

## Inevitability 71

### Chapter 71: Underground

They? Lumian couldn't hide his surprise at Reimund's response.

He had assumed that Reimund had drowned in the river of his 'own accord,' becoming a sacrifice to some unknown entity. But now, it seemed there were others involved. It wasn't just an unseen force that had pulled Reimund into the depths.

“Who are they?” Aurore demanded.

Reimund's face contorted with pain and fury. His eyes burned with hatred. He spat the words,

“Pons Bénet, Pons Bénet and his men!

“They held me down in the water!”

After Ava and the others had left the riverbank, Pons Bénet and his thugs appeared where Reimund had washed ashore. They forced him back into the water, drowning him to turn him into a sacrifice? Lumian pieced together the scenario from Reimund's words.

The entire Lent celebration had been twisted into a dark, sacrificial ritual!

Aurore pressed for more information, but Reimund only repeated the same few phrases, as if they were all that remained of his memory.

Damn, we missed the best time for spirit channeling. All we have left is this lingering obsession... Aurore thought for a moment, formulating a question that Reimund might or might not recall.

“Did they sacrifice you to a specific being?”

“What's so special about Him? Where is He?”

This time, Aurore was more cautious. She didn't ask for the full name, only seeking indirect information to aid her judgment.

She believed that if Reimund's spirit had sensed anything during the sacrifice, it would have left a strong impression. Otherwise, it wouldn't.

Reimund hesitated, tears welling up in his ghostly eyes, turning the corners red.

Lumian's expression darkened. Unconsciously, he began clenching his fists.

Suddenly, Reimund cried out, “Underground! Beneath the cathedral!”

What? Aurore could hardly believe her ears.

Based on her question, Reimund was implying that the secret entity he had been sacrificed to resided beneath the cathedral!

That's impossible. It's the Fifth Epoch. How can a god walk the land? Aurore composed herself, considering that Reimund's spirit retained only a fragment of his obsession and some spirituality. His answers were disjointed and fixated on certain points. In other words, his testimony might not actually confirm the being's location beneath the cathedral. It could simply be a reaction to her prompting.

But regardless of whether Reimund's answer was true or a reflection of his obsession, something was amiss beneath the cathedral. It held the key to the sacrificial ritual!

Aurore could only hope that the secrets hidden there wouldn't prove too horrifying or outlandish.

She tried asking about other matters, but Reimund's spirit could only repeat phrases like “they drowned me,” “Pons Bénet,” and “beneath the cathedral.”

Seeing no further gains, Aurore ended the spirit channeling and watched as Reimund's form vanished above the candle flame. The blue hue that had stained the altar swiftly receded.

After dispelling the wall of spirituality, she noticed Lumian lost in thought, silent.

“Wh-what are you thinking about?” Aurore waved her hand in front of her brother's eyes.

The corners of Lumian's mouth curled up as he forced a smile.

“I regret not hitting Pons Bénet harder yesterday.”

He had kned Pons Bénet, causing him considerable pain, but he had held back, not wanting to escalate the conflict with the padre and his allies before the twelfth night. He had rationally restrained himself, not crippling Pons Bénet outright.

“There'll be a chance,” Aurore reassured him.

Lumian nodded and chuckled.

“Actually, we've been overlooking something. Before Lent, we're not the only ones afraid of escalating the conflict. The padre and his goons are too. They're not ready, and they haven't started the ritual.”

In other words, if Lumian had truly wanted Pons Bénet to suffer irreversible harm, the padre would likely only feign retribution and avoid any real action.

They would bide their time until Lent. Regardless of whether Lumian had offended them or not, once the Lent celebration “began,” everyone in the village would be in their sights.

Aurore understood Lumian's point and nodded slightly.

“You can decide how to exact revenge on Pons Bénet.

“What we need to focus on now is how we can survive until the twelfth night after the padre and his cronies gain immense power during Lent.”

Lumian immediately sank into deep contemplation.

Aurore shared her thoughts.

“We have two options. We either join forces with the three foreigners, or we find a way to strengthen ourselves.”

She hesitated for a moment before continuing, “If we can confirm that Madame Pualis has no connection to the loop and is trapped here like us, we might even cooperate with her.”

“Huh?” Lumian was taken aback.

Madame Pualis was a terrifying and malevolent Beyonder!

Aurore sighed and said, “A philosopher from my homeland once said that balance is needed between principal and secondary contradictions. We must unite all possible forces.

“Yes, there's definitely something off about the cathedral's underground. It might hold crucial clues. We have to investigate it before Lent, as we may not get another opportunity.”

From Aurore's knowledge, most of the cathedrals in this world had underground chambers. Some stored Sealed Artifacts, while others served as burial sites for important figures. Although Cordu's cathedral didn't contain Sealed Artifacts or notable people to be buried, it still featured a large basement when constructed.

“Alright,” Lumian agreed. “I'll talk to the three foreigners tomorrow.”

He then brought up Reimund's condition.

“Why can he only say those few words? Was the spirit not summoned properly?”

Aurore sighed again.

“There's a critical period for mediumship. Within an hour of death.

“After an hour, the spirit of the deceased rapidly dissipates, losing their original memories. All that remains are some thoughts, emotions, and images they can't let go. In the technical terms of our homeland, it's called obsession.”

Lumian nodded slightly.

“When the next cycle starts, we'll summon Reimund from the beginning. Does that count as an hour of death?”

“But wait; why does Reimund remember the last, last cycle?”

Only then did he recognize the issue. After the cycle reset, shouldn't Reimund forget about drowning?

Aurore was stumped. Combining her thoughts from the ritual, she pondered and said,

“I believe it counts.

“It's not Lent yet. According to the timeline, Reimund hasn't drowned, so he shouldn't know the murderer's identity. However, because he lost his body, he can only exist as

a spirit. It's similar to death. There will be lingering obsessions. Thus, the person we summoned just now remembers certain events from the previous, previous cycle.

“In simpler terms, Reimund's state has become unique due to his body's loss. He retains a certain amount of memories when the cycle resets!

“Heh, it's like a glitch.”

The loop created a tiny error because Reimund's body was sacrificed? Lumian roughly understood his sister's explanation.

Aurore chuckled and added, “It seems that the power allowing us to loop is very mechanical and rigid. It probably isn't under the original owner's control and operates autonomously. Otherwise, it could easily target Reimund's spirit.”

At this point, she appeared to relax somewhat.

“Haha, in that case, we still have a chance to break the cycle.”

Influenced by his sister's emotions, Lumian's somber mood lifted slightly.

After all their efforts, they finally saw a glimmer of hope.

The two of them cleaned up the altar and moved to the second-floor study. Aurore taught Lumian Hermes and ancient Hermes, word by word, based on the disordered and incorrect ritual he had written.

Lumian had already learned some words, so his progress was promising.

Under the bright electric lamp, Aurore explained the pronunciation and structure of the words to her brother. While he revised, she used musk, cloves, blood, and other materials to create candles.

As Lumian studied intently, he occasionally glanced at his sister working beside him, feeling as if he had returned to their warm life—free from loops or malevolent gods.

Outside the window, the night was tranquil.

Lumian woke up to find himself in his misty room.

As he got out of bed, he walked over to the table and grabbed a pen and paper. He then wrote down the ancient Hermes and Hermes words, but in the wrong order. He then corrected them by labeling each with a number.

After finishing, Lumian let out a sigh of relief and looked over to the table.

There were four items there, the two grayish-white musk candles made by Aurore (one with Lumian's blood, and the other without), the bottle of gray amber perfume, the metal bottle containing tulip powder, and the silver dagger provided by Aurore.

That lady really sent them in... Lumian's heart calmed down when he saw the items.

Lumian grabbed the items and looked for Aurore's homemade incense. When he found it, he went downstairs and placed everything on the dining table. Then, he went to the kitchen to grab a glass of water and a pile of coarse salt.

The materials for the ritual were now prepared.

Before falling asleep, Aurore was worried that Lumian didn't have the corresponding symbol to pray for the boon. This would prevent him from burning the items on the replica goatskin to inform the target deity of his desires. However, since the mysterious lady didn't mention it, there was probably no need for it. After all, it was essentially praying to the power in Lumian's body. It could 'hear' all the prayers without any additional 'paperwork.'

Lumian took a deep breath and slowly exhaled as he looked at the items on the dining table.

Without wasting a moment, Lumian placed one of the grayish-white musk candles, the one with his own blood, at the top of the altar, representing the deity. He placed the other candle in front of him.

Following the order of god before man, Lumian lit the candle by sparking his spirituality. He wasn't an expert at sanctifying the ritual's silver dagger or creating a wall of spirituality.

As Lumian's spirituality flowed out from the tip of the silver dagger and connected with the air around him, he felt a mystical sensation that he couldn't explain.

Soon, the wall of spirituality was complete, and Lumian's own spirituality was significantly depleted.

He cleared his mind using Aurore's homemade incense and Cogitation, allowing him to enter a state where he could perform the ritualistic magic.

With a sizzling sound, Lumian dripped the gray amber perfume and tulip powder onto the candle that represented the deity. A strange fragrance filled the air, and Lumian felt a magical energy pulsing around him.

Lumian took a step back, glancing at the small notebook beside the altar. He looked at the burning candle and shouted in ancient Hermes, "Power of Inevitability!"

## Chapter 72: Sacrificial Dance

"Power of Inevitability!"

As Lumian uttered the words in ancient Hermes, the light above the altar dimmed ominously. The orange candle flame flickered wildly, as if buffeted by an unseen wind, compressing to the size of a peppercorn.

Simultaneously, heat bloomed in his chest, and his head spun. His ears buzzed, as if once again on the verge of hearing that terrifying voice emanating from an infinite distance, yet remaining unnervingly close.

Lumian steadied himself and had a sudden realization.

The corruption within him had been sealed by the master of the bluish-black symbol. Even if he delved into deep Cogitation, he could only summon the thorn symbol and release a meager aura. He couldn't harness its true power.

Could this ritual bypass the seal and absorb the boon?

Only if the owner of the bluish-black symbol, that great existence, had tacitly granted permission!

Remembering the enigmatic lady's self-assured demeanor, Lumian felt a surge of confidence. He even suspected that the ritual itself contained a component for seeking the great presence's approval. As for which part, his knowledge of mysticism was too limited to speculate.

In the throes of the ritual, Lumian dared not delay. With a focused mind, he began reciting the subsequent incantations in ancient Hermes.

“You are the past, the present, and the future;

“You are the cause, the effect, and the process.”

These words resonated within the sealed altar. The floor and artifacts seemed to writhe, as if innumerable bizarre entities were about to burst forth and invade the dream ruins.

