing next to a fully-armored statue. Descending the nearby stairs, designed for two people to walk side by side, they ventured further into the depths of the castle.

The walls of the staircase were mottled and grayish-white, winding their way down into the bowels of the earth. The surroundings grew increasingly quiet as they descended.

After traversing about three floors, Lumian and his group reached the entrance of the underground maze.

The passageways were illuminated by numerous wall lamps, some connected to gas pipes, while others had a more classical design with candles burning brightly.

Lumian gazed up at the ceiling and noticed the aqueous-black stone bricks above, shrouded in darkness. Their cracks were distinct, and the surface exhibited signs of peeling.

“Let's choose this one,” Poufer declared, taking a carbide lamp from the wall and leading his team down the leftmost passageway.

After setting up the carbide lamp, Lumian instinctively proceeded down the corridor ahead without hesitation.

He believed that in such an environment, methodical searching might cause them to overlook something significant. By relying on the convergence of Beyonder characteristics and the concealed Blood Emperor aura, he believed he would stumble upon something of value.

“What's your reason for choosing this path?” Albus Medici's expression was always a little annoying.

Lumian responded with a hint of nonchalance, “I have faith in fate.”

“I like that reason,” Elros chimed in with a faint smile.

Poet Iraeta took a puff from his cherrywood pipe and added, “I believe in it too, but only if fate is inclined to favor me.”

The quartet ventured deeper into the corridor, encountering what appeared to be storage rooms along the way.

Soon, they arrived at a dimly lit hall with three doors, each bearing a single word in ancient Feysac: Hope, Death, and Madness.

Lumian had abandoned deep thinking by this point. Without hesitation, he walked towards the Door of Madness and gently pushed it open.

As the door swung ajar, darkness enveloped the room, and the light from the carbide lamp spilled in, revealing an eerie sight. Lifelike wax statues stood throughout the room, both men and women, adorned in either ordinary or exquisite attire, their expressions twisted in agony.

“Not bad,” Albus commented, disdainfully patting a wax statue's face with his right hand.

Elros glanced at him.

“Didn't your mother teach you manners?”

Albus chuckled.

“I don't have a mother.”

Elros was momentarily taken aback, not quite sure how to respond to that statement.

In the background, Poet Iraeta spoke with a touch of admiration, “In the past, when rumors circulated about me having an affair with a widow, I’d quietly spread gossip that I had kidnapped the Member of Parliament’s daughter and was suspected of murdering a merchant. I even found myself entangled in rumors involving human meat pies, and my neighbors mysteriously vanished.

“As long as I don’t care about my reputation and actively tarnish it, no one can perch on the moral high ground and point fingers at me.”

As expected of a poet... Lumian praised inwardly. Holding the carbide lamp, he led the way through the room filled with wax statues, their goal being the exit at the far end.

The wax figures, illuminated by the dim yellowish light of the gas wall lamps, appeared unnervingly lifelike. Their eyes seemed to follow Lumian and his companions, creating an unsettling and bizarre atmosphere.

Lumian couldn’t shake the memory of the previous wax statues that had come to life and attacked. He couldn’t help but feel that any of these figures could suddenly spring to life and lunge at them.

Breaking the indescribable silence, Albus Medici

spoke in a relaxed tone, addressing Elros, “You’re Poufer’s cousin. Your last name isn’t Sauron, is it?”

Elros candidly admitted, “You’re right.”

Albus casually inquired, “Which family do you belong to?”

Elros turned her head to look at Albus Medici and then at Lumian. She replied with a smile, “My full name is: Elros Einhorn.”

Chapter 425 The Living

Einhorn? Even though Lumian was a young man deprived of an education, he had received Aurore’s rigorous education and knew that this last name represented the royal family of the Feysac Empire in the north.

Previously, when he had observed Elros acting reserved and obedient in front of Poufer Sauron, he had assumed that her father’s family wasn’t particularly outstanding and had perhaps even declined, forcing her to rely on her cousin. He hadn’t expected her to bear such a distinguished last name.

It was worth noting that more than a thousand years had passed since the establishment of the Feysac Empire in the late Fourth Epoch. The Einhorn family had always held the throne, while the Sauron family had lost the Intis throne nearly two centuries ago. It was clear which family held the upper hand.

Albus Medici glanced at Elros in surprise and added a touch of provocation to his words, “You’re an Einhorn? I couldn’t tell.”

Elros gazed straight ahead, returning to her obedient demeanor.

She spoke emotionlessly, “The Sauron family and the Einhorn family often formed marriage alliances. Even though the Sauron family has long left the Intis throne, this tradition endures. My mother just happened to marry a member of the Einhorn royal family.”

Poet Iraeta asked with interest, “So your last name is Einhorn. Why did you come to Trier? You were living in Red Swan Castle when I first met Count Poufer.”

“Six years ago, my father perished in the war between the Feysac Empire and the Loen Kingdom. My mother brought me back to Trier, where we stayed with my maternal grandfather, who also happened to be Poufer's grandfather,” Elros explained with a soft sigh. “Two years ago, my maternal grandfather passed away. Last year, my mother succumbed to illness.”

The frequency of death does seem remarkably high? Right, Aurore had mentioned that while the four powerful countries of the Northern Continent sometimes collaborated and at other times clashed, marriages between the royal family and nobles never ceased. Consequently, cousin marriages had become frequent... According to Franca, the Hunter pathway has mainly been in the hands of the Sauron and Einhorn families. Could a Hunter-Hunter marriage guarantee that future generations would be better suited for the Hunter pathway? Lumian held the carbide lamp and proceeded down the corridor toward the exit of the wax statue's room.

The wax statues on either side, bathed in the yellowish glow of the carbide lamp, seemed eerily lifelike.

As they ventured further down the corridor, it grew narrower, and the wax statues almost obstructed their path.

Lumian couldn't help but bump into them. Their bodies were cold, and their limbs felt stiff. They were indeed genuine wax statues.

Finally, the four of them reached the end of the room and opened the iron-black wooden door.

Just as Lumian was about to depart, a subconscious impulse made him glance back.

In the dimly lit room, the pained expressions on the wax statues' faces appeared haunting, as if their eyes were fixed on the exit.

Lumian was reminded of his earlier encounter with the wax statue in the river. He instinctively raised his wrist slightly and discreetly extended the middle finger toward the wax statue in the room.

“I really wish I could set this place on fire,” Albus Medici lamented with a touch of regret.

Lumian was momentarily surprised, but he secretly concurred.

Good idea!

He had a suspicion that if he could incinerate these wax statues, the potion would be fully digested.

Elros Einhorn remarked calmly, “Red Swan Castle experiences an average of three fires a month.”

Is she suggesting we should go ahead and burn it down without any apprehension? Lumian grumbled in his thoughts and proceeded into the corridor behind the wax statue's room.

The passageway descended diagonally, leading them deeper underground.

Lumian felt an urge to purse his lips and whistle in amazement, but he resisted.

The four of them continued down until the corridor leveled out once more.

The wall lamps were not lit. Whether gas or candles, they slumbered in the darkness.

With the yellowish glow of their four carbide lamps, Lumian discerned a room at a diagonal angle ahead, its wooden door slightly ajar. A faint, lingering odor of blood emanated from within.

He approached and pushed open the wooden door.

Light streamed into the room, and the scene within was cast upon the eyes of Lumian, Albus, and the rest of the group.

It was a small bedroom, but time had not been kind to it. The bed had crumbled, the wood decayed, and the table lay in ruins. A collection of assorted items lay scattered in the center of the room.

