

Inevitability 51

Chapter 51: Temporal Node

The thing that slithered out of Deputy Padre Michel Garrigue's mouth was slender and covered in scaly brownish-green skin, like a diaphanous and fuzzy lizard.

As soon as it left Michel's body, its dark green vertical eye darted left and right, vigilantly sizing up its surroundings.

While doing so, it even peered out the window but didn't detect White Paper. Instead, Lumian and Aurore sensed the coldness and indifference in its eyes.

"What's this?" Lumian asked.

Aurore shook her head.

"I don't know. It looks like a special spirit."

Lumian immediately judged, "It sure doesn't look like something good!"

Even through White Paper and the mirror, the lizard-like creature still made him feel uneasy, and his hair stood on end.

Aurore glanced at him and reminded, "This lizard seems to possess an ability that leads to a degree of mental corruption. Just looking at it from afar makes one feel uncomfortable. If you stare at it for too long, you might end up with mental problems. You must be careful. If the discomfort is serious, immediately close your eyes and try Cogitation. Get your mind right before looking again."

"It's fine for now," Lumian tersely acknowledged. "What about you? Don't you feel uncomfortable?"

Aurore smiled and replied, "As a Mystery Pryer, I've seen things more corrupting than this. My resistance is much higher than yours.

"Besides, don't I go crazy occasionally? It doesn't seem to matter even if I go crazier a little more intensely and frequently."

"I think it's necessary to check your mental state when you said that last sentence," Lumian said, half concerned and half joking.

Aurore chuckled. "That's called being self-deprecating.

"Sometimes, it's not as if I can stop looking just because I want to. The Mystery Pryer's eyes are special and can't be completely sealed. I can only barely prevent it from affecting my daily life."

As the siblings spoke, the blurry lizard-like creature crawled along the wall and floor at an extremely fast speed to the bottom floor of the house.

A few animal skulls hung on the wall opposite the door on the first floor. They were from wolves, deer, and wild boars. The deputy padre, Michel Garrigue, wasn't a Cordu native. He ought to have lived in the cathedral, but Guillaume Bénét had prevented him from doing so using an excuse. He could only rent a place from the hunter, Sabaté.

The lizard burrowed into the wolf's skull and kept entering and exiting the socket.

Not long after, it switched to the wild boar's skull and continued doing the same thing.

After coming out of the deer's pale-white skull, the "lizard" crawled out of the house at a speed several times faster than a galloping horse. White Paper quietly floated in the night sky and followed it.

The "lizard" crawled all the way out of the village and finally arrived at the square.

It circled around the cathedral and arrived at the cemetery before plunging into a grave.

Ten seconds later, it crawled out and entered another tomb with a tombstone.

Just like that, the strange lizard-like creature moved through different graves. Lumian could even imagine the scene of it entering and exiting different human skulls in the coffins.

That scene made Lumian's skin protrude with tiny goosebumps. He couldn't help but ask, "What is this guy doing?"

Incomprehensible!

Aurore slowly shook her head. "It's a blind spot in my knowledge."

After "touring" the cemetery, the lizard-like diaphanous creature returned the way it came and entered Michel Garrigue's room.

It burrowed into Michel's mouth and disappeared.

After 20 to 30 seconds, Michel Garrigue opened his eyes and sat up. He gulped down water from the cup on the bedside table, looking extremely parched.

He put down the cup, wiped his mouth, and fell back to sleep.

Aurore turned her head and looked at Lumian.

"How is it? There's indeed something wrong with him, right?"

"How is this a problem? This is a huge problem!" Lumian didn't hide his emotions in front of his sister. "Pierre Berry, who grazes humans, the padre whose key to the time loop, Madame Pualis, who makes men give birth, Naroka, who went to Paramita, an owl who has lived for countless years, and the deputy padre who has a lizard living in him. Aren't there too many extraordinary individuals in Cordu?"

During the loop, Lumian had griped about how little help Ryan, Leah, and Valentine, the three official investigators, had been. In hindsight, how could he blame them? The abnormalities in Cordu were truly exceptional!

They might have taken action, but the results were probably unsatisfactory.

Aurore glanced at her brother, half-warning and half-teasing, "You haven't mentioned the most remarkable person yet.

"The only one in the village who can remember the loop and possess a unique dream ruin."

"..." Lumian was speechless and felt a headache brewing.

Aurore turned to the mirror on the table, contemplating.

"I don't expect any significant changes with the deputy padre. Although I could examine his Astral Projection more thoroughly, it could be hazardous.

"It's fine if it endangers me because I'll be another living Warlock in the next cycle, but we need more information. We should wait until we have enough before prying deeper. Starting the loop prematurely would waste time explaining and communicating."

Lumian agreed, sharing her perspective.

Aurore then suggested, "I plan on having White Paper monitor the padre now."

"..." Lumian was taken aback. "Didn't you just say we shouldn't pry deeper to avoid triggering the abnormality prematurely?"

The padre was the linchpin to the mystery. Wasn't it reckless to rush in like that?

Aurore smiled at Lumian. "I'm sure what I'm doing is safe."

Noticing Lumian's confusion and worry, she elaborated, "You heard the padre and Pons Bénéat's private conversation on April 1st during the previous cycle. The padre claimed to be an ordinary person, but he had a way to deal with me, a Beyonder.

"Based on the corresponding scene and the fact that there was no reason to lie to an ordinary person like you, I believe the padre was truly powerless before April 1st. Today is March 29th, and we haven't crossed midnight, so it's safe to spy on him."

Lumian felt relieved. "That makes sense."

Aurore continued, "From their conversation, I deduced that the padre found a way to quickly gain Beyonder powers on April 1st. If he senses danger, he can become a Beyonder instantly. Maybe he has an item that can deal with me.

"Additionally, the padre's strength at the Lent celebration didn't match that of a Sequence 9. I suspect he's taking a path beyond the divine paths the mysterious woman mentioned. He's probably praying to a certain entity for a blessing. Otherwise, he wouldn't have grown so powerful in just a few days without any noticeable inclination to losing control."

Lumian listened quietly and suddenly recalled something.

“On the morning of Lent during that cycle, I had just become a Hunter when I ran into Pons Bénet. I wanted to test myself by fighting him, but he ran away as if he knew I had become a Beyonder beforehand.

“Maybe he had also received a blessing and could sense danger...”

Lumian added another crucial point.

“It was probably April 3rd when I saw Pons Bénet enter Naroka's house during her funeral.

“If he had already received a blessing, he wouldn't have failed to detect spying from an ordinary person like me, considering his keenness on the morning of Lent.”

Aurore nodded. “In other words, it's highly likely that the padre's group became Beyonders between Naroka's funeral and Lent.” Between April 3rd and the morning of April 5th.

“Of course, we can't rule out the possibility of them receiving blessings in batches,” Aurore added.

The situation became clearer after this discussion. Lumian smacked his forehead and sighed.

“What's wrong?” Aurore asked, confused.

Lumian praised her, “I should have discussed these things with you earlier. You're much better at analyzing than I am!”

Aurore chuckled. “You sure know how to praise me in various ways. You're inexperienced and lack knowledge, so you didn't think of it immediately. You would've discovered these details sooner or later.”

Although she dismissed her brother's praise, her pleased expression was evident.

White Paper flew towards the Bénet residence at Aurore's command.

The Bénet residence was the tallest and most lavish in Cordu, aside from the cathedral and the castle's modified administrator's residence.

It was a grayish-blue three-story house with a chimney on top.

As the head of the Bénet family, the padre lived in a room on the top floor's east wing. The dark gray curtains were tightly drawn, and the master of the house appeared to be asleep.

This wasn't a problem for White Paper. It slipped through the wall and blended into the darkness in the corner.

In the room, Guillaume Bénet, who had finished his affair with Madame Pualis, was sitting in a recliner, staring at the curtain in front of the window, dressed in light-blue pajamas.

Aurore's eyes darkened, revealing Guillaume Bénet's aura.

The red, green, purple, and blue colors made Lumian dizzy.

Recalling his sister's teachings, he tried to differentiate between them and realized that the padre's body was relatively healthy except for his overzealous desires.

“What's he thinking about? Which mistress to meet tomorrow?” Lumian mocked him, even though the padre couldn't hear him.

At that moment, Guillaume Bénét stood up and punched the air in front of him.

“It's all your fault!”

Chapter 52: Entering the Ruins

“It's all your fault!

“It's all your fault!

“Damn it!

“Son of a bitch!”

Guillaume Bénét's fists continued to hit the air, his rage boiling over at a seemingly invisible creature.

His expression was twisted with hatred, and he didn't bother to suppress his emotions.

Aurore narrowed her eyes and gestured for White Paper to investigate the area.

But there was nothing there, just empty air.

Lumian clicked his tongue in annoyance. “He's been itching for a fight for a while now. Who's he blaming?”

Aurore shook her head and casually replied, “Maybe it's a bishop holding him back, stopping him from rising in rank and gaining extraordinary abilities. Or perhaps someone lured him into secretly worshipping a hidden entity, hoping to receive blessings and grow stronger...”

She considered that, as the sub-deacon of the Eternal Blazing Sun Church, a priest overseeing a rural cathedral, establishing contact with a concealed being wouldn't be easy on his own.

When it came to matters of supernatural power, he'd undoubtedly turn to the Dariège region's Church. The associated occult artifacts and sorcery grimoires would be handed over to the Inquisition for safekeeping or even sealing. They wouldn't be left at Cordu's cathedral. More importantly, it was impressive enough that he could command ancient Feysac. Languages capable of summoning supernatural forces like Hermes and Elvish weren't something a sub-deacon like him would encounter. And Aurore, through the Eye of Mystery Prying, had long determined he wasn't someone with innate spiritual prowess who could unintentionally attract malevolence.

Thus, without a certain someone's “guidance,” how could the padre come into contact with a hidden existence?

Aurore considered the possibility that Guillaume Bénét had come into possession of a mysterious item without turning it over.

Lumian laughed at the idea.

“Can't the padre gripe over that hidden existence? He even dared to make Saint Sith feel aggrieved. It's not impossible for him to blame that hidden existence for enticing him.”

After mocking Guillaume Bénét, Lumian analyzed seriously, “I've been thinking about why the padre suddenly fell into corruption. There are two suspects. The first is Madame Pualis. She's obviously very powerful. Whether it's Louis Lund, who gave birth in the castle, or the woman suspected to be her in the wilderness surrounded by the undead, it shows that she's not simple. She's involved with abnormal pathways and hidden existences. It's possible that she enticed the padre.”

“By the way...”

Lumian smacked his head.

“What's wrong?” Aurore didn't know what her brother had realized.

Lumian replied solemnly, “Do you think the padre has ever given birth to Madame Pualis' child?”