Ooo!

A black wind materialized out of nowhere, encircling Lumian. The candle flame, previously shrunk to a peppercorn size, swelled, suffused with a silvery hue and a touch of black.

Lumian heard the voice that had always pushed him to the brink of death once more. But at some point, a faint gray fog had emerged from the altar, coalescing around him.

The sensation left him suspended between deep Cogitation and witnessing the Noodle Man's dance. He wasn't on the edge of death, but he wasn't comfortable either. It felt like severe tinnitus—dizzy, nauseous, and agitated to a degree, his mind a swirling mess.

Barely maintaining control, Lumian continued the ritual.

“I implore you,

“I beseech your benediction.

“I plead with you to grant me the power of Dancer.

“Tulip, a herb that belongs to inevitability, please pass your powers to my incantation!

“Gray amber, a herb that belongs to inevitability, please pass your powers to my incantation!”

As the ritual progressed, Lumian's tinnitus and dizziness intensified. It felt as if countless maggots writhed beneath his skin.

Finally, he completed the incantation.

Almost instantaneously, the silver-black candle flame condensed, transforming into a pillar of light that illuminated his left pectoral.

Silver-black phantom liquid poured forth, swiftly enveloping Lumian, rendering him sinister and fearsome.

It felt as if his skin was pierced by a thousand needles, his muscles and ligaments torn asunder. The mysterious voice became deafening, reverberating within his mind.

Lumian was consumed by excruciating pain, his mind teetering on the edge of madness.

His blood vessels seared as if incinerated from within.

This torment far exceeded the near-death state induced by deep Cogitation.

All he could do was clench his teeth and endure, desperately clinging to his fraying sanity. As for everything else, it didn't matter.

Amid the tempestuous onslaught, he was adrift. Time became an enigma.

At last, the agonizing pain abated. Lumian felt as if he had been unburdened or had emerged from drowning, a sudden sense of relief washing over him.

He swiftly collected his thoughts and looked up.

The candle flame had returned to its original size, but retained its silver and black hues.

Regaining his senses, Lumian took two hasty steps forward and snuffed out the candle representing him to avert any mishaps.

Next was the candle symbolizing the deity.

He meticulously followed the procedure, completing the ritual step by step. As he dissolved the wall of spirituality, he felt mentally drained and his body sore, as if he had battled a formidable beast.

Before long, the dining table was cleared. Lumian began to assess his condition and discovered a wealth of knowledge had materialized in his mind.

There were three primary parts to this:

First, it involved harnessing the power of dance, rhythm, and spirituality to tap into the forces of nature and communicate with unknown entities. This was the essence of being a Dancer. With this knowledge, Lumian could not only beseech Inevitability but also craft new sacrificial dances tailored to various situations, in order to “appease” other beings.

The second and third parts were applications of the first.

What Lumian desired most was the enigmatic dance performed by Noodle Man. The knowledge was directly implanted into his mind, enabling him to comprehend it instantly; all that remained was to practice.

With this arcane sacrificial dance, Lumian could activate the black thorn symbol on his chest while exploring the dream ruins, suppressing or weakening the formidable monsters therein.

The third segment involved another bizarre dance. It didn't resemble a traditional sacrificial rite but rather a blend of sacrifice and summoning.

By executing this dance, Lumian could attract nearby objects, and at the cost of his own blood, bond one of them to himself, thereby gaining access to one of its abilities or traits.

Of course, Lumian would first need to endure such possession. Some attachments could inflict significant adverse effects on humans, while others might prove reluctant to depart, creating complications.

Lumian felt it was crucial to understand the summoned entities fully. It would be far too hazardous to experiment without anticipating potential issues.

The value of mystical knowledge was apparent in such a situation. Lumian desperately required resources like Mysterious Creatures Illustrated or Spirit World Creatures Illustrated, but even a Warlock, renowned for their extensive knowledge, could not possess such information.

Moments later, Lumian stretched and discovered that his flexibility had indeed improved dramatically.

Although not quite on par with Noodle Man, a mutated monster with reassembled organs, he now surpassed nearly all ordinary humans, enabling him to execute the enigmatic sacrificial dance.

Lumian effortlessly kicked backward, touching the back of his head, and nodded contentedly, murmuring, That's right. I can perform many actions that were once impossible. My Hunter combat skills have also greatly improved.

Lumian practiced the mysterious dance to familiarize his body with the corresponding movements, aiming to reduce the time needed to complete the routine.

Sometimes his movements were forceful and resonant, as if in combat, while other times they were gentle and unhurried, as if conveying a message, yet always rhythmic.

As Lumian danced, his spiritual energy radiated outward, merging with the ambient natural forces.

Gradually, his thoughts concentrated, his mind quieted, and he entered a transcendent, mystical state.

This allowed him to perceive various subtle phenomena surrounding him, as if his Spirit Vision had been activated.

Simultaneously, he seemed to connect with the unseen power within him.

His chest warmed once more, and a faint, horrifying voice echoed, but without consequence.

Phew... Lumian ceased dancing, unfastened his clothing, and inspected his chest.

The black thorn symbol reemerged, accompanied by the bluish-black one.

Lumian's thoughts briefly scattered but quickly returned to normal. He had achieved the desired effect perfectly.

He then calculated the precise duration from the emergence of the black thorn symbol to its disappearance.

It lasted approximately one minute.

Lumian fastened his clothes and prepared to try the other bizarre dance.

It was crazy and warped, and he couldn't describe it properly.

As he danced, his spirituality spread out again, blending with the natural forces surrounding him.

In the last third of the dance, he sensed something strange approaching.

Three figures appeared on the first-floor window, but they were blurry and transparent. Lumian recognized them as the skinless monster, the shotgun monster, and the mouth orifice monster with the black mark.

He muttered in amusement, Is this a victims' complaints meeting?



Lumian could make one of the monsters attach to him and borrow their abilities by taking out a ritual silver dagger and making a cut on his body to release some blood.

He craved the mouth orifice monster's "invisibility" but resisted the urge—lest something happened via allowing a monster he murdered to possess him—and finished the dance.

As Lumian danced the last few moves, he heard weak and soft voices.

It sounded like many people communicating, but it was unclear where the voices came from.

Lumian analyzed it and realized the voices seemed to come from his body, from the corruption that had been sealed.

After the last move, Lumian stood there and muttered to himself, What did I hear?

Lumian was only semi-literate in the field of mysticism and couldn't identify the source of the soft sounds he heard. He had no choice but to give up, as it wasn't more terrifying than the corruption itself.

After the sounds subsided and him finishing the two mysterious dances, Lumian confirmed that the Dancer had enhanced his spirituality. Although he knew he was most likely inferior to Sequence 9s who excelled in spirituality, he had escaped the shackles of being a Hunter. He felt he was above average.

My shortcomings have been compensated for. Lumian was very happy about this.

Lumian didn't dwell on what would happen to his body after enduring the Dancer's power and the corresponding corruption. He couldn't stop it, so he decided not to think about it. He rubbed his tired head and made up his mind to rest for the night, returning to the real world to wait for the owl!

### Chapter 73: Tracking

Lumian's eyes snapped open, his aches gone and his spirituality restored.

He sprang up, strode to the window, and yanked the curtains aside.

Dawn had yet to break. The blood-red moon sank in the west while stars speckled the sky. On a nearby elm, the large owl with piercing eyes reappeared, gazing down at Lumian.

Instead of alarm or anger, Lumian flashed a dazzling smile.

"You're back," he said, almost too eagerly. His mannerisms, his tone, even his facial expression—it all made the target want to punch him.

The owl stared for a few seconds before spreading its wings and vanishing into the darkness.

Almost simultaneously, Aurore emerged from her bedroom, turned the handle, and entered Lumian's room.

"How'd it go?" Lumian asked immediately.

Aurore nodded.

"White Paper is on it."

Her once light-blue eyes had darkened, and the trees in them grew larger as they receded.

She produced a mercury-plated mirror and set it on Lumian's table. Using pale-white powder, she cast a spell that showed him what she was seeing.

Lumian glimpsed the owl's silhouette. It circled Cordu at a low altitude, as if trying to shake off any pursuers. But White Paper, a creature from the spirit world, was swift and unfazed, maintaining a constant distance.

After a minute or two, the owl reached the village square.

Without hesitation, it dove into the cemetery beside the cathedral.

Why is it here again? Lumian sighed inwardly.

The last time the siblings spied on Michel Garrigue, the “lizard” that crawled from the deputy padre's mouth also wound up in the cemetery, slipping in and out of various graves!

Lumian glanced at his sister. “You don't think it's like in stories, where the cemetery doubles as a villain's lair or hideout, do you?”

Aurore scoffed. “You know life inspires art, right?”

“I suppose...” Lumian conceded, accepting the professional author's explanation.

At that moment, the owl landed on an unremarkable grave.

Like most graves in Intis, it featured a deep pit filled with a coffin and covered with soil. One or two stone slabs lay atop it, and a tombstone marked its head.

This was Lumian's guess, at least; from the outside, the grave seemed ordinary.

The owl settled on the slabs sealing the grave.

With White Paper's aid, Aurore and Lumian uncovered suspicious traces.

The tombstone was blank. The stone slab, which should have been dirty and overgrown, was clean, as if regularly tended.

“Something's off about this grave,” Aurore remarked.

As she spoke, the slabs sealing the grave fell.

No, not fell—opened.

Inward, like a door, revealing darkness and stone stairs descending deeper.

“Wow,” Lumian marveled. “It's huge!”

Not the average grave he'd pictured, but more like a spacious mausoleum.

Cordu has such a place... Aurore had thought six years in town taught her everything about Cordu, but it was growing stranger by the day.

As the siblings talked, the owl swooped into the depths of the mausoleum.

The underground space was no exaggeration. As White Paper followed, it entered a tomb chamber.

About the size of Lumian's kitchen, the chamber held a black coffin at its center.

The coffin wasn't closed. The lid leaned against the side, resting on the ground.

The owl flew over and perched on the coffin's edge.

“The dead Warlock?” Lumian tensed.

Aurore tersely agreed and instructed White Paper to approach the coffin and peer inside.

Almost simultaneously, Lumian spotted a figure lurking in a corner of the tomb.

Before he could tell his sister to check it out, White Paper's gaze fell into the open coffin.

With a bang, the mercury mirror before them shattered, and Aurore let out a pained, muffled cry.

Lumian spun to face his sister, only to find her eyes squeezed shut. Blood-streaked tears traced her cheeks, and her facial muscles spasmed as if they might split.

Without waiting for the semi-illiterate mysticism student to react, Aurore retrieved a short incense stick from a hidden pocket and lit it with a match.

