

Inevitability 81

Chapter 81 Key

Beside the serpentine river outside Cordu Village, under the piercing sunlight, Aurore, clad in a casual blue dress, sat on the ground with her eyes closed, listening to Lumian's conjectures and analysis.

She remained silent for a while, as if lost in thought.

After nearly a minute of contemplation, Aurore spoke, "If something truly occurred during the ritual on the twelfth night, causing the hidden entity's power to disperse and trigger a time loop in Cordu and its surroundings, I believe that the people and even the spirits in this area at that time wouldn't have been spared."

"What do you mean?" Lumian, also seated on the ground, struggled to grasp his sister's reasoning.

Aurore elaborated, "I mean that it's both power and corruption. Once it disperses, everyone in this area will endure the corruption on relatively equal footing. Only those bearing the black thorn symbol or under the protection of other high-level entities can barely remain unaffected.

"Consider this: isn't it like a dam bursting, flooding the entire place up to the rafters? Unless a boat was prepared beforehand, we'd undoubtedly be drenched."

Lumian envisioned such a scene and hesitantly inquired, "So, does that mean everyone in the village has been tainted by the dissipating power, effectively becoming a component of the loop?"

By "component," he didn't mean participating in or being affected by the loop. More precisely, people became part of the loop's structure.

Aurore, her eyes still closed and her blonde hair tied up, gently nodded.

"I suspect that not only will killing the padre result in a reset, but also slaying other villagers in Cordu will trigger a similar effect. It's like trying to dismantle the loop's components. There will surely be a reaction to such disruption."

"But we just killed the midwife yesterday afternoon..." Lumian trailed off before finishing his sentence.

Suddenly, numerous thoughts raced through his mind, and he hesitantly proposed, "Is it because the people in the castle are protected by other high-level entities?"

"Is that why Madame Pualis claimed she could leave the loop at a specific moment?"

"She wasn't tainted by that power. She's not part of the loop. She's affected, but she can exploit loopholes or seize opportunities to escape?"

Aurore sighed softly. "That's why she said she can't save us or take us with her. We've already been corrupted and are fused with the loop."

At this, she managed a bitter smile. “Or rather, we're already dead. We're merely existing in the form of loop components.

“No wonder that mysterious lady said that if she forcibly ended the loop, everyone here would die. That's because we are the forcibly dispersed loop itself.”

Lumian fell silent. He yearned to contradict his sister and argue that they shouldn't be so pessimistic, but her words aligned with the mysterious woman's.

What he couldn't comprehend all this time was that, given the woman's ability to freely enter and exit the loop and her audacity to mention the hidden entity, even if she couldn't break the loop without causing any harm, it ought to be simple for her to safeguard two or three people and facilitate their departure.

Now, there was a more plausible and disheartening explanation to this conundrum.

After a few seconds, Lumian found a counterargument.

“Ava, Reimund, and Naroka are all dead, but their deaths didn't cause the loop to restart.”

Aurore, her eyes still closed, offered a complex smile. “Perhaps they died before the loop began, so without participating in the ritual on the twelfth night, they weren't tainted.”

Her implication was clear. In the timeline before the loop transpired, Naroka had perished before Lent, while Ava and Reimund had been sacrificed during the celebration. They didn't survive until the twelfth night and were not part of the loop.

She paused for a moment and continued, “Jean Maury, who vanished today, might be in a similar situation. According to normal developments, he should have discovered something abnormal after Lent and before the twelfth night. He wanted to escape, but was silenced. Our investigation merely expedited this event.

“The only thing I don't understand is that Reimund's corpse was sacrificed, right? He shouldn't have been in the loop from the start...”

Hearing his sister's words, Lumian instantly recalled the events beneath the cathedral.

The invisible figure in the black robe was composed of Reimund and the others' spirits!

Lumian combined his knowledge of mysticism and attempted to speculate.

“Maybe the Lenten sacrifice wasn't made directly to the hidden entity, but to the altar. It's part of the twelfth night's ritual, so Reimund's spirit appeared beneath the cathedral.

“His body is useless, but before the loop began, Pons Bénet and his associates could leave Cordu. To stop those downstream from finding the body and alerting the higher-ups, they might retrieve it after completing the ritual of sending it downriver.

“Once the loop started, the power had limits. It can't cover the area where Pons Bénét and the others recovered the body. They're affected by the corruption in their bodies and won't consider leaving this area.”

Aurore pondered for a moment and nodded in agreement.

“In the past few days of the loop, other than you, the three foreigners, and Madame Pualis and her subordinates, none of the villagers have thought of leaving Cordu to hunt or gather wild fruit.

“If you hadn't reminded me, I would've been the same.”

Aurore revealed a desolate, self-deprecating smile.

“We're already a group of monsters. We're barely surviving as humans by relying on the loop.”

“No, there must be a way for redemption. That lady said it exists!” Lumian interrupted his sister's self-pity.

Aurore exhaled slowly and stated, “Can't you let your sister be vulnerable for a few minutes?”

She continued, “Based on this line of thought, we can only rely on ourselves. Breaking the cycle with external forces is equivalent to killing us.”

Lumian sighed. “Unfortunately, there's no way to verify this speculation at the moment. We can only confirm it on the twelfth night.”

“We can verify it, but it'll waste a lot of our time. Besides, I can't do it,” Aurore replied.

That's true... Lumian roughly grasped his sister's meaning and plan: Kill a villager not currently on the padre's team to see if it would trigger a reboot. If it did, they could find a way to lure one of the three foreigners into a death trap and see if it triggered the cycle. If not, it would validate Aurore and Lumian's guesses. Most people in Cordu Village had been corrupted and were part of the loop. Those who came later were only affected by the loop and had a chance to escape it with the help of loopholes or external forces.

However, that would squander many of the past few days, and Aurore wasn't the type to kill innocents, especially those they had a good partnership with.

Lumian had no moral qualms in this regard. From his perspective, dying in the loop wasn't true death. There was a high chance of only residual problems. That was much better than being trapped in the loop.

Of course, if he really wanted to do so, he wouldn't try to murder Leah and the others. Instead, he would reason with the three foreigners.

With Valentine's fanaticism and piety, he was confident he could persuade him to commit suicide.

The siblings exchanged glances and fell silent, unsure of what to say.

After a while, Lumian changed the subject.

“Grande Soeur, what do you think is the key to ending the loop from the inside?”

Aurore had been pondering this question. As she thought, she said, “We can't just end the loop from the inside. We have to use this situation to remove the corruption in everyone's bodies. Otherwise, what's the difference between this and suicide?”

“Yes, according to my previous guess, something happened to the ritual, causing the entire village to enter a loop. And the reason an accident occurred was that you bear the mark of that great entity. It was activated and sealed the heavy corruption in your heart...”

Aurore assessed her brother as she spoke.

Lumian instantly grasped her meaning.

“You mean I'm the key to ending the cycle?”

Aurore nodded. “The source of the accident lies with you, so naturally, the key to ending the cycle is with you.”

“Of course, this is only a guess. Perhaps the key to the loop is the vessel that will bear the power of the hidden entity's descent during the twelfth night's ritual. For example, the padre or someone else...”

Aurore suddenly fell silent and looked at her brother for a few seconds.

“Could these two speculations be equivalent? You are the vessel? Otherwise, as an auxiliary sacrifice and contaminant, even if something unexpected happened, the ritual wouldn't have failed disastrously and its power dissipated uncontrollably.”

Uh... The more Lumian thought about it, the more he felt that his sister's guess made sense.

He muttered to himself, “That black thorn mark on my chest is darker than the padre's was...”

“So when the priest tried to deal with me, he showed signs of losing control, allowing me to kill him...”

“Therefore, that mysterious lady never said how to end this loop. She just told me to explore the dream ruins and figure out their secrets...”

Aurore got a little pumped. “Yeah, that's probably a clue!”

“Maybe the dream ruins stem from the corruption in your body or are closely linked to it. So you can rely on the black thorn mark to take down every monster you run into there.”

“Once you unlock the secrets, you can rein in or safely tap into the power in your body to some extent and siphon off the corruption from everyone in Cordu. The loop will break on its own.”

“Yeah, maybe this can only be done at certain times. Like at the ritual on the twelfth night.”

Lumian leapt to his feet. “I’m heading back to dream now!”

“No rush.” Aurore slowly sat up. “Aren’t you hurt? Aren’t you going to rest?”

Lumian patted his chest.

“The liquid Madame Pualis sprinkled healed all my wounds and restored my spirituality.”

“Oh, was that pomelo sago... child-giving Guanyin...” Aurore muttered.

“Huh?” Lumian didn’t get it at all. His sister was speaking a totally foreign language.

Aurore smiled with her eyes closed.

“What I mean is, go home, fill your belly, take a nap, and explore your dreams!”

Chapter 82 Dream Divination

In the semi-subterranean two-story building, Lumian and Aurore quietly consumed their belated lunch.

The mutton, which should have been succulent and tender, tasted utterly bland on their palates.

Barely satiated, Lumian was about to clear the table when tinkling sounds reached his ears.

“Leah and the others?” He glanced towards the door.

Aurore, too, sensed something. She set down her cutlery and fixed her gaze upon the entrance.

Moments later, the doorbell chimed.

Without hesitation, Lumian abandoned his seat and strode towards the door, peering at the visitors through the peephole.

It was indeed Leah, accompanied by the other two foreigners.

Valentine had finally changed his attire. Previously engulfed in flames due to the Sufferer’s aura, Madame Pualis had tended to his wounds, but his scorched clothing was beyond repair.

Lumian swung the door open and greeted them with a warm smile.

“My cabbages, you already miss me?”

“Oh, you actually can change clothes?”

Valentine had swapped his white vest, blue tweed jacket, and black trousers for a yellow vest, black formal jacket, and dark pants. White fabric flowers adorned Leah’s white cashmere dress—one large and two small—concealing signs of damage with impressive sewing skills. As for Ryan, Lumian couldn’t detect any difference in his outfit or evidence of his previous injuries. Lumian suspected the man had packed at least two identical sets of clothing.

“We've gathered information on those two matters,” Ryan replied coolly, his eyes hinting that details would follow once they were inside.

Lumian sought Aurore's approval before fully opening the door and ushering the three investigators in.

This was the first time Ryan and his colleagues had met Aurore, and they exchanged polite introductions.