“...” Aurore was filled with regret for believing her brother was on the brink of an important discovery.

She snapped, “Who told you that Louis Lund's child is Madame Pualis's?”

“What if it's Administrator Béost's or a hidden existence's? No, no. If it was, you would have exploded and turned into a monster when you saw that scene.”

“I just find Madame Pualis to be more dominant in her relationship with the administrator.” Before the loop began, Lumian felt that the administrator, Béost, was a little weak. He couldn't keep the butler in check and couldn't keep an eye on his wife. When he appeared with Madame Pualis, he always tried to please the latter.

Lumian originally thought that the administrator loved his wife very much, but now, he had a new guess.

“Do you think the administrator is another fertility tool for Madame Pualis?”

“Perhaps.” Aurore held her forehead. “The world of mysticism has really broadened my horizons. Many scenes that only exist in novels and imaginations have been realized... in some warped manner...”

After sighing, she muttered to herself, “There seem to be more than one or two children born in the castle. Where are they?”

Lumian thought for a moment and expressed that he had no idea.

Infiltrating the castle and conducting a search was out of the question. Not after what happened to Louis Lund and the events in the wilderness. Whatever it took, he wasn't about to cross paths with Madame Pualis again.

Aurore felt the same. After their run-in with Madame Pualis, the siblings wanted nothing more than to avoid her at all costs.

The padre grunted in frustration, downing a glass of red wine to take the edge off.

He let out a long breath, put down the tall glass, and walked to the bed.

It wasn't until the padre's breathing eased and he seemed to be asleep that Lumian mocked, "Look at him, crashing early. What, no late night rendezvous with his mistress? Oh, he doesn't smoke in private, either."

This was inferred from the absence of cigar cases, pipe, and other items in the bedroom.

Aurore chuckled and said, "He doesn't drink much alcohol either. Everyone says he's a pillar of propriety."

She dispatched White Paper to scout the bedroom. Finding nothing, it returned as instructed. Aurore turned to Lumian.

"You only mentioned one suspect. What about the other?"

"That sneaky owl. Always watching, never acting." Lumian voiced his guess. "It might have led the padre to the legendary Warlock's legacy."

"Mmm." Aurore felt that the possibility was quite high.

Lumian then suggested, "If that owl pays me another visit, we capture it and interrogate it."

"You sure you can take down an owl that has lived for centuries?" Aurore smirked.

"I've got you, haven't I?" Lumian flattered his sister.

Aurore scoffed. "Our chances aren't great, even with both of us."

"But we can't just sit around and do nothing. We need to find out what's going on before it's too late. As long as we don't interfere with the advent of the twelfth night, we'll be fine."

Lumian nodded heavily.

Aurore noticed his exhaustion and reached for White Paper, who had returned.

"You've been using your Spirit Vision too much today. Get some rest. We'll continue tomorrow."

She paused for a moment before continuing, "In the morning, I'll teach you the basics of the Hermes language. Then, in the afternoon, go see Pierre Berry and have a drink. I'll sneak into his sheep pen and see if I can get any useful information from his three sheep."

She thought this was the easiest route to investigate.

"Isn't that too risky?" Lumian asked, already on his feet.

Aurore reassured him with a smile.

"Don't worry, I won't pick a fight. I just need to talk to them in Highlander. It shouldn't raise any alarms. They might know something useful."

Lumian nodded.

“I'll head to Ol' Tavern tomorrow afternoon. I'll try to get to know the three foreigners. They could be valuable allies.”

Of course, he had to be careful not to reveal their identities as Beyonders.

“Okay,” Aurore agreed with her brother's plan.

Lumian woke up in his dream bedroom, shrouded in a faint gray fog.

As he expected, all the gold, silver, and copper coins, as well as the axe and pitchfork he had collected, were gone.

The cycle had reset the dream.

I have to gather them again... Lumian muttered to himself as he left the bedroom and headed to the study.

He picked up the livre bleu from the table and flipped through it idly. Many of the words had been cut out.

Indeed, I was the one to send the request for help... He no longer felt anything about being the one who had sent the request for help.

He suspected that Aurore had guided him in sending the request. After all, he had no knowledge of mysticism back then, so he would have relied on a reliable messenger or a postman.

Speaking of which, Lumian realized that the postman who came once a week wasn't in the loop.

He figured that the officials probably prevented ordinary people from entering Cordu after receiving the letter.

Lumian looked around for a box to store the letter, but he couldn't remember how many similar items Aurore had in her collection, so he gave up.

He got dressed in a way that didn't affect his movements, grabbed his iron-black axe, and headed out into the wilderness filled with crevices. He walked towards the ruins surrounding the dark red mountain peak.

Lumian easily dispatched the two familiar monsters. He slung the shotgun, cloth bag of lead rounds, and assortment of coins.

He moved forward cautiously, deliberately avoiding the path he had taken before, knowing that he was not prepared to face the three-faced monster.

As he made his way through the collapsed buildings and thin gray fog, the constantly alert him took a sniff.

He caught a whiff of blood.

After some thought, Lumian sneaked into the shadows and hid in a hidden space on the top of a half-collapsed house, peering through a gap between a few rocks.

In the distance, amidst the barren, rubble-filled wasteland, he saw a lump of flesh slowly wriggling towards a building.

The flesh was mixed with yellow fat, as if a creature had been crushed by a falling boulder.

Lumian pondered how to deal with such a monster. Should I behead it? But it doesn't even have a head.

Suddenly, several dark-black, fleshy ropes appeared out of nowhere and bound the blob of flesh tightly.

Chapter 53: 53 Mark

53 Mark

Tentacles? Lumian was momentarily dumbstruck before recognizing the appendages that ensnared the fleshy mass.

He knew Aurore's novels well and had seen all the illustrations. Not only did he recall every melodramatic scene, but he also grasped concepts typically beyond his ken, such as monstrous tentacles.

Seven or eight inky tendrils enveloped the fleshy lump, dragging it towards the crumbled building.

A figure emerged from the chaos of strewn rubble.

The creature bore a humanoid form, its upper body and feet bare, clad only in black pants.

But it lacked a head, sporting only a remnant of a neck. A whirl of razor-sharp teeth filled the cross-section, and its crimson skin gleamed between them.

Lumian couldn't help but imagine a human whose head and half their neck had been replaced by some bizarre, gaping orifice. He shook his head, unable to locate a weak point for attack.

Seven or eight fleshy tentacles sprouted from the monster's maw, swiftly hauling the fleshy mass before it and hoisting it up.

The creature's neck-mouth blossomed open like a morning glory.

Its pearly, needle-like teeth clamped onto the flesh, swallowing it whole like a snake devouring its prey.

Lumian scoffed silently.

So, you still need to eat. Thought you guys could survive without food...

He then fell into deep thought.

Monsters should be common in these ruins. Food must be scarce...

So some monsters feed on others, like now. Or maybe, everyone's both hunter and prey...

Could I lure an unbeatable monster to others and exploit the chaos?

Theoretically, yes. But it's risky. They might just team up to kill me first...

As Lumian mulled it over, he noticed the monster's chest—heaving from the effort of digestion—was beginning to swell and contract, as though it was undergoing intense digestion.

This attracted Lumian's attention and made him realize that the monster's chest was anything but ordinary.

Three black, seal-like marks adorned its pectorals and base of the neck.

Wh— Lumian's pupils dilated instinctively, straining for a better look.

He'd seen something similar on the padre!

At the end of the Lent celebration, the padre's body had swelled, tearing his clothes to reveal a black mark!

Upon closer inspection, Lumian confirmed that the three black seals on the monster matched the padre's.

Composed of cryptic words and symbols, they seemed to connect with an ineffable realm.

The difference? The padre bore at least 11 or 12 marks, whereas the monster had only three.

What's the deal with these marks? Are they bestowed by a hidden power? And the more you have, the greater the boon? Lumian wondered, perplexed.

He tried in vain to memorize the markings but couldn't in such a short time. Without pen or paper, he couldn't reproduce them either.

The monster finished digesting the fleshy mass. It swung its arm, shaking the fleshy tentacles beside its mouth-orifice.

The mark beneath its neck glimmered, and a low hum emanated from its chest.

The sound swelled, evoking a maelstrom of air tearing through a beehive, whistling in and out of countless tunnels.

The trumpet-like orifice gaped wide, amplifying the maddening drone.

The cacophony grated on Lumian's nerves, making him itch to pummel the beast.

Your noise is unbearable, you know that?

As rage coursed through his veins, Lumian acted on impulse, leaping from the partially collapsed rooftop, shotgun in hand.

Bang!

Lumian hit the ground hard, his eyes locking onto the monster's gaping maw filled with razor-sharp teeth.

He was about to rip the other party a new one for being a stubborn old pig, but serenity gripped him like a vice. He felt helpless, like a bystander who had been thrust onto the stage of a deadly play.

The monster's blood-red mouth was trained on him, and it made no sound.

“Can I say that I'm sorry, that it's a misunderstanding?” he muttered, his voice barely audible.

He suspected that there was something wrong with the noise just now, causing him to lose his mind. He jumped out of his hiding spot and tried to attack!

But it was too late for apologies. He had to make a choice: fight or flee.

With his experience, Lumian knew that running was not an option. The monster was unscathed and ready, its eight tentacles raised and poised for attack.

Therefore, if he really wanted to escape, he had to fight before finding an opportunity!

If he wanted to survive, he had to fight. Without hesitation, Lumian raised the shotgun in his hand, loaded with lead bullets.

Bang!

The monster was caught off guard by Lumian's speed and decisiveness. It had no idea what the shotgun was and didn't stand a chance as it was pelted with lead bullets.

“Ah!”

it howled in pain, its mouth filled with razor-sharp teeth opening instinctively. Its chest was a bloody mess, including the black mark on its right side,

However, the black mark seemed to be engraved in his blood and flesh. It was still clearly visible and remained unharmed.

Lumian didn't revel in the monster's screams. He quickly repositioned himself and pulled out a new round from his bag.

But before he could take aim again, the black mark on the creature's left side glowed, and it vanished into thin air.

Just like that, it disappeared in front of Lumian!

Had it escaped or turned invisible? He racked his brain for answers from the various novels Aurore had written and the mysticism knowledge she had taught.

Lumian searched frantically for any sign of it, but it was gone.

This scene and difficulty that he had never faced before made Lumian panic. He wanted to take the opportunity to escape and subconsciously take a few steps back.

Lumian's ankles were suddenly yanked, and he lost his balance, flipping over and hanging upside down.

Dark, fleshy tentacles appeared out of nowhere, wrapping tightly around Lumian's legs and hoisting him up.

The monster was right in front of him, its black mark glowing on its right side. The vortex-shaped mouth filled with white, razor-sharp teeth widened to reveal a blood-red interior.