The walls bore vivid, deep gouges, as if they had been violently clawed at by someone until their fingers must have bled and rotted.

The blood, having seeped into the crevices, had oxidized over time, turning black. Its original appearance was lost, but a faint cloyed odor still lingered.

Then, a whistle reached Lumian's ears.

Albus Medici expressed his emotions through this sound.

He moved past Lumian, entering the room, and ran his fingers along the deep scratches on the wall.

"I can only imagine the horrifying sounds that were produced," the chubby-faced Elros commented, her focus on the matter somewhat off.

Lumian surmised that someone from Red Swan Castle had once descended into madness and been confined in this room. The marks on the wall were the haunting legacy of their torment.

After a cursory search that yielded no findings, they pressed on.

They opted for the right path at the three-way intersection, leading them to a room with its wooden door partially open.

Inside, the room was in shambles, marred by the presence of the blackened bloodstains. The walls appeared to be adorned with what could only be described as decaying flesh.

Albus Medici observed it and let out a disapproving click of his tongue.

"A guy exploded here. From the inside out. Blood and flesh splattered everywhere."

Lumian nodded almost imperceptibly. The judgment aligned with his.

Could it have been the result of a Pyromaniac losing control and meeting their end?

Poet Iraeta, holding a carbide lamp in one hand, took a puff from his cherrywood pipe, struggling slightly, and offered his own perspective.

"I can't quite fathom why such a tragedy unfolded, but there's a certain poetic quality to it."

Is an explosion a form of art? Lumian muttered as he entered the room and began his search.

In this environment, his emotions were somewhat more agitated than usual, and his aggressive impulses were undeniably heightened.

The putrid blood and decaying flesh seemed to exude an aura that could influence one's mental state.

After moving forward for over ten meters, the group discovered another room adjacent to the corridor, its wooden door partially open.

The room didn't reek of blood, but Lumian felt as if sharp blades were pressed against his skin, causing his hair to stand on end.

Sharpness!

That was the word that naturally came to his mind.

As the light from the carbide lamp illuminated the room, Lumian, Elros, and the rest observed that the furniture had been reduced to tiny fragments. Beds and desks lay in finger-sized squares, partially collapsed.

"Remarkable swordsmanship," Albus Medici remarked with a chuckle.

Lumian wasn't too concerned with this matter. What troubled him was that this place was unlike the previous two rooms, which had signs of decaying blood and rotting flesh.

Where had the person who once occupied this room disappeared to? Lumian scrutinized the area intently before deciding to move on.

Shortly, they reached a descending stone staircase. The lower portion of the staircase was enveloped in darkness, seemingly endless.

On either side of the stairs were rooms with slightly open wooden doors. The interior of these rooms was pitch-black, as though it could swallow all light and motion.

Lumian instinctively chose the left side, pushed open the door, and extended the carbide lamp into the room.

Bathed in the direct yellow light, an intact bed, an undamaged table, and a chair all stood in perfect order.

Two gleaming, cold swords adorned the wall before them. On the table, a pile of colorful building blocks of various shapes and a row of iron soldiers, each as tall as a candle, were neatly arranged.

These iron soldiers were clad in blue coats with golden embroidery. They wielded spears that resembled tree branches or black rifles, a popular toy in Intis that had enjoyed popularity for a century or two.

Lumian walked over and placed the carbide lamp down. He picked up one of the iron soldiers and adeptly twisted the torsion spring on its back.

With a series of creaking sounds, the iron soldier sprang to life, swaying forward while raising its spear.

Memories of owning a set of such iron soldiers during his youth, before his mother's illness and his pépé's financial troubles, flooded into Lumian's mind.

"There are no signs of damage here. It's as if it contains items from childhood to adulthood," Elros observed as she circled the room.

Albus Medici grinned and remarked, "I wonder where the owner of this room is now. Hopefully not mad enough to scratch the walls or self-destruct from the inside out."

As they conversed, Lumian extended his right palm, attempting to open the wooden desk drawer to see what it held.

Suddenly, an ethereal voice echoed around them.

"My grandfather went mad and ventured into the depths of the underground palace, never to return..."

Lumian tensed, his body swiveling as he scanned the surroundings for the source of the voice.

Albus, Elros, and the others followed suit, clearly hearing the unsettling voice.

"My father went mad and ventured into the depths of the underground palace, never to return..."

"My brother went mad and ventured into the depths of the underground palace, never to return..."

"I... hear the summonings from the depths of the underground palace..."

Lumian, Albus, Elros, and Iraeta simultaneously directed their gazes at the wooden door across the corridor.

The spectral voice emanated from there.

With a snap, Iraeta, positioned in the corridor, pushed open the wooden door behind him. Ignorance often knew no fear.

The yellowish light immediately illuminated two figures and a pile of materials.

One of them was a flesh-toned puppet mounted on a metal frame, hairless with rudimentary facial features.

Surrounding it were molds, hair, clay, and pigments stored in containers.

A man clad in a grayish-black robe, his natural red hair flowing, was diligently painting the puppet with a fine brush.

Sensing the intrusion of light, the man slowly raised his head, revealing a weathered face adorned with thick hair and dark, iron-like eyes.

Upon spotting Lumian, Iraeta, and the rest, he spoke slowly, his voice ethereal as he inquired, "Are you here to make wax statues?"

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Iraeta unconsciously took a step back.

"No, there's no need."

He snapped out of his daze and focused on the man in the gray robe who was diligently painting the puppet in the dimly lit room. He asked with curiosity, "Are you the artisan of wax statues who serves Count Poufer?"

This Count had a peculiar hobby of crafting wax figures for his friends.

The man with the fiery red beard avoided direct eye contact and continued coloring the half-finished puppet in front of him.

Lumian, who had already returned to the corridor, turned his head and glanced at Albus Medici. Instead of speaking, he directed his question at the enigmatic man in the cluttered room, "What should we call you?"

Lumian was certain that something was amiss with the wax statue artisan before him, but he couldn't determine the extent of the problem. They had just noticed that no light escaped from this room, indicating that the man had been working on the puppet in complete darkness!

The man with deep, iron-black eyes and a fiery red beard looked up once more and spoke in a spectral tone, "My grandfather went mad and ventured into the depths of the underground palace, never to return..."

"My father went mad and ventured into the depths of the underground palace, never to return..."

"So, are you mad as well?" Albus Medici interrupted the man's ramblings.

The man hesitated for a moment before answering, "I... hear the summonings from the depths of the underground palace..."

At this point, his gaze swept across the faces of Lumian, Albus, and Elros. The corners of his mouth, obscured by his beard, curled up slightly, hinting at an elusive smile.

His vacant iron-black eyes grew more intense, and his voice carried a sense of urgency.

"The three of you, hurry to the depths of the underground palace..."

Iraeta muttered under his breath, "Why not me?"

Lumian's mind raced as he sought common ground with Albus and Elros.

As Poet Iraeta had pointed out, the "three of you" in the strange man's statement didn't include him. Given the peculiar atmosphere and circumstances, something was definitely awry.

I'm a Hunter, and Albus is a Hunter. Could Elros also be a Hunter? While Lumian contemplated this, Albus Medici seemed unfazed by the eerie words of the wax statue artisan. He flashed a

cheeky smile and asked, "Do you want us to venture deep into the underground palace to rescue your grandfather, father, and brother, or would you prefer to send your regards?"