A subtle scent wafted, distant and faint, soothing the body and mind.

Aurore's facial distortion eased. Finally, she exhaled and wiped her tears with a handkerchief.

“Are you okay?” Lumian asked, concerned.

Aurore's eyes remained closed.

“It's not serious. I'll recover after some sleep. Luckily, White Paper is weak. Sometimes, weakness is an advantage!”

She rejoiced.

“Huh?” Lumian didn't understand.

Aurore laughed at herself.

“In short, I saw something I shouldn't have, but White Paper was too weak to handle it. It caught only a fleeting glimpse before suffering severe injuries that forced it to retreat into the spirit world. The impact on me lessened significantly as well. Otherwise, it wouldn't have been so easy to keep things under control. It could have been quite problematic.”

The world of mysticism is perilous... Lumian truly grasped the meaning of not seeing what one shouldn't.

He waited for his sister to recover slightly before asking, “What did White Paper see? Why was it so harmful?”

“I saw a silver-black speck of light.” Aurore didn't dare to remember. “As for things that can cause damage just by looking at them, there are countless possibilities. Perhaps it's an object that reveals godhood, or a High-Sequence Beyonders' Mythical Creature form, or something laden with curses and malice...”

“Mythical Creature form?” Lumian had never encountered this term before.

Aurore casually elucidated, “The essence of the divine pathway is to transform Beyonders into deities. At Sequence 4, we can assume our own Mythical Creature form, albeit incomplete. For those below Sequence 4, merely witnessing this form can inflict harm. They might even lose control.”

Saints are that formidable? They're worlds apart from Beyonders below Sequence 4... No wonder they're deemed demigods at Sequence 4... Lumian instantly recognized his own ignorance. He had naively believed that the demigod title was basically no different from lower-ranked Beyonders.

He then said, “Aurore, when White Paper neared the coffin, I think I saw a figure in a corner of the tomb, but I couldn't make out who it was, what they looked like, or what they wore.”

“Another person was there?” Aurore was taken aback.

Lumian nodded.

“So, is the one inside the coffin the deceased Warlock or the one in the corner?”

“I think it's the one in the coffin.” Aurore, eyes still closed, pondered before continuing, “The one in the corner is either his puppet or subordinate, or another Beyonder. They control the Warlock's corpse.”

Lumian tersely acknowledged her words.

“This means the Warlock issue hasn't been fully resolved. Perhaps this is the root cause slowly corrupting Cordu.”

This discovery left him both elated and frustrated.

He was pleased that their investigation had advanced significantly, but disheartened that merely glimpsing the Warlock's corpse could injure them. Losing control was a high probability. How could they return to the tomb for further confirmation and pursue additional actions?

Aurore also considered this.

“Let's not visit the tomb for now. We'll concentrate on the area beneath the cathedral. Maybe we can uncover vital clues there to help us resolve the tomb situation.”

“Alright.” Lumian had previously planned to discuss exploring the cathedral's underground with the three foreigners at dawn.

In response, Aurore added, “If I fully recover, I'll accompany you to the cathedral.”

Lumian hesitated for two seconds before consenting.

At this point, they needed to marshal all their strength to find hope!

With her eyes still closed, Aurore asked, “Your ritual appears to have succeeded. How do you feel?”

Lumian recounted the entire ritual process and his gains, but omitted the precise description of the being.

“I nearly lost control when I received the boon. It stabilized afterward, and my body underwent no abnormal changes. Perhaps it's because my Sequence is low enough.”

Aurore smiled, eyes still closed.

“The dance that summons abnormal creatures around and allows one to be possessed by them is quite intriguing.

“It reminds me of a legendary ability from our homeland, the Spiritual Boxer!”

“Huh?” Lumian couldn't comprehend.

Aurore laughed and replied, “It entails requesting partial possession from demigod-level creatures to utilize their combat prowess.”

“That would require an incredibly robust body, soul, and mind, right?” Lumian speculated.

Aurore didn't pursue the topic further and instructed her brother, “Help me back to my room. I need to rest.”

As Lumian assisted his sister and they walked to her bedroom, he casually inquired, “What I find odd about that ritual is that I extracted a bit of power from the seal without the bluish-black symbol's owner's consent. Could it be that He has been watching me the entire time? That's impossible. How could He have that much free time?”

Aurore mulled it over for a moment before responding, “You mentioned that the mysterious woman's description of the honorific name was vague and inaccurate to avoid drawing the attention of the corresponding being.

“Could it be that the black thorns and the bluish-black symbol have some sort of shared authority?” Lumian pondered aloud. “Maybe They both have power in the Fate domain. And when you use a vague honorific name, it could refer not only to the person with the black thorns, but also the owner of the bluish-black symbol.

“Under normal circumstances, this wouldn't matter much, but because you have the corresponding symbols and power on the altar, they reacted to the stimulation and the existence discovered your actions. And since you were guided by the mysterious lady, it was easy for you to obtain permission.

“So when you finish reciting all the honorific names and point to the corruption in your body, there won't be any obstacles in extracting some strength. The 'back door' has already been opened.”

“What an ingenious ritual design... It has to be an expert at exploiting bugs.”

“I see,” Lumian said, finally understanding the situation.

Chapter 74: 74 Mute

74 Mute

His sister needed rest, so Lumian couldn't learn new Hermes and ancient Hermes words. He could only revise what he had already learned. Around ten o'clock, he left the house and headed straight to Ol' Tavern.

He had two objectives: first, he wanted to see if the mysterious lady would appear after he became a Dancer and provide him with some knowledge. Second, Leah and the other foreigners lived there. After yesterday's incident, they might not be out today.

Upon entering Ol' Tavern, Lumian quickly scanned the room and was disappointed to find that the spot where the lady usually sat was vacant.

With a slow exhale, he walked to the bar counter, intending to ask if the three foreigners were around.

At this moment, the tavern owner, Maurice Bénét, appeared to have just woken up and was clearly not in high spirits. He had a bulbous nose and was conversing with a customer at the bar.

The customer seemed agitated, gesturing wildly and making muffled sounds, but he couldn't speak.

Mute? Lumian approached curiously and realized the customer wasn't one of the village mutes but Jean Maury, Sybil Berry's husband.

Sybil was the mistress of Padre Guillaume Bénét, sister of Shepherd Pierre Berry, and a member of their small group.

Jean Maury isn't mute... Lumian assessed the middle-aged man in confusion.

His black hair was unkempt, and his stubble was uneven. His eyes were filled with anger and fear.

Uncharacteristically agitated, he gestured urgently, trying to communicate something to the tavern owner.

As Lumian thought, "Odd," he approached the bar counter and knocked on it with a smile.

"Hey, what's going on?"

"Maurice, did you sell fake alcohol to Jean? He looks so angry he can't speak."

"What's that got to do with me?" Maurice Bénét quickly defended himself. "He muted himself."

Jean Maury paused and glanced at Lumian, reverting to his usual sullen demeanor.

He then turned and left Ol' Tavern.

After he disappeared through the door, Lumian lowered his voice and asked, "What's wrong with him?"

Maurice Bénét looked outside and whispered, "I heard he caught Sybil and the padre in bed together last night, and it made him so mad he went mute. Today, he's been telling everyone he sees. Heh, he doesn't even have the guts to go to Dariège to confront the padre. What a coward. Serves him right!"

Lumian was baffled and shocked.

If he remembered correctly, Jean Maury knew about his wife Sybil's prolonged affair with the padre. He just didn't want her to be with another man. How could he be so angry that he went mute over something he was prepared for?

Something was off!

Moreover, in the previous cycle, there had been no instance of Jean Maury becoming mute from anger. Otherwise, Lumian would have known.

In Cordu, this was headline news. It would have spread rapidly.

Could it be that their investigations had caused a disturbance, making Jean Maury encounter something he wouldn't have otherwise? As Lumian speculated, he showed an excited expression.

“Is that so?”

“Then I'll have to ask him properly!”

Maurice Bénét wasn't surprised by his eagerness for gossip, thinking it was typical.

He scolded jokingly, “Damned kid, be decent and don't provoke that poor man. Besides, he's mute and can't write. How can he tell you what happened?”

Lumian chuckled and said, “Can't he gesture?”

He raised his hands and clenched his left fist, gently hitting his right palm.

Throughout the Dariège region and even across southern Intis, this was a universal gesture for the act between a man and a woman.

Maurice Bénét cursed angrily, “I hope you've got some decency left and don't play pranks on that poor man.”

“Don't worry. I just want to 'hear' the story.” Lumian waved his hand and dashed out of Ol' Tavern, searching for Jean Maury.

However, Lumian didn't know where the man had gone, nor was he gesturing his story to other villagers. Lumian scoured Cordu but found no trace of him.

Finally, he arrived at Jean Maury's house.

At the entrance, Sybil Berry, clad in a grayish-white dress, was sorting through spoiled potatoes.

“What's the matter?” The woman looked up at Lumian.

Like Pierre Berry, she had blue eyes, and her long black hair flowed softly down her back, unlike other married women who always wore their hair in a bun.

Lumian answered frankly, “I'm looking for Jean Maury?”

With plump cheeks and gentle features, Sybil replied indifferently, “He's not home.”

“Then do you know where he went?” Lumian pressed.

Sybil replied calmly, “We had an argument last night. He might have left Cordu and doesn't want to return for the time being.”

Lumian's brows twitched. He sensed that something bad had happened.

Clearly, Jean Maury couldn't leave Cordu. That would trigger the cycle and cause a restart!

As these thoughts raced through his mind, Lumian wore a mischievous grin.

“Why did you guys quarrel? I heard that you and the padre...”

He didn't finish the sentence but instead punched his right palm with his left fist.

Sybil's face turned cold as she cursed in a low voice, “Get lost! Get out of my house!”

Lumian clicked his tongue and left Jean Maury's house.

After walking for a distance, the smile on his face vanished.

In truth, he didn't want to ask about Sybil's affair with the padre. He had seen the padre and Madame Pualis naked. What else was there to ask?

But if he didn't ask, it didn't fit his persona in the eyes of the villagers. He had already “visited” them. If he didn't anger the mistress of the house, could he still live up to the name of Prankster King of Cordu?

Therefore, Lumian had no choice but to ask. Otherwise, he might be suspected.

The persona of a character was sometimes useful and sometimes troublesome.

Judging by the padre's actions and the information he had, Lumian suspected that Jean Maury hadn't become mute because of the affair but had uncovered something else.

It was highly likely that he had been poisoned and rendered mute!