“About the impending horoscope shift, and the villagers' supposed good fortune, it's tentatively confirmed that the padre orchestrated the rumors,” Ryan revealed, wasting no time as they settled around the dining table. “But I don't think it's that simple. The methods and rhetoric resemble those of a village witch. Under normal circumstances, the padre wouldn't devise such a scheme.”

Village witches were part-time fortune-tellers who frequented small towns and villages.

Aurore nodded thoughtfully.

“Could it be the influence of the deceased Warlock? Hmm, a way to lure villagers into secretly worshipping the evil god.”

“And they believed it so easily?” Valentine seethed.

His expression conveyed utter disbelief at the gullibility of Cordu's inhabitants.

It's all because believing in the Eternal Blazing Sun doesn't alleviate their poverty, and they're still oppressed by the padre and the administrator... Aurore held her tongue, fearing a confrontation with Valentine.

She could envision villagers experiencing tangible benefits from the padre and his followers after turning to the evil god, such as reduced contributions to the Eternal Blazing Sun or protection from Pons Bénet's harassment. They could even scare their irritating neighbors using the thug's name. In short, their lives would genuinely improve, giving them hope and fueling their devotion.

Nevertheless, Aurore didn't condone their actions. While the government and Church primarily sought money, the cults demanded lives.

Ignoring Valentine's question, Lumian 'helpfully' suggested, “You should ask the villagers yourself and thoroughly investigate the cause of their wavering faith. If you uncover the truth, I believe the papacy will hold you in high regard.”

The papacy referred to the Eternal Blazing Sun's pope, a title shared by many church leaders. Lumian had recently learned this after perusing the materials Aurore had procured.

Valentine fell silent, evidently intrigued.

Aurore shifted the focus to Ryan.

“Did you locate Sybil's husband, Jean Maury?”

Ryan glanced at Leah, prompting her to speak.

Leah nodded and said, “We infiltrated Jean Maury's residence and obtained one of his belongings. Using this item, I performed a dream divination.”

Dream divination... Aurore nodded, unsurprised.

As Lumian recounted their exploration of the castle the day before, Aurore had already pieced together their pathways and approximate Sequences based on the performance of the three official investigators.

Clearly, Leah belonged to the more common Seer pathway in Intis. Moreover, she wasn't a Sequence 9 Seer or Sequence 8 Clown, but at least a Sequence 7 Magician. This could be inferred from her Beyonder powers like Paper Figurine Substitutes and Damage Transfer, as well as her skills in divination and acrobatics.

Aurore wasn't certain if Leah had reached Sequence 6, as her knowledge of the pathway's subsequent stages was limited.

Valentine belonged to one of the main pathways controlled by the Eternal Blazing Sun Church: the Sun. Likewise, he wasn't a Sequence 9 Bard or Sequence 8 Light Suppliant. Aurore deduced from his Holy Light Summoning, Holy Water Creation, and Sun Halo that he was a Sequence 7 Solar High Priest. Furthermore, he likely hadn't reached Sequence 6 Notary, as he hadn't displayed the corresponding abilities.

Ryan's Beyonder powers were uncommon in Intis; he was likely a Warrior.

This pathway was primarily controlled by the Church of the God of Combat from the Feysac Empire in the north. However, in the past five to six years, numerous Beyonders and Beyonder creatures of the Warrior pathway had appeared in various countries.

Several members of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society had either actively or passively chosen this pathway.

According to Aurore's knowledge, this was also known as the Giant pathway. Sequence 9 was Warrior, Sequence 8 was Pugilist, and Sequence 7 was Weapon Master. Sequence 6 was a level that experienced a qualitative shift compared to previous Sequences. They were called Dawn Paladins, who possessed the strength of Giants and could create Sunrise Gleam in a certain area to eliminate illusions and negative or evil energies.

They could also condense full-body armor known as Dawn and weapons they were proficient with. Among them, the most potent was the two-handed broadsword, the Sword of Dawn. With the Sword of Dawn, they could unleash their Sequence's most powerful attack—Hurricane of Light. This could annihilate the human body, exterminate vengeful spirits, and even wound evil spirits.

Considering Ryan's performance, Aurore believed he was a Sequence 6 Dawn Paladin, though he probably hadn't become a Sequence 5 Guardian yet.

Aurore had always felt that these three official investigators were on par with her. Now, she realized that each of them was stronger than the last. If she wasn't prepared, she wouldn't stand a chance in a one-on-one battle.

It was well-known that in the official categorization, Sequence 9 and Sequence 8 were considered Low-Sequence Beyonders. They had some unique abilities compared to ordinary people, but their flaws were apparent. Sequence 7 to Sequence 5 were Mid-Sequence, where they began to possess

extraordinary powers. Sequence 4 and above belonged to the demigod domain, making them worthy of the title 'High-Sequence Beyonders.'

According to some members of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society who had infiltrated official organizations, when dealing with ordinary Beyonder matters, a team of one Mid-Sequence and two Low-Sequence Beyonders would be assembled to carry out the first round of investigations. They would then deploy more high-level forces depending on the situation. This time, facing the anomalies in Cordu, the Intis officials had sent three Mid-Sequence Beyonders. They weren't taking the situation lightly.

However, even this joint investigation team didn't seem to be enough for Cordu.

Aurore had shared all this information with Lumian, and the siblings listened intently as Leah continued.

“In the dream divination, I saw Shepherd Pierre Berry. He emerged with a few nails wrapped in hair and stuffed them into the hay,” Leah described the scene in the simplest terms.

Haystacks... nails and hair... Lumian instantly recalled his discovery under the guidance of the three sheep.

He had also found some nails wrapped in hair in the haystack of the Berrys' sheep pen.

He frowned and said, “Are those Jean Maury's nails and hair? Was he killed by Shepherd Pierre Berry at the Berrys' place?”

Aurore nodded.

“Originally, the custom of hiding one's nails and hair outside the house was to prevent it from affecting one's family horoscope and luck. It was limited to family members with a bad reputation or who committed suicide, as well as those who were murdered by their relatives. But because Jean Maury was killed at the shepherd's house, Pierre Berry still carefully cut off the other party's nails and took some hair to hide in the haystack outside the house?”

“No wonder it was there before... That must be from their previous victim. How many people have they killed in secret?” Lumian scoffed under his breath. “At this point, he's still worried about messing up his horoscope and luck?”

“Imbecile!” Valentine cursed aloud.

They had been briefed by Lumian earlier and knew about the three sheep, the haystack, and the old folk customs they represented.

After discussing for a while and confirming they wouldn't try anything else for now, Leah and the others bid Lumian and Aurore farewell and returned to Ol' Tavern.

The siblings didn't mention their speculations at noon, afraid it might deter the official investigators from cracking this case open from the inside. After all, they could only be affected and might escape with outside help.

After clearing the table and helping wipe it down, Lumian returned to his room and lay on the bed.

With conflicting thoughts and many unanswered questions, sleep eluded him for a long time. He relied on some meditation techniques to slowly calm his mind and finally drifted off.

In the room shrouded in faint gray fog, Lumian opened his eyes and sat up straight.

He lowered his gaze and looked at his chest. His vision seemed to cut through the thin cotton shirt and flesh, allowing him to see the black thorn tattoo and the bluish-black pattern underneath.

Is this the root cause of this endless loop? Lumian thought.

The black thorn symbol was at the heart of the issue, and the bluish-black pattern brought protection from that ominous force, allowing Cordu to be salvaged.

All of this could be traced back nearly six years.

Lumian remembered clearly that he had still been a street rat at the time. He had barely survived by relying on seeming unthreatening due to his young age and extreme ruthlessness.

Then, one day, he met a dying old man.

Maybe it was because he had picked up some street smarts, or maybe because the old man reminded him of his only family, P  p  , who had raised him until his early teens but sadly passed on, Lumian chose to lend a hand.

Though he ultimately failed to save the old man's life, Lumian still sent him to the crematorium and buried him in a public grave.

He had found the bluish-black symbol on the old man's corpse during this. From then on, he often dreamed of the vast expanse of gray fog.

His luck also turned sour, and he began struggling to scavenge enough food. Thankfully, he met Aurore not long after.

Chapter 83 A Sudden Encounter

Phew... Lumian exhaled steadily and reined in his racing thoughts. He slung his shotgun over his shoulder and clipped on his axe. Leaving the semi-subterranean two-story building perched on the edge of the wild, he strode into the dream ruins.

Tracking a familiar route through the dense forest, he crept deeper into the tangle of collapsed houses towards the hulking "peak" of crumbling red stone.

Thick fog clung to the somber sky, weeds rasped at his feet. The whole world was darkened, bleak.

Soon Lumian left familiar ground behind, plunging into the heart of the ruins.

He scanned the ruins constantly, cataloging every trace, theorizing how each might be useful in a fight.

Caution slowed his progress but hunting taught caution and carefulness above all.

Finally, a clue. Fresh footprints, seemingly human. Tucked behind a jumble of rubble at the road's edge, cunningly concealed.

This one knows how to move unseen... Capable of eliminating traces to a certain extent... Lumian observed for a while and made a preliminary judgment.

He suspected that it was something similar to the shotgun monster, perhaps bearing clues to Sequence 8 of the Hunter's pathway.

Experience and Aurore's speculation told him three types of monsters likely infested these ruins.

The first bore no boons or Beyonder characteristics, like Noodle Man or the mouth-orifice monster, probably under the sway of that hidden being called Inevitability.

The second displayed Beyonder characteristics but no boons, typified by the shotgun monster. The black thorn on Lumian's chest would suppress them. It meant that they were tainted by some hidden corruption, resulting in them turning into monsters.

The third showed no boons or Beyonder characteristics, mere humans or creatures twisted into horrors like the skinless monster he first found.

Whether monsters with both boons and Beyonder characteristics existed, he and Aurore suspected so but lacked proof.

Therefore, it was very likely that a monster with Hunter traits possessed Beyonder characteristics!

Lumian tracked the footprints and discovered two lethal traps along the way, validating his hypothesis.

Had he not tread carefully or lacked his Hunter abilities, he might have become prey instead of predator.

Soon, the footprints grew fresher.

This meant a high probability of encountering his target if he pressed on.

Rather than rushing to "greet" his target, Lumian circled around and located an ideal ambush spot.

Then he began to dance.

Amid the intangible melody, he stamped with powerful steps and spun in a gentle, graceful semicircle, reenacting Noodle Man's strange, mysterious sacrificial dance.

His skills were rough and rusty, but with his Dancer power, Lumian felt his chest heat up.

After undoing his shirt and confirming the black thorn symbol's materialization, Lumian climbed into the collapsed house's center and settled into his chosen hiding place.