The stench was overwhelming, and Lumian felt dizzy as he hung upside down.

He could see the blood-colored skin of the monster's mouth and countless teeth.

Thinking quickly, he grabbed one of the tentacles and wrapped it tightly around his arm. In his hanging state, he aimed his shotgun at the monster's mouth and fired.

Bang!

The monster screamed as flesh and blood spewed from its mouth.

It flung Lumian away, and its body turned transparent before vanishing once again.

Lumian hit the ground and rolled before getting back up, determined to find his target.

Suddenly, he caught a whiff of blood approaching him.

Without hesitation, he leaped in the opposite direction.

Dark tentacles emerged from the air where he had been standing, but they missed their mark.

The monster reappeared three to four meters away, its vortex-shaped mouth wide open, ready to strike.

Lumian loaded his shotgun with lead rounds, but the black mark on the monster's left side glowed, and it vanished again.

Invisibility. It's indeed invisibility! Lumian instantly made a judgment.

Coupled with his previous encounter, he believed that this invisibility could not hide his scent and would lose its effect once he entered an attack state.

After figuring it out, Lumian calmed down and mocked inwardly,

How can you be invisible if you can't even hide your scent?

Capturing traces was a Hunter's forte.

Lumian regained his composure and calmly surveyed his surroundings as he circled the area.

Soon, he spotted the monster's footprints and caught the scent of blood and its unmistakable stench.

Using these clues, he dodged the monster's attacks and fired his shotgun, but it seemed to have no vital points. The creature only grew weaker after being hit multiple times.

With the lead rounds running low, Lumian quickly thought of a solution.

In just a few seconds, he had an answer.

He had scouted the area beforehand and found several natural traps that could be used, including one that would be perfect for this monster.

As two faint footprints appeared in the distance, Lumian turned and ran, narrowly avoiding the dark, fleshy tentacle that missed its target.

He kept running, occasionally looking back to make sure the monster was still chasing him and to dodge any attacks.

Buzz, buzz, buzz!

The monster's "noise" only fueled Lumian's anger, making him want to turn around and attack with his axe. But he reminded himself that his goal was to kill the creature, not just vent his frustration.

Fortunately, he remembered that his goal in running was to kill that guy. At the moment, he wasn't really running away. Anger and frustration didn't change his plan. It only made him more motivated.

Thud thud thud!

Finally, he spotted the half-collapsed building and rushed inside, stopping at the edge and pretending to lie in ambush.

Soon, he heard the shallow footprints of the monster approaching, along with its stench and blood.

Lumian estimated the distance of the tentacle and took a couple of steps back. With a swing of his axe, he struck a stone pillar that was about to collapse, and then kicked it hard, using the reaction force to roll back.

The half-collapsed building couldn't withstand the impact and crumbled, a cascade of heavy rocks filling the passage. Boom!

The monster, hiding and ready to attack, let out a fierce scream that lasted only a second before it was silenced forever.

Chapter 54: 54 Interpretation

54 Interpretation

Lumian rolled away before springing back to his feet.

The sudden scream and its abrupt end brought him a sense of relief.

Still, he remained vigilant. Shotgun slung and axe in hand, he cautiously approached the collapsed building.

Dust swirled in the air where bricks and wooden beams once stood, lingering on.

Outside, Lumian couldn't spot the monster's corpse. It must be buried beneath the rubble. His sense of smell was compromised in the dusty environment. He raised a hand to shield his nose from the irritants.

Given the situation, Lumian retreated several steps, maintaining a safe distance as he patiently waited for the dust to settle.

As he stood watch, he scrutinized his surroundings, on alert for any subtle signs of movement or scent.

Finally, the air cleared, and his vision returned.

Lumian neared the wreckage once more, tracking the scent of blood to find the monster crushed beneath heavy stones.

With no need to rush, he employed his Hunter expertise to methodically remove the rocks, avoiding any secondary collapse.

Simultaneously, he kept his guard up against the monster, which might still be alive and awaiting an opportunity to strike.

He pulled away another massive stone, revealing the twisted creature, its head-neck a mangled vortex.

Its maw faced the sky, crushed into a gory mess. Its chest was flattened, and its sharp mouth impaled on a jagged stone pillar. Several dark, fleshy tentacles had snapped.

If not for its distinct features, Lumian wouldn't have recognized the semi-solid mass as his target.

The trap had worked better than he'd anticipated!

After confirming the monster's demise, Lumian noticed the three black markings on its chest, still clearly visible despite the carnage.

It's so odd... This can't be common, even in mysticism, right? Despite going through his sister's crash course, Lumian still had much to learn. He relied on his intuition for judgment.

He had planned to use his knife to remove the skin with the black mark, but the creature's chest was too mangled to salvage anything.

After pondering for a moment, he tore a piece of cloth from his linen shirt, using it as makeshift paper.

Next, he wrapped another strip around his finger, staining it with the monster's blood. Whether it sufficiently isolated potential contamination or poison, he couldn't be sure. If anything happened, he'd have to leave the dream quickly, minimizing any damage to reality. He should recover within hours or half a day.

Using the blood as ink, Lumian copied the three black marks.

As he drew, dizziness struck, and a swelling pain pulsed in his forehead.

Lumian surmised from his sister's teachings that his spirituality was nearly depleted.

Just copying these marks almost drained me entirely?

He was astonished by the bizarre markings and the meager spiritual capacity of a Hunter, which he suspected was only slightly greater than a spiritually gifted person.

After resting briefly, Lumian continued copying. It took three intermittent attempts before completion, his head throbbing.

In his current state, further exploration was impossible. He pocketed the cloth, hoisted his axe, and headed back across the wilderness towards home.

Emerging from the ruins, he felt a sense of accomplishment, as if he had absorbed a significant portion of the Hunter potion.

Looks like it was a successful hunt, Lumian mused.

His unsorted experiences bubbled to the surface.

Staying calm is crucial... When faced with unexpected prey and no time to prepare, calmness is even more vital.

Always observe your surroundings and exploit opportunities.

With his thoughts racing, Lumian made his way home, ascended to the second floor, and entered the bedroom.

He forced himself to memorize the marks for a while before collapsing on the bed in exhaustion.

The next morning, when Lumian woke up, his temples were still throbbing a bit. That was a sign his spirituality had been drained in the dream ruins.

He shook his head and left the room to splash his face in the bathroom.

When he went downstairs, he realized his sister had already made breakfast—toast with jam, sliced sausages, and strong black coffee.

“So early?” Lumian blurted out in surprise.

His sister rarely woke up early.

Aurore replied grumpily, “Realizing we're stuck in a time loop, and the people around us are getting weirder and creepier, how can you sleep well? Not me.”

“I've got no choice.” Lumian comforted his sister. “At least you can really sleep. I've got stuff to do in my dreams.”

“That's true.” Aurore picked up the coffee laced with half a packet of sugar and took a swig.

After her brother sat down and wolfed most of the toast and sausage, she asked, “What did you get out of exploring the dream ruins?”

Lumian recounted his run-in with the monster and said, “Aurore, uh, Grande Soeur, help me figure out what those three black marks mean. At the end of Lent, the priest had something similar on him, but even more.”

Aurore nodded and took out a fountain pen and a note from a hidden pocket in her beige dress.

Lumian began sketching, but he couldn't accurately replicate the black marks.

Soon, he handed the note to his sister and “introduced,” “I only memorized it a few times. I can't be sure if some of it's right or wrong, but some of it must be. Here, here, and here are spot on.”

Just replicating part of the mark had drained a lot of his spirituality.

Aurore placed the note on the dining table in front of her and focused on it for a while.

“These words aren't any I know. The symbols that go with them are more warped than those commonly seen in mysticism too.”

Lumian was a little disappointed when Aurore added, “Judging by the influence of transcendent words and symbols on the surroundings and the leverage the marks have on natural power, I suspect this is the outward manifestation of a special contract.”

As she spoke, she tapped the note with her index finger.

“Contract?” Lumian asked.

Aurore nodded.

“Paired with your battle with that monster, each black mark should represent a special contract.

“The effect of this contract is likely helping it gain a superpower from certain spirit world creatures, creatures from other dimensions, or extraterrestrial creatures. So, the black mark on its left chest emits light and grants invisibility. The one below its neck corresponds to a voice that makes people frustrated, resentful, and lose their

minds. The one on its right chest didn't show anything. I suspect it has something to do with its mouth orifice, tentacles, or digestion."

"No wonder..." Lumian immediately understood some of the details of the previous battle.

He then laughed and said, "The padre signed more than ten contracts with different creatures?"

"What does this mean? Everyone can be his daddy!"

"What a strange way to put it," Aurore muttered. "From the looks of it, the priest who fought you at the end of Lent didn't even show a tenth of his strength. He probably only used one ability he got through the contract. His body and mind went out of whack for no reason, and he was at your mercy."

Lumian didn't get the previous two cycles, but he clearly knew it was luck back then.

He eagerly asked, "Can I copy the contract obtained from the monster and contact the corresponding creature?"

He was very envious of that "invisibility" ability.

"A contract is a contract, and a ritual is a ritual. Do you know how to conduct a ritual?" Aurore doused his enthusiasm. "Even if you master the ritual, do you know what the price of such a special contract is? The padre might have only completed it with the blessing of a hidden existence..."

Aurore paused for a second and muttered to herself, "Why does the monster in your dream ruin have such a black mark... Did it also receive the blessing of that entity?"

As she spoke, Aurore cast her gaze at Lumian's left chest.

"Could it be related to the black thorn symbol sealing your heart?"

"The padre had one too. Hmm... Maybe the thorn symbol represents a hidden existence that created the dream ruin. The key to breaking the cycle might be hidden there. Or, maybe reality can only solve the problem by doing something simultaneously with the dream ruin..."

"It's possible," Lumian thought, realizing that this could explain why the monster had a black mark and why the mysterious lady wanted him to explore the dream ruins.

He let out an emotional sigh.

"Aurore, uh, Grande Soeur, your imagination is indeed much richer than mine."

"That's what an author should be like," Aurore replied with a smile.

After breakfast, Aurore brought Lumian to the study to teach him Hermes.

They ended the lesson around three or four in the afternoon, only stopping to grab a quick bite to eat.

“Alright, you can go out and drink with Pierre Berry now,” Aurore said, realizing it was time and that no one would suspect them.

Lumian acknowledged her instruction briefly and expressed his concern.

“You must be careful.”

Aurore was going to take the risk of coming into contact with the three sheep to gather information.

Lumian arrived at the dilapidated two-story house where Shepherd Pierre Berry lived and looked around before asking the old woman, “Where's Pierre?”

The old woman, Pierre Berry's mother, Martie, appeared to be in her early fifties but had many wrinkles due to overexertion from work. Her skin was freckled, and her black hair had turned gray. She looked almost as old as Naroka.