I have to find him as soon as possible. If he goes around looking for people to complain to, he might just die like the previous one. No, he's already missing... The more Lumian thought about it, the more he felt that something had happened to Jean Maury.

The villager who had snitched in Dariège previously had fallen to his death for no reason!

Just as Lumian was making his last effort to find Jean Maury, he encountered Ryan, Leah, and Valentine, who were “hanging around” in the village.

They were still wearing their original clothes.

“Good morning, my cabbages,” Lumian greeted them with a smile.

As soon as they approached, he immediately asked in a low voice, “Did anything happen yesterday?”

Leah replied with a smile, “That madame doesn't seem to want to pursue the matter. She didn't appear.”

As expected... Lumian looked around and saw that there was no one nearby. Only then did he tell the three official investigators about his sister's deduction of the Madame Pualis pathway and her guess of Pulitt's identity.

Valentine's expression soured as he listened, while Leah was rather excited.



Ryan recalled and said, "It's rare for a Demoness to appear in Riston Province. We don't know much about this, but the higher-ups should know very well. I'll send a telegram later and tell them about Madame Pualis. Hmm, I'll only mention how Madame Pualis's room has Pulitt's photo, but the Roquefort family doesn't have Pualis."

Seeing Lumian's puzzled expression, Ryan added, "In Intis, Demoness-related matters often happen."

So, my sister's pen pal is also in Intis? Lumian nodded and said, "So far, Madame Pualis doesn't seem to have anything to do with the loop. Also, she seems to be aware of the loop. That might be why she didn't pursue our search of the castle.

"Is it possible that we can join forces with her to some extent?"

Valentine blurted out, "How can I work with such an evil and filthy person who's even more terrifying than a demon?"

Lumian didn't even look at him. He turned his gaze to Ryan and Leah.

Seeing that they were somewhat hesitant, he tried to persuade them earnestly.

"A limited cooperation, only in the loop. When this damned loop is resolved, you can deal with her however you want! You can even tell her directly about this. I believe she can understand and accept it."

Ryan thought for a few seconds, patted Valentine's shoulder, and said to Lumian, "Indeed, the most important thing now is to resolve this loop. However, we can't be sure of that madame's attitude. We don't dare to visit her directly. I'm afraid we'll have to trouble you or your sister to communicate with her and inquire."

"Alright," Lumian agreed.

He planned to do it himself.

He didn't want his sister to be alone with Madame Pualis when he realized that she might harbor abnormal feelings for his sister.

Valentine kept a poker face as he listened to their conversation. He neither agreed nor disagreed.

Lumian peered around furtively once more.

"There are three more clues..."

He recounted Reimund's case, Jean Maury's situation, and the "burial chamber" where the owl had flown into.

Leah was stunned.

"How did you get so many clues so quickly?"

She even suspected this guy or his sister were off. That was why there were red flags and clues everywhere.

Who were the real investigators here? Why hadn't we caught on?

“Blame yourselves for not remembering the first two cycles.” Lumian smirked, spreading his hands in mock innocence.

Leah nodded, swallowing his explanation.

Ryan mulled it over for a beat before uttering in a gravelly voice, “Then we gotta investigate the cathedral catacombs ASAP. Yeah, it's probably very dangerous down there. You should contact Madame Pualis first. If she's down to joining, we'll have a way higher chance of nailing this.”

## Chapter 75: 75 Meeting Madame Pualis Again

### 75 Meeting Madame Pualis Again

Outside the administrator's residence, a building transformed from an old castle.

Lumian strolled through the gardens and approached the front door. He said to the valet standing guard, “I need a word with Madame Pualis.”

The valet—clad in a crimson shirt and ivory pants—sized him up warily and asked, “What's this about?”

Is this brat here to make trouble?

Lumian scoffed. “That's not for you to know.”

Why would some servant care so much? Who do you think you are? How many kids have you popped out?

The valet hesitated before deciding to pass the message to Madame Pualis and let her decide if she wanted to entertain this cheeky young man.

Lumian loitered by the entrance for a few minutes. When the valet returned, Lumian said, “Madame will see you in the small parlor.”

The small parlor was familiar to Lumian. The few times he had accompanied his sister here, he had been entertained in that very room. Without needing directions, Lumian made his way to the correct room. The valet trailed behind like an obedient dog.

Lumian sprawled on the sofa in the parlor and helped himself to the black tea. Then Madame Pualis glided through the doorway.

The lady was dressed to kill in an exquisite black corset dress, a matching shawl draped over her shoulders. She wore a slightly askew lady's round hat and a diamond necklace laced in gold.

The outfit struck Lumian as familiar. He realized that Madame Pualis had worn this very ensemble when she came to seduce him.

She did that on purpose, didn't she? Lumian thought with an icy smile.

“Good morning, Madame Pualis.”

Just as the greeting left his lips, Lumian suddenly noticed the figure beside Madame Pualis. It wasn't Cathy, the lady's maid, but the 'midwife' who had met her demise at Ryan's hands just yesterday.

The 'midwife' wore a grayish white dress. Her eyes were blank, her face expressionless. Her skin had a bluish tinge, identical to when Lumian had seen her corpse in the garden the previous evening. However, she wasn't carrying any gardening tools this time.

Bringing the 'midwife' instead of her maid? She did that on purpose too, didn't she? Lumian couldn't help the cynical thought.

Madame Pualis smiled. "It should be noon by now."

She settled into the armchair that signified the host, while the 'midwife' stood to one side like an accessory.

"If you haven't eaten lunch, it's not noon yet," Lumian quipped.

His heart raced underneath the retort. He suspected Madame Pualis had brought the 'midwife' here to interrogate him about yesterday's events.

If he didn't handle this well and Leah's group didn't restart the cycle in time, Lumian suspected he might have to play 'daddy' for a few minutes. Or longer.

Madame Pualis glanced at him, her bright eyes sparkling with an inscrutable smile.

Casually, she asked, "What seems to be the trouble?"

Lumian decided to cut to the chase. Solemnly, he said, "Madame, you must have realized we're stuck in a time loop."

As he spoke, he watched Madame Pualis's face closely, alert for any reaction.

If she revealed surprise, shock or confusion, he would quickly add, "Just kidding!" Then, he would start with something odd and see how she responded. Only then would he consider telling her about the time loop.

Of course, if Madame Pualis looked like she already knew and her 'secret' was out, escape would be his top priority.

The odds of escape were slim in that scenario, but how would he know if there was any hope without trying?

Madame Pualis sized Lumian up for a few seconds, then smiled.

"Looks like you've found a boss too."

She didn't seem surprised by the time loop concept, nor did she look puzzled. That was as good as admitting she knew what was going on.

Boss? That was a favorite word in Aurore's books. Did she mean some higher power that granted boons? Lumian interpreted Madame Pualis's words.

He believed she could retain memories across loops only because she had a 'boss'—some kind of protection.

Lumian smiled and pretended to sigh in relief. "Seems I won't need to explain much."

"What are you getting at?" Pualis asked, still smiling.

The 'midwife' stood motionless beside her like a mannequin.

Lumian had an excuse prepared and launched into it with enough charm to convince anyone.

“People outside already know about Cordu's abnormality. If we don't end this loop soon, this place will be wiped out. Everyone dies.

“We're in the same boat. Only by uniting can we avoid sinking. Only then do we have a chance of finding the key to escape this loop and return to normal life.

“Madame, time is running out. Let's work together.”

Madame Pualis listened with a faint smile, not interrupting Lumian's story.

At this, she chuckled. “Who said we're in this together?”

What? Could she be the one wanting to sink the boat? Lumian grew alarmed.

Madame Pualis maintained her smile. “Why should I cooperate with you? I can leave here at a specific time.”

Wh... Lumian was stunned, but a glimmer of hope flickered.

“Are you saying you have a way out of the time loop? You only need to do something at a precise time?”

Madame Pualis nodded and sipped her tea from fine porcelain. She said nothing else.

The perks of a higher power's protection... Wait, this isn't the first cycle. Why is she still here? Could other cycles have restarted before that specific time? Hmm... That explains why she didn't pursue us infiltrating the castle and killing the 'midwife'. She fears the three Beyonders causing trouble and forcibly restarting the cycle... Lumian grasped things that had puzzled him.

He suspected Madame Pualis was also waiting for the twelfth night.

Amid his thoughts, Lumian smiled. “I wonder if you can take Aurore and me out of this cycle?”

What official investigators? I've never heard of them!

Madame Pualis appraised him with amusement.

“Why should I help you?”

“Didn't you say that love...” Lumian stopped, unable to continue.

He meant to mention Madame Pualis's words about love, hoping she might save him and Aurore out of kindness. But since Madame Pualis likely desired his sister, he couldn't say it.

If Madame Pualis loved him, a shameless man like Lumian would have played the love card and offered to bear her child to get them out of this loop.

Well, he would grit his teeth and give birth himself if it meant Madame Pualis evacuating him and Aurore from this cycle.

Madame Pualis's expression shifted slightly. After a few seconds of silence, she said, “Are you suggesting love is unfathomable? Saving her despite clearly wanting her dead for her mistake?”

Lumian didn't answer. He could tell Madame Pualis referred to a 'she'.

Madame Pualis didn't expect a response. She sighed, "But what if it's irredeemable?"

Irredeemable... Lumian's heart sank like plunging into an icy lake in early spring.

Regaining his breath, he asked for confirmation,

"You mean, at that time, you can only take a few people, but that doesn't include me or Aurore?"

Madame Pualis nodded.

"You can see it that way."

Looks like I still have to rely on myself... Lumian sighed, forcing calm.

The rise and crash of hope was unpleasant indeed.

He thought for a moment, then smiled.

"Madame, the three foreigners and I will explore the cathedral's underground later. If anything happens, the cycle might restart ahead of time. We won't even make it to Lent."

Let alone the twelfth night.

Madame Pualis narrowed her eyes, chin raised. "Are you threatening me?"

"No, just a reminder." Lumian smiled sincerely, the picture of relaxed.

Outwardly, he feared angering Madame Pualis and being confined here to give birth. The three investigators would restart the cycle if he didn't emerge fifteen minutes later.

Madame Pualis gazed into Lumian's eyes for a few seconds. Seeing no flinch or evasion, she suddenly smiled.

"You're truly interesting. It would be lovely if you and your sister became my lovers."

Without waiting for a response, she turned to the 'midwife'.

"You destroyed a Heretic Spellmaster, yet I didn't blame you. I'm merciful enough, but you still expect my help?"

Heretic Spellmaster? Lumian filed away the term and said earnestly, "This isn't about help. It's about doing what benefits everyone."

Madame Pualis fell silent for a few seconds before smiling again.