He quickly glanced into the distance and spied a figure digging a trap.

It was certainly a "person," but its whole body was charred black, and crimson flames blazed on its surface endlessly.

No way it's a Pyromaniac, right? I've landed a big one... Lumian was both thrilled and vexed.

He was thrilled that the primary ingredient matching a Sequence 8 Provoker had appeared. What troubled him was that it was much stronger than the prey he had anticipated.

Pyromaniac was a Sequence 7 of the Hunter pathway. According to Aurore, it was a Sequence that had undergone a qualitative change. Its ancient name was Fire Mage.

Lumian believed that with him being a Hunter, a Dancer, and possessing the black thorn symbol, as long as he wasn't careless, hunting a Provoker monster shouldn't be an issue. However, he wasn't confident against a Sequence 7 Pyromaniac.

As long as the monster attacked him from afar, it might not be weakened by the black thorn symbol!

After some thought, Lumian decided to retreat.

He planned to devise an effective plan to handle the flaming monster after setting up a targeted trap.

His initial idea was to head home and dance the dance that could summon the strange objects in the surrounding area and see what kind of adverse effects it would have on him when allowing the remnant spirit of the mouth-orifice monster to possess him.

If it wasn't severe and acceptable, he could borrow the other party's ability in the future, such as Invisibility.

Lumian wasn't too worried about the aftereffects of being possessed or whether the vengeful spirit would be willing to leave after successfully possessing him.

In any case, he was in the dream ruins. As long as he didn't die on the spot, he could recover fully after returning to reality to rest.

Just as Lumian made a move, the flaming monster suddenly raised its charred face and bulging eyes, looking right at him.

Not good! Lumian thought. Instead of climbing, he jumped down from his hiding spot.

Almost instantly, a massive fireball smashed into where he'd been, sending bricks and rocks flying, erupting in flames.

Lumian staggered in a sorry state. When he crashed, he could barely control his body. All he could do was tumble and roll to cushion the impact.

If not for Dancer's extraordinary flexibility, his muscles and ligaments would have torn from the twisted movement.

By the time Lumian stood up again, the flaming monster had already materialized atop the collapsed building. Phantasmal fire ravens coalesced from flames around it.

Upon seeing this, Lumian felt as if surrounded by soldiers with guns trained on him.

Without hesitation, he bolted towards the collapsed building where the flaming monster stood.

Faced with such a scene, he felt the only way to turn defeat into victory was by using the black thorn symbol on his chest.

And this seemed to require closing the distance!

Thud thud thud!

As Lumian ran, half the Fire Ravens descended from the sky and detonated behind him, causing heat waves to surge and explosions to reverberate.

The remaining illusory Fire Ravens banked and locked onto their running target.

At that moment, Lumian arrived at the bottom of the collapsed building, no more than five meters from the flaming monster.

In the next second, the charred monster enveloped in crimson flames froze. The remaining Fire Ravens around it were instantly snuffed out.

It's working! Just as joy flooded Lumian's heart, the flaming monster pivoted and fled from the collapsed building in the opposite direction.

“Hey, don't run!” Lumian blurted subconsciously.

He circled around the ruins before him and chased after the flaming monster.

Lumian chased it for two blocks. As the monster was too swift, he completely lost sight of it.

At this moment, the searing sensation in Lumian's chest vanished.

He had no choice but to stop and adjust his breathing, gearing himself up to track the footprints and watch out for traps.

As he panted, Lumian's gaze swept around and suddenly froze.

Not far away, a figure loomed in the doorway of a half-collapsed building.

The figure wore a black robe with a hood. Aside from that, it seemed ordinary enough, except it had three faces on its head.

The front face was an old man's. Milky eyes, scraggly brows, wrinkled as a prune.

The left was in its prime, chiseled and stubbled, icy blue eyes gleaming.

The right was a child's—one less than five years old—smooth and round, blue eyes wide with innocence and ignorance.

The three-faced monster! That three-faced monster! Lumian was truly frightened.

As he was chasing after the flaming monster, he'd wandered deep into the ruins and stumbled on the three-faced monster!

Despite mastering the mysterious Sacrificial Dance and activating the black thorn symbol, Lumian had no intention of using the three-faced monster as target practice. His instincts screamed that this foe was lethal. According to the mysterious lady's words, even weakened by the black thorn symbol, the monster could easily slay a weak hunter.

Lumian's plan was to steer clear of the three-faced monster's territory and practice on other monsters. He wanted to test the black thorn mark's power against enemies of varying might before deciding whether to hunt the three-faced monster.

Unexpectedly, the monster left its domain and stumbled upon Lumian!

Eh... would a little dance of contrition perhaps appease you? Lumian thought, taking an involuntary step back.

At the entrance of the crumbling building, the three-faced monster in a black robe and hood retreated a step.

Lumian spun around.

The three-faced monster mirrored him.

Lumian bolted.

The three-faced monster fled as well.

Lumian, who had meant to flee and try dancing, ran a few paces before sensing something amiss.

He halted and glanced back. By chance, he saw the three-faced monster retreating.

“...” Lumian stared, stunned.

After a moment, Lumian vaguely grasped the situation. He touched his face and muttered, “Am I that scary?”

The three-faced monster's actions reminded him of their first encounter.

Back then, Lumian stole a glance at the three-faced monster and cowered in terror, praying to the Eternal Blazing Sun to conceal him. Though the three-faced monster clearly peered toward his hiding spot, it didn't seem to notice anything. Instead, it took the initiative to retreat further away.

So it wasn't the Eternal Blazing Sun that shielded me, nor was I very fortunate. Did the three-faced monster sense my “specialness” and flee? Lumian nodded thoughtfully, hazarding a guess.

In the dream ruins, can monsters of a certain level directly perceive my “specialness” without me half-activating the black thorn symbol?

Chapter 84 Dirk

Lumian broke the monsters in the dream ruins into three levels based on how the flaming monster and the three-faced monster reacted when they encountered him.

The lowest level ones acted on instinct alone. As soon as they saw him, they would attack. When he activated or partially activated the black thorn symbol on his chest, they would immediately give up and submit fully to his mercy.

The higher level ones would hunt him down before he partially activated the black thorn symbol. After he finished the sacrificial dance, they would cunningly opt to escape. But they couldn't sense the existence of the black thorn symbol beyond five meters. The flaming monster likely only remained in fear and associated the corrupting aura from the seal with Lumian.

At a certain level, Lumian didn't even need to activate or partially activate the black thorn symbol on his chest, nor did they need to be within five meters of Lumian for them to obviously feel his “specialness” and show conspicuous dread.

Were there any other levels above these three? Lumian felt there should be at least one, at most three. For instance, the kind that wouldn't fear the partially activated black thorn symbol so much that they immediately fled. They would persist in attacking despite significant weakening. Or for example, the kind that were so high in level that they wouldn't react to the black thorn symbol at all...

Therefore, while Lumian was delighted that he could scare off the three-faced monster and seemed capable of doing whatever he wanted in the dream ruins, he didn't dare to be careless.

Disregarding terrifying beings that might be higher in level than the three-faced monster, just the flaming monster could incinerate him to ashes without being impacted by the partially activated black thorn symbol with its powerful long-range attack.

With this in mind, Lumian hesitated for a moment before stealthily delving deeper into the dream ruins along the three-faced monster's escape route. He planned to scout the blood-colored “peak” and surrounding area today to gather information for the subsequent unlocking of the dream's secret.

Along the way, he proceeded to a relatively concealed area less easily discovered, on guard against any monsters that might suddenly burst out.

Perhaps because the three-faced monster had just passed by, frightening off the other monsters, Lumian didn't see a single 'person.' He successfully passed collapsed buildings and gray gravel everywhere and arrived at the base of the blood-colored “peak.”

There was still a circle of ruins, but unlike the outer layers, the buildings here hadn't collapsed, but seemed to have completed a warped reassembly as if they had a life of their own. They were interconnected, as if a strange thorny city wall had been built.

The “wall” was dyed a faint grayish black. The windows and doors of the original buildings were embedded messily on its surface. Some were open, permitting one to see the shattered tables and chairs inside. Some were tightly shut, as if they couldn't be pulled open.

Lumian scanned the area and gazed up at the blood-colored mountain behind the city wall.

At this range, even with the heavy fog blanketing the sky and the dim light filtering into this realm, Lumian could see every detail of the mountain peak clearly.

It was made of rocks and soil, no more than 30 meters tall, but it gave off a towering menace. The color on its surface was unnatural, neither the brownish-red of the rocks nor the reddish-brown of the soil. They seemed dyed at a later time, making it look sinister.

According to Aurore's novels and paranormal magazines, this might be dyed red by human blood... Lumian thought. He raised his gaze higher and higher, glancing at the peak shrouded in thick fog.

Suddenly, an unseen wind blew away some of the fog.

The peak came into view.

Sitting cross-legged was a giant four to five meters tall with three heads.

“He” was naked and had three heads growing from “his” neck. One faced left, revealing anger, greed, and hatred. Extremely evil. One faced forward with a warped expression of pain and regret. The other faced right, holy, with pity in its eyes.

The giant had six arms stretching out at odd angles. Its entire body, including the three heads, was made of flesh and organ fragments stitched together with pus flowing everywhere. Especially, transparent blood-like tears dripped from the head facing Lumian.

Seeing the giant, Lumian's mind buzzed as he heard a terrifying voice seeming infinitely far yet right beside him.

His head felt as if it had been split open with an axe, and intense agony occupied his mind, robbing him of all thoughts.

Thick and thin blood vessels protruded from his body surface, so red that they were about to be ignited.

When Lumian “woke up” from his near-death state, he realized that he was curled up on the ground, rolling back and forth, as if this wasn't enough to resolve the pain in his body.

His vision was blurry, stained with blood, and everything he saw was misty.

In this state, Lumian felt that even the skinless monster could easily kill him. However, perhaps because the black thorn symbol had been completely activated, no “person” dared to enter this area.

As for the giant at the summit of the blood-colored mountain, it was unknown if it couldn't leave or if it had been affected by the black thorn symbol and hadn't attacked Lumian, who had nearly lost control.

After regaining his composure, Lumian stood up and noticed the linen shirt beneath his dark-colored jacket stained with blood and sweat.

What the hell was that? The more he pondered it, the more dread crept in.

With a mere glance, the black thorn symbol had flared to life and nearly overpowered him. It posed an even greater threat than wielding the Dancer's might.