Quite aggressive... Logically speaking, he's at least a Pyromaniac, the kind whose potion has mostly been digested. There's no need to provoke everyone with every word... Could it be that he's intentionally misleading others to believe that he's only a Provoker? Lumian looked at Albus's well-defined side profile and muttered inwardly.

The man painting the puppet paid Albus no attention and continued his work.

"Sorry to bother you," Lumian said, not giving Albus a chance to escalate the situation. He reached for the vermilion wooden door's handle, gently closed it, and left the room behind.

Lumian decided not to explore the room with the iron-clad soldier, fearing it might trigger unwanted events.

In the darkness, Lumian descended the worn stone steps, carbide lamp in hand.

Amid the echoing footsteps, Elros Einhorn suddenly commented, "That man looked like a lion..."

Lumian recalled the wax statue artisan's appearance. Indeed, with his long, dense red hair and beard, he did resemble a humanized lion.

Albus Medici gently swayed the carbide lamp in his hand and glanced at Elros.

"This is your maternal grandfather's castle. You've lived here for nearly six years. Don't act like a visitor like us who doesn't know anything."

"I genuinely don't know who that person was," Elros replied, shaking her head. "I rarely enter the underground palace. The farthest I've gone is the room filled with wax statues."

In other words, during your limited explorations, you had chosen the same path as me. You had selected the Door of Madness among the three doors of Hope, Madness, and Death... Why didn't you continue deeper? What were you worried about? Lumian deduced some information from Elros Einhorn's succinct answer.

Albus scoffed.

"Have you heard of the legend of Sauron family members going mad and venturing into the depths of the underground palace, never to return?"

"For example, my grandfather went mad and ventured into the depths of the underground palace..."

The member of the Iron and Blood Cross Order mimicked the man's speech with an uncanny accuracy.

Excellent, you've asked the question I wanted to ask... Despite Albus Medici's grating manner, he did serve a purpose.

He had no reservations and, with great acumen, asked questions that he couldn't.

With such a teammate around, Lumian could maintain a semblance of distance and conceal his true thoughts and attitude.

The worn stone steps seemed never-ending. As Elros descended carefully, she sighed and explained, "I've always known about such legends.

"The master of Red Swan Castle and the Sauron family members who reside here, both men and women, gradually become violent and irritable, eventually going mad. It's possible for them to enter the depths of the underground palace after mutilating themselves and never return. These incidents occur sporadically, sometimes once every few years, or two or three times a year.

"Apart from the family members who yearn to restore their forebears' glory, Sauron has distanced himself from this ancient castle. He doesn't want to go mad.

"This has a certain effect, ensuring the Sauron family's continuation and heritage. However, that madness seems to be a curse, a curse rooted in the bloodline. Sauron, who resides elsewhere, will occasionally have people suddenly return and repeat the experiences of their forebears here."

Is this the surface explanation behind the Sauron family's decline? If the core members of the family go mad one by one and enter the depths of the underground palace without returning, the family will indeed decline bit by bit... Why did Elros tell us in detail about the matters that's privy to the Sauron family... She believes that we won't leave alive, so she's satisfying her desire to share? Lumian couldn't help but recall the nightmares he had experienced due to the King's Pie game.

In the nightmares, Red Swan Castle was overrun by lunatics who mutilated themselves in gruesome ways, gouging out their own eyeballs and more.

It seemed that these lunatics might have included various individuals from the Sauron family who had gone mad over the course of more than two centuries.

But not all of them shared the Sauron bloodline. Lumian remembered how Novelist Anori and other participants in the King's Pie game had also gone insane and committed grotesque acts to themselves and others, despite lacking the Sauron family's lineage.

Albus Medici, in his irritating manner, wore a smirk as he asked Elros, "Did your maternal grandfather also go crazy and venture into the depths of the underground palace?"

Elros remained calm and replied, "No, he passed away due to chronic headaches. Not every owner of Red Swan Castle eventually goes mad."

Albus, undeterred, continued to press, "What are the common factors among those who don't go mad?"

Elros's face was illuminated by the carbide lamp's glow as she responded in her usual tone, "It's a family secret."

In essence, she was saying: "I'm not going to tell you."

This response left Lumian, who was leading the way, feeling a growing sense of frustration.

If Elros had simply cautioned them against prying into the Sauron family's affairs from the start, he wouldn't have reacted emotionally. But her willingness to share intriguing information, only to withhold the crucial details, felt like a deliberate provocation.

After a moment of silence, Albus Medici's smile returned, and he probed further, "What about your mother?"

Elros replied, "She passed away normally due to an illness."

Albus chuckled and continued, "What about you? You also have the Sauron family's bloodline. Will you suddenly go crazy?"

Elros turned her head and glanced at the impolite fellow, revealing an indescribable smile.

"In the long run, we'll all go mad."

Who do you mean by "we"? Lumian's forehead twitched, sensing that Elros wasn't just referring to the Sauron family.

A moment of silence followed, broken by Poet Iraeta's heartfelt sigh.

"The fear of a family, the curse that has lasted for generations, and the forebears who have ventured into the dark underground. What an excellent theme for an essay. It's very inspiring. If Anori were to find out, he would definitely produce a classic novel. Even I would have the urge to write a long poem."

As they conversed, the four of them finally reached the end of the lengthy stone steps.

Before them stretched a vast hall with grayish-white stone pillars supporting the dark ceiling above.

The four carbide lamps illuminated the space, revealing several piles of bones partially exposed behind certain stone pillars.

"Plenty of the dead." Albus Medici, undaunted, sighed with a smile and strolled toward one of the bone piles.

At that moment, Lumian picked up a rustling sound.

He swiftly raised his head and raised the carbide lamp.

In the dim yellow lighting, mottled ceiling, a colossal shadow moved with surprising speed, crawling across the uneven surface before vanishing into the shadows on the other side.

The shadow was a spider-like creature.

In comparison to its kind, it had only one pair of eyes, but each eye contained numerous tiny single eyes moving independently, radiating a cold and eerie light.

Countless long, thick bristles encircled a withered, blackened, fist-sized heart on its back.

Lumian's blood ran cold as a term leaped to the forefront of his mind: Black Hunting Spider!

This was one of the main ingredients of the Conspirer potion.

Over the past month, although Lumian hadn't yet acquired any ingredients related to Black Hunting Spiders and Sphinxes, he had amassed a general understanding of these two Beyonder creatures, including their appearance and abilities. Recently, he had contemplated “teleporting” to another location in his quest to locate these creatures.

However, the Black Hunting Spider he had just witnessed was even more unusual than the information he had gathered. It deviated significantly in several details, particularly the presence of a withered heart that eerily resembled that of a human.

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The suspected Black Hunting Spider flashed and disappeared into the shadows on the other side of the hall.

Lumian only saw it but didn't react in time. Albus Medici and Elros Einhorn were equally caught off guard.

By the time Iraeta sensed the abnormality and looked up at the ceiling, the colossal black spider had vanished.

“What are you looking at?” the poet asked curiously, casually commenting, “There's no mural on the walls of the underground maze. This doesn't match the Sauron family's former glory.”

In the Northern Continent, murals were essential when constructing grand buildings. All painters took pride in being invited to create these magnificent works of art, especially when it came to epic paintings on cathedral domes and walls. These paintings were not just a status symbol but also required months or even years to complete.

Lumian withdrew his gaze and smiled.

“I saw a venomous spider. No one has been here for a long time. It seems to have become a haven for dangerous creatures.”