"I won't explore the cathedral's underground with you, but for Aurore's sake and your courage, I'll provide some help if anything happens."

Lumian was satisfied to negotiate this much. He stood and mimicked the gentlemanly posture from his sister's books. Pressing a hand to his chest, he bowed. "I thank you, my lady."

Madame Pualis chuckled. "Shouldn't it be 'my sunshine'?"

She referred to what Lumian had said in a previous loop: "Madame, you are my sunshine."

Lumian felt embarrassed but had always been shameless. Pretending not to hear, he left the small parlor.

After descending the hill from the castle and entering Cordu, Lumian spotted Leah, Ryan and Valentine waiting to greet him.

“How did it go?” Leah asked with a smile.

Lumian recounted his conversation with Madame Pualis, concluding, “This is the best outcome we could hope for.”

“That's right. We can still count on someone to help in our direst moment.” Ryan nodded.

Lumian asked, “Did you get a reply?”

Before visiting the castle, Ryan had reported Madame Pualis wasn't truly of the Roquefort family and Pulitt's photo was in her room. Leah exhaled, answering for Ryan, “Our superiors remind us to consider the possibility of Pulitt becoming a woman through potion or power.”

“As expected,” Lumian tersely acknowledged. “When do we explore the cathedral's underground?”

Ryan had already decided. In a deep voice, he said, “Now.”

## Chapter 76 Physical Examination

“Now?” Lumian jumped in fright.

Though eager to explore the cathedral's underground, not to this extent!

A thought occurred. “Can't we wait until nightfall?”

In the dead of night with only two or three servants left in the cathedral, wouldn't it be easy for Beyonders like them to infiltrate?

Ryan replied gently yet firmly, “Now is the ideal time. Think about it. If we realize there's no one in the cathedral at night and it lacks protection, how could the padre and company not realize the same? I suspect they'll send their strongest to guard it in shifts or set subtle traps. Once triggered, there'll be an alarm.

“And now, it's nearly noon. All villagers have gone home, so no one will come pray at this hour. Furthermore, it's daytime, so the traps won't activate to prevent accidents. With the two padres and servants in the cathedral, it's easy for people to lower their guard. In short, their strongest will be home eating in peace. We only face the padre, deputy padre and three odd-job workers.”

Lumian nodded, grasping it, and finished Ryan's thought.

“And before April 3rd, the padre is still an ordinary person without supernatural powers.”

Today was April 1st.

“Plus, though the deputy padre seems off, he's clearly not a core member of the padre's team. Same for the three odd-job workers,” Leah added with a smile. “Can't four Beyonders handle five ordinary people silently?”

Lumian hesitated before replying, “But won't this make it impossible to reach the twelfth night?”

This amounted to triggering an abnormality on the padre's side. History would change accordingly.

“You said it yourself. Compared to us, the padre and company will hold back until Lent to usher in the twelfth night. As long as we don't kill him, finding someone entering the basement will make him pretend not to notice and accelerate gaining supernatural powers,” Leah said smiling. “Gaining power, he might hunt us with the others, but Cordu isn't small and we're not weak. We can hide and stall until Lent.”

Lumian accepted this reasoning. “Alright, let's do it now.” He reminded them, “But Aurore's eyes haven't fully healed. I'm afraid she can't help us.”

Before seeing Madame Pualis, Lumian had checked on Aurore. Her eyes might only recover by evening.

“It's fine. Madame Pualis backs us, doesn't she?” Leah said half-jokingly, the bells above her head ringing.

Lumian no longer objected and cautiously suggested, “Before the cathedral, let's walk around the village and confirm Shepherd Pierre Berry and the dangerous ones are home.”

He wanted to avoid running into Pierre and the others, who had received a boon, upon entering the basement.

Ryan nodded approval, agreeing.

Discussing details, Valentine glanced coldly at Lumian. “Do you need cleansing?”

Leah quickly explained on her companion's behalf, “You went into the castle and spoke with Madame Pualis. You might have been corrupted again.”

“No, I believe Madame Pualis won't do that this time. It's meaningless.” Lumian felt certain.

He had no choice but to feel certain. He dared not let Valentine purify him again. Compared to yesterday, he was already a Dancer. Evil aura had seeped from the seal inside. Once purified by holy water, there would likely be huge trouble.

According to Aurore's analysis, he needed full-body purification.

Seeing Lumian having no issue with it, Valentine, just being kind, naturally said no more.

Then, wandering Cordu, Lumian made his way home and told Aurore their plan.

Aurore was vexed at the inability to join and help. She could only offer to wait in the village edge and restart the cycle if anything went wrong. This required little vision. It sufficed to vaguely see

the road. Agreeing to have her restart before anyone came for her at 12:30, Lumian bid Aurore farewell and reconvened with Leah's group.

By then, the three official Beyonders had confirmed where Shepherd Pierre Berry and the padre's core members were.

Making a half detour, they reached the cathedral's side along a small path, the door they had used to catch the padre and Madame Pualis's affair in a previous cycle.

Lumian readied to volunteer when Leah strode over, using a wire to fiddle with the lock and push open the dark wooden door.

Seeing Lumian's surprise, she smiled. "It's a necessary technique for investigation."

Don't make it sound so noble... Lumian didn't voice his thoughts as Leah had already entered the cathedral.

The small silver bells on her veil and boots didn't move or make a sound.

Lumian tried interpreting this.

"It's very safe entering the cathedral. No danger?"

Leah glanced back. "Please add 'limited to dealing with the cathedral's people.'"

Did this mean danger in the basement remained unknown? Lumian roughly understood, gaining insight into divination. However, even improved by Dancer, he lacked divination.

Ryan passed him, following Leah into the cathedral.

Steps in, a servant approached.

In a blink, Ryan rushed over, raised a hand and chopped the servant behind an ear.

The servant crumpled soundlessly. Ryan caught and dragged him into the nearest room.

Leah rushed over, taking a colorless liquid-filled bottle and pouring it down the servant's throat.

"What's this?" Lumian asked, curious.

Leah maintained her smile.

"A sedative."

You're well prepared... Lumian sighed inwardly.

Taking down the three odd-job workers without alerting the padre, Leah crept into the padre's room through the shadows, silently turning the handle and cracking the wooden door. She saw Cordu's mightiest man in a gold-threaded white robe, breathing slowly and deeply on a simple bed.

Plates for lunch and silver cutlery were on a table by the door.

Leah sized him up and leapt in, chopping the padre behind his ear.

Immediately, she poured most of the remaining sedative down Guillaume Bénét's throat.

"That's it?" Lumian stuck his head out from behind Leah.

Wasn't this too easy?



“What else? What did you expect of an ordinary person?” Leah asked, amused.

Lumian tersely acknowledged, lifting the padre's robe.

“What are you doing?” Leah was shocked yet smiling.

Lumian said without turning, “Checking his body.”

He wanted to see if the padre had the black thorn symbol on his chest.

Soon, the padre Guillaume Bénét's top half was exposed, revealing nothing but tufts of black hair.

No black thorn symbol. No black mark of a special contract.

Lumian nodded imperceptibly, muttering, Looks like the symbol is received after accepting the boon. Or does it exist now but only activates through Cogitation?

And how did I get mine? The twelfth night?

Thinking the padre Guillaume Bénét might lack the black thorn symbol now, Lumian couldn't help evil thoughts.

If I kill him now, will it trigger the cycle?

How would killing this man in advance impact later events?

Considering the padre's importance later, Lumian— still wanting to wait for the twelfth night— convinced himself otherwise.

Leaving the padre's room, Ryan said to Lumian and Leah, “Can't find the deputy padre.”

“Ah?” Lumian hesitated before understanding. “Maybe he's home. He's not allowed to live in the cathedral, and no one brings him food.”

“This demon's lackey is truly tyrannical,” Valentine cursed, glancing at the padre in the room.

Without further ado, the quartet headed in the opposite direction for the altar.

In a corner loomed a stone staircase, narrow and steep, allowing only one person to pass through.

It ascended into the cathedral's roof before winding deeper underground.

Leah took point. After taking a few flights of stairs to the bottom, the veil and the four small silver bells on her boots rang at the same time.

Ding ding dang dang. The sound wasn't loud but echoed faintly in the small space. Sometimes urgent, sometimes soothing.

“What does this mean?” Lumian struggled to interpret it based on his past encounters.

Leah turned aside and grinned.

“It means there's a level of risk, but I can't determine how serious.”

“The divination had worked for the castle...” Lumian muttered to himself in surprise. “Doesn't this mean it's even more dangerous underground?”

“Not necessarily,” Leah soothed. “Perhaps it's just interference. Hadn't Madame Pualis been absent at the castle?”

At this point, it was impossible to back out over such a trivial hiccup. They descended the stairs one by one into the depths.

Soon, the four saw an old brown wooden door in the basement.

Leah pinched her glabella and activated her Spirit Vision before approaching the wooden door.

Though Lumian hadn't mastered activating Spirit Vision, with the Dancer's spirituality boost, it didn't take long for him to activate it. He saw everyone glowing red and healthy.

When her companions were set, Leah opened the basement door.

Amidst the creaking, Lumian caught a whiff of a familiar fragrance. Elegant and sweet.

He instantly made the connection and hurriedly told Ryan and the others, “Smells like gray amber.”

This was the material used to revere the hidden entity called Inevitability!

## Chapter 77 Changes

Lumian had briefly informed Ryan and the others about the black thorn symbol on Guillaume Bénet's chest, “Inevitability” in the hidden entity's honorific, gray amber, tulips, cloves, and deer musk for the corresponding domain. He claimed the source was the padre, and it had nothing to do with him.

Hearing this, Leah, Ryan, and Valentine immediately grew alert with guesses.

“The sacrificial site?” Ryan muttered.

As he spoke, all looked to the basement.

With dim light trickling down the stairs, they could barely see inside.

The space under the cathedral was bigger than Lumian's whole first floor. The floor was grayish-white stone slabs, and it looked pitch black due to the lack of light. In the middle stood a stone platform half a man's height.

The top of the stone platform caved in slightly, as if hiding something, but nobody could see clearly.

As Lumian pondered, he whispered, “This might be where the padre and company pray to the evil entity for boons.”

“They actually built the evil god's altar under the cathedral!” Valentine was furious. Lumian suspected he would combust any second and turn to holy light to purify everything here.

“Calm down,” Ryan patted Valentine's shoulder. “Get ready to light the fire.”

He then gestured for Leah to scout.

Leah kept her sweet smile and sniffed.

“That hidden entity with 'Inevitability' as an honorific name really likes fragrance...”

Sighing, she entered the basement, lips moving as if chanting.