“He went to the cathedral,” Martie replied.

Lumian was alarmed. He went to the cathedral again?

Chapter 55: 55 Persona

55 Persona

If Lumian remembered correctly, Pierre Berry would undoubtedly visit the cathedral to offer his prayers past noon of March 30th. He and Reimund had crossed paths with him during the previous cycle, and Lumian had also encountered him at the village square at a similar hour.

However, it was already three or four in the afternoon!

“When did he leave?” Lumian inquired.

Martie pondered for a moment and responded, “Around the time taken to cover a mile.”

In the countryside, except for a handful of people, hardly anyone owned a timepiece. Time was generally conveyed through specific activities and indications such as grape harvesting season, the duration of a mile's walk, and so forth.

Obviously, if the timeframe was brief enough for people to perceive it more distinctly, “a few minutes” and “15 minutes” would be employed in verbal expressions.

A mile? That isn't too far... Lumian speculated that Pierre Berry had already gone to the cathedral around noon and had yet to return.

One mile in Cordu was equivalent to one kilometer in the Intisian metric system.

After bidding farewell to Pierre's mother, Martie, Lumian departed from the Berry residence and proceeded towards the village square.

He was unsure whether Pierre Berry had visited the cathedral at noon and returned again in the afternoon, or if something had cropped up, delaying his return.

If it was the former scenario, Lumian could sense something brewing. It was highly unusual for Pierre Berry to frequently visit the cathedral to meet the padre. Something dreadful was certainly afoot.

If it was the latter scenario, it would be a massive problem!

Before Lumian, who retained his memories, and Aurore, who already knew the cycle, made an attempt, the history should remain unaltered!

If there were any deviations, it could indicate that the siblings had not completely comprehended the pattern of the cycles, or that there were others who could retain their memories.

With this in mind, Lumian heaved a sigh and raised his hand to strike his face.

He was so startled that he forgot to inquire if Pierre had visited the cathedral at noon.

That was crucial.

It was far too suspicious to turn back and ask now. Lumian could only obtain some information from Pierre when they drank together later. He quickly suppressed his frustration and strode towards the square.

Upon entering the cathedral of the Eternal Blazing Sun, he saw the padre, Guillaume Bénét, standing in front of the altar with several sunflowers. He was conversing with a few individuals seated in the front pew.

As soon as Lumian entered, Guillaume Bénét ceased speaking and glanced over.

Some plot? Lumian smiled as he approached the altar, observing the individuals listening to the padre's 'sermon.'

He spotted Shepherd Pierre Berry, the thug Pons Bénét, and a few of his henchmen. He also saw the padre's mistress, Madonna Bénét, and Sybil Berry. He was surprised to see a man here but also found it reasonable—Arnault André, Naroka's youngest son, a farmer in his forties.

“Hello, Pierre...” Lumian greeted him with a smile, but he halted midway.

The second half of his sentence was meant to be, “Aren't you buying drinks? Why are you here?” However, he suddenly became vigilant and remembered that this arrangement had yet to occur in this cycle.

This was something that had only transpired in the previous cycle. This was the first time Lumian had encountered Shepherd Pierre Berry in this cycle.

As Cordu's Prankster King, Lumian's reflexes were lightning-quick. He promptly altered his posture and extended his arms towards the altar.

“Praise the Sun!”

Keeping up the facade, his thoughts raced as he conjured up a fresh alibi.

After paying homage to the Sun and receiving a response from the priest, Lumian pivoted and addressed Pierre Berry, who sat at the front row's edge, gazing at him with bewilderment.

“I heard you had returned to the village, so I went to your dwelling to seek you out. Lo and behold, you're here in the cathedral.”

He didn't specify who had informed him, knowing that Pierre Berry would have been spotted en route to the cathedral.

With no witnesses to his lie, Lumian had a fallback option—Ava's father, the cobbler Guillaume Lizier.

“Why are you looking for me?” Pierre Berry rose to his feet, clad in a dark-brown robe, his blue eyes brimming with gentle amusement and perplexity.

Lumian had already prepared a plausible excuse. He grinned and responded, “I yearn to hear your tales while tending to your flock. Diverse countries, varied hamlets, and sundry locales. They must be enthralling.”

In the past, he had frequently conversed with newly-returned shepherds to enrich his knowledge.

Without waiting for Pierre Berry's reply, Lumian shifted his gaze from his disheveled and greasy black hair to his brand-new leather shoes.

“Did you make it rich?”

“My current employer was more generous this time and bestowed upon me quite a few things,” Pierre Berry replied with a smile. “I'll treat you to a drink later.”

“Alright.” This was precisely what Lumian had been angling for.

He even inquired, “When will you be heading there?”

This displayed the panache of a regular patron of Ol' Tavern. He was unashamed when it came to cadging a glass of wine.

Pierre Berry glanced at Guillaume Bénét, the priest, and received a corresponding hint.

“How about after dinner?” he suggested.

“Agreed,” Lumian assented readily.

Thereafter, under the scrutiny of the shepherd, priest, Pons Bénét, and company, he seated himself in the second pew closest to him.

“...” Pierre Berry was momentarily taken aback. “Aren't you going back?”

Lumian beamed.

“I haven't prayed in ages. I'll seize this opportunity to pray, lest the deity thinks I'm not devout enough.”

“Carry on, carry on. Pretend I'm not here.”

Saying so, he closed his eyes, lowered his head slightly, and crossed his arms over his chest.

Pierre Berry, Guillaume Bénét, Pons Bénét, and the rest exchanged glances, at a loss for words.

After patiently waiting for an extended period and observing Lumian still engrossed in prayer, the priest turned to Pierre Berry, gesturing for him to inquire.

Pierre Berry approached Lumian's side and patted his shoulder.

“How long do you intend to pray?”

Lumian opened his eyes and stated gravely, “I plan to pray until dinnertime. Since there's nothing else to do, I can make a confession later.”

Guillaume Bénét's forehead twitched upon hearing this.

Gazing at Madonna, Sybil, Pons, Arnault, and the others waiting for him, he exhaled slowly. He signaled to Pierre Berry and gestured towards the door.

Pierre Berry comprehended the priest's unspoken message and hastily informed Lumian, “I'm done praying. Shall we proceed to Ol' Tavern now?”

“Absolutely!” Lumian stood up, grinning from ear to ear. There was nary a hint of solemnity or piety in his demeanor.

Previously, he had discerned that his arrival had impeded the padre and his accomplices' machinations. In a mischievous attempt to play a prank, he feigned interest and lingered until Pierre Berry was required to depart prematurely.

He surmised that the padre saw through his act, but what use was being the Prankster King of Cordu if he didn't create a bit of mischief in such circumstances?

He had to maintain his persona to avoid arousing suspicion!

Lumian lamented his sister's probable departure to Berry's abode to confer with the three sheep. Had she been present, he could have dispatched White Paper to the cathedral to clandestinely overhear the padre's scheme and glean valuable intelligence.

Perhaps I can undertake this in the next cycle, but would Pierre detect our surveillance? Pierre is no simpleton. He is certainly more capable than an ordinary person like the padre... Lumian's thoughts raced as he trailed Pierre out of the cathedral and towards the Ol' Tavern.

In the sheep pen behind the Berry household.

Aurore, donned in a white gown, circumnavigated the woods and vaulted the wooden fence.

As an alluring woman seldom seen in the village, she had to choose this relatively secluded path. Otherwise, she would be subjected to small talk or worse, suspicion.

When will I learn the spells of invisibility and shadow concealment? Aurore ruminated wistfully as she advanced towards the three sheep that had huddled beside a haystack.

Speaking in Highlander, she said, “Do not fret. I am the adversary of Shepherd Pierre Berry.”

The eyes of the three sheep, whose coats were besmirched with filth, underwent a rapid transformation. Their initial vigilance and apprehension gave way to hope and perplexity.

Despite their initial reservations, they did not retreat and permitted Aurore to approach.

Aurore continued, "I discovered your peculiarities through certain means. You were once human, were you not?"

The eyes of the three sheep were suddenly imbued with shock, elation, hope, and skepticism. They instinctually bleated.

Aurore surveyed them.

"You cannot speak, but you can write, can you not?"

One of the sheep was stupefied for a moment before hastily inscribing on the ground.

It scribbled a simple Highlander word: "Yes."

The sheep was confirming that they were once human.

"What transpired? Why were you transformed into sheep?" Aurore pondered briefly before adding, "Write the beginning, middle, and end separately to save time."

The three sheep divided the task and inscribed different portions of the narrative on the surface of the soil using their hooves.

Before long, they had each completed a sentence.

"We were caught."

"A ritual was conducted."

"Swaddled in sheepskin and metamorphosed into sheep."

A ritualistic sorcery that can convert a human into a sheep using sheepskin? Hmph. That is decidedly easier than transfiguring a person into a sheep. The only question is, which deity was the ritual invoking? Aurore queried as her mind raced, "Did Pierre Berry capture you? Is he alone?"

She wished to ascertain Pierre Berry's current strength.

"Yes." One of the sheep responded.

The other sheep added more: "He has an accomplice. They were both exceedingly formidable."

Pierre Berry was already immensely powerful before his return to the village? Aurore suddenly detected something amiss.

Why did Pierre Berry appear to be under the sway of Guillaume Bénét, the padre?

Guillaume Bénét was still an ordinary person!

Chapter 56: Intuition

The more Aurore ruminated on the matter, the more her suspicions intensified.

How could the powerless Guillaume Bénét possibly subdue the mighty Pierre Berry, who possessed no less than supernatural abilities?

If the padre was indeed favored by the clandestine force to the extent that his clique considered him their leader, he should have been bestowed with a boon long ago and elevated above the common masses.

Should he decline the boon, he would inevitably face ostracism.

In these circumstances, his standing, authority, and machinations paled in comparison to his might or the gulf that separated him from divinity.

Aurore lacked the luxury of time to ponder this and could only conceive of two plausible explanations.

Either Guillaume Bénét was not the true leader of the small group and was merely exploiting his status to orchestrate and conceal the anomaly from the Eternal Blazing Sun Church in Dariège.

Or, he was not rejecting the boon but merely biding his time to attain greater power.

Neither explanation boded well.

Aurore directed her gaze at the three sheep and inquired, "Who was the man that accompanied Pierre Berry in his assault on you?"

The three sheep scribbled down their responses.

"Niort Best."

"A shepherd named Niort."

"He goes by the name Niort."

Niort Bastet too has achieved extraordinary power? Aurore was acquainted with the individual in question.

Niort was a fellow shepherd from Cordu who frequently grazed his flock alongside Pierre Berry. But he had seemingly not returned early this time.