Without waiting for Iraeta's response, he suggested, “Albus, Elros, and I have impressive skills and extensive hunting experience. It's clear you lack sufficient training. Why don't you return to the surface ahead of time? Continuing forward could be perilous for you. You don't truly believe you can find the crown and become king, do you?”

Iraeta muttered, “No problem. You're my sponsor, after all.

“If it weren't to accompany you guys and have some fun, I wouldn't venture into this pitch-black underground. I'm past the age of adventuring and performing arts. Alright, I'll head back to the surface now and wait for you in the living room. There's La Fée Verte, black tea, refreshments, and tobacco. It's much more comfortable than here.”

As the poet spoke, he turned and walked toward the stone steps at the hall's exit.

Just as he took several steps, a blaze erupted from the shadow on his right, hurtling towards Iraeta like a crimson spear.

Behind Lumian, flames surged around Albus Medici, transforming him into a crimson spear that collided with the flaming spear attacking the poet.

The member of the Iron and Blood Cross Order transformed into a crimson spear and flew out with a whoosh, colliding with the flaming spear that had attacked the poet.

With a resounding crash, the two flaming spears disintegrated, revealing Albus Medici and the colossal black spider with a withered heart.

The spider emitted a high-frequency squeak, raising its body and swinging its four thick-furred limbs, resembling scythes that flickered with a cold light, at Albus Medici.

At the same time, a nearly white-hot spear flew and struck the side of the black spider, incinerating its hard shell and piercing through it.

It was Elros Einhorn. She seemed prepared and quietly shifted her position, waiting for the colossal black spider to appear.

In the next moment, agile crimson Fire Ravens followed different trajectories, rushing into the wound created by the burning-white spear.

Rumble!

The fiery explosion within the colossal black spider's body created a chaotic storm of flames, tearing at its outer carapace and flesh.

Lumian didn't hold back his impressive abilities.

He had started condensing the Fire Raven the moment Albus Medici confronted the assailant.

The colossal black spider's scythe appendages missed Albus, who had seized the opportunity to retreat.

Under the relentless assault, the spider emitted a piercing screech that reverberated within its chitinous shell.

The shriveled, blackened heart behind it suddenly glowed dark red, creating blazing fireballs.

These fireballs formed a net, enveloping the colossal black spider, and shot toward Lumian, Albus, and Elros, leaving crimson trails in their wake.

In contrast, Iraeta, who had been stunned by the superhuman battle, was ignored and unharmed.

Rumble! Rumble! Rumble!

As Lumian and the others dodged the incoming fireballs, one of them shot deep into the hall, dissipating quickly.

Hidden within the fireball, the colossal black spider seized the opportunity to break through Lumian and the others' encirclement and disappear once more.

The crimson flames around them continued to burn. Albus Medici glanced at the dark-red liquid dripping from the heavily injured black spider but didn't immediately pursue it. Instead, he smiled at Lumian and said,

“Nice baiting.”

Lumian didn't deny it.

He had asked Poet Iraeta to return to the surface alone to lure out the colossal black spider as bait.

If the spider didn't take the bait, Iraeta would have left the underground palace without any danger. But if the spider planned to hunt an ordinary person alone, Lumian was ready to use Spirit World Traversal and the Spell of Harrumph to protect the target. He aimed to eliminate the creature, suspected to be a potion ingredient, as quickly as possible.

With such an opportunity, he wasn't willing to hold back and hide his trump cards. He wanted to end the battle swiftly to prevent any mishaps.

Unexpectedly, Albus Medici's reaction was quicker than his. Therefore, Lumian stopped in time and switched to Fire Ravens. He intended to observe the black spider's combat style and uncover any secrets it might hold.

Now, Lumian was certain that the colossal black spider was more formidable than a Black Hunting Spider. If it were the latter, it would never have escaped the encirclement of three Hunters; it would have perished from the repeated explosions.

Although it was confirmed that the black spider wasn't equivalent to a Black Hunting Spider, it was undoubtedly from the Hunter pathway. With the corresponding Beyonder powers, the special parts on its body could certainly be used to brew potions.

Lumian turned to Elros and said straightforwardly, "That monster is different from a Black Hunting Spider. There's a human-like heart on its back. What's going on?"

Elros gazed at the dark-red blood dripping into the hall's shadows, pondering for a moment.

"I've never seen such a Beyonder creature before."

She paused for a moment before continuing, "All I know is that if the owner of Red Swan Castle and many core members of the Sauron family don't go mad and venture into the depths of the underground palace without returning, someone will extract their heart and send it somewhere in the underground palace."

Upon hearing this, Lumian suddenly recalled a scene he had dreamt of due to the lingering effects of the King's Pie game.

In a bronze coffin surrounded by countless white candles, a hand with dark-red, almost black blood vessels extended, holding a shriveled, withered, black heart with some blood seeping out.

What the f*ck is the Sauron family up to? Lumian couldn't help but curse inwardly.

What lay in the depths of this underground palace, and how many mutated monsters lurked within?

At that moment, Poet Iraeta finally snapped out of his daze. He looked at Lumian and the others in shock, fear, and excitement.

"Are all of you Beyonders capable of using Beyonder powers?"

"You know about Beyonders too?" Albus Medici wore an expression that suggested he wasn't worthy of knowing.

As Iraeta approached Lumian, he quickly explained, "Seven or eight years ago, I went to a battlefield to gather material and saw something. I knew that there were many people in our army who could use superpowers. They were called Beyonders."

"We do have superpowers, and they look quite similar," Lumian said with a smile, glancing around. "Do you want to follow us deeper or return to the surface yourself?"

Iraeta didn't hide his fear and muttered, "Of course, I'll follow you. Although it's very likely that I'll encounter the large spider again, it's better than walking alone in the darkness with unknown monsters lurking around."

"I don't want the last poem of my life to be 'Oh, foolish Iraeta.'"

Lumian pondered for a few seconds and calmly said, "If you wish to return to the surface, I can escort you to the entrance of the underground palace."

"Then I'll definitely choose to return!" Iraeta changed his mind without hesitation.

Lumian then turned to Albus and Elros and asked, "Do you want to join me, wait here, or venture deeper by yourselves?"

Albus Medici gave Lumian a deep look and sneered.

"I didn't expect you to be such a moral person. You can escort this poet with a dubious reputation yourself."

His implication was clear: "You must have ulterior motives for escorting someone out, considering your lack of morals."

He didn't specify if he intended to stay or venture in alone.

"I'm with Albus," Elros, who stood by Albus, replied with a smile, holding the carbide lamp.

Lumian observed the dark-red blood droplets left by the black spider and proceeded to ascend the stone steps with Iraeta, using the carbide lamp for illumination.

In the pitch-black and silent underground, they returned to the corridor where the wax statue artisan and the iron soldiers were.

Poet Iraeta glanced back at the deep darkness below and said to his sponsor, "Those two shouldn't be simple."

"I know," Lumian replied nonchalantly.

Holding the carbide lamp that emitted a yellowish glow, he advanced at a moderate pace.

Iraeta walked closely beside him and continued in his usual tone, "The war between the Loen Kingdom and the Feysac Empire ended over seven years ago. But Miss Elros mentioned that her father died in the war six years ago. If I recall correctly, it was likely due to dissatisfaction with the Feysac Empire's losing treaty, leading to a rebellion. This was a civil war in the Feysac Empire. Why did Miss Elros mention the Loen Kingdom?"

“Is her father a representative of the extreme faction or a member of the royal family who perished in the rebellion?”