The four silver bells chimed again, sometimes intense, sometimes soothing.

One step, two steps, three steps... Leah turned and said to Ryan and the others, “Nothing unusual around the entrance.”

Ryan, Lumian, and Valentine entered the basement through the old brown wooden door and came to where Leah had stopped.

Leah kept moving forward.

After a few steps, the silver bell on her veil and boots shook violently.

Ding ding dang dang!

The sound spread everywhere.

Specks of dawn-like light immediately appeared around Ryan and condensed, forming silver full-body armor over him.

Simultaneously, a pure broadsword of light appeared in Ryan's hand.

Valentine spread his arms, letting golden illusory flames burn around him.

One flame suddenly lengthened and widened, and Leah walked out of it.

She returned to Lumian and the others from near the altar.

How magical... Lumian marveled at Leah's act again. Compared to the Sun pathway's abilities and Ryan's combat state he could understand and imagine, Leah's various acts were even more bizarre and more magical. For example, her ability to transfer his wound from his thigh to his calf edge yesterday blew his mind.

Faced with the sudden 'alarm,' Lumian responded the only way he could.

He drew the iron-black axe and hid behind Ryan, whose body had grown much larger.

In this, he sized up his surroundings but found no abnormal changes.

He had his Spirit Vision on, after all.

Of course, Lumian had found something. With the golden flames' help, he saw piles of human bones at the basement edge. Some were even covered in light sheepskin.

Sacrificial offerings from before? The padre and company have conducted cultist rituals here for at least half a year, but Aurore and I didn't notice at all... Lumian's thoughts raced as he again felt Cordu, where he'd lived nearly five years, was unfamiliar. At some point, this place had become abnormal. Perhaps, it had been abnormal from the beginning.

Ryan warily eyed the altar direction and asked, “Is everything alright?”

Leah shook her head. “I don't feel any issues, just signs of danger.”

“Strange...” Lumian's voice trailed off as he turned to Leah.

He saw that the beautiful woman's face had turned translucent, and twisted maggots seemed to crawl below. She was even scarier and eviler than legendary evil spirits, making his scalp tingle and heart race wildly.

This exceeded Lumian's imagination. He suspected he'd have nightmares for a long time.

“Y-your face!” he warned Leah, unable to contain his fear.

Leah subconsciously touched her face with her right hand, and her expression changed.

As for whether her expression changed, Lumian couldn't tell from the transparent and distorted maggots.

Leah hurriedly looked at her hand back. The skin there had also turned translucent, and the flesh below seemed to have turned into strange maggots.

“You're losing control!” Valentine also noticed Leah's condition.

Leah muttered confused, “But my mental state is alright.”

Ryan tilted his head and reminded, “Make sure you're not hallucinating.”

Almost simultaneously, Lumian realized the tall warrior was rapidly shrinking. The silver armor over him and broadsword of light disintegrated.

In a blink, Ryan turned into a short man only about 1.5 meters tall. His brown coat and light yellow strides were either too big or too long.

He's also mutating? Only Valentine and I are fine... Lumian's pupils dilated as he subconsciously looked at Valentine.

“Ryan, you've shrunk!” Valentine, already a pure light figure, warned his companion anxiously.

Lumian, nearly blinded, hurriedly asked Leah, “Any changes for me?”

Leah said with countless transparent maggots that seemed to want to crawl out but couldn't leave the flesh, “You're very normal. But under such circumstances, normality might be the greatest abnormality.”

I'm normal? Could the black thorn symbol have protected me, causing the danger here to think I'm one of them? Lumian suddenly guessed.

At this, Ryan had finished checking his body. He said warily, “I'm not shrinking, but I've returned to my former self. I've even lost my superpowers.”

“Former self?” Lumian blurted.

He vaguely thought of something.

Ryan nodded. “Yes, I'm naturally short. As a man, this is a huge misfortune. So I chose Warrior when selecting my potion. It could effectively change my height.

“I don't know if I'm lucky or not. The past five to six years had many Beyonders monsters and abnormalities related to the Warrior pathway appear, allowing me to be less worried about the materials needed to advance.”

Hearing Ryan's words, Lumian roughly understood the anomaly's source.

“You've returned to the past! As far as I know, the authority of that hidden existence is related to the past...”

With that, he mimicked the mysterious lady and deliberately paused a few seconds before adding another word.

“It also involves the present and— and— and the future.”

Though now speaking Intis, he still had to be cautious.

Leah reacted quickly and blurted, “Valentine and I have entered the future. Is this the state of one of our futures?”

“And I'm the present?” Lumian asked, confirming Leah's guess.

He then thought of the three-faced monster he had encountered in the dream ruins.

The monster had only one head, but it bore three faces: one aged, one in its prime, one youthful.

Lumian suspected this was another gift from the owner of the black thorn symbol. Moreover, it was of a higher order, but the recipient couldn't withstand it or had met with an accident, turning into a three-faced monster.

Leah nodded gently.

“Likely, but this change in state doesn't affect my mind. I don't feel like I'm about to lose control at all.”

“Nor do I feel like I'm immolating,” Valentine added.

Ryan pondered a moment and said, “Similarly, I didn't lose my memories.”

“Perhaps there's only a little power left here that can't affect the mind, heart, and memories, but if we maintain this state for too long, I'm unsure if there will be any serious aftereffects.”

“I'm fine. At most, I'll consume the potion again and advance again. As for you, there should be many possibilities in the future, but now, perhaps the future has been determined, one will lose control, and the other will transform into holy light. This is an inevitability I understand.”

“How frightening,” Leah exclaimed with a smile. “Luckily, we can restart the cycle while also attempting to seek the present here.”

Seeing that there were no terrifying monsters attacking, Lumian suggested, “Shall we go out first and see if we can recover naturally?”

“Besides, we might encounter a power that represents the present along the way.”

Ryan didn't object. “We can give it a shot.”

He was now an ordinary person, and it would be dangerous for him to go any further.

“I'm afraid that another change in state will cause me to lose control,” Leah said cautiously.

It would definitely be good to encounter the 'present,' but it would be troublesome to encounter the 'past.' They didn't know what would happen if 'future' was additionally stacked on them.

Lumian took the initiative to say, “Let me scout the way. I still have a chance to change my state.”

He mainly wanted to see if his luck was good enough to encounter the 'present' or if the black thorn symbol on his chest protected him.

“Be careful,” Ryan warned, and Leah nodded.

Valentine's gaze on Lumian grew less cold.

He couldn't help but think, This lad has a very sacrificial spirit. Furthermore, he's a devout believer of the lord. Once the cycle is lifted, let's see if there's a way to remove the hidden corruption on his body and let him join our team.

Seeing that Lumian was about to take a step forward, Valentine, who had regained his composure, suggested, “Let me see if I can rid myself of this state first.”

No one objected. Lumian was the same. This was because he was in the present. He didn't need to remove any negative state or undergo purification.

In the next second, he realized he had miscalculated.

Valentine didn't directly use Holy Water Creation to purify Leah and Ryan. Instead, he used Sun Halo.

A dark golden light flashed, and an invisible force spread in all directions.

## Chapter 78 Traces

Lumian jumped in fright. It was too late to evade, so he could only brace for the invisible force to crash upon him.

He instantly felt warmth, and valor flooded his body. It was as if the sun had at last arrived in winter when he lacked clothes.

Other than that, he felt nothing peculiar. It was precisely the same as the experience in the castle yesterday afternoon.

Eh, as a Dancer, am I actually unscathed? Lumian couldn't help but swivel his head to glimpse the short Ryan and the terrifying Leah. He realized that there was no black fog or smoke billowing from them.

Promptly after, Valentine, who was in the form of a figure of light, conjured Holy Water Creation and let fall a few drops on Leah and Ryan. However, the two of them retained their transformed semblances with no signs of improvement.

“Purification and exorcism are futile?” Lumian asked.

He hoped to determine why it was possible and why not. Only then would he, who had already received a boon, know what to evade or feign that nothing had transpired when encountering something similar in the future.

Ryan briefly explained to him, “Purification and exorcism aren't omnipotent. The correspondent power is in the category of evil. For instance, the aura of depravity and all undead. The last isn't necessarily evil, but it's incompatible with the real world. It needs to return to the spirit world, so it can still be purified and exorcized.”

“Just like how our definition of an evil god is based on Their style of acting, the power of an evil god isn't necessarily evil.”

Lumian roughly fathomed and thoughtfully asked, “Inevitably's, uh, power doesn't belong to evil, nor does it signify depravity?”

So there is no way to purify or exorcize it?

“Yes.” Valentine had already affirmed this through his previous attempt.

From the looks of it, it's normal for me to be able to withstand the halo. But why can the holy water activate the black thorn symbol on my chest and permit me to hear the terrifying sound? This is because the corruption in the seal doesn't belong to me at the moment. It's incompatible with my body, rendering my body impure. Therefore, it needs to be purified? Lumian made a guess.

He had wanted to use Shepherd Pierre Berry, who had already received a boon, as an example to ask if the mutation of the body was also in the category of evil and depravity, but the current situation was rather urgent, so he didn't have the luxury to discuss the topic.

Lumian tried to walk to the basement door.

After taking two steps, he suddenly heard a buzzing sound in his ears. He could vaguely hear a voice that seemed to come from an infinite distance but also seemed to be right before him. However, it wasn't clear enough and was very fuzzy. It only made his chest heat up slightly and his mind enter a state of disorder.

This was very similar to when he saw Noodle Man dancing.

This made Lumian confirm that the black thorn symbol on his chest had been partially activated.

He quickly pivoted around and gazed at Ryan, Leah, and Valentine, only to find that they didn't react abnormally.

Lumian was immediately disheartened. He originally believed that the two symbols on his chest could suppress and weaken Beyonders to a certain extent, but from the looks of it, they could only target the monsters in the dream ruins, especially those that had been bestowed by the owner of the black thorn symbol.

Of course, he wasn't sure if fully activating the symbol on his chest would affect the surrounding Beyonders.

“Has my condition changed?” he asked Leah and the others.

“No.” Leah and the others shook their heads in unison.

Lumian nodded indistinctly and affirmed two things.

The first was the black thorn symbol on his chest, or rather, the evil god corruption sealed in his body. It could indeed help him “resist” the abnormality in the basement.

Secondly, luck was on his side. He was affected by the power of the present.

After a few seconds, Lumian attempted to take a diagonal step forward.

The slight heat in his chest did not weaken, maintaining its previous intensity.

“Any changes this time?” he asked Ryan and the others again.

Leah was the first to shake her head. “You're fine.”

Lumian exhaled and muttered inwardly, With the protection of the black thorn symbol, I can move freely here. Shepherd Pierre Berry and company should be the same...