"Where is Niort? I did not spot him in the village," Aurore queried.

The three sheep moved a few steps away and found a new patch of unmarked soil on which to write.

"He's dead."

"I killed him."

"We took him out, but we were apprehended."

Had he fallen victim to a counterattack? Aurore nodded pensively.

"Are all of you Beyonders?"

The three sheep ceased writing Highlander with their hooves and nodded in assent.

Aurore acknowledged them tersely as she raced to process the implications.

Pierre Berry and Niort Best are hunting Beyonders. What is their motive?

And one of them is now dead...

Either Niort's abilities paled in comparison to Pierre's, or they had acquired their powers through the boon and were far from proficient in wielding them. It was certain that the Beyonder battles would encounter complications...

Aurore glanced at the three sheep once more and asked, "Do you know why Pierre captured you?"

The three sheep resumed writing.

"I have heard him speak of God and devotion."

"It may be for a blood sacrifice."

"I suspect he wants to offer us as a sacrifice to an evil god."

Indeed, Beyonders possess remarkably high spirituality and unique characteristics. They are far superior to ordinary mortals as sacrificial offerings, and they can appease malevolent gods more effectively... Pierre Berry and Niort Best were using grazing sheep as a ruse to abduct Beyonders from other countries to offer them up as sacrifices? It is a scheme that can easily evade the local authorities' notice... Aurore nodded imperceptibly.

She spoke solemnly, "Did Pierre mention the honorific name of that god? Or rather, who were they praying to during the ritual that transformed you into sheep?"

The three sheep were taken aback, as if they were awash in recollections.

Suddenly, they lowered their heads and extended their hooves towards the soil before them.

For some inexplicable reason, Aurore felt that the temperature had plummeted, and the sun had been obscured by dark clouds, as a chilly mountain breeze swept past.

The three sheep began writing.

Aurore's spiritual intuition sounded a powerful alarm, prompting her to bellow, "Hold on!"

The three sheep lifted their heads and looked at her.

At some point, blood-red tears had welled up in their eyes, and their fur was stained and ghastly.

In the next moment, they resumed writing.

Aurore whirled around and dashed towards the fence.

As she exited the pen and looked back, the three sheep were bathed in the sunlight.

If not for the bloodstains on their faces, everything seemed entirely ordinary.

Thump, thump... Aurore's heart continued pounding.

Panting heavily, she breathed a sigh of relief.

If I had not learned to seal my sight and glimpsed things I should not have seen, I would not have reacted in time...

She produced a vial of iron-black powder and scattered it over the sheep pen.

The words etched in the soil vanished as though by an unseen hand.

As for the stains on the sheep's faces, Aurore found it challenging to expunge them using spells, so she refrained from approaching them and merely washed them away with water.

She feared that the three sheep were different from before and harbored latent dangers.

In Ol' Tavern, Lumian sat at the bar, sipping on light-green absinthe, his right elbow propped up casually as he surveyed the room.

He searched for the mysterious lady, but she was nowhere to be seen, nor were Ryan, Leah, and Valentine.

Lumian knew not when the former would arrive, and as for the latter three, he assumed they were wandering the village, engaging in idle chatter.

Pierre Berry, who had just finished his glass of absinthe, picked up a new pale green liquid and babbled, "I had a chance to get married."

"Is that so?" Lumian scoffed, "Who would fancy a shepherd?"

Pierre sighed and replied, "Most of the pastures we graze in are owned by manor owners or nearby villages. If we want to graze, we have to pay a ranch tax or marry a village girl and settle down there."

Lumian smiled. "That's a good thing for a shepherd."

Pierre took a sip of absinthe and glanced sideways at Lumian.

"That girl must fancy you and not ask for dowry.

"At one time, a lady thought I was not bad and didn't mind that I was a pauper and a shepherd. She was willing to marry me. Was she very foolish?"

"Yes." Lumian nodded "honestly."

Pierre took another sip of absinthe and was silent for a long time before saying, "Later, she died. She worked in a factory in the suburbs and fell ill due to exhaustion. I went to several cathedrals, got the priests to pray for her, and found doctors to treat her, but it was useless. After that day, I realized something."

Lumian asked, taking a swig of absinthe, "What was it?"

Resentment flashed across Pierre's face as he replied, "Those who possess flesh and excrete from their posterior cannot absolve us of our predicament!"

Lumian asked, "So, those without flesh and those who do not excrete from their posterior are acceptable?"

Pierre chuckled. "Those are saints and angels, but will they deign to look at us?"

Lumian tsked. "Then why did you go to the cathedral to seek the padre's counsel? Not only does he possess flesh and excrete from his posterior, but he also indulges in the carnal pleasures with women."

Pierre turned his head towards Lumian and cast a sidelong glance.

“You fail to comprehend. He possesses a certain intellectuality that can redeem our souls.”

“Intellectuality?” Lumian struggled to grasp the term.

Pierre took another sip of his light-green absinthe, seemingly oblivious to the question.

Lumian dared not press the matter further, and instead inquired, “I heard that you visited the cathedral at noon. Why did you return in the afternoon?”

Pierre's warm smile illuminated his face as he replied, “In the afternoon, one can converse with like-minded individuals.”

He did not deny that he had visited the cathedral at noon.

Lumian breathed a sigh of relief, knowing that for the time being, no one else would retain their memories and disrupt the flow of history.

He suspected that Pierre Berry had visited the cathedral at noon to confer with the padre in advance of their small group discussion scheduled for the afternoon.

After their libations and with the sun setting on the horizon, Lumian and Pierre Berry bid each other farewell and returned to their respective abodes.

Pons Bénet, the padre's younger brother, abruptly emerged with a few thugs and obstructed Lumian's way upon him reaching a secluded path.

The brawny, raven-haired, azure-eyed Pons Bénet stared at Lumian and smirked maliciously.

“You were good at pranks in ze afternoon, no? Wasting our time in ze cathedral. If ze padre wasn't there, I would have beaten you up, eh! Bastard, come and eat Daddy Pons's XX.”

Initially taken aback by this imbecile's foolishness, Lumian was elated.

His and Aurore's judgment was correct. In the previous cycle, Pons Bénet likely hadn't acquired supernatural abilities before Naroka's funeral and thus had no sense of danger.

He had actually dared to obstruct a Beyonder's path!

Without hesitation, Lumian turned and bolted, with Pons and his thugs in hot pursuit.

However, as soon as they exited the trail between two buildings, they lost sight of their quarry.

Pons Bénet scanned his surroundings and ordered his subordinates, “Spread out and search.”

He deemed it impossible for Lumian to have fled so swiftly and believed he was hiding nearby.

The thugs dispersed and combed the area for any potential hideouts, leaving Pons Bénet alone at the trail's entrance.

Lumian, who had ascended to the second floor of the adjacent building, chuckled and leapt towards Pons.

Bang!

Pons was sent hurtling to the ground with tremendous force, gasping for breath and momentarily incapacitated.

Had Lumian not restrained himself and struck him directly, he might have broken several bones.

Lumian stood up, clasped Pons's forearms, and smiled at him, saying, "Come, let us become better acquainted."

Before Pons could offer any resistance, Lumian pulled him into his embrace and kneed him.

Pons's eyes nearly bulged out of their sockets, and his face twisted in agony.

Thud!

Lumian released him, allowing the man to crumple to the ground like a shrimp.

He then turned and darted down the trail, vanishing from sight before the thugs returned.

In the kitchen, which also doubled as a part-time living and dining area,

Lumian updated his sister on his situation.

"Pierre Berry visited the cathedral in the afternoon... It's confirmed that Pons Bénet still lacks any superpowers."

Aurore nodded slightly and recounted her own experience, particularly the inexplicable danger at the end.

Lumian pondered for a moment before remarking, "That enigmatic lady claimed that certain entities might corrupt you merely by acknowledging Their existence."

Chapter 57: Arrangements

Aurore recollected the situation and surmised that her brother's account was accurate.

She sighed, overcome with emotion and remarked, "To think that such dreadful corruption can be brought about by that concealed entity worshiped by Pierre Berry and his accomplices. Even the evil deities mentioned in ancient manuscripts fail to elicit such a reaction."

Lumian showed no signs of surprise and said, "Otherwise, why are we trapped in a time loop?"

The more Aurore contemplated, the more perplexed she became. She muttered, "Is it possible that we have to confront the concealed entity on the twelfth night and defeat it to end the cycle?"

"This would entail gathering ingredients, digesting the potion, and undergoing repeated cycles to become a deity..."

Lumian interrupted her train of thought as he realized that his sister was becoming increasingly irrational.

"Stop! It cannot be this extreme."

Aurore acknowledged his remark tersely and nodded slightly.

“You are right. We have, at most, one more cycle. It is impossible for us to become deities within twenty days.”

She then shrugged and added, “There is no hope. Let us wait for death.”

“...” Even Lumian, who had an inventive mind, struggled to keep up with his sister's thoughts.

Aurore exhaled and looked at her brother. “All right, I am done venting. Continue.”

“Huh?” Lumian appeared puzzled and took a few seconds to understand what his sister meant by continuing.

“By the look of things, the three transformed sheep are to be offered as sacrifices and brought back to Cordu. It is no surprise that they did not wait until early May. The twelfth night is, in fact, the day of a grand-scale sacrifice to the concealed entity?”

Aurore's eyes scanned the surroundings, and she said, “That was my assumption, but why did the padre and his accomplices receive varying degrees of blessings before Lent? According to my understanding, it should have been an exchange through sacrifice.”

Drawing on his malicious perspective, Lumian made a bold conjecture based on the previous cycle's events.

“A small sacrifice and a grand ritual? At the end of the Lent celebration, the padre, who had obtained extraordinary powers, no longer concealed his abnormality. It is evident that he was planning something significant!”

After pondering for a moment, Aurore said, “The Lent celebration could be a part of the grand ritual. Before the grand ritual, the padre made up his mind and offered his soul to the evil deity. With a certain amount of offerings, he obtained a plethora of blessings, completely revealing his true colors. By the looks of it, everyone in Cordu will be implicated once the Lent celebration commences. No one can escape.”

The siblings exchanged glances and believed that their assumption was close to the truth.

However, if the abnormality erupted entirely from the Lent celebration until the twelfth night, how could they patiently wait until the final ritual to find the key to the cycle?

There was a high probability that everyone in the village, apart from those who died as sacrifices, would be corrupted!

“I am only a Sequence 7...” Aurore covered her face and said, “And you are only a Sequence 9.”

They were facing such a dire situation!

Based on Lumian's account of the battle at the end of the Lent celebration and Aurore's recent experience hunting black-marked monsters, she knew that she was no match for the padre who had received a boon. She felt that she had to prepare in advance before she could confront Pierre Berry.

