

CIRCLE OF INEVITABILITY

Chapter 6: Ruins

Lumian's subconscious gaze darted around the room, taking in the familiar sights of the table, the chair, the bookshelf, the wardrobe, and the bed.

It was his bedroom, but it was cloaked in a thin, gray fog.

Is this some sort of lucid dream? I'm having a lucid dream? His pupils dilated as the realization dawned on him.

A lucid dream was a rare occurrence where one's mind could think and remember like in a state of wakefulness while still in a dream state. It was a skill that required specialized training to master.

Aurore had tried various methods to induce lucid dreams in order to unravel the secret of Lumian's gray fog dream and help him eliminate the latent danger it posed, but she had failed.

But now, Lumian found himself inexplicably conscious in his dream.

As the shock of the situation passed, he began to consider the possibility of why this had happened.

Could it be because of the tarot card that represents the Seven of Wands? That woman said it would help me unlock the secret of the dream..

Therefore, its function is to allow me to enter a lucid dream state and explore the area enveloped by the gray fog?

Hmm... Compared to my previous impression, the gray fog seems to have faded a lot. A lot more...

With these thoughts racing through his mind, Lumian rose from his chair and strode to the side of the room. He placed his hands on the table against the wall and gazed out the window, where a completely unfamiliar landscape greeted his eyes.

This dream did not replicate the Cordu where he lived.

Under a thin, ghostly fog, a towering mountain peak caught Lumian's attention. It rose up twenty to thirty meters into the air, constructed from brownish-red stones and reddish-brown soil.

Buildings surrounded the mountain, now in ruins, either fallen or charred beyond recognition.

They resembled crypts, a disordered cemetery surrounding the mountain's base.

The ground was marred by holes and scattered with gravel. Not a blade of grass or a single weed could be found in this barren wasteland.

The fog in the sky thickened to an impenetrable white, with no indication of a sun. Lumian could only see as if in the dead of night, under the light of the stars.

After a moment of observation, he murmured to himself, "That's it? This is the dream that's been haunting me for years?"

But soon he refocused his thoughts on a more practical question:

Where is the dream secret hidden?

On the peak, or in one of these shattered buildings?

Lumian did not rush to leave his bedroom and explore the dream. Instead, he stayed put, scanning the area from his vantage point.

Suddenly, he caught sight of a figure darting through the ruins of the buildings surrounding the mountain peak.

Despite the fog's thinness and the two-story house's limited height, Lumian couldn't shake the sense of its presence. He wondered if he was hallucinating.

Taking a deep breath, Lumian muttered to himself, "Stay calm. Be patient. Stay calm. Be patient."

From what I can see, this dream is shrouded in secrecy, and it doesn't feel entirely my own. Lumian knew that blindly exploring it could lead to danger. Yes, I will search for that woman tomorrow and see what information I can find. Then, I will make a decision...

Lost in thought, Lumian withdrew his gaze and prepared to exit the dream to rest in peace.

However, he didn't know how to wake himself up while being awake.

After numerous attempts to awaken, he laid in bed and attempted to clutter his thoughts, trying to recreate the state he was in while sleeping.

After an indeterminate amount of time, Lumian abruptly sat up and noticed the faint glimmer of golden sunlight filtering into the room through the curtains.

I'm finally awake...

As expected, sleeping within the dream restores my disoriented state. Then, I can escape...

Lumian breathed a sigh of relief and whispered to himself.

In that moment, a knock reverberated through the door.

"Aurore?" Lumian's heart clenched, fearing the worst.

"It is *moi*," Aurore's voice infiltrated the room.

Lumian sprung from the bed and rushed to the entrance. He grabbed the handle and pulled it open.

Lo and behold, it was Aurore standing outside. She donned a white silk nightgown, and her long tresses of golden hair cascaded elegantly down her back.

"How did it go?" She appeared certain that Lumian had just awoken.

Lumian held nothing back and recounted every detail that had occurred.

Aurore nodded pensively.

"The purpose of the card was to facilitate a lucid dream..."

She inquired, "What are you going to do next?"

Lumian grunted curtly.

"I shall grab a bite to eat before visiting the woman and attempting to gather more information to discern her true intentions."

"Very well." Aurore offered no objection.

She added, "I shall also pen a letter to someone inquiring about the dream you recounted and the symbols therein."

At this juncture, she glimpsed Lumian's suddenly apprehensive expression and smiled.

"Fret not, I shall make adjustments. I shall not jettison everything at once. After all, I am the one who instilled in you the principle of gradual progress."

"Well, when you converse with that woman, do not be aggressive. Endeavor to be amicable. It is not that we are fearful of her, it is simply better to acquire another ally than an additional adversary."

"Understood," Lumian replied solemnly.

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Cordu, Ol' Tavern.

Lumian strode into the Cordu, Ol' Tavern and approached the bar counter. He leaned in and spoke to Maurice Bénét, the tavern owner who also doubled up as a bartender.

"Which chamber does the foreign madame occupy upstairs?"

Ol' Tavern, the only inn in the village, boasted six rooms on the second floor for guests to rest their weary heads.