Wait, the padre hasn't received any blessings yet. There's no thorn symbol! How did he reach the altar unscathed?

With this in mind, Lumian grasped something as he turned his gaze to the ground.

With the help of Valentine's light, he saw many messy footprints that ordinary humans couldn't see.

Apart from a small number of them, which were everywhere, they followed a certain pattern and extended to the front of the altar.

Lumian immediately overlapped with the nearest footprint, and the slight heat in his chest began to weaken.

This meant that he had returned to the present.

As expected, there's a safe route here that leads to the present! Lumian suddenly became very happy. This was because the three powerful Beyonders, Ryan, Leah, and Valentine, hadn't discovered it, and he, a mere Hunter, had found it.

This reminded him of something his sister Aurore had said: “Every pathway has its strengths. Before becoming a demigod, Sequence 9 of some paths might trump Sequence 5 of others in certain situations.”

Lumian had originally felt inferior and suppressed, useless before the powerful Beyonders these past two days of exploration. Now, he'd regained a good amount of confidence.

Finding faint traces in reality is a Hunter's specialty. Can you?

Of course, Lumian didn't forget that Aurore added: “But there are pathways good at everything.”

He gathered his thoughts, turned around, and commanded Ryan, Leah, and Valentine. “Take a step toward the altar at the same time.”



Ryan and the others were clearly puzzled. They couldn't just trust Lumian blindly without knowing why.

Lumian could only explain, "Look closely at the ground There are many footprints marking a safe path left behind by the padre's group!"

Ryan, Leah, and Valentine, lacking Lumian's abilities, could barely see a trace in the sun's dim light. They believed him.

They knew that in Intis, many Hunter pathway Beyonders had collaborated. Some Sequences were skilled at detecting faint signs.

Following Lumian's guidance, they trekked the secure route.

Instantly, Lumian saw Ryan regain height, Valentine darken, and Leah's face normalize.

They had returned to the present, no longer trapped in the past or future.

Lumian easily rejoined the team on the safe route.

He grinned and said, "No more slip-ups. There may be no coming back if anything else goes south."

He was mimicking Ryan's tone and felt it fit their current situation.

Typically, his attitude would've had him mocking them: "Haha, are you blind? Can't you see any of the obvious signs? Another mistake and you're done for!"

Leah touched her face and breathed a sigh of relief. "We're with you."

Lumian wasn't humble. He carefully picked out the footprints on the ground and crept up to the altar.

It wasn't as straightforward as heading back just now since it didn't matter if he took a wrong turn, but Ryan and the others couldn't.

This time, Leah's silver bells stayed silent.

Only once all four had reached the altar did they start ringing, sometimes soothing, other times intense.

"It's dangerous, but we can find a way around it," Leah, experienced enough, explained.

Ryan instantly nodded.

"Don't touch anything here for now. We'll just observe."

Lumian had already set his sights above the altar.

There was a depression at the bottom, as if hollowed out to hold something. Inside were grayish-white candles, a small bottle of clear liquid, and an unopened wooden box.

But the most striking item was a black object—a long robe with a hood.

In front, in the center of the circle, was a circular symbol made of thorns.

Every part of it was twisted and pitch-black, as if painted with some strange substance. It gave the feeling of slowly oozing.

Seeing the symbol, Lumian felt dizzy and ringing in his ears.

Ryan snorted, and a dawn-like light naturally emanated from him.

This helped Leah and Valentine suppress the mental confusion.

“Don't stare at that symbol too long,” Ryan said in a deep voice.

Lumian quickly shifted his gaze aside.

The dizziness and ringing in his ears lessened.

That seems to be all for the altar. Lumian was about to suggest searching the area when he heard Leah ask Ryan, “Will your Sunrise Gleam activate the altar?”

Huh? Lumian whipped his head around and unconsciously looked at the altar again.

Ding ding ding. Leah's veil and silver boots rang harshly, an urgent warning.

In the same breath, the black altar robe leaped up as if inhabited by an invisible being.

Ooo! A chill wind gusted. Lumian glimpsed transparent faces under the hood—ferocious, warped heads radiating hatred. They swarmed into a strange, terrifying gestalt.

Lumian recognized one face: pale, swollen, with blood and tears pooling in its eyes. Reimund.

Lumian dodged behind Ryan, uninterested in a closer look.

“Save us! Save us!”

The translucent faces shrieked in unison. Their shrill cries pierced Ryan and the others like needles, threatening to fell them.

Valentine was unmoved. Arms spread, he summoned a holy flame-wreathed pillar of light from the sky. It landed over the black robe.

Light erupted. Lumian and Leah shut their eyes on instinct.

## Chapter 79: Sufferer

Sensing the light dim, Lumian hurriedly opened his eyes.

The black robe lay charred on the altar, resisting the golden flames licking at its edges. Yet still it struggled to stand, like a cursed puppet refusing to die.

The translucent faces of Reimund and the others flickered in and out of existence around him, ghosts trapped between the present and a future obliterated.

“Down!” Ryan bellowed.

Lumian dropped without hesitation. If there had been time, he would have thrown himself flat to the ground.

Leah and Valentine were a heartbeat behind, scrambling to duck.

In the same instant, Ryan plunged the Sword of Dawn into the altar's heart, piercing the robe.

Silently the broadsword shattered into a resplendent storm of light, tearing the altar asunder.

When the radiance cleared, Lumian peered up to find the altar a ruin, reduced by a third. Candles, thorns, and black cloth had vanished, ground to dust floating on the air.

Incredible power... Lumian had pondered this strike since the day before.

“Everything okay?” he asked.

Leah rose and spun swiftly around. The four silver bells decorating her veil and boots jangled ominously, their tune neither reassuring nor alarming.

“This isn't over.” She warned Ryan and Valentine before murmuring. “The altar's gone—so what's the catch?”

As she spoke, Valentine conjured golden flames that floated in the air and lit up the space.

At the far end of the basement, there was naught but piled human bones and a few sheepskins. The ceiling was bare and unadorned—not even a chandelier.

Lumian snickered. “No Beyonder characteristics?”

“Maybe they were sacrificed,” Ryan said bluntly. “It's also likely they didn't get many boons in the beginning and weren't tough enough. They could only nab normal folks as sacrifices and only go after Beyonders once they had decent powers. For instance, this time.”

It was clear they weren't unfamiliar with getting boons.

Ryan then said, “There's nothing else here. We should bail. No point tangling with danger we can't see.”

Lumian didn't react. Lumian scanned the room again, searching for any hidden doors from the subtle traces.

The answer was no.

He led the way out of the basement, Leah, Ryan and Valentine trailing behind.

As soon as Lumian emerged, Ryan grunted in pain.

His body flew backward, slamming into the basement door. The rickety stairs shuddered.

Wham!

Some invisible spear had pierced Ryan's chest, pinning him to the wall. Blood gushed from the gaping wound. If Ryan hadn't jerked aside just in time, that spear would've skewered his heart.

Leah, who had her Spirit Vision activated the entire time, couldn't detect their attacker.

It was as if some deity had singled Ryan out for punishment.

Before they could figure out what was going on, Leah's smile twisted into a grimace.

Her arms snapped back on their own. Bones shattered with a crunch as her limbs went limp. A crater bloomed in her stomach, as if she'd been sucker-punched. The impact sent her staggering backwards into the wall.

Valentine shrieked from the foot of the stairs.

His ribs collapsed one by one, like a sledgehammer was pounding his chest. With a series of bangs, bloody holes tore through Leah and Valentine's stomach and chest, spearing them to the stone wall.

Lumian was stunned for a moment. While this inexplicable change confused him, he was relieved that he didn't appear to be the target of this bizarre attack.

Did that black thorn symbol protect me? As this thought flashed through his mind, he suddenly felt an invisible force slam him against the wall by the stairs.

There was nothing visible with his Spirit Vision.

Remembering what had happened to Ryan and the others, Lumian immediately dodged to the side.

Intense agony instantly filled his mind. The skin on his right chest tore open, roughly exposing his lungs.

Lumian felt as if an invisible rod had impaled him and nailed him to the wall.

As his bright red blood flowed out, Ryan lit up the area with spots of light that looked like dawn. This would effectively banish evil and dispel illusions.

However, the four of them still couldn't see anything.

Bang!

Ryan's chest caved in, hit by an invisible hammer.

As Leah's veil and silver bell boots rang out intensely, her nails were pried out by an invisible force, staining them red.

This indescribable pain contorted her face in terror.

Valentine spread his arms and let the holy pillar of light descend upon him. The light of the sun suddenly erupted, obliterating all evil and igniting Valentine's body. However, in the sun's glare, his arms were uncontrollably wrenched backward and stuck to the wall. Two blood-red holes appeared on his wrists, nailing them in place.

When the light faded, Valentine's face was charred, and his skin peeled off inch by inch.

Seeing their ordeal, Lumian couldn't help but feel anguish for them.

It was unknown if it was because of the black thorn symbol, but his misery had abated. His face felt as if slapped by an invisible hand repeatedly. His face was red and swollen, and his teeth were loose. He could hardly speak.

Just as another round of attacks were about to descend, Lumian's vision blurred and he glimpsed a wilderness.

In the distance loomed a mountain range, and close by stretched a grassy wilderness.

Two demon-like creatures with goat horns hauled a dark red, conch-like carriage from afar, hastening before Lumian and company.

Seated in the carriage was a woman in emerald robes and laurel wreath. Chestnut locks swept up, hazel eyes bright and watery. Dignified and noble, reminiscent of Madame Pualis matured.

She kept her pledge to proffer aid? Lumian startled, then delighted as the invisible force assailed them not.

Somehow he knew the woman before him was not quite Madame Pualis. Or rather, not Madame Pualis precisely. More an unearthly construct Madame Pualis had fashioned by dint of will.

Lumian chose to call her Madame Night.

Unlike his Paramita encounter, Madame Pualis grasped an oak branch mistletoe-wreathed at its tip in one hand, a jadeite bowl of sparkling liquid in the other.

Madame Pualis dipped the oak branch in the bowl and sprinkled them.

After the third sprinkle, Lumian saw his chest wound heal apace. The swelling receded swiftly, and no more was he pinned immobile to the wall.

Leah, Ryan and Valentine wholly healed, no trace of cruel injuries.

“What attacked us?” Lumian asked, figuring nothing ventured, nothing lost.

Madame Pualis, seated in the crimson carriage, replied superciliously, “There's a hint of Sufferer taint on you now. Thankfully, it's minor. Otherwise, you'd have to restart the loop.”