Lumian had fortunately defeated the mutated padre in a one-on-two battle.

Yet, preventing the padre and his accomplices from obtaining supernatural powers in advance could avert the twelfth night. The cycle would most likely restart in advance.

“Hell difficulty! Hell difficulty!” Aurore slammed the dining table with a mournful expression.

Without waiting for Lumian's response, she raised her hands and tousled her blonde locks, as if releasing pent-up emotions.

After a series of gestures, Aurore composed herself and calmly addressed Lumian, “Seek out the trio of foreigners tomorrow morning. You may disclose the abnormality in the village to them. Concealing our status as Beyonders is unnecessary.”

“It's very dangerous...” Lumian instinctively replied.

Was it not natural for wild Beyonders to be considered culpable when they encountered officials?

Aurore let out a slow exhale and stated, “In this predicament, we can't care less. Other than the enigmatic lady, the trio are likely the most reliable individuals in the village. Moreover, each of them possesses strength that is on par with mine or even surpasses it. We are all in the same boat. Do not underestimate one another. Whether one is a wild Beyonder or an official, we must band together. As for the possibility of being hunted down by officials in the future, we shall cross that bridge when we come to it. For now, we must focus on escaping this loop.”

Lumian had heard his sister use the phrase 'all in the same boat' before. He knew it implied that everyone was in a similar predicament and facing the same problem. If something were to happen, no one could escape. They had to stand together.

“Very well, I will seek them out tomorrow,” he assented.

Aurore continued, “I now suspect that someone else is behind the padre and Pierre. He is the root of the corruption.”

“Madame Pualis?” Lumian guessed. “Not only is she powerful, but she is also the padre's mistress. She can control him in secret and use him to influence the others in the village.”

“But she has no apparent connection to Pierre.” Aurore gazed at her brother, frowning in contemplation. “From the encounter with the three sheep, Pierre and Niort should have gained supernatural powers when they grazed the plains last October. At the very least, they should have acquired the corresponding knowledge. This is because they did not return midway, so it is impossible to obtain it elsewhere.

“This means that the abnormality in the village can be traced back to July and August of last year. Did you notice any anomalies?”

Lumian shook his head slowly.

“No.”

He had initially thought that he was thoroughly acquainted with Cordu, but now, he realized that the undercurrents had been present for over half a year. This realization filled him with dread and made him feel like a stranger in his own home.

What is the problem? Lumian felt as though he was shrouded in layers of fog. He could never discern the truth of the matter.

Aurore continued, "It could also be that owl. Perhaps the legendary Warlock who died is not truly deceased. He may still be hiding somewhere in the village, or perhaps someone who we frequently encounter. He may have already discovered that I am a Warlock, and deliberately suppressed the legend from me. There are no such restrictions for ordinary individuals like you."

Aurore instructed in a low voice, "Notify me immediately the next time the owl pays a visit. I will get White Paper to track it and determine its whereabouts."

Lumian tersely acknowledged his sister's request, indicating that he too was waiting for the owl to appear.

This time, I will pluck all your feathers! He cursed inwardly.

Aurore pondered for a moment before issuing a third directive.

"Tomorrow afternoon, I shall extend an invitation to Madame Pualis. The administrator remains at his post, leaving the butler and the servants as the only occupants of the castle. You may clandestinely enter and scour for any clues. If you are successful in persuading the three foreigners in the morning to come, we can get their aid in this operation."

She dared not let White Paper venture to Madame Pualis's place whilst she was present. Nevertheless, she could not afford to be distracted whilst in Madame Pualis's company, thus she had to rely on her brother.

Lumian nodded before advancing the suggestion,

"I would advise against being alone with Madame Pualis. I fear she may seize the opportunity to deal with you."

"Shall we invite Nazélie and the others to an afternoon tea gathering?"

The more individuals present, the safer it would be.

"Indeed." Aurore deemed it a superior option.

She then remarked in a tone that was equal parts apprehensive and teasing, "You must exercise caution after infiltrating the castle. I do not wish to end up an aunt."

Lumian dared not retort, but gave her a glance that conveyed, "I am more concerned about your safety, for Madame Pualis will be with you."

During supper, Aurore set White Paper free to monitor the sheep pen. She discovered that the three sheep had licked the blood off their faces, preventing Shepherd Pierre Berry from detecting any anomaly.

Following that, Lumian resumed his education on mysticism until he fell asleep. He acquired mastery over many Hermes words, including “me,” “name,” “summon,” “need,” “light,” and “Sun.”

Light served as an incantation to activate the Integrity Brooch. There were three paragraphs in total.

Lumian awoke in the room shrouded in a faint gray mist.

He strode to the window and scrutinized the dark red “peak” and the dilapidated edifices that surrounded it once more.

I wonder what secrets lie here... Lumian muttered.

As he gazed, a thought suddenly struck him.

The ruins contained too many hazardous zones that he either could not or dared not approach. For instance, the lair of the three-faced monster. However, if he could summon a spirit world creature akin to White Paper and forge a pact with it, allowing it to infiltrate and observe, he ought to be able to gather more intelligence.

His vision, sense of smell, and hearing were all heightened by his Beyonder characteristics. In theory, they constituted a kind of supernatural power that could be conveyed upon White Paper.

As he ruminated, Lumian muttered to himself, The problem now is whether I can summon a spirit world creature in the dream ruins...

If I cannot, can I utilize our connection to bring it into the dream after summoning and forging the pact in reality?

What implications will the addition of a contracted creature have on the cycle? Can the corresponding spirit world be added to the mix? If not, once the summoning duration elapses, the contracted creature will return and the cycle will recommence...

The more Lumian thought about it, the more his head throbbed. He felt a profound reverence for mysticism. He could only hope to swiftly master a few languages that would enable him to complete a summoning ritual.

Without further ado, he seized his shotgun, the meager quantity of lead bullets that remained, and the sharp axe. He departed his home, traversed the wilderness, and re-entered the ruins.

Chapter 58: Cherishing Talent

After two nights of reconnaissance, Lumian discovered that the monsters inhabiting the outskirts of the dream ruins were fewer in number than he'd initially believed.

Having dispatched the skinless creature, the shotgun-wielding monstrosity, and the monster with the black mark, Lumian found little else in his search of the area. All he uncovered were a few twitching chunks of flesh.

Their sole purpose seemed to be as sustenance.

Yet Lumian had long since realized that he had no need for food within the dream.

Each time he entered, he felt invigorated and hunger-free. His energy would wane only after extended bouts of exploration or combat, replaced by a sensation akin to hunger. But it was a mild feeling that didn't necessitate additional nourishment.

Once the hunger became unbearable, Lumian's spiritual reserves and stamina would be all but depleted. Physically and mentally drained, he'd be forced to exit the dream.

After consuming a meal and recovering in the real world, he would return to the dreamscape, his vigor restored and hunger vanquished.

As he delved deeper, Lumian surveyed his surroundings for any signs of collapsed structures. He discovered a smattering of coins, but their combined value amounted to little more than a Louis d'or.

He found merely a few livre bleu inscribed with words.

Left with no alternative, Lumian decided to venture further into the ruins.

He cautiously navigated through the faint gray fog and oppressive darkness, weaving between the ruins' standing and fallen walls.

Suddenly, he stumbled upon a series of shallow, bizarre footprints.

It was difficult to classify them as footprints—the left one appeared ordinary, but the right seemed more akin to a palm imprint.

Another monster? Lumian stealthily trailed the footprints, all the while scrutinizing his environment and envisioning the ideal battlefield for various scenarios.

Eventually, he detected movement, prompting him to halt. He skirted around the area and scaled a toppled building, using the scattered, hefty rubble as cover.

Peering out cautiously, Lumian surveyed the source of the noise.

There, in the center of an uncluttered wasteland, stood a figure that could scarcely be described as human.

While vaguely humanoid in shape, closer inspection revealed a host of incongruities.

Two eyes occupied the space where a nose should have been. Above them, a mouth, and below, a pair of ears. The nose was nestled near the temples, while a leg and an arm replaced each shoulder. The lower half of the figure consisted of another leg and arm. The entire form seemed to have been haphazardly assembled from mismatched human components.

This revelation instantly clarified the nature of the peculiar tracks Lumian had been following.

The creature was garbed in a brown short-sleeved shirt and dark blue trousers, typical attire for lower-class Intisians. It paced the barren landscape, shoeless and hatless.

Lumian refrained from attacking, opting instead to observe patiently.

Before long, the monster raised an arm and contorted its body backward, its head making contact with the ground.

It's incredibly flexible... it would make a great dancer... Lumian mused sardonically.

As if on cue, the creature launched into a dance.

Its movements alternated between bold and graceful, sometimes bizarre and comical, yet always rhythmic.

More notably, the creature seemed to possess no skeletal structure—its limbs twisted and folded behind its back, and its legs and arms intertwined with ease.

As the Prankster King of Cordu Village, Lumian quickly devised a fitting moniker for his newfound quarry: Noodle Man!

Drawing on his observations, he began to formulate a strategy for the impending confrontation.

I mustn't assume that I can evade its attacks simply by maneuvering behind it. Noodle Man is capable of treating its front and back interchangeably...

I must be wary of its potential to constrict me like a serpent...

Though its vital points remain uncertain, it does have a head—I'll start by chopping off that...

As Lumian's thoughts raced, the monster's dance grew increasingly frenetic. It leaped skyward, limbs splayed as if attempting to embrace the heavens.

Lumian found himself somewhat entranced, an urge to sway his body in sync with the creature's movements taking hold.

He couldn't help but recall a melody his sister often played, the beat echoing through his mind: Dum-tch, dum-tch...

Suddenly, a warmth spread across his left pec as whispers seemed to reverberate in his skull.

His scalp prickled and body shuddered, as though the phantom voice that had once pushed him to the brink of madness was about to speak again.

Uh... Lumian hastily undid the buttons of his leather coat and gray shirt with his left hand and gazed at his bare chest.

The inky thorn mark over his heart had returned. The bluish-black symbol, consisting of an eye and writhing worms, materialized and bore down on the former.

Lumian froze in shock as his mind raced.

I hadn't even entered Cogitation, let alone held it for a few seconds...

Did Noodle Man's dance somehow trigger this?

Is there something related to mysticism about that dance? Some hidden magic?

Luckily, when the mark activates like this, the horrific whispers are nearly mute. It won't drive me to death's door or strip me of all restraint. But I'll suffer a skull-splitting migraine, uncontrollable tremors, and disorientation...

Since becoming a Hunter, Lumian had avoided entering that Cogitation state to tap into his special trait. The danger seemed far greater now.

Before, he had flirted with death and emerged unscathed. But now, hovering at death's door might cause him to lose all self-control, with irreparable consequences!