He dared not recall the giant's visage, only deduce what he could from fractured impressions.

An advanced variant of the three-faced monster?

Sheer corruptive influence?

Aurore was right, there are sights not meant to be seen...

It occupies the crimson mountaintop, the heart of this dreamscape in ruins... Does that signify it's integral to the dream's mysteries?

As his thoughts raced, Lumian forced down the urge to gaze up at the mountain's summit.

If he took another look, it would spell certain death!

He resolved to withdraw for now and return to the real world to recover. He would resume his exploration at night.

Lumian spun on his heel, ready to retrace his steps out of here, when a sudden clanging caught his ear.

What's that? Curiosity seized him, and he devised a plan to sidle over for a peek.

Of course, he would proceed judiciously, not hastily or rashly. He tucked himself into a half-collapsed building facing the city wall to recoup his spirituality.

After a time, Lumian again performed the mysterious sacrificial dance.

He seemed to morph into a high priest of the hidden existence, gratifying that existence with movements that could marshal the ambient forces of nature.

When a burning sensation flared in his chest, Lumian halted and honed in on the intermittent clanging.

Skirting the blood-hued mountain crest and dilapidated city wall, dancing anew, he spied an orange glimmer through a half-open brownish-red wooden door in the 'wall.'

A flickering orange flame shone behind a half-open wooden door.

Clang! Clang! Clang!

The figure in the room was reflected in a grimy, diagonal glass window above. It looked humanoid, but too spindly in the dim light.

In that moment, the figure raised a hammer-like object and smashed it down with formidable might.

Clang!

Another metallic clash rang out, crisp and ominous.

A blacksmith? There's a blacksmith in these ruins? Lumian guessed, relying on his knowledge.

Trusting that the thorn emblem on his chest hadn't vanished yet, he dropped into a crouch and darted to the glass. He turned and peered in.

Though Lumian's eyes weren't healed, and his vision unclear, he could just make out the scene beyond the city wall.

Shattered furniture and debris littered the space. In the center was a stove, its top half gone, housing a fire. On top, an iron plate cobbled together, mismatched.

A pewter-black dirk lay on the plate, twice as long as a normal dagger, strange patterns coating its surface. Just looking at it made Lumian dizzy.

Clang!

The figure pounded the dirk like a skilled blacksmith, hammer blows ringing out in a steady beat.

'He' wore a black robe, decay marring the side of its face visible to Lumian, even revealing bone in places.

Another monster? Is it picking up where it left off when it was still human? That dirk isn't run-of-the-mill. It's a tad sinister. I wonder if it's a Sealed Artifact or a Beyonder weapon, Lumian thought.

He was less than three meters from the rotting 'blacksmith,' but the other party didn't seem to detect the black thorn symbol on his chest. 'He' kept pounding the dirk in silence.

Given that the black thorn symbol was about to vanish, Lumian recoiled and tiptoed away from the window.

He had only taken a few steps when the searing sensation in his chest disappeared.

The next moment, a creaking sound came from behind him.

Lumian whipped around and saw the mahogany door swing open.

The black-robed 'blacksmith' emerged. There were four or five putrid gashes on 'his' face that bared its bones. Half of 'his' left eyeball dangled from its eye socket. It looked like a corpse that had been dead for some time.

'He' clutched the hammer in 'his' right hand and the pewter-black dirk in 'his' left. Lumian's reflection glinted in 'his' lifeless eyes.

“F*ck!”

Lumian couldn't help cursing.

He instantly grasped the situation.

The 'blacksmith' monster had clearly been influenced by the black thorn symbol, so 'he' had been 'quietly' pounding the malicious dirk, feigning nonchalance.

When the black thorn symbol disappeared, 'he' immediately seized 'his' weapon and emerged to hunt him.

How cunning!

Chapter 85 Appropriating

As soon as Lumian confirmed the situation, he pivoted on his heel and bolted.

He couldn't leverage the environment here, and he was clueless about the 'blacksmith' monster's abilities. What choice did he have but to run?

Once he escaped to the nearest natural trap and it was still in hot pursuit, he'd consider counterattacking.

Thud thud thud!

Lumian didn't run in a straight line but snaked left and right in an S-shape.

He worried it might predict his trajectory and hurl a fireball or long-range weapon.

The old Lumian could run on a curve, but he'd have to throttle back at points. Otherwise, his body couldn't take it and he'd eat dirt.

Things were different now. He was extremely limber, far beyond ordinary humans. His muscles and tendons easily let him arch his body in a smooth semicircle.

With this move, he felt that unless the 'blacksmith' monster had special abilities, he should reach the ruins seven to eight meters away.

Suddenly, dread gripped his heart with premonition.

Without thinking, Lumian plunged forward, riding his momentum.

Sizzling, sharp pain seared his back. The evil pewter-black dirk had sliced him, spurting bright red blood.

The 'blacksmith' monster had caught up in a single bound and swung its weapon.

It seemed to have shortened over a dozen steps to one!

Lumian endured the pain and rolled twice before finally touching a half-collapsed building.

He vaulted in with a whoosh. Slithering through the walls and furnishings as cover, he bolted out the back entrance.

Being back in this area was like a tiger returning to the deep mountains or a trout in a river. He adeptly wove through the ruins and buildings, at times circling around, other times going straight.

Within ten seconds, he arrived at a natural snare he had spotted earlier. He ducked behind the roof that had slid to the ground and held on for the 'blacksmith' monster to turn up.

He didn't try the sacrificial dance because he felt there wasn't enough time. The other side clearly had some distinctive tracking prowess.

As time passed, Lumian didn't spot the 'blacksmith' monster, nor did he catch any sound approaching. He didn't note any indistinct footprints around him.

It didn't chase after me? Lumian couldn't help but frown.

He was glad, but he also felt this situation was a bit odd.

After some thought, he guessed the 'blacksmith' monster couldn't leave the city wall, so the moment he went into the building ruins, it gave up chasing him.

Considering he had already suffered two injuries and was drained, Lumian decided not to explore further.

Leveraging his terrifying flexibility, he treated the wound on his back and headed toward the edge of the ruins.

After walking a long time, he looked at the familiar collapsed buildings and suddenly felt something was off.

It has already... been more than enough time to finish a meal. The dream ruins... aren't especially large. I should be able... to walk out in a straight line. Why haven't I... escaped yet?

The more Lumian contemplated it, the more he sensed that something was amiss. His thoughts were becoming foggy and disjointed, as if severe exhaustion was overtaking him or he was about to drift off to sleep.

He forced himself to focus, relying on his Hunter abilities to locate the path, hoping to get out of these ruins immediately.

However, as he walked, he couldn't help periodically slipping into a daze. Eventually, he didn't even know what he was doing.

After an indeterminate amount of time, Lumian's eyes abruptly reflected the flickering orange glow of a fire.

He found himself back by the "city wall" and the chamber where the 'blacksmith' monster was.

Not good...

I'm... under... its influence...

No wonder... it didn't... chase me...

It seems... I can't force my way... out. I can... only... think of a solution... starting... with that monster...

Lumian's thoughts slowed and fogged.

As he approached the chamber involuntarily, he struggled to perform the mysterious sacrificial dance.

Since he had to confront the 'blacksmith' monster, his greatest reliance was the black thorn symbol on his chest. He had to activate it immediately!

Amid the sonorous but intermittent noises from within, Lumian saw the door emitting orange flames open. The monster in a black robe holding a pewter-black dirk and hammer appeared in the doorway.

Unlike before, much of the rotting marks on its face had vanished, and fresh flesh had grown over the wounds that exposed its bones.

Its eyes lit up as it gazed at Lumian with undisguised greed and amusement.

This made it appear more human than zombie.

At the same time, Lumian saw himself reflected in the glass window.

His face was pale, and his eyes were dull. Some of his skin showed signs of decay.

He looked more like a zombie than a human.

Lumian instantly realized the truth.

I will... take its place... It will... walk out... as a human...

Lumian, who didn't know what ability had affected him or when he had encountered the anomaly, only had one thought—giving it his all by finishing the sacrificial dance and partially activating the black thorn symbol on his chest.

He slowly but firmly began his dance, but the 'blacksmith' monster didn't seize the opportunity to attack. It seemed to be patiently waiting for the outcome, afraid that additional actions would impact its fate.

As he edged closer and danced each step, Lumian's vision grew increasingly blurry. He only knew that the 'blacksmith' monster's smile was becoming more and more human.

After advancing some distance, Lumian's mind buzzed.

He heard a terrifying sound that seemed to come from an infinite distance yet also seemed close at hand.

This wasn't clear enough and was very illusory. It only caused some disorder in his mind, preventing him from experiencing a near-death experience.

Amid his grogginess, Lumian's thoughts cleared, and his vision returned to normal.

He felt a burning sensation in his chest and knew that the partially activated black thorn symbol meant trouble.

Almost simultaneously, he saw the smile on the 'blacksmith' monster's face freeze.

Numerous silver and black warts protruded from the monster's face, head, and hands.

The wicked dirk in its hand buzzed and vibrated violently, as if trembling in fear.

Pa!

Amidst a crisp metallic snap, a jagged fracture shot across the pewter-black dirk's demon-etched blade.

The 'blacksmith' monster crumbled into silver-black warts and warped maggots crawling across its black robe.

The maggots and warts stopped moving, turning into lifeless gray flesh.

Lumian gawked at the scene, dumbstruck. It was as if the enemy had suddenly committed suicide mid-battle while he stood by helpless.

After over ten seconds, he snorted at the fleshy lumps in bemused disbelief.

“So you dragged me here to attend your own funeral?”

“You should've said so earlier. No need for all this pomp and show. I'd have gladly shown up and applauded your swan song!”

He strode over to the chunks of flesh the 'blacksmith' monster had crumbled into and scrutinized them intently.

Nothing else seemed amiss. Save that the slightly cracked pewter-black dirk still quivered minutely, like a wounded animal encountering its mortal foe.

Lumian's heart raced as he looked down at his chest, sensing the black thorn symbol beneath his clothes.

He realized the truth and grabbed the pewter-black dirk with his right hand.

The evil dirk trembled vigorously but didn't struggle or resist. It was docile.

As soon as he held it, the heat in his chest intensified.

Something leaked out, resonating with the pewter-black dirk.

Amidst the metallic hum, Lumian grasped a greater understanding of the sinister dirk in his grip.

It was a corrupted Beyonder weapon, gaining power and a semblance of life.