A member of the royal family who rebelled? Is that why they fled to Trier? Lumian considered the information provided by the political enthusiast, Iraeta.

Iraeta glanced at his sponsor and continued, “Actually, before today, I saw Albus Medici elsewhere.”

Lumian's curiosity was piqued as he asked, “Where?”

Iraeta glanced around and lowered his voice.

“Sacred Heart Cloister.”

Chapter 428 Incineration

Sacred Heart Cloister? The largest cloister in Trier's Eternal Blazing Sun Church? Why did Albus Medici go there? Could he be an undercover agent sent by the Purifier into the Iron and Blood Cross Order? Or did Gardner Martin instruct him to keep an eye on the Sacred Heart Cloister? Lumian's mind raced with questions and guesses.

As he advanced, clutching a carbide lamp, Iraeta hastily interjected with more information.

“I have a friend at the Sacred Heart Cloister. I often go there to drink with him.”

Lumian, momentarily diverting his focus from Albus Medici, jested, “Can the cloister monks drink?”

The two moved through the shadowy passageway, guided solely by the yellowish glow of the carbide lamp.

Iraeta rambled, “Of course they can, but they can't partake in liquor or get inebriated. The wine brewed by the Sacred Heart Cloister is the finest I've ever tasted.”

“Is your friend a monk?” Lumian walked at a moderate pace, his footsteps echoing through the seemingly endless passageway.

Iraeta appeared content conversing with Ciel and didn't hide anything.

“Yes, he's a member of the Brotherhood Minor and served as my nephew's baptism priest. Later, he could no longer tolerate the cathedral's clergy indulging in pleasures and chose to become a monk. He joined the Sacred Heart Cloister and is currently overseeing the brewery.”

A member of the Brotherhood Minor, champions of temperance and asceticism... Lumian deduced this and redirected their conversation.

“How often have you and your friend seen Albus Medici? What was the reason for his visit to the Sacred Heart Cloister?”

“Just once,” Iraeta muttered. “I don't concern myself with such matters. There are no nuns there. When I saw him, he was walking through the corridor with a monk and entered the rear of the cloister.”

It appears that Albus Medici had not entered covertly or with fear of discovery... Lumian deduced this from Iraeta's account.

Amidst Poet Iraeta's relentless search for topics, the two of them finally passed through the eerie wax statue room, leaving behind the hall with the enigmatic doors of Hope, Madness, and Death. They retraced their steps to the underground palace.

Iraeta let out a long sigh of relief and relaxed. He grumbled, “The underground palace is so dangerous, and there are creatures with supernatural abilities. Poufer truly led us into an adventure down here!

“Is he attempting to get us killed?”

You've all been corrupted by the King's Pie game many times. I wonder if you're truly alive... Lumian refrained from a direct response to Iraeta's grievances, opting for a playful smile as he remarked,

“It seems that the more frightened and tense you are, the more you like to talk.”

“That's what makes me feel alive,” Iraeta confessed. He extinguished the carbide lamp as they exited the underground palace via the spiral staircase.

Lumian turned back, retracing his steps to the Door of Madness.

He hadn't closed the door when he left. Even though he hadn't approached yet, the yellowish light from the carbide lamp made the wax statues appear faintly, as if they were waiting in the darkness.

Lumian stopped at the door, slowly bent down, and placed the carbide lamp on the ground in front of him.

Then, he straightened up and swept his gaze across the wax statues' faces, their expressions frozen in agony and shrouded in shadows.

Crimson Fire Ravens began to materialize around him, one after another.

Since Count Poufer had shown ill intent by leading them into the perilous depths of the underground palace—any ordinary person would already have died—there was no reason to show any courtesy to a member of the Sauron family, the owner of Red Swan Castle!

Lumian's plan was straightforward: to set the wax statues ablaze. This had several purposes. First, it might assist in digesting his potion. Second, it could preemptively eliminate potential threats, preventing the wax statues from coming to life and attacking at a critical moment. Lastly, it could create a chaotic situation that would disrupt Count Poufer's secret plan, sowing doubt and confusion for their further exploration.

Chaos often created opportunities.

Swoosh! Swoosh! Swoosh! With a swift motion, he released a flurry of Crimson Fire Ravens that darted towards the wax statues.

After dispatching two batches of Fire Ravens, Lumian dropped to one knee, pressing his hands to the ground.

From his palms, fiery serpents slithered out, winding their way through the pile of wax statues and swiftly igniting them.

A cacophony of explosions followed as the wax statues' heads burst, and their lower extremities were engulfed in flames, creating a cage of crimson fire.

The flesh-white wax that composed their bodies melted rapidly, turning into liquid droplets or softening and crumbling away, rendering them fragile under the dual onslaught of explosion and combustion.

Smack!

The “muscles” on one of the wax statues completely disintegrated, revealing a new face.

It was a human face!

It was a male human who had lost his eyes and died long ago, his face filled with pain! Silently, more wax statues softened and crumbled.

Without exception, there was a human corpse inside every one of them.

Among the corpses encased in the wax statues were men and women, some with exposed flesh and skin, others with heads and bodies that appeared to have been crudely stitched together after death. Some had open stomachs, their intestines tangled and filled with white wax, creating a grotesque sight...

What all of them had in common was the haunting expression of pain etched across their faces, as if they had lived through unspeakable horrors or had been trapped in the darkest of nightmares.

As Lumian observed, the melted wax transformed into a viscous liquid that oozed from the faces of the deceased humans. It was as if these tortured souls were weeping tears of relief as they faced the purifying embrace of the flames.

Inside the statues are actually real people... Lumian, who had his fair share of horrifying scenes, couldn't help but tense up, instinctively feeling repulsed and afraid.

He finally knew where the ordinary people from Red Swan Castle who had gone mad and mutilated themselves in his nightmares had gone.

Lumian rose to his feet, clutching the carbide lamp. Crimson flames erupted from his body, transforming into blazing meteors that streaked to every corner of the wax statue-filled chamber, turning it into an inferno.

The flesh-white wax began to burn fervently, feeding upon itself until there was no space left for the fire to consume.

Lumian's eyes reflected the crimson conflagration and the viscous wax tears on his pale face.

He didn't avert his gaze but watched intently.

At that moment, he gained a newfound understanding of his pyromaniac abilities. The once-vague third acting principle became clear.

The Pyromaniac wreaked havoc and caused utter catastrophe!

As for Pyromaniacs, they could willingly unleash disaster and destruction upon anyone.

Lumian fervently wished that the heretics and those who had gone “mad” and could only harm others would be engulfed by the flames!

Having amalgamated his various acts into this principle, Lumian had an uncommonly clear sense that his Pyromaniac potion had been entirely digested. He could even hear an imaginary shattering sound.

With a series of thuds, the lifeless bodies, stripped of their wax support, fell one by one to the ground. They piled up and burned even more fiercely.

All of a sudden, the wooden door creaked open from the exit opposite the wax statue's chamber.

The wax statue artisan, his thick beard and hair resembling a humanoid lion, stood before Lumian.

His iron-black eyes were tinged crimson by the flames that surged toward the ceiling. His voice sounded ethereal as he inquired, “Why... did you... set my wax statues ablaze?”

Lumian didn't answer; instead, he activated the black mark on his right shoulder.

Spirit World Traversal!

A spectral light flickered within his clothing, and his form swiftly materialized next to the wax statue artisan.

Almost simultaneously, Lumian parted his lips.

“Ha!”