Maurice Bénét was not a burly man. Like most in the village, he had raven locks and blue eyes, but his nose was always red, a consequence of his heavy drinking.

He was related to the Church's padre Guillaume Bénét, but the two were not close and were merely distant cousins.

"Why the inquiry?" Maurice Bénét inquired, his curiosity piqued. "What business would a big-city woman have with a country bumpkin like you?"

There was an obvious look of inquiry on his face. Maurice had a sixth sense for these things, especially when it came to men and women.

Lumian scoffed, "Aren't you a country bumpkin and a hillbilly yourself?" He casually made up a reason, "The lady lost something last night. I found it this morning. Just trying to return her property."

Maurice Bénét didn't buy it for a second. "Is that so?"

Eight out of ten things that came out of Lumian's mouth were lies.

"What else? Do you think she'll fall for me?" Lumian said, undaunted.

"That's true." Maurice Bénét was convinced. "She's in the room by the square, opposite the washrooms."

After Lumian left, Maurice polished a glass, eyes tracking him. He whispered, just barely audible to Lumian, "Impossible? Not always. Sometimes people want to try something new..."

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Lumian found the washroom on the second floor, the only spot of light in the dim, narrow hallway. But his eyes were drawn to the door across from it. A piece of paper hung from the brass handle, stark white against the dark red wood.

Scrawled on it in Intis: "Currently resting. Do not disturb."

Lumian read the note for a few seconds. Instead of rushing forward to knock on the door, he took two steps back and stood against the wall.

He planned to wait here until the lady came out.

Life on the streets had taught him hard lessons. When an opportunity appeared, you seized it with both hands, no hesitation, no second thoughts, no fear. Otherwise it slipped through your fingers, and you were right back where you started. So he would wait as long as it took, the minutes ticking by endlessly as he ignored the eyes he felt tracking him, the whispers in his mind.

He stood there without a hint of frustration, probably capable of passing off as a statue.

Finally, a soft creak.

The woman had changed into a pale green dress with white edges. Her brown hair was swept into a tight bun.

Those light-blue eyes flicked to Lumian before moving to the paper sign on the door handle, a smile dancing at the corner of her mouth.

"How long did you wait?" she asked, not at all surprised to see him there.

Lumian took a step forward and said, "That's not important."

He tried to keep his tone even, to appear less eager.

"What do you want to ask?" the woman said, cutting straight to the point.

Lumian glanced around the empty hallway. "Here?"

The lady replied with a smile, "If you don't mind, I don't mind either."

Lumian had already noticed that the other occupants of the tavern, including Ryan and Leah, were nowhere to be found. There was no one else on the second floor except for him and the woman in front of him.

Lumian asked, organizing his thoughts carefully.

"What's the secret in that dream of mine?"

The lady laughed involuntarily.

"That's for you to answer, not me."

She paused for a moment before saying, "All I can say is, you'll find extraordinary power there."

Extraordinary power... His pulse roared in his ears.

"What's the point, if it's just a dream? Won't change anything out here."

The woman's lips curled into a smile.

"Who's to say what's possible, in the realm of the extraordinary? Perhaps, it can?"

After everything, the power I crave is there for the taking? Lumian's breath caught.

The grin slid away as the lady added seriously, "But danger lurks there too. Die in the dream, you die out here."

Die in the dream, die for real? Lumian didn't understand, but he chose to believe it.

That dream clung to Lumian like a shadow, as it had for years. But it was different, somehow. Special. And Aurore's voice whispered in his memory: "Careful's never a bad idea." Lumian preferred to view the situation as challenging and the consequences as severe. He couldn't afford to underestimate the danger or be careless.

After a few seconds, he asked, "If I stay out? What then?"

"Theoretically speaking, there won't be any consequences. No one will force you," the woman said thoughtfully. "But as time passes, I can't be sure that the situation won't change. And the probability of things going wrong is much higher than things going right."

"How much higher?" Lumian pressed. "90% to 10%?"

"No, 99.99% to 0.01%." The lady added seriously, "Of course, this is just my personal judgment. You can choose not to believe it."

Lumian felt a wave of uncertainty wash over him, his mind racing with conflicting thoughts.

Recently, I'm becoming convinced that the dream is a hidden danger. Not caring is the worst choice...

But if I really want to explore it, there's a very high chance that an accident will happen without any knowledge...

Should I wait for Aurore to gather more information from her pen pals before making an attempt?

But if I do, Aurore definitely won't allow me to use the dream exploration to obtain extraordinary powers...

Wasn't my investigation of the legend to seek extraordinary powers?

It's too risky. It can lead to death...

Perhaps I should do a preliminary exploration at the edge of the dream ruins to gather information and not take the risk of entering?

Hmm, I can tell Aurore about the conversation, but I can't reveal the possibility of obtaining extraordinary powers...

Once his thoughts had settled, Lumian gazed at the woman across from him and asked in a low, serious tone, "Who are you exactly? Why did you give me that tarot card and the opportunity to explore the dream?"

The woman smiled enigmatically.

"I will tell you once you have unraveled the mystery of the dream."