In other words, Lumian hadn't encountered a 'blacksmith' monster—the dirk was the true menace. The 'blacksmith' monster was its puppet, or rather, wielder.

It could gradually transform any living being who touched its cold steel and drew blood into a zombie, robbing them of will and reason. They would always clutch it and act on its desires.

Those who were cut by it, spilling crimson, would have their destiny appropriated by its edge.

When seizing one's fate, it could inflict no further harm.

Just now, it had bartered the fate of the 'blacksmith' monster becoming a puppet to exchange for Lumian leaving the wilderness as a human.

If there was nothing to trade, he had to kill the target completely to strip a portion of his fate from him and store it in the dirk.

This ability came from the Dancer's corresponding Sequence 5, Fate Appropriator!

Therefore, after the corruption in Lumian's body was half-activated, it resonated with the evil dirk through flesh and blood, letting some knowledge seep out.

Otherwise, he could only get someone to use divination and figure out patterns to grasp the pewter-black dirk's abilities and characteristics. He could also rely on his repeated experiments to gather information.

After sorting out the additional knowledge in his mind, Lumian looked at the evil dirk that was still trembling in his hand and chuckled.

“Actually, I don't mind you appropriating some of my destiny, but you'll have to bear the consequences!

“If you can swap with my fate of being trapped in this time loop, I'll kneel and grovel before you three times.

“Tsk, but randomly appropriating destinies will only hurt you!”

The pewter-black dirk merely trembled, not daring to respond.

Lumian now understood why the dirk was so obedient.

First, the half-activated black thorn symbol suppressed it. Second, encountering Lumian had traumatized the sentient weapon.

Exhaling, Lumian said, “From today onward, your name is Fate Appropriator Dirk. Got it?”

The dirk bobbed up and down twice, as if nodding.

“Unfortunately, you're only a Beyonder weapon. Your power will gradually fade. You could have lasted two years, but now, severely damaged from your foolishness, you'll only survive half a year,” Lumian said regretfully.

In fact, he could replenish Fate Appropriator by extracting power from the corruption in his body, but that required finding someone to repair the crack.

No sooner had he spoken than the heat in his chest quickly vanished. The minute was up.

Wasting no time, he hurled Fate Appropriator Dirk away as if it were red-hot coal.

Chapter 86 Another Idea

The pewter-black dirk clattered to the ground, bouncing a few times before coming to rest.

Lumian heaved a sigh of relief and muttered to himself, Without the protection of the half-activated black thorn symbol, this thing's a ticking time bomb...

Luckily, he already knew how to avoid the sinister dirk's adverse effects.

Lumian approached the grayish-white remains and picked up the black robe left behind by the monstrous 'blacksmith.'

He tore off several strips of cloth and wrapped them tightly around his right hand, as if applying a thorough bandage.

Then, Lumian grasped the Fate Appropriator Dirk.

The pewter-black dirk remained unresponsive the entire time.

Prepared to discard the item in his hand at any moment, Lumian relaxed and whispered, “I need to find a scabbard to carry it around safely.

“Do I have to permanently bandage my left or right hand just to have time to protect myself when I need to draw the blade in an emergency?”

“This thing is dangerous, but it's also incredibly powerful. Besides its short lifespan, it outclasses all the Beyonder weapons Aurore mentioned. Many Level 3 Sealed Artifacts might not even compare.”

While muttering to himself, Lumian swaddled the Fate Appropriator Dirk in layers of black cloth.

Once wrapped securely in three layers, he slid the evil dirk into his left belt with a sense of relief.

Having done this, Lumian rubbed his temples and, despite his physical and mental exhaustion, entered the room from which the 'blacksmith' monster had emerged. He searched the room meticulously.

Aside from the smoldering furnace, he found nothing.

Lumian's investigation concluded cautiously and carefully as he retraced his steps.

Unhindered by fate, he successfully left the ruins, crossed the desolate wasteland, and entered his semi-subterranean two-story building.

Not in a rush to sleep, Lumian left the room, stowed the Fate Appropriator Dirk, and rested briefly. Once his spirituality recovered and his needs were met, he performed the bizarre dance—alternating between madness and distortion—in his bedroom.

He aimed to attract the peculiar creatures in the vicinity and let one of them possess him to test the negative effects.

Having sensed the fear and reverence of the flaming monster, the three-faced monster, and the Fate Appropriator Dirk towards the black thorn symbol, he was no longer as terrified of allowing certain entities to possess him.

His corruption was far more powerful!

Moreover, he was quite exhausted and would soon fall asleep. When the time came, even if the strange being he harbored was reluctant to leave or caused severe negative effects, he would recover after resting in the real world for a day.

Is this what Aurore often calls cheating and exploiting loopholes? Lumian mused as he danced.

As the dance intensified, his spirituality expanded, merging with a certain force of nature that radiated in all directions.

Gradually, Lumian, seemingly fused with his surroundings, sensed something entering the area.

He lifted his leg, took a step, and spun around. Without activating his Spirit Vision, he saw three translucent figures materialize at the bedroom's glass window.

They were the familiar skinless monster, shotgun monster, and mouth-orifice monster.

Seems like my spiritual perception isn't strong enough, or my level is too low. I can only 'summon' them... Lumian didn't mind. He drew the ritual silver dagger Aurore had given him and sliced a wound on the back of his left hand.

A drop of crimson blood quickly welled up but didn't spread.

On the spot, it congealed and took on a demonic hue.

The three ghostly figures outside the window instantly stirred.

Lumian deftly used the ritual silver dagger to pick up the congealed drop of blood. With a final flourish of his dance moves, he pointed the blade towards the mouth-orifice monster.

He was inviting the entity to latch onto him.

The monster, bearing three black marks on its upper body, opened its vortex-shaped mouth as if responding to Lumian's call, but it hesitated to take further action.

That's right. The window is still closed, and the monsters in the dream ruins don't dare enter my house... Lumian swiftly grasped the situation. In sync with his dance rhythm, he leapt, landing gracefully on the desk before the window.

With his left hand, he slid the tightly shut glass window open. Then, he extended the ritual silver dagger, bloodied tip first, outside the house.

Instead of devouring the drop of blood and entering Lumian's body through the ritual silver dagger, the maw-like creature retreated seven or eight meters, floating amidst the howling wind, still mesmerized by the dance.

"Hey, come over!" Lumian, on the verge of completing his final dance step, couldn't help but urge anxiously.

The three hazy, translucent figures outside the house drifted further away. As Lumian's dance came to a halt, they vanished entirely.

"..." Lumian stared at the scene, baffled by the mouth-orifice monster's refusal to possess him.

He carefully reviewed the dance and the bloodletting process, certain he had made no mistakes.

Could it be that its fixation remembers that I killed it, so it's unwilling to attach itself to me?

But the knowledge that came with Dancer didn't mention this. Logically, it should be more eager to possess me and take revenge... Lumian pondered.

Recalling the three-faced monster's flight upon seeing him, he formulated a new hypothesis.

I'm corrupted by an evil god and sealed by a greater being. Are these strange creatures terrified and unwilling to attach themselves to me?

This was an extremely rare circumstance. It made sense that Dancer's corresponding mystical knowledge wouldn't cover such anomalies.

The more Lumian considered it, the more he believed this was the cause, and the angrier he became.

“So you guys just watch me dance, but aren't willing to possess me?”

“What's this called? In Aurore's words, freeloading!”

Lumian's disappointment grew as he realized that, before reaching Contractee, one of Dancer's abilities was rendered useless. He couldn't attract strange creatures and exploit their traits or powers.

He consoled himself, hoping that only the dream ruins' creatures behaved like this. After all, they were closely tied to the owner of the black thorn symbol.

I wonder what I can attract in reality. Will they dare to attach themselves to me... Lumian mused, walking to his bed and lying down.

His mood lifted as he glanced at the Fate Appropriator Dirk, ensconced in layers of black cloth, on the cabinet beside him.

This powerful Beyonder weapon would aid him in delving deeper into the dream ruins and uncovering their secrets. The only drawback was its inability to be brought into the real world.

I wonder if that mysterious lady can help bring it out, just like how she brought the potion and ritual ingredients into the dream ruins...

But the next time I explore the dream ruins, I'll have to trouble her to bring the Fate Appropriator Dirk back in...

She's definitely unwilling to keep providing help. She's clearly averse to hassle and prefers slacking off...

With these thoughts, Lumian drifted into a deep sleep.

When Lumian woke up, the sky was an unnatural shade of inky black. Only a smoldering crimson smear of sunset remained in the distance, filling him with a bleak melancholy as if the entire world had abandoned him.

Adjusting his emotions, Lumian left the room and descended to the first floor.

Aurore was busy cooking dinner.

“Are your eyes okay?” Lumian went over to help.

“Pretty much.” Aurore tucked a stray lock of blonde hair behind her ear and widened her eyes at him.

Lumian peered into their light blue depths but saw nothing amiss beyond a hint of blood.

Aurore continued frying the lamb chops and casually asked, “Discovered anything interesting in the dream ruins this time?”

Lumian began chopping ingredients for the last dish, recounting his encounters.

“That blade is powerful indeed.” Seeing her brother was unharmed, Aurore stifled her concern with a laugh. “If it were me, I'd never call it Fate Appropriator Dirk. Too straightforward, lacking charm.”

Lumian asked curiously, "What would you name it then?"

Aurore smiled and said, "Fallen Mercury!"

"Fallen Mercury it is!" Lumian nodded immediately.

He had to use the name his sister gave!

Aurore burst out laughing.

"Actually, it's not the best name, but that's all I could think of on short notice.

"Hmm, the monsters' behavior confirms our theory. The black thorn symbol on your chest, or rather, the corruption in your body isn't simple. It can suppress something powerful to an extent and relates closely to that hidden existence.

"Perhaps the key to the loop lies with you."

"Yes." Lumian nodded. "Let's see what secrets the dream ruins hold. Then we'll wait patiently for the twelfth night."

So far, they had investigated almost all abnormalities. Only the tomb where the owl was had not been explored.

It was far too dangerous. Aurore didn't believe she, Lumian and the three foreigners could face it. Her only hope was asking Madame Pualis for help, but she clearly didn't intend to interfere, merely waiting for the opportune moment.

Lumian didn't hold much hope recounting how the strange creatures his dance attracted were hindered by the two symbols on his body, preventing success.

"Grande Soeur, any ideas to circumvent this restriction?"

Aurore scooped up the lamb chops, pondering a moment.

"Since it's impossible to invite a 'god' to possess you, why not try giving an order?"