A pale-yellow, gaseous light shot out of his mouth and struck the wax statue artisan's head.

The wax statue artisan, clad in a grayish-black robe, swayed visibly, as if momentarily losing his balance. He didn't lose consciousness completely; it was more like he had undergone a Psychic Piercing and was in a state of shock induced by the pain.

Lumian didn't rely solely on the Spell of Harrumph. He raised his prepared left palm and hurled a crimson fireball, tightly compressed in layers, into the wax statue artisan's mouth and nose with Fire Infusion.

The fireball, gradually turning white in color, whooshed into the target's mouth and nostrils, invading his brain.

Boom!

The blazing white fireball exploded from the inside out while Lumian watched as the wax statue artisan's head expanded rapidly before exploding.

Flaming flesh and blood spurted out. Lumian, already prepared, shielded his face with the carbide lamp in his right hand, leaving the back of his hand stained with blood.

With a thud, the wax statue artisan, with only a small half of his head remaining, swayed and collapsed to the ground.

Lumian, who had meticulously prepared a sequence of attacks, found himself momentarily taken aback. He hadn't expected the situation to resolve so effortlessly.

He had foreseen that the enigmatic wax statue artisan might pose a formidable challenge, and he had readied himself to “teleport” instantly if things took a turn for the worse.

It was worth noting that the wax statue that had reanimated previously had been more formidable than the wax statue artisan himself. Merely being in its presence had weighed heavily on Lumian's body and mind, almost rendering him incapable of resistance.

Did he possess the unique ability to create these wax statues, but lacked inherent power? Or did he need to draw strength from the Sauron family's underground palace to bring these menacing wax figures to life? Perhaps my attack was too swift, leaving him no time to react. He perished on the spot before he could tap into any external strength? Lumian gazed down at the wax statue artisan and assessed the situation.

In the depths of the underground palace, within a hall adorned with white candles,

Poufer Sauron, seated in a corner, abruptly opened his eyes and fixed his gaze upon the bronze coffin situated in the center of the chamber.

Around the coffin, numerous candles strangely extinguished without warning.

Wh— Poufer rose to his feet, his expression slightly twisted in consternation.

At the exit of the wax statue chamber, Lumian witnessed a crimson radiance emanating from the wax statue artisan's body.

Initially, the luminescence surged towards the head, but only a small fragment of the wax statue artisan's head remained. Consequently, it shifted to his chest, yet it couldn't dissipate.

Lumian felt a tinge of surprise. He tore open the grayish-black robe of the wax statue master, unveiling his chest.

There lay a sinister, pitch-black wound, and the space where his heart should have resided was hollow!

The heart is missing... Elros had mentioned that the Sauron family members' hearts had to be sent deep into the underground palace... Lumian vaguely grasped the reason behind the wax statue artisan's formidable yet fragile nature.

Ultimately, the crimson light coalesced into an ethereal entity with myriad gullies, resembling a shrunk blood-colored brain.

Unsure of its significance, Lumian stashed it away and made his exit.

The flames in the room continued to burn, but for some unknown reason, they failed to spread.

In the stone pillar hall where the confrontation with the black spider had transpired.

Albus and Elros observed as Lumian returned, carrying a carbide lamp that emitted a faint yellowish glow.

Almost simultaneously, they noticed the specks of blood on Lumian's body.

“Did you kill the poet?” Albus asked, amused.

Lumian shook his head and replied calmly, "I killed the one making the wax statues."

Chapter 429 Orders

Upon hearing Lumian's response, Albus's eyes widened slightly, and his eyebrows twitched.

Elros's mouth hung open as if something was stuck in her throat.

She quickly smiled and scrutinized Lumian's face with a meaningful gaze.

At that moment, Albus returned to normal and gazed at Lumian. He clicked his tongue and said, "You're really ruthless. You even went back and killed the wax statue guy."

"I had no choice. He stopped me from burning the wax statues," Lumian said with a gentle smile.

Albus's eyebrows twitched again.

"Did you really burn them?"

"Of course," Lumian shared his findings sincerely. "The wax statues' surfaces melted and peeled away to reveal human corpses."

Albus wasn't surprised at all. He applauded and smiled mockingly.

"Well done! I must praise your courage."

It's as if he's saying that I'm ignorant and fearless... Lumian didn't believe that Albus was really praising him.

Elros maintained her smile and spoke as though a bystander, "The Sauron family isn't the only one in Red Swan Castle who's gone mad. The butler, guards, valets, and maids have also gone mad. Their deaths after mutilation are terrifying. It's not suitable for their families and the public to know. They can only report their disappearance and compensate them a large sum of money."

Even so, they can still recruit new servants... Is it because the salary is high, or is the matter kept under wraps? Will they only choose foreigners who have just arrived in Trier and don't know anything? Lumian knew that ancient families like Sauron had servants who served them for generations, but their numbers were already limited.

"Shall we continue forward?" Elros inquired.

"Of course." Lumian still wanted to track down the severely injured black spider and extract the Beyonder characteristic it would produce to study the withered, black heart.

Albus Medici answered with his actions and walked deeper into the hall.

Under the yellowish glow of the carbide lamp, the darkness gradually receded, revealing the drops of dark-red blood flowing from the mutated giant spider.

As he advanced, he casually asked Elros, "Who's responsible for sending the extracted hearts into the depths of the underground palace?"

“Just because members of the Sauron family go mad and disappear into the depths of the underground palace doesn't mean that ordinary members of the Sauron family can't enter. In particular, the successor of Red Swan Castle often goes to certain rooms and halls in the underground maze. It begins the first time Poufer becomes king while playing King's Pie.”

Influenced by the frenzied and violent spirit? Lumian recalled the invisible entity that had circled above his head after winning the King's Pie game while not daring to descend due to the Blood Emperor's aura.

Soon, the trio reached the end of the hall. Through an open wooden door, they followed a corridor with numerous reliefs of soldiers engraved on both sides and a few storage rooms.

The yellowish light shone further, first outlining the outline of a wooden door, then a figure.

The figure wore a light-colored formal suit and had curly black hair. He had a slightly mean appearance and was clearly a participant in this gathering. He was Ernst Young, the critic assigned to Count Poufer's team.

“Are you lost?” Albus Medici greeted him “enthusiastically.”

Ernst Young held a carbide lamp that no longer emitted any light and smiled bitterly.

“We had already split up, and each believed we could find the Count's crown. But before I could search carefully, the carbide lamp suddenly went off. I had no choice but to return in the dark and search for a room with a bell rope.”

“How unlucky.” Albus sighed exaggeratedly for Ernst Young.

He had already reached the open door and stood beside Ernst Young.

Suddenly, crimson fireballs shot out from his free left hand, landing beside the critic and creating a blazing circle of flames.

“W-what are you doing?” Ernst Young asked in surprise.

Albus replied with a smile, “I'm here to help you illuminate the area. Isn't it very bright now?”

Ernst Young fell silent, crimson flames dancing on his face.

He's not surprised that Albus can create flames and possesses superpowers... Lumian had sensed that there was something amiss with Ernst Young when he saw him, like a troublemaker sent by Poufer Sauron. However, saying that something was amiss was an understatement; he was entirely abnormal.

Flames raged, and the temperature around Ernst Young soared.

Lumian glanced over and noticed a strange softening on the critic's face.

A viscous, wax-like liquid seeped out of Ernst Young's skin.

As Lumian's forehead throbbed, Albus extended his hands, leaned forward, and pushed open the wooden door.