Worse, excessive exposure to that ghastly whisper might drive him irreparably insane, even if he survived and retained control.

He dared not take that risk again unless it was a last resort.

After two or three seconds, Lumian was no longer astonished by the thorn symbol being stimulated by Noodle Man's dance. An indescribable joy welled up in his heart.

He could endure such a negative state completely!

So, is there a chance that by learning Noodle Man's dance, I can dance it ahead of time to activate... uh—partially activate the special trait of my dream when hunting powerful monsters? Then, I'll charge at the stunned target and finish it off in a few moves.

Even if I can't fully trigger my special trait by dancing, it should be useful. I don't expect the target to give up resisting like the shotgun monster. It's enough to weaken them greatly... Lumian's thoughts raced. The more he watched the dancing Noodle Man, the more he found it pleasing.

The eyes on the nose, the mouth on the forehead, and the arm that acted as a leg. How could any of that be as beautiful as the magical dance?

In the blink of an eye, Lumian felt a strong sense of cherishing such talent, allowing him to find a reason.

Aurore said that we can't select talents with a uniform standard. So, why must it be a human and not a monster?

He decided not to hunt the Noodle Man before mastering the dance. He would come and observe it a few times every night to try to master it as soon as possible.

Of course, he planned to experiment with the other party first.

He wanted to see how the incomplete special trait would affect the monster!

Lumian quickly made up his mind. He didn't button his clothes and bared his left chest. He circled around the cover and jumped from the collapsed house to the wasteland.

Noodle Man's dance abruptly halted.

It began to tremble.

It turned to Lumian, prostrated itself, and lay on the ground.

Lumian stopped and didn't approach further, maintaining a safe distance.

Noodle Man didn't move.

Lumian nodded imperceptibly and muttered to himself, "Even when facing my 'special' trait that hasn't been fully activated, such a low-level monster will give up resisting and express its submission... I wonder what will happen to those at a higher level or those with Beyond characteristics... What I can be sure of is that the effect won't be as good..."

Lumian looked at Noodle Man and smiled.

"Come on, dance again."

Noodle Man didn't dare look up. It was unknown if it understood what Lumian was saying.

Seeing that his sincere words were ineffective, Lumian emphasized, "Quick, dance for your pépé again!"

Noodle Man's body trembled as it continued to prostrate.

How can I communicate with it if monsters can't understand human language? Lumian felt a little helpless.

He immediately put his newly acquired Hermes vocabulary to use and said, "I. Need..."

Lumian didn't say another word and began a dance with his body movements.

The monster didn't even acknowledge him as it pressed its face against the soil of the wasteland.

"Are you an imbecile?" Lumian couldn't help but curse.

He felt his scolding was unjustified. After all, which monster he had encountered was not stupid?

Even the most intelligent shotgun monster was subdued by human intelligence!

At that moment, Lumian felt the warmth in his chest dissipate.

He instinctively lowered his head and noticed the thorn symbol and the bluish-black symbol vanish simultaneously.

Lumian quickly shifted his gaze towards Noodle Man.

Noodle Man happened to raise its head and looked at Lumian with its nose-located eyes.

The man and monster stared at each other, stunned for a second.

Thud, thud, thud. Lumian turned around and ran away.

Noodle Man leaped up and chased him ferociously.

Lumian was well acquainted with the area. His running speed was faster than the uncoordinated monster, so he easily shook it off and circled back to the wasteland to hide in his original location.

He didn't flee because he was afraid of the other party, but he was concerned that he might not be able to control himself if they really fought. He didn't know if he could find another dancing Noodle Man in the dream ruins.

Before learning that mysterious dance, he had no intention of hunting this strange monster.

After waiting for a while, Lumian saw Noodle Man return to the area.

He nodded and muttered to himself, As expected, monsters have their own territory. They are accustomed to moving around or patrolling a certain route... This is very similar to wild beasts...

Next, Lumian patiently waited for the dance that might not happen.

After nearly two hours, he had expended quite a bit of his spirituality and felt a little hungry.

Noodle Man, who had rested for a long time, walked to the center of the wasteland and raised its arm and leg.

Chapter 59 Again

Noodle Man danced once more, and Lumian confirmed that the mysterious dance could prevent the black thorn symbol on his chest from activating fully. It produced no terrifying sound, only an illusory whisper.

This was highly advantageous for Lumian's "special" trait in the dreamscape.

However, he discovered two problems:

Firstly, Noodle Man's dance moves were extremely difficult and violated the human body's structure. Only a monster with exaggerated flexibility like Noodle Man could complete them. Although Lumian was a Beyonder and a Hunter with a greatly enhanced body, he had no confidence in replicating them himself. He feared that dancing even once would result in ligament tears, muscle strains or worse, fractures.

Secondly, the dance stirred the surrounding powers of nature and depleted Lumian's spirituality considerably.

After watching it for the third time, Lumian sighed silently, realizing he needed rest. I have to go back and rest after watching this.

A Hunter's spirituality is really useless!

He was almost certain that the hidden existence corresponding to the thorn symbol was closely related to this dream ruin.

The padre had a black mark on his body, and there was a dancing monster that could activate the thorn symbol. It would be surprising to say that it had nothing to do with the hidden existence!

Lumian believed Aurore's guess even more, thinking of the similar symbol on the padre's chest and the dream ruins rebooting along with reality.

The key to resolving the loop might be hidden in the depths of this place, playing a vital role.

Is that why the mysterious lady kept hinting at me to unravel the secret of the dream ruins? The more Lumian thought about it, the more frustrated he became. He raised his left hand, which wasn't holding an axe, and made obscene gestures at the black thorn symbol on his chest.

Ignoring the question of whether the hidden existence could sense or see him, Lumian felt that the problem wouldn't deteriorate any further, given that he had already fallen into a time loop thanks to Him, and the people around him were becoming stranger and more dangerous.

After watching the dance for the third time, Lumian rubbed his somewhat empty head and left the ruins to return to his home on the other side of the wilderness, enduring the slight warmth in his chest.

Before leaving the dream, he attempted to consolidate the dance movements he had memorized and almost sprained his back, broke his knee ligaments and tore his calf muscles.

"Dogsh*t, this isn't something an ordinary human can do!" Lumian cursed and lay on the bed.

As his spirituality was greatly drained, he quickly fell asleep.

.....

As Lumian awoke, the sky was just beginning to lighten. The sun had yet to rise, and the crimson moon had lost its luster.

He sat up slowly, feeling the satisfaction of a deep sleep. His exhausted spirituality had been perfectly replenished.

Walking to the window, Lumian drew back the curtains, allowing the light of dawn to flood the room.

In the next moment, his eyes were fixed on the figure larger than an ordinary owl, perched on an elm tree not far away, staring down at him.

Lumian quickly snapped out of his daze and opened his mouth.

“Aurore! Aurore!”

The suspect is here!

Quick, follow it!

Upon hearing the shout, the owl unfurled its wings and soared towards the edge of the village.

It gradually descended and vanished into the forest bordering Cordu Village.

Aurore, dressed in a white silk nightgown, entered Lumian's bedroom seconds later, her face contorted in irritation.

“Is it that owl again?”

Lumian gazed out of the window and replied, “Yes. Did White Paper manage to follow it?”

Aurore pulled at her long blonde tresses and spat, “Why does it always appear at such ungodly hours? I was sound asleep when you woke me up. By the time I could release White Paper, it had flown away.”

Lumian shot back, “But you said you couldn't sleep well with something on your mind.”

Aurore rolled her eyes at him and sneered, “Humans tend to feel nervous, uneasy, and fearful at the beginning. Once they get used to it, they become numb to it. Only by sleeping well can they remain alert and rational. If you don't sleep well, it will affect your mental state and signs of losing control will surface.”

Lumian's expression was remorseful as he said, “We can only wait for the next time.”

After a moment of contemplation, Aurore suggested, “Let's try to identify a pattern in its appearances. We can't keep waiting around all the time. We need to rest and cannot be on guard constantly.”

Lumian reminisced about the first few sightings.

“It's always in the latter half of the night and early morning hours...”

“Why only during that period?” Aurore inquired further. “It seems more like an act than a pattern. Think carefully. Did you do anything or repeat the same actions on the corresponding nights when it appeared in the first half of the night?”

“I was exploring the dream ruins,” Lumian admitted to his sister as he began to recall. “Before it first appeared, I killed the first monster in the dream. Before it appeared the second time, I activated the symbol on my chest through Cogitation and discovered what was special about me. The third time, I consumed the potion in the dream and became a Hunter. The fourth time, which is today, I discovered a way to activate my specialness in the dream to a certain extent while incurring less damage.”

“How did you do it?” Aurore asked eagerly.

Lumian recounted Noodle Man's dance and his attempt.

As Aurore listened, she thought about the owl. After her brother finished speaking, she deliberated and said, “The owl's visits seem to be related to significant progress in your exploration of the dream.”

Uh... Lumian thought for a moment before his eyes lit up.

“Indeed!

“The first time I killed a monster, the first time I displayed my specialness, the first time I consumed a potion and stepped onto the Beyonder path, the first time I found a way to make use of that specialness...

“Similar major developments also have a certain reaction in reality. That owl sensed it and came over to observe? Heh, it smelled something.”

Aurore tersely acknowledged.

“In the future, we can deliberately create a similar opportunity to see if we can wait for that owl.”

“I believe the next time it appears is after I master the mysterious dance and can truly use the specialness brought about by the symbol on my chest in my dream,” Lumian pondered, revealing a malicious smile. “When the time comes, I'll inform you before entering the dream. Be prepared.”

Aurore thought for a moment and nodded.

“I hope to figure out who the owl is related to and what role it plays in Cordu's abnormality.”

Lumian seized the opportunity to inquire, “Aurore, uh, Grande Soeur, do you possess any knowledge about that particular dance? As you are aware, my understanding of mysticism is still rudimentary.”

Aurore dragged a chair in front of Lumian's wooden table and settled in. After pondering for a moment, she responded, “Several notebooks have alluded to the existence of large-scale ritualistic magic during the early Fifth Epoch and throughout the Fourth Epoch.”

“Those rituals entailed not only numerous sacrifices but also a multitude of participants. They employed specific dances to appease their desired entities in exchange for a response.”

“In essence, it was a form of sacrificial ritual and magic. Dancing, from the outset, was believed to influence nature and facilitate communication with deities. Its effects resemble those of Beyonder language and the combination of herbs, essential oils, and other ingredients.”

In Aurore and Lumian's world, history was divided into five epochs. The First Epoch was the Chaos Epoch, followed by the Dark Epoch, and then the Cataclysm Epoch. However, Aurore had heard from a pen pal that the Cataclysm Epoch was also known as the Glorious Epoch.