"Order?" Lumian's eyes lit up.

Aurore nodded slightly.

"Since those strange creatures fear the corruption in your body and the seal of that great existence, use their fear like a fox assuming the authority of a tiger. Order them to attach themselves to you. Right, use ancient Hermes when you try."

"That's an idea..." Lumian understood what his sister meant by "a fox assuming the authority of a tiger."

Aurore carried the plate of lamb chops to the table and said, "I'm not sure if ordering them under those circumstances will work. After all, I'm not a Dancer, and I don't have any relevant mysticism knowledge. However, you won't lose anything by trying."

"That's true." Lumian took over at the stove and said with a grin, "It'll just be another wound while I bleed a little. I'll recover after a nap. What do you think the three-headed giant at the top of the mountain is? What does it have to do with the hidden existence and the corruption in my body?"

Aurore set the plates down and turned around.

"Don't you think you're overestimating me? I've never encountered or heard of such strange things."

Without waiting for Lumian's response, she added thoughtfully, "However, there are many similar concepts in the myths and legends of my hometown. They have three heads and six arms, gods or demons..."

She continued, "And according to our guesses, the dream ruins are closely related to the corruption in your body. There's a high chance that the giant's image reflects some aspects of the hidden existence."

"You said that the honorific name or description of that person is different from the usual ones. Every segment contains three aspects and three forms that symbolize a certain authority. Therefore, it's very normal to correspond to three heads, just like how the three-faced monster has faces that represent the three stages of humanity."

"As for why it has six arms and why it sits atop the blood-colored mountain, there's too little information. I can't guess."

"Hmm... Focus on the circle of 'walls' for the time being. I feel that we can find many useful clues."

"Alright." Lumian followed his sister's instructions and placed the sliced shredded potatoes into the pot, stir-frying them with oil.

Aurore ended the topic regarding the dream ruins and said to Lumian, "When you went to bed in the afternoon, I thought about it seriously and decided to invite the three foreigners to stay with us."

"Why?" Lumian was puzzled.

Aurore watched her brother bustling around and sighed.

"We assumed the padre would react like a normal person, but we can't forget that some of his followers have already accepted a boon. In a way, they're corrupted."

"According to the mysterious lady, the boon's effects concentrate on the body and mind. So, besides gaining abilities, one's personality will shift. The more boons a person takes, the more severe the change will be, especially if they can't handle it."

“Right.” Lumian recalled the mysterious lady's words.

She warned that if the body couldn't endure such a massive “boon,” the recipient would either turn into a monster, become a puppet of an unknown entity, or transform into someone else who'd treat things they cherished in the past with indifference.

Aurore concluded, “Thus, Shepherd Pierre Berry and his followers, who've received the boons long ago, might disregard the padre's plan and seek greater vengeance.

“If the five of us stick together and support each other, we can effectively improve our chances of survival until the twelfth night.”

Lumian pondered her proposal and agreed.

But he raised a logistical issue.

“So, where do they stay? In the living room downstairs?”

“It won't work as well if we're on separate floors.” Aurore glanced at her brother, who approached with a plate of stir-fried shredded potatoes. “You can move into my room, and we'll let the three foreigners use your bedroom and the study upstairs. They can divide the rooms among themselves.”

“Huh?” Lumian didn't expect such an arrangement. “I'll share a bed with you?”

Aurore couldn't help but laugh.

“No big deal. Strong, independent women don't sweat the small stuff!”

“Huh?” Lumian didn't grasp his sister's last remark.

Aurore chuckled, explaining, “I'm saying that given our situation, let's not get hung up on trivial matters.

“Do you want to share a bed with Ryan and Valentine, or should I sleep with Leah?”

“True, I can't fully trust them.” Lumian nodded.

The three official investigators only cooperated with the siblings because they were trapped in a loop. Who knew if they'd secretly manipulate the situation while they slept together, planning to capture the two wild Beyonders once the loop ended?

Aurore chuckled and suggested, “If they're concerned about us and decide to share a room, you can sleep in the other one.”

“Better to stay in the same room.” Lumian felt the walls offered little protection.

Aurore said no more, only adding, “Remind me to restock our food supply tomorrow. After Lent, the villagers will grow stranger. We might need to defend this place or hide in the nearest high mountain pasture.”

Then, she urged her brother to eat dinner.

Before sunset, Lumian left the semi-subterranean two-story building, ready to invite Ryan and the others to move into his home.

Upon seeing Ol' Tavern in sight, Lumian spotted a few familiar faces.

Pons Bénet was strolling down the village's main road with his three thugs.

Almost instantly, the black-haired, blue-eyed, musclebound villain noticed Lumian.

He couldn't help but clamp his legs together, as if recalling some excruciating agony.

Eyeing Lumian, Pons Bénet faced a dilemma.

He craved revenge, but feared history would repeat itself with him and his men beaten to a pulp.

As Pons Bénet wavered, Lumian flashed a brilliant grin.

“Hey, isn't this my rebellious son?”

He strode towards the villain and his three thugs who had drowned Reimund, poised to pummel them.

Pons Bénet saw this and didn't hesitate. With his eyes, he signaled to the three brutes beside him, ordering them to charge.

The three thugs immediately rushed at Lumian and pulled out short sticks, iron rods, and other weapons.

Lumian sped up too.

Just as he was about to collide with the three thugs, he abruptly leapt at one of the enemies.

This unorthodox move caused the three thugs' attacks to miss.

Lumian grabbed the target's shoulder and did a somersault.

His back seemed to flex like a spring, helping him grab the enemy and build up enough force for the roll.

In an agile, exaggerated forward somersault, Lumian hurled the enemy and smashed him into the ground.

Bang! The thug's vision darkened. His whole body ached, and he couldn't rise for a moment.

At that instant, Lumian landed behind the other two, only seven or eight steps from Pons Bénet.

He crouched slightly and charged at the villain. As Pons Bénet frantically dodged, he shouted, “Quick, quick! Stop him!”

The remaining two thugs hastily turned and chased after Lumian. Pons Bénet composed himself and brazenly charged at the bastard, preparing to stall him before they surrounded him.

Just as the two thugs were about to catch up to Lumian, who had deliberately not run at full speed, suddenly stopped and squatted.

Amid grinding sounds, not only did the two thugs fail to hit their target's back, but because they couldn't halt in time, they lost their balance and collided with Pons Bénet.

Lumian pounced like a tiger and grabbed the two thugs' necks. He lifted their bodies and smashed their heads together.

Bang!

The two thugs' foreheads instantly swelled and they fainted on the spot.

Immediately after, Lumian tossed away the burden and exerted strength with his feet. He twisted his body and slid behind Pons, who had just risen.

He grabbed the other party's arms and bent them backward.

With a cracking sound, Pons Bénet let out an extremely pained scream.

“How is it? Does it feel good?” Lumian asked Pons Bénet with a smile as he hoisted him and marched out of the village.

Before long, he arrived beside the river, grabbed the back of Pons Bénet's head, and forced him underwater.

As bubbles surfaced, Lumian lifted Pons Bénet's head, turned his face, and asked with a smile, “Does it feel good to bully others?”

Pons Bénet's face was soaked, and he looked to be in extreme agony. Snot and saliva flowed out, making it impossible for him to answer.

“Doesn't it feel great?” Lumian's voice suddenly intensified. He grabbed the villain's head and smashed his forehead into the water, hitting the cobblestones.

Bright crimson liquid seeped out of the water. Pons Bénet struggled uselessly with his legs, unable to lift his head.

Gulp. Gulp. As time dragged on, his struggles weakened.

Only then did Lumian haul him up. He thrust out his left hand and smacked Pons across the face.

“I'm asking you, does it feel good to bully others?”

Pure terror filled Pons's eyes. He didn't know how to respond.

Just then, a figure ambled over to the riverside. It was the hooded Shepherd Pierre Berry.

He glanced at the pathetic Pons and gently told Lumian, “We're all from the same village. Enough. You want to kill him?”

Lumian immediately released Pons's head and stood up. He grinned at Pierre Berry, replying,

“I'll listen to you. Make sure this jerk doesn't bully others again.”

Without waiting for Pierre's response, Lumian strode past the shepherd into the village.

On the second floor of Ol' Tavern, in Ryan's room, Lumian relayed his sister's thoughts to the three official investigators.

Ryan exchanged a look with Leah and Valentine and nodded.

“Smart thinking. In a situation like this, spreading ourselves too thin just makes us an easy target. We can move into your house now.”

As they headed to Lumian and Aurore's house with her luggage, Leah asked Lumian amidst her tinkling sounds, “So what's the plan for the tomb?”

“The plan?” Lumian snorted. “You think we can just waltz in there?”

Leah smiled, relieved. “Good, you're still being cautious.”

Ryan chimed in, “What we mean is if whatever's in that tomb really leads to the cycle's key, it'll show up during the twelfth night ritual. And if it's got nothing to do with the source of the cycle, why take the risk going in?”

“In short,” Lumian said, catching on, “we just wait patiently for the twelfth night?”

Chapter 88 EQ

Ryan nodded at Lumian's confirmation.

“You can interpret it that way, but if there are any other abnormalities worth investigating, we can't ignore them.”

“Alright.” Lumian actually shared the same thought.

He hadn't even planned on participating in Lent, just in case he couldn't resist attacking when he saw the “performance” at the celebration.

The four of them rapidly reached Lumian's residence, where Aurore led them to the second floor.

Now dressed in a pure white cotton dress that accentuated her down-to-earth charm, Aurore pointed to Lumian's bedroom and study, offering the three official investigators a choice.

“You can choose either room.”

Ryan glanced at Leah, seeking her opinion.

After pondering for a few seconds, Leah raised her right hand, pointed at the study with a smile, and said, “That recliner looks pretty good; I could sleep there. Ryan, bunk in that room with Valentine.”

While Aurore had the same question in mind, Lumian asked, “You trust us that much?”

He assumed the three foreigners would opt to sleep in the same room on the floor, fearing an attack if they were separated.

Leah grinned and answered Lumian's half-mocking, half-doubtful query, “My divination tells me the two of you can be trusted.”

As she spoke, she walked into the study. Accompanied by tinkling sounds, she lay on the recliner with a contented expression.

Aurore found Leah intriguing and approachable. She smiled and advised, “A friend once told me that you can believe in divination, but not blindly. Divination is not all-powerful.”

“My mentor said something similar, but we're all in the same situation. If I don't trust it, what else can we do?” Leah replied with a grin, snuggling into the recliner.