Amidst the creaking sounds, the scene behind the door was tainted with a yellowish glow.

Coffins of varying sizes had been chiseled into the walls. Chains hung from the ceiling, and coffins of various colors dangled from them. The ground was filled with countless coffins, with only narrow gaps for people to pass through.

At that moment, Ernst Young raised his hands, his eyes empty, and tore at his face.

The half-waxed, half-real skin was torn off, revealing bloody flesh and dark-blue—nearly black—blood vessels.

A potent scent of blood and burning wax permeated the air, causing all the coffins in the hall to tremble simultaneously.

Bang! Bang! Bang! The coffin lids of various colors opened one after another, and black giant spiders with compound eyes, lush bristles, and withered hearts inlaid crawled out.

Rustling sounds filled the air as the giant black spiders covered almost every corner of the hall.

Aiming at Lumian and the others, they extended their mouths and quickly condensed a crimson fireball that was nearly white.

Numerous fireballs flew out, as if a volley had been fired from an artillery battery.

Whether it was Lumian, Albus, or Elros, they all lunged to the side of the corridor, avoiding the location facing the hall.

Rumble! Rumble!

The entire corridor was engulfed in flames, ravaged by the shockwaves. The walls on both sides showed signs of collapse.

Lumian's target was an empty storage room to the side, successfully evading the violent bombardment.

Elros was the same. Only Albus used Ernst Young as a cover.

Amidst the incessant explosions, the critic, who had lost most of his face, shattered into pieces. Flesh and blood splattered, and some parts of his body melted like candles.

The rustling sound resounded once more, and the innumerable black spiders seemed to surge out of the hall.

Lumian's scalp tingled as he listened. His first instinct was to quickly “teleport” away.

In the face of such mutated black spiders, he had no problem dealing with one or two. Two was a bit of a stretch, but three meant he had to consider retreating. And now, there were dozens of them!

Son of a sow! There are so many of you. What do you usually eat to survive? Just air? Lumian cursed inwardly as he activated the black mark on his right shoulder to use Spirit World Traversal.

Suddenly, he heard a nearly ethereal female voice.

The voice quickly became clearer. It belonged to Elros Einhorn.

Then, the girl's voice in Hermes reverberated.

“I command you, in the name of the Sauron family bloodline.

“Leave this area!”

The rustling stopped abruptly, and the entire area fell into an indescribable silence.

After a few seconds, the rapid crawling sounds of arthropods echoed again, but they spread in all directions.

Lumian ceased his attempts to use Spirit World Traversal and cast his gaze towards the corridor beyond.

The flames gradually extinguished, and no black spiders appeared.

Lumian left the side storage room in thought and saw that all the coffins in the hall ahead were open, but there was no sign of the giant black spiders.

Elros, dressed in a light-colored dress, stood in the corridor, her right hand clenched tightly, her left palm hanging low. Her aura seemed slightly different from before, as if the commander-in-chief of an army had arrived before her loyal soldiers, naturally displaying an alluring charm that made people submit to her.

Clap! Clap! Clap! Albus Medici stood up from behind the crumbled Ernst Young, clutching a lamp.

He smiled mockingly and said, "Aren't you an Einhorn? Why are you using the Sauron family's name?"

Elros cast a cold glance at the Iron and Blood Cross Order member, causing him to subconsciously shut his mouth.

"I have half of the Sauron bloodline." Elros turned to Lumian and smiled again. "Do you want to continue?"

"Of course!" Albus Medici was the first to respond.

Lumian cracked his neck and smiled. "The game isn't over yet."

Although he had the urge to escape the underground maze, the more he wanted to succumb to his urges, the more he couldn't show it.

His experience and Aurore's teachings had taught him not to let others guess his true thoughts under such circumstances.

The aura around Elros that made people involuntary submissive gradually dissipated, and she returned to her obedient state.

Lumian and Albus entered the hall ahead side by side and saw that the wooden coffins of various colors were empty. The corpses that should have existed looked like they had been eaten by the giant black spiders.

Just as he was about to pass through the mass tomb, Lumian spotted a massive black spider sprawled in a corner. Its side was hideously torn, and dark-red blood continued to flow.

This was the Beyonder creature that had previously fought the three Hunters. Due to its severe injuries, it couldn't leave the tomb according to Elros's "orders." It could only stay where it was and "lick" its wounds.

Upon seeing Lumian and the others, the giant black spider half-raised its body and let out a threatening squeak.

Glancing at the shriveled heart on the black spider's back, Lumian casually smiled and said, "It's mine, and the rest of the spoils of war are yours. How does that sound?"

Albus Medici chuckled. "Is that all you eye? Only you care about such things."

Elros's lips curled into a faint smile. "I have no problem with that, but since it's your spoils of war, you can retrieve it yourself. I won't provide any assistance."

"I like that. You can occasionally say something nice," Albus praised Elros before casting his gaze at Lumian.

The two Hunters, a man and a woman, appeared to be waiting to "appreciate" Lumian's performance.

The colossal black spider had suffered severe injuries but had clearly not lost its ability to fight!

Chapter 430 "Reckless"

Sensing Albus and Elros's gazes, Lumian cautiously approached the injured black spider with the carbide lamp in hand.

As a Hunter, he had a clear grasp of his two teammates' current mindsets.

It was akin to navigating a dark forest. Everyone assumed the role of the hunter, but the moment one revealed their vulnerability, they became the hunted, vulnerable to collective assault.

Albus and Elros desired insights into Lumian's condition and capabilities.

They harbored doubts that Lumian could easily dispatch the wax statue artisan, believing he must have paid a significant price. Moreover, they aimed to decipher the precise Sequence of the previous winner of the King's Pie game and the mystical items he carried.

Lumian had no qualms about eliminating the severely injured black spider, but he was reluctant to unveil his trump cards—Spirit World Traversal and the Spell of Harrumph—to Albus and Elros.

As he closed in on the black spider, his thoughts raced, pondering the most efficient strategy that would incur minimal cost and time, making the task as straightforward as possible.

Lumian's gaze swept from the torn-open side of the black spider, which remained trapped in the hall like its kin, dark-red blood oozing out. With his left hand, he casually retrieved a silver earring from his pocket and fastened it to his left earlobe.

Lie!

Having fully digested the Pyromaniac potion, Lumian's emotions steadied. He could now covertly wield the Flog boxing gloves and employ Lie.

Crimson flaming ravens materialized around him.

Almost simultaneously, the colossal black spider reacted. The shriveled heart within it emitted a dark-red glow, conjuring a plethora of menacing fireballs, as if weaving a protective crimson net.

Swoosh! Swoosh! Swoosh! The Fire Ravens encircling Lumian shot out, each following a distinct trajectory towards their respective targets.

Over a hundred crimson fireballs erupted from the black spider's form, hurtling forward with menacing howls.

Rumble!

In an instant, some Fire Ravens were intercepted by the fireballs, while others detonated them, setting off a series of explosions around the black spider, causing flames to erupt one after another.

At that precise moment, a brilliant fireball streaked towards the hall's exit.

Lumian had been awaiting this opening. He raised his left hand and snapped his fingers.

With a resounding crash, the bright fireball lost its trajectory and plummeted to the ground.

Instead of detonating, flames billowed upward, revealing the black spider's figure.

Lumian charged forward, his left hand ablaze with crimson flames.

They coiled, layer upon layer, compressing until they almost turned white.