The Fourth Epoch was the Age of the Gods, or the Epoch of the Gods. The Fifth Epoch was the present day, which began 1,358 years ago and was referred to as the Iron Age.

Of the five epochs, the history of the first three remained unverifiable, with only myths and legends surviving. The Fourth Epoch occasionally yielded documents, information, notebooks, ruins, mausoleums, ancient cities, and so on. Nevertheless, history seemed shrouded in a thick fog, with only a faint outline discernible. The theological texts of the seven Churches often recounted stories from the Fourth Epoch, which served as the only source of illumination.

After listening to his sister's explanation, Lumian hazarded a guess.

“That Noodle Man employs dance to appease the hidden entity that corresponds to the thorn symbol. Is it hoping to elicit a response or a boon?”

“Perhaps a significant portion of its ritual is absent, resulting in an extremely weak effect. Or is the problem with the dream ruins causing a failure that can only trigger a tiny fraction of the power contained in the symbol within my body?”

“Heh heh, it's as if I'm a god. Having witnessed Noodle Man's dance and being pleased by it, I decided to highlight the symbol and offer a certain response.”

However, Lumian had no control over this. It was an automatic reaction of the thorn symbol.

Aurore smiled and replied, “You are more like a carrier of that symbol, a tool, in a sense.”

She paused thoughtfully and said, “I suspect that the dance was specifically invented to please or communicate with the hidden entity that corresponds to the thorn symbol. Otherwise, it wouldn't have elicited a reaction from the symbol...”

“Furthermore, based on your description, this is not something an ordinary person can accomplish. Only Beyonders with special enhancements can do so.

“Although I am familiar with the names of the corresponding Sequence 9 and Sequence 8 pathways, I have a certain level of understanding of them. None of them can execute that kind of dance, and Noodle Man's performance does not seem like that of a higher Sequence. Otherwise, you would not have been able to escape.”

“Perhaps it is not from the 22 pathways, but rather a boon from a hidden entity?” Lumian recalled the mysterious lady's words.

Aurore looked out the window and pursed her lips.

“I wonder if this has anything to do with the Circle Inhabitant or a power equivalent to Sequence 9 or Sequence 8?”

“Probably.” Lumian suddenly laughed. “Let me name it. Noodle Man, Circle Inhabitant's corresponding Sequence 9!”

Aurore couldn't help but look up at the ceiling.

The siblings chatted for a while before heading downstairs for breakfast.

After studying Hermes until past ten, Lumian departed with important items.

Chapter 60: “Dancer”

Lumian was in no rush to track down Ryan, Leah, and Valentine. Instead, he headed straight for the Ol' Tavern, hoping to get lucky.

If that enigmatic woman showed up, he had a slew of questions for her!

Accepting her gift had bound him to some future cost. He might as well seize the chance to gain more benefits, as Aurore had advised.

The instant Lumian stepped into the Ol' Tavern, his eyes sparkled.

The mysterious woman sat in her usual corner seat, two glasses of emerald absinthe before her.

Two glasses? She knew I'd come? Lumian approached her with a smile and greeted her.

“Good morning.”

She wore a white blouse with vine-leaf patterns at the collar and a beige ankle-length dress, a light-red beret beside her.

Lumian, no stranger to his sister's fashion magazines, recognized this as Trier's latest trend.

She glanced up at him.

“It's getting late. Almost noon.”

This is to fit your schedule, isn't it? Lumian thought, annoyed.

But seeing the enigmatic woman brought him a strange sense of calm.

He sat and cut to the chase.

“I've been through a lot lately.”

She slid a glass of absinthe his way. The swirling green liquid was like a beacon of joy.

She neither invited him to speak nor silenced him.

Lumian sipped the absinthe, finding it rich and invigorating, with a subtle bitter note. It tasted different from any absinthe he'd had before.

“What's this?” he asked, puzzled.

“Another kind of absinthe—quite popular in Trier these days. To differentiate it from the original, people call it absinthe fennel. Authors, painters, and poets are particularly fond of it.” She took a small sip.

The green liquid in the clear glass seemed to possess a hypnotic hue.

Absinthe's main ingredients were wormwood, fennel, and anise. Different producers used slightly varied recipes, some even adding lemon essential oils.

Lumian didn't understand her motives. Had she traveled to Trier just to bring back absinthe fennel?

He didn't ask. Instead, he recounted recent events, both real and dreamed.

She sipped from her small cup of absinthe fennel, listening quietly to Lumian's account.

“That's about it. Can I learn that mysterious dance as quickly as possible?” he asked, bluntly.

He didn't bother inquiring about the loop's key or the dream's secret. Experience told him he wouldn't get a straight answer.

The woman swirled her emerald liquid and smiled.

“Without a significant boost in flexibility, you'll never master it.

“You could force yourself through a portion, but you'd risk ligament and muscle tears. How would you hunt monsters then?”

Lumian was attuned to the subtext in others' words.

“Is there a way to greatly increase my flexibility?”

She chuckled. “That's for you to figure out.”

“...” Lumian was stumped by her cryptic hint.

If she were a less mysterious acquaintance, he'd demand, “Explain yourself! Don't make me kneel and beg!”

As if reading his mind, she smiled and added, “The solution to your flexibility lies within you.”

“Huh?” Lumian looked perplexed.

She sipped her absinthe fennel and sighed.

“Didn't your sister teach you ritualistic magic?”

Lumian noticed the strange emotion flicker in her eyes once again.

“She did.” His heart quickened. “Pray to myself?”

She assessed him and laughed.

“Who do you think you are? What good would praying to you do?”

“You can only summon the weakest creatures from the spirit world. Your spiritual perception improves with your body.”

Danger intuition, for example? Lumian grasped the gist of her words.

Though Hunters' spirituality was enhanced, it focused on spiritual perception and fell short in ritualistic magic and other mystical matters.

“So, what do I need to do?” Lumian pressed.

The lady sighed wearily. “You've studied dualistic ritual law, haven't you?”

“Yes.” Lumian nodded.

The lady sighed again. “Luckily you have a sister. Otherwise, I'd have to teach you all this mystic mumbo jumbo. Too tiresome.”

You mean you didn't tell me about ritual magic, Cogitation, Spirit Vision, contracted creatures, or magic languages because it was too much hassle? You just showed up after Aurore finished teaching me? Lumian felt rage bubbling up inside him.

He took a couple of deep breaths and said, “Dualistic rituals require items closely tied to deities or supernatural beings, but I don't have any...”

His voice trailed off as a thought struck him.

The woman smirked and said, “Oh yes, you do.”

“Don't you remember?”

Lumian jabbed a finger at his chest.

“The thorn symbol and the bluish-black symbol?”

The lady nodded before reminding, “Forget the bluish-black symbol. The key to a dualistic ritual is channeling the divine power in the object. If its power decreases, the balance in your body will be disrupted. And when that happens...”

She left the sentence hanging but her expression told Lumian all he needed to know.

In Aurore's usual grim words: “No hope. Just wait for death!”

“Is the bluish-black symbol protecting me from corruption?” Lumian knew enough about the mysticism to recognize his current state as corruption.

“It's the great existence I mentioned protecting you,” the woman said solemnly.

“Once you solve the secret of the dream ruins, I'll tell you His honorific name. You can pray to Him directly.”

Did this great existence seal the corruption symbolized by the thorn in my heart, preventing it from corrupting me completely? Lumian didn't know if this great existence was good or evil, or had sinister intentions, but he felt an odd affinity with Him on this.

He thought for a moment and guessed, "Use a dualistic ritual to steal the power of the thorn symbol?"

"If its power decreases, the corruption will weaken and the seal strengthen?"

"How can you call it stealing?" the lady retorted. "This is appealing to an entity for a boon. It just so happens He has some of His power nearby. The response follows the law of proximity. Thanks to the seal from the great existence and barriers attenuating it, the entity's true form won't sense it."

Only mystics like you who speak in riddles understand how to sugarcoat it... What's the difference between this and stealing? Lumian thought sourly.

From the lady's explanation of divine boon and abnormal pathways, he asked shrewdly,

"Through the dualistic ritual, can I appeal to the power behind the thorn symbol and ask it to grant me the ability to greatly increase my flexibility?"

"Something like that," the lady said. "To be precise, ask it to grant you the power of Dancer."

"Dancer?" Lumian thought of Noodle Man's performance.

The lady took a sip of absinthe and said, "For Beyonder pathways beyond the standard 22, we classify them into Sequence 9 to Sequence 0 for convenience.

"In a way, this Sequence division follows the rules of this world.

"Does Dancer correspond to Sequence 9 of the thorn symbol, just as Circle Inhabitant corresponds to its Sequence 4?" Lumian fired off. "Can it boost my flexibility and improve my mystic skills, allowing me to easily grasp that mysterious dance?"

The lady smiled in relief. "As expected, with a foundation in mysticism, communication is much easier. No need for me to explain further."

Lumian asked eagerly, "Then what are Sequences 8, 7, 6 and 5 of the thorn symbol?"

"Sequence 8 is Alms Monk, and Sequence 7 is Contractee. Gosh, why do you want to know so much? Master the ritual first and strive to become a Dancer as soon as possible." The woman was losing patience.

Alms Monk... Contractee... These names instantly clicked for Lumian.

Alms Monk referred to certain members of the various churches in reality.

The Eternal Blazing Sun Church was rife with factions, each with their own beliefs. Two main groups stood out; the Order of Preachers and the Brotherhood Minor, also known as the Alms Monk Brotherhood.

The former was made up of clergymen and the Purifiers of the Inquisition who were dedicated to the cruel persecution and purification of heretics, cultists, and wild Beyonders, all in the name of promoting the orthodox teachings of the Eternal Blazing Sun.

The latter, however, were mainly concentrated in the cloisters, with a few clergymen among their ranks. They espoused temperance, begging for food and ascetic training, preaching in various poor places, all with the aim of spreading the faith of the Eternal Blazing Sun.

At the mention of the Alms Monk, Lumian immediately thought of missionaries, asceticism, and special ritualistic magic.

As for Contractee, the first thing that came to mind was the black mark on the padre and the mouth orifice monster.

Aurore explained that it might be a mark left behind by a special contract.

“Wait, the monster I killed was a Contractee?” Lumian asked in surprise.

I actually killed a monster equivalent to a Sequence 7?

The lady nodded slightly and said, “Yes, Contractees use special contracts and godhood provided by that existence as witnesses to obtain different powers from various creatures. One contract corresponds to one ability.

“Whether they're powerful or not depends on the abilities they obtain and how many they have. It's not impossible for ordinary people to kill them if they take the wrong path.

“In fact, similar situations occur in the Beyonder domain. It's common for Beyonders who aren't skilled in combat to be killed by those of an inferior Sequence.

“Ability is important, as is intelligence. Preparation in advance is equally significant.”