Aurore didn't mind relinquishing her favorite seat. She pulled over a chair and sat down.

Their study also served as a small living room. It occasionally hosted afternoon tea parties, so there was ample space and chairs.

Ryan surveyed the corridor briefly before returning to the study. He said to Aurore and Lumian, “I have some suggestions.”

“Please, go ahead.” Aurore politely assumed an attentive posture.

Ryan nodded and offered, “First, when you sleep at night, don't close any doors. Let everyone be in the same space. This way, no matter where an abnormality occurs, we can react promptly.

“Second, considering we've destroyed the altar, someone might attempt to deal with us before Lent. Starting tonight, everyone will take turns on night duty. Yes, from 10 p.m. to 8 a.m. the next morning, two hours per person...”

How professional... Aurore muttered almost silently.

Lumian glanced at her, as if asking why she hadn't thought of it.

Aurore spread her hands slightly, signaling her lack of experience in team operations.

She then turned to Ryan and Valentine, stating confidently, “Lumian will cover the period between 10 p.m. and midnight.”

Leah and the others didn't object to this arrangement.

From their perspective, it made sense. Among the five present, Lumian had the lowest Sequence and least experience. He was most prone to mistakes on night duty, but from 10 p.m. to midnight, others would still be awake to cover for him.

Lumian knew his sister's intentions extended beyond this.

He had to explore the dream ruins undisturbed after falling asleep.

After finalizing the first schedule, Valentine volunteered, “I'm used to sleeping and waking early. I'll take the 6 a.m. to 8 a.m. slot.”

“You get up early to welcome the sunrise?” Lumian teased instinctively.

Valentine's gaze on him softened.

“Yes, I want to greet the rising sun and praise the light.”

His eyes seemed to say: “As expected, only a devout believer of the Eternal Blazing Sun understands me.”

Hey, I'm mocking you, brother! Lumian felt slightly defeated by Valentine.

In the Eternal Blazing Sun Church, “brother” was a term used among believers. The two mainstream organizations within it, the Order of Preachers and the Brotherhood Minor, employed the term.

"I'm not used to being woken up mid-sleep," Leah chimed in. "I'll take the midnight to 2 a.m. slot."

Aurore nodded.

"I like to wake up late. I can take 2 a.m. to 4 a.m. And don't wake me for breakfast tomorrow. I'll get up around noon."

"Leave the rest to me." Ryan claimed the worst period with satisfaction.

He also entered the study and found a chair to sit on.

A conversation flowed effortlessly. Aurore, though seldom venturing out, possessed a wealth of knowledge spanning from astronomy to geography. She had her finger on the pulse of the latest trends, scandals, and supernatural events in metropolises like Trier and Backlund. This left Leah, Ryan, and the others secretly in awe of her.

"As expected of the renowned author, Aurore Lee," Leah couldn't help but exclaim. "No wonder you can tackle any theme."

Aurore inquired with genuine curiosity, "Have you read my novels?"

Leah's eyes sparkled as she replied with a smile, "I've been reading your first novel since I was a young girl. By the way, I'd love your autograph!"

As she searched for papers and fountain pens, the silver bells on her veil and boots jingled.

"Are those Sealed Artifacts?" Having heard Lumian mention Leah's performance with the four bells, Aurore couldn't resist asking.

Leah produced a stack of post-it notes and a fountain pen, casually responding, "Yes, they can proactively warn me and enhance my divination abilities. The downside is they're rather noisy and not exactly discreet. Plus, the wearer must dress fashionably, with a dress being mandatory. It has to look good, or it'll be not only useless but also potentially misleading or even dangerous."

Aurore chuckled. "I can't decide if these bells were originally a man or a woman."

Lumian agreed. If they were from a woman, it was a remnant of her vanity. If a man, he was undoubtedly a pervert.

Leah offered a faint smile.

"That involves some confidentiality, so I can't say any more."

She stood up, handing Aurore a post-it note and the fountain pen.

Aurore signed and asked, "Which genre of my novels do you prefer?"

"Romance," Leah replied without hesitation. "Your first novel, *Eternal Love*, left a deep impression on me."

"I wrote that book too early," Aurore admitted with a hint of embarrassment. "I was young, and my writing skills were unpolished. I lacked experience. Many scenes felt rigid, and much of the dialogue was overly emotional and unrealistic..."

Lumian chimed in, "But it's sincere and original."

Having read his sister's novel, he knew it dealt with a couple's separation through life and death, interwoven with adventure, misunderstandings, and terminal illness. It was a trailblazing piece in the Intis literary world.

Naturally, this drew criticism from conservative authors and critics. They echoed Aurore's self-assessment and claimed it couldn't qualify as literature, deeming it a mere pedestrian novel.

"That's right," Leah agreed, retrieving the paper and pen. She looked at Aurore and asked with a smile, "Ms. Author, would you consider becoming our informant at Bureau 8?"

Seeing Aurore's surprise, she continued, "Our primary objective in targeting wild Beyonders is that they're unpredictable and may lose control or cause disaster at any moment. Otherwise, they can use their Beyonder powers for all sorts of malicious purposes to satisfy their desires.

"Over the past few days in the village, I've carefully observed both of you and confirmed that you're orderly Beyonders. Prior to arriving in Cordu, the information we gathered indicated that you haven't committed any wrongdoing on the surface.

"This meets our recruitment standards. Moreover, once you become our informants, you won't need to worry about being targeted by official Beyonders."

Aurore found the proposition enticing. She glanced at Lumian and gave a slight nod.

"I'll think about it. I'll give you my answer when the cycle is over."

Lumian immediately understood why his sister had looked his way.

I don't have a problem, but will a heavily corrupted guy like you bomb the test?

After chatting briefly, the siblings bid adieu to Leah and the others and headed back to Aurore's room.

Aurore perched on the edge of the bed and glanced at the door. She hushed her voice and muttered, "Leah's socially adept."

"What do you mean?" Lumian also sensed Leah had made the vibe harmonious in the study.

Aurore smiled and said, "She took the initiative to bring up my novel and asked for my autograph to bond with me, so she could pitch recruiting me. The recruiting was to fix the distrust and barriers we have, easing teamwork the next few days.

"The whole process seemed natural, not off-putting or wary. That's a sign of high EQ. You should follow her lead!"

Lumian remembered the chat and said self-deprecatingly, “If it were me, I might've been booted by now.”

Amused, Aurore leaned back and said, “At least you know yourself!”

She ruffled her blonde hair and said, “I'll nap a bit. My eyes haven't fully healed so I need more rest. Rouse me at ten and I'll keep watch over you. It's your first night shift, so better safe than sorry.”

Lumian didn't object and agreed instantly. He watched his sister lie on the bed unhesitatingly, pull the blanket over her and close her eyes.

The room instantly turned eerily silent.

Lumian quietly switched off the electric lamp and drew the curtains.

Then, he sat on the chair by the desk and quietly watched his sister sleeping peacefully under the crimson moonlight. His heart gradually calmed down.

Chapter 89 Nothing Happened

The wind outside rustled, almost silent. Lumian allowed his thoughts to wander in this tranquil state as instinctive questions ran through his mind.

There's still light in the corridor. Leah must be awake still, reading Aurore's book collection...

Pitch darkness blankets my bedroom. Valentine should be resting in bed. I wonder what Ryan's up to...

Heh heh, they didn't bring any alcohol on their first visit. They've no clue about Dariège's customs...

If the cycle lifts, Grande Soeur can turn informant for Bureau 8. When the time comes, she won't fret over any investigation if she goes to Trier... As for me, I needn't undergo any special tests as an informant, right?

Now we've a full theory of the whole affair. The sole thing we can't be sure of is the owl and the dead warlock in the tomb's role...

If they bewitched the padre and company, causing the abnormality to achieve some goal with the twelfth night ritual, why did they do nothing but monitor my progress exploring the dream ruins?

Could it be that, like Madame Pualis, they await a specific time or the ritual on the twelfth night, intending to complete the disrupted part? Is that why they want no changes to the loop restarting it ahead of time?

Their actions in turn prove the key to the loop lies with me. That's why they repeatedly try to confirm how far I've explored the dream ruins...

If I unlock the dream's secret before the twelfth night comes and master recycling the corruption, will they ignore the possibility of the cycle restarting ahead of time and attack me to hold me in custody?

Yes, it's very likely they still have their memories...

As all sorts of thoughts raced through his mind, Lumian suddenly heard faint commotion.

“Baa...”

It was a sheep's bleat, as if from afar.

Lumian instantly thought of the three people turned sheep and Shepherd Pierre Berry.

Don't tell me he really wants to attack us dead of night? Lumian stood up and listened intently.

Outside the window was but the wind's sound through leaves and branches. No bleating.

It seemed Lumian so engrossed in his thoughts was hallucinating.

But he didn't think so because he felt slight heat in his left chest.

The black thorn symbol seemed to have appeared again!

This meant an invisible force closely tied to the hidden existence had quietly invaded the room.

Lumian had no time to think. He rushed to the bed and shook Aurore.

“Wake up! Wake up!” he shouted in a hushed voice.

He instinctively worried Leah, Ryan and Valentine would sense something amiss with him.

Aurore opened her eyes, her light-blue eyes clearly dazed.

“What time is it?” she asked in a weak voice. Obviously she was still not fully awake.

“There's a situation,” Lumian said decisively before continuing, “Half past nine.”

They were one of the few families in the village with wall clocks.

Aurore's eyes snapped open. She bolted upright, threw out her right hand, and massaged her temples.

She had no time to consider what she might see that she shouldn't.

If she couldn't pinpoint the anomaly and confirm the problem as soon as possible, she might not have to worry about seeing anything again. The dead had no need for eyes!

Aurore scanned the room, her gaze darkening as if reflecting strange, indescribable lights and shadows.

Lumian seized the chance to tell his sister about the sheep's bleat he'd heard in the distance and the triggered heat in the black thorn symbol on his chest.

Aurore frowned. “But I didn't detect anything...”

“The burning in my chest remains,” Lumian rumbled.

He felt inexplicably terrified. The darkness around him was not simple. An indescribable danger lurked.

Aurore scrutinized every corner of the room, trying to find the unknown.

Silently, Lumian broke into a cold sweat—a stark contrast to the searing heat in his left chest.

He deliberated for a moment and said, “Why not tell Ryan and the others? Maybe they can find something.”

Aurore pondered, then nodded.

“Use your sudden sense of impending danger as an excuse.”