“Sufferer taint? What's that supposed to mean?” Lumian exchanged puzzled looks with Ryan and the others.

Madame Pualis replied gently, “That's all I know.”

“Then do you know what happened to the dead Warlock and owl in the cemetery?” Lumian pressed.

Madame Pualis glanced at him. “If I'd known, things wouldn't have turned out this way. I'd originally planned to rule this place, but now I have no choice but to leave.”

Rule this place? Alarm bells rang in Lumian's head. Falling into a loop might not be the worst fate.

Aurore and I have no idea how many babies we'd have if Madame Pualis gets her way!

Compared to that, getting looped and destroyed at any moment doesn't seem so bad.

At least we'd die unadulterated!

Madame Pualis glanced at them but said nothing more. She had her pitch-black demon beasts pull her conch carriage into the wilderness.

By the time she disappeared from Lumian and the others' sight, the wilderness was gone.

Just then, they realized they were still in the basement. Half of them were on the stairs, the other half by the wooden door.

If not for the blood and fallen nails on the ground and walls, they'd have thought they'd experienced a hyper-realistic illusion.

“Let's get out of here first.” Ryan quickly regained his senses and told Valentine, “Get rid of any traces we left.”

Valentine nodded and conjured illusory golden flames to burn the blood and nails away.

The four of them faced no further attacks on their way back to the cathedral.

It was unclear if the Sufferer taint had been expended or if Madame Pualis had wiped it out.

Just as Lumian was about to leave through the side door, he suddenly spotted the deputy padre, Michel Garrigue, standing dazed outside the room where sleeping servants had been stowed.

Was this fellow back from filling his stomach? Lumian was about to avoid him when Michel, with his curly brown hair and delicate features, suddenly turned and saw them.

Ryan was poised to knock this guy out when Michel Garrigue asked with an unnaturally cheerful smile, "Here to pray? Need a confession?"

Everyone else in the cathedral has collapsed, but you're concerned with confessions? Lumian looked at Michel as if he were mad.

Compared to before, this guy's abnormality was glaringly obvious!

## Chapter 80 Joint Investigation Team

Leah sensed Michel's abnormality and turned to Ryan, asking with her eyes if she should knock him out.

At this moment, Lumian spoke up. "Is the padre not here?"

Michel's eyes lit up, unable to hide his excitement. "The padre is resting. You can pray to me."

His face was filled with pleading.

Lumian hesitated, obviously uneasy, before reluctantly saying, "Fine."

Seeing Michel's elated expression, Lumian turned to Leah and the others, feigning annoyance.

"What's wrong with you lot? Coming to the cathedral to pray is what any true believer would do. What is there to be afraid of?"

What he really meant was that they had already escaped the basement without getting caught. Why worry now? As believers of the Eternal Blazing Sun, it was perfectly normal for them to come to the cathedral to pray. Using a side door was a trivial matter. As for the padre and his lackeys taking an extended lunch, what did that have to do with them?

Lumian knew such excuses would only fool dimwits, but they should placate the padre, at least for now. The padre wouldn't expose them until Ryan's group tried reporting the irregularities to the higher-ups and put an end to Cordu's depravities.

As long as Leah and the others continued strolling around the village, casually chatting with people as if they hadn't found anything incriminating in the cathedral's basement, the padre would be content to maintain the status quo.

Add to that, Ryan had demolished their underground altar. It would take time for them to restore it. Lumian estimated the padre wouldn't gain any boons for at least a couple of days, if not until after Lent began.

By then, it wouldn't matter if the padre suspected them or not. Appearing "normal" was the most pressing concern.

Upon hearing Lumian's words, Deputy Padre Michel Garrigue vigorously nodded.

"Absolutely! No matter your past sins, if you pray sincerely and repent, God will forgive you."

Is that so? What if the padre repented to the Eternal Blazing Sun and confessed that I had strayed long ago, believing in an evil god? Now, I want to return to the righteous path? Lumian appeared pious as he strode to the altar, but he didn't buy it.

Michel hastened ahead, seeming poised to take flight in his zeal.

Leah couldn't help but glance sideways at Valentine, seeing his complicated expression at the fanatical clergyman. This should have earned Valentine's praise, but he knew the deputy padre was clearly deranged.

Redirecting her gaze from Valentine, Leah rushed to Lumian's side and whispered in his ear, "Did you consider that half those present don't believe in the Eternal Blazing Sun?"

"You're not?" Lumian seemed genuinely surprised.

Not because he was perceptive and grasped her hint, but of the five there, aside from the unhinged deputy padre, Valentine was certainly one of the remaining four. Lumian himself barely counted as half.

Leah nodded slightly, her bells chiming.

She smiled and whispered, "Ryan hails from the Machinery Hivemind. I'm from Bureau 8, we don't belong to the Eternal Blazing Sun Church."

Lumian had heard his sister mention that the Machinery Hivemind was on par with the Eternal Blazing Sun Church's Inquisition. It was a branch of the Church of the God of Steam and Machinery dealing with matters concerning those from beyond. Bureau 8's full name was Bureau 8 under the Intis Intelligence and Homeland Security Committee. It was the Republic's most official organization in the domain of the Beyonders.

"Weren't you sent by the Church?" Lumian asked curiously, finding a chair and sitting down.

Leah sat beside him, smiling thinly.

"Too many dangerous run-ins with those from beyond have happened at country borders in recent years, especially in disputed territories. When Cordu called for help, the higher-ups decided to set up a joint task force to get into Cordu, figure out what's really going down, and give the best recommendation for how to handle it.

"Who knew that this place..."

She shook her head, seeming at a loss for words while her bells chimed.

The strangeness and horror of this place was beyond her imagination.

At times she felt Valentine was right to suggest reporting everything and requesting Cordu's destruction.

But she wasn't ready to die yet. She had to choke back her professional instincts and morals.

At that moment, Deputy Padre Michel Garrigue picked up the book on the altar and glanced at the four praying.

Leah then crossed her arms over her chest and bowed her head.

“...” Lumian was a little stunned.

And you claim not to believe in the Eternal Blazing Sun!

Leah sensed his gaze and turned, flashing him a wry grin.

“God won't fault me for posing as a sheep of another flock during a crusade. If you doubt it, look...” She jerked her chin to the other side.

Ryan, hailing from Machinery Hivemind, folded his arms over his chest in a pious fashion.

So your moral compass possesses flexibility when questing... Lumian longed to jibe Leah and Ryan, but worship had commenced. He couldn't lag behind.

After adopting a reverent mien and closing his eyes, the deputy padre, Michel Garrigue, riffled through the Holy Bible and intoned gravely, “God spake, 'Let there be light,' and there was light...”

Lumian suddenly felt a surge of nostalgia as he listened to the familiar sermon in the cathedral.

Though he used to just go with the flow and float through the service, whispering and gazing around, he now longed for the simplicity of the past—even if he had to pray with the greatest devotion.

Even the unpleasant events that had once annoyed him were now a source of comfort.

By the time Lumian and the others left the Eternal Blazing Sun cathedral, the padre and servants were still knocked out cold.

Ryan glanced toward the castle and sighed emotionally.

“That woman's far more powerful than I realized.”

“How powerful?” Lumian asked, curious.

Ryan deliberated a moment. “It's like she's touched the threshold of godhood, yet not quite.”

You seem to have said something yet not quite... If Lumian didn't need Ryan and the others recently, he'd have spoken his mind.

However, thanks to his extensive knowledge of mysticism, he could roughly guess what Ryan meant by “the threshold of godhood.”

Sequence 4! The beginnings of a demigod!

He pondered a moment.

“I think Pualis seemed off when she appeared as Madame Night.”



He'd told them about Madame Night in Paramita.

"I got the same impression," Leah said with a smile. "Like a botched patchwork monster."

Ryan nodded.

"We have an understanding of Madame Night to some extent. In the border region between Intis and Feynapotter, similar incidents have occurred frequently in recent years. Some call her Madame Night, some call her Madam Härt, some call her The Benevolent, and some call her The Vile. But so far, we haven't caught any of them. We still lack a systematic grasp of them.

"Yes, this is the first time I've heard of Paramita."

Leah strode to the edge of the village square with a tinkling gait. "Something about Paramita occurred to me from the description."

"What?" Lumian never felt embarrassed to inquire.

Leah glanced southward. "In Feynapotter's Church of Earth Mother, there's a saying: 'The soul returns to the land.'"

The soul returns to the land... Images of the wilderness and wandering undead surfaced in Lumian's mind.

He had to admit Leah's association made sense.

Arriving at the elm tree at the village entrance, Ryan surveyed the area and remarked,

"Let's not provoke that madame further. Regarding escaping the loop, even if she doesn't provide aid, she won't become an enemy. We just need to monitor her movements and see if we can utilize the specific temporal node she mentioned."

Wasn't it because you clearly couldn't defeat her if you didn't provoke her? Lumian suppressed his mouth, ready to retort.

He then asked Valentine, "How many minutes?"

He worried that if he mistimed, his sister would trigger the loop and restart everything.

Valentine extracted a gold pocket watch and popped it open.

"Ten minutes remaining."

"That's good..." Lumian sighed in relief and waved at Ryan and the others. "I'm going to search for Aurore. If you've nothing else to do, help me locate Sybil's husband, Jean Maury. Investigate who's spreading the rumor that the horoscopes are about to change and everyone will usher in good fortune. If you discover anything, come to my house to find me. Goodbye, my cabbages!"

That was what Leah and the others had planned to do, so no one objected.

Lumian fell into deep thought as he bade farewell to the Joint Investigation Team and walked to the agreed-upon spot at the edge of the village.

After completing his exploration of the cathedral's underground, he had a darn good hunch about the anomaly in Cordu.

The ones responsible for the loop were definitely the padre's group. They'd been secretly worshiping an evil god for at least six months and had secretly sacrificed quite a few foreigners under the cathedral in exchange for loads of boons.

Before Lent, the padre, Pons Bénet, and their lot had received a boon using the three Beyonders that Shepherd Pierre Berry had brought back—or at least one of them. The former instantly became a pretty powerful Beyonder. Hence, they kicked off a grand ritual at the start of Lent.

On the twelfth night, in the final stage of the ritual, the hidden being with the name of Inevitability would accept the large-scale sacrifice and complete something that the padre and company had prayed for. But at that moment, something unexpected happened. The ritual failed to complete, and the power involving the past, present, and future dissipated, bringing about a time loop.

As for what unexpected event had occurred, Lumian recalled something the mysterious lady had once said: “You belong to the group of individuals who are on the brink of being corrupted. Luckily, the mark left by that great existence was activated, and the corresponding power descended upon you, sealing the source of corruption and establishing balance...”