Upon reaching the black spider's side, which lay stunned from the impact, Lumian leaned in and swung his left arm, pressing the blazing white fireball against the grotesque laceration, allowing it to penetrate the creature's body.

Amid the frantic thrashing of its limbs, the black spider barely managed to turn around. Lumian had already capitalized on the moment to lean back and roll, increasing the distance between them.

His form materialized beside the crimson sea created by the Fire Ravens and the fireball, distancing himself from the creature's violent aura.

Boom!

The white-hot fireball detonated within the black spider's body. The incineration might not have been visually apparent, but the swift expansion of gas tore through the Beyond creature entirely, ejecting its chitinous shell along with its flesh.

The colossal black spider emitted a spine-chilling screech as its eight hairy legs frantically recoiled.

Lumian wasted no time, preventing it from regaining its composure. He condensed a crimson spear that gleamed nearly white and hurled it toward the creature.

The flaming spear soared through the air, piercing the gaping wound and pinning the giant black spider to the ground.

The spear disintegrated, setting its insides ablaze. The black spider writhed a few times before falling silent.

Lumian didn't rush to approach his fallen foe. He turned to Albus and Elros. With a smile, he removed Lie and said, "It's settled."

As he spoke, he summoned dozens of crimson Fire Ravens and sent them swooping toward the seemingly lifeless black spider.

Boom!

The black spider leaped once more, self-destructing.

It had been pretending to be dead!

Unfortunately for it, Lumian had maintained his distance and didn't fall into the trap. He only sacrificed a dozen Fire Ravens.

The remaining crimson Fire Ravens swarmed the battered body of the black spider, restoring “peace” to it.

Upon witnessing this, Albus nodded slowly and grudgingly admitted, “Not bad.”

Elros observed thoughtfully, offering no immediate response to Lumian's proclamation.

Lumian turned to the motionless black spider, waiting for an iron-black light to emerge from its body before he approached.

After assessing the black spider's condition, he decided to exploit its severely injured state. Potential weaknesses included a probable decrease in Flame Controlling ability and agility. Therefore, he activated Lie and harnessed its Flame Controlling attributes to match his own speed and agility.

The iron-black light didn't converge on the black spider's compound eye as Lumian had anticipated. Instead, it flowed into the shriveled, blackened heart embedded in its back like a stream.

Lumian halted beside his prey, puzzled by the unfolding scene. After the Beyonder characteristic seeped out, he decided to collect it before drawing any conclusions. He carefully removed the shriveled heart, black compound eyes, and poison glands from the mouth, stashing them in separate concealed bags and metal canisters.

“Don't tell me you're merely a Pyromaniac and haven't advanced to become a Conspirer?” Albus taunted.

You know perfectly well that I only recently became a Pyromaniac when I joined the Iron and Blood Cross Order... Lumian grumbled inwardly. He straightened up and offered a smile.

“That's correct. I'm still just a Pyromaniac.”

“Pyromaniacs aren't capable of taking down the wax statue artisan...” Elros mumbled softly.

Albus's gaze briefly flickered towards Lumian's pocket where Lie was concealed, but he said nothing more.

See, I'm speaking the truth. If you doubt me and suspect otherwise, there's little I can do... Lumian chuckled, picked up the carbide lamp, and led the way to the exit of the hall.

After traversing another dark corridor, they arrived in a dimly lit room.

Within the yellowish light, iron-clad soldiers donned in blue coats adorned with golden threads came into view.

Unlike children's toys, each one stood nearly two meters tall. The spears they held glinted with a frigid gleam and appeared exceptionally sharp.

“If they were to come to life, it'd be an entire army,” Albus remarked with a hint of significance.

Army, soldiers... Lumian suddenly recollected the desire for submission in the King's Pie game. He remembered the wax statue's actions when it attacked him and the evident hierarchy within the Iron and Blood Cross Order—Brigade Commander, Deputy Brigade Commander, Commanding Officer, NCO, and Soldier.

In the midst of his musings, Lumian made an educated guess.

Could the higher ranks of the Hunter pathway involve the military, obedience, and regimentation?

The wax statues resemble soldiers awaiting commands, as do these iron automata. Could a high-Sequence Beyonder of the Hunter pathway possess the ability to create specialized soldiers?

The underground palace of Red Swan Castle is indeed teeming with the essence of the Hunter pathway. It's no wonder I encounter creatures from this pathway so frequently...

This meant that Lumian didn't have to search. He merely needed to engage in combat to secure the corresponding rewards.

What a perilous hunting ground, one that could potentially make me the prey, yet offers substantial gains! He sighed deeply.

Lumian observed as Albus Medici summoned layers of compressed white fireballs and casually sent them gliding across the room.

The fireballs didn't detonate; they hovered silently over the ground, resting on the shoulders and hats of the iron soldiers.

After the trio departed the room, Albus transferred the carbide lamp to his left hand, raised his right palm, and snapped his fingers, emulating Lumian.

Rumble! Rumble! Rumble!

In the room behind them, the white-hot fireballs ignited one after another, setting each other ablaze and causing the ground to quiver slightly.

Delayed Explosion!

One of Pyromaniac's abilities, Delayed Explosion!

Despite the fact that the iron soldiers in the room were constructed of metal, they either lost their limbs or internal components under the formidable shockwave. Some were even buried beneath stone bricks as a result of the collapsed wall.

Noticing Lumian's gaze, Albus wore a satisfied smile.

"To eliminate concealed threats, just like how you handled those wax statues."

"I thought you wouldn't dare," Lumian replied with a grin.

Upon witnessing Albus's actions, Lumian discerned his intentions. He was taken aback that Red Swan Castle's underground palace appeared to possess a form of self-defense mechanism. No matter how potent the explosions or flames, their effects were confined to a single room, preventing spillover.

Indeed, without such protective measures, Red Swan Castle would have likely crumbled long ago, given the rampant monsters dwelling within... Lumian observed another descending corridor ahead.

At the corridor's terminus stood a pair of hefty iron doors, the dark surface marred by large splotches of red, as if someone had splattered blood on them.

Elros took a deep breath and moved ahead of Lumian and Albus.

She reached the door, carefully set down the carbide lamp, extended her hands, leaned forward, and exerted force.

Amidst a grating sound, the iron-black door slowly swung open.

Lumian's eyelids twitched when he beheld a vast expanse of candlelight.

The bronze coffin from his nightmare was starkly reflected in his vision.

At that moment, nearly a third of the white candles surrounding the coffin had been snuffed out, while a substantial portion still burned brightly.

In the flickering candlelight, the door creaked open. Lumian rapidly surveyed the area but found no other individuals present.

The three Hunters remained rooted by the door for over ten seconds.

Finally, Albus Medici turned his head and tauntingly asked, "Why aren't you guys going in?"

"Why did you stop too?" Elros Einhorn inquired instead of responding.

"We're waiting for you to take the lead," Lumian replied with a casual grin.

This hall was rife with danger and concealed profound secrets. Naturally, he wanted others to scout the path first!

Lumian realized he wasn't alone in thinking this. Albus and Elros shared similar sentiments.

Albus withdrew his gaze and let out a soft chuckle.

"Since you're all cowards, I'll have to do it myself."

With that, he abruptly dropped to one knee and placed his hands on the ground.

Silently, two crimson fire serpents darted toward the bronze coffin.

Hey! Lumian's eyes narrowed. He hadn't anticipated Albus would act so recklessly.

Assaulting the most problematic element without conducting any investigation?

Elros's expression froze as she instinctively extended her right hand, as if attempting to halt Albus.