“Right.” Lumian opened his mouth, about to yell outside—then froze.

“What is it?” Aurore asked, alarmed.

Lumian frowned. “The heat in my chest is dimming fast...”

Meaning the black thorn symbol was “fading” rapidly.

“The danger invading our room has left?” Aurore mused. “Because we prepared, it did nothing?”

“Perhaps.” Lumian turned to the corridor and bellowed, “Something's wrong!”

Ryan appeared in the doorway in the blink of an eye, followed by Leah, then Valentine, who looked jolted from sleep.

Without waiting to be asked, Lumian recounted what had happened, using his sense of danger in place of the burning in his chest.

Ryan listened intently, not doubting this was Lumian's hallucination. He sighed,

“It's useful indeed to take turns on night watch.

“Mostly it's boredom, but if it saves everyone, it's almost life and death.”

As he spoke, he conjured pure Sunrise Gleam around him, circling every room on the second floor.

Though he couldn't find the sinister power, he could at least sanctify the environment.

Leah paced around, muttering under her breath. Her veil and boots jangled ominously, then fell silent just as abruptly.

Finally, she said to Aurore and Lumian, “It was dicey just now. On top of that, whatever it was could block my Sealed Artifact from giving me any warning. I'm afraid these stupid bells will only go off once that thing really starts targeting someone. But now, it has left.”

“Well, that's reassuring.” Aurore sighed in relief.

“Maybe it wasn't a single creature.” Lumian relaxed and grinned. “Could've been more than one.”

Ryan and the others were silent.

“That's even worse!” Aurore lashed out at Lumian and told the investigators, “Now that the alarm's off, let's get back to our schedule.”

She didn't mention who might've snuck in to attack them. There were too many possibilities: Shepherd Pierre Berry, the unknown corpse in the tomb, or the shady deputy padre.

Without solid clues, speculating would just waste time. Better to wait until daylight.

For now, they just had to remember that nighttime held real danger. Someone was out to get them, so they'd need to stay on high alert.

Once Leah and the others had gone to their rooms, Lumian glanced at the wall clock and asked Aurore, "Want to sleep in a bit more?"

"No way, waking up and crashing this late sucks." Aurore stretched her arms overhead. "Ugh, just to handle emergencies, I got this dress with pockets for spell components and useful stuff. I didn't even dare roll over, scared I might stab myself. I slept like a board."

As she spoke, she hopped off the bed and strode to the window. She yanked back the curtains and peered outside.

Cordu was silent. Many houses were still lit up.

"I thought that owl would come after us for sure, but there's no sign of it out there." Aurore surveyed the area and explained to Lumian.

Lumian nodded.

"That was my guess too."

He then leaned in and whispered everything he had figured out to his sister.

"Not bad," Aurore said with a smile. "You're getting better at analyzing situations. I've got nothing to add." She paused. "But we can't take matters into our own hands. That tomb is too dangerous..."

At this point, she exclaimed, "At dawn, we'll pay Madame Pualis a visit and tell her your theory. Let her know the Warlock's and owl's motives might affect her escape from this time loop at that precise moment."

"I'll go myself," Lumian said. He didn't want Aurore anywhere near Madame Pualis who had designs on her.

Aurore didn't argue. She only reminded him, "Watch your back. Don't piss her off, or else..."

She eyed his abdomen meaningfully.

Aurore sighed and said, "Truth is, that mysterious lady at Ol' Tavern is clearly stronger, but she wants nothing to do with this time loop. No way she'll help us investigate that tomb."

"Yeah," Lumian agreed.

He then said, "Still, I'll drop by Ol' Tavern tomorrow to see if I can run into her. What if she changes her mind?"

"Fair enough." Aurore didn't object.

They chatted in hushed tones until midnight.

After Lumian relieving his post with Leah in the study, he returned to Aurore's room. He lay beside his sister, inhaling her familiar scent and sinking into the soft mattress. Sleep eluded him.

“What's wrong?” Aurore asked, noticing his tenseness.

“Just not used to this,” Lumian said carefully.

Aurore scoffed.

“What happened to the bold Lumian I know?”

Lumian didn't reply. Aurore exhaled slowly and smiled.

“Remember when you first started tailing me? You were scared I'd slip away and refused to sleep at night. You were super vigilant.”

“Yeah, I do.” Lumian drifted into the past. “Back then, you'd hum me a lullaby and let me doze off to the sound of your voice.”

As soon as the words left his lips, a familiar melody reached his ears. Light and soothing, it calmed his body and mind.

Leaning against the bed, Aurore gazed into the deep crimson dark before her. She hummed the lullaby from her hometown, soft and wistful.

It was a song their mother had crooned when Aurore was just a kid, coaxing her to sleep.

“Go to sleep, go to sleep...”

Lost in the gentle tune, Lumian gradually unwound and slipped under.

Lumian woke up amidst the faint gray fog.

He scoped the room and realized that he wasn't in his sister's room. He was still in his own room.

Chapter 90 Trying Again

Indeed, no matter where I fall asleep, I'll wake up here. Lumian tumbled out of bed and glimpsed at the Fate Appropriator Dirk beside him. No, Fallen Mercury. He paced to the window in the faint gray fog.

He planted his hands on the desk and cast his gaze at the blood-colored “peak.”

At the summit of the mountain, the fog was dense and stratified, utterly masking the three-headed, six-armed colossus.

I nearly lost control with just a glance the last time. I really have no idea what to do if I have to face it in the future... Lumian sighed in frustration.

He didn't sink into such emotions for long and quickly broke free because he still had numerous things to do.

Lumian contorted himself into a deranged dance within his bedroom, emitting a distorted spiritual pulse. Combined with the stirred forces of nature, he 'broadcasted' himself in an unspecific direction.

Before long, he sensed approaching entities and saw the translucent forms of the mouth-orifice monster, the shotgun monster, and the skinless monster reflected in his glass window.

Lumian was in no hurry. Following his dance, he withdrew a ritual silver dagger and stabbed the back of his left hand.

A droplet of crimson swiftly surfaced and congealed into a bead atop his skin, guided by his spirituality and the forces of nature.

The trio of creatures shifted but did not dare enter Lumian's abode or attach themselves to him.

Lumian spun around, elevated his left hand and bellowed, "I!"

Shouting in the ancient tongue of Hermes, it caused the room to rock faintly.

Employing his ritual dagger, Lumian collected the droplet of blood and aimed it at the mouth-orifice beast. "I command you! Onto me!"

Again in ancient Hermes. An imperceptible gust blew.

The translucent form of the mouth-orifice monster trembled visibly, as if seized and vigorously shaken by an invisible entity.

Just as Lumian completed his dance, believing it would have no effect, the mouth-orifice monster hurtled into the house and landed upon the ritual silver dagger, devouring the droplet of crimson.

It then convulsed violently as it tunneled into Lumian's body through the silver dagger.

Lumian could not help but gasp, his mind flooded with thoughts of 'So hungry, so hungry, starving, starving.'

He hastily turned and stared at the full-length mirror on his wardrobe. He saw his visage was pallid and tinged cerulean. His maw gaped wildly, resembling a cadaver more than a living being.

Success... Lumian exulted gazing at his reflection as if regarding a stranger.

It felt somewhat alien.

He resisted his intense hunger and attempted to sense the mouth-orifice monster possessing him.

It was like acquiring an additional brain. Much of it brimmed with hunger, bloodlust, madness and more. Instinctively, he had a proclivity to harness its characteristics.

Lumian could utilize his will and spirituality to magnify one of those instincts. It equated to employing the mouth-orifice monster's traits or abilities.

Without a second thought, Lumian chose invisibility.

In the blink of an eye, his reflection vanished from the full-length mirror.

Everything from his body to his clothes to the ritual silver dagger had disappeared.

Lumian took a few steps forward and back, but he couldn't spot any traces of himself in the mirror or glass.

Of course, his footprints and scent remained.

Lumian stuffed the silver dagger Aurore had given him, raised his arms, and punched the air a few times.

With each whooshing punch, the full-body mirror stayed empty until Lumian swung a fist at its surface.

The moment his knuckles connected with the mirror, his outline materialized. His face was pale with a tinge of blue, and his eyes glinted dangerously.

Unbelievable... No matter what I do, the invisibility stays on, but I can't mute it. However, as long as I attack the mirror, I lose invisibility... I thought it was optical invisibility like Aurore said, but it seems to be a result of mysticism... Attacking something forms a bond with it, rendering me invisible to its 'gaze?' Lumian hovered his right fist over the mirror.

After verifying the effects and limits of invisibility, ravenous hunger overwhelmed him. He stomped downstairs into the cellar and found two steaks.

If not for his rationality, he would've sunk his teeth into the dark meat.

Lumian abandoned the ingredients and grabbed the cheese he had stockpiled, realizing he had to fry the steak medium rare with no fire set up.

He didn't care if it was clean or delectable. Like a ghost starved to death, he shoved food into his mouth.

After eating a few cheese slices, Lumian finally satiated his intense hunger.

Looks like this is the downside of the mouth-orifice monster... he evaluated seriously. Luckily, I can still control my body and haven't lost my mind... That thing is obsessed with revenge but overpowered by even greater fear... If I utter 'leave' in ancient Hermes now, it'll bolt faster than anything...

By now, Lumian was sure the mouth-orifice monster's possession had acceptable side effects. Invisibility would become a potent weapon to explore and battle in the dream ruins.

Coupled with Fallen Mercury, he felt his combat ability had more than doubled.

Lumian returned to the dining table, pulled out a chair, and sat down, patiently awaiting the possession's end.

Soon, his spirituality nearly depleted.

He didn't strain himself. He stood up and performed some seemingly insane moves.

It was the same dance to attract monsters. Its purpose was to force the possessing creature out.

Without Lumian's command in ancient Hermes, the mouth-orifice monster's blurry and translucent figure flew out and vanished through the glass window on the first floor without glancing back.

Lumian couldn't help but make a self-deprecating remark. "Don't run so fast. You're acting like I have a cesspit on me."

He knew he could maintain possession for about three minutes given his spirituality. Once invisible, his consumption rate would double.

Of course, that was under normal circumstances. In danger, he could strain himself to last longer. But that risked losing control, best avoided if possible.

Though the mouth-orifice monster had left, Lumian still felt ravenous. He lit the stove and fried the steak medium well.

Then, he picked up his knife and fork and quickly cut, forked it, and put it into his mouth. He felt that the juice locked in the meat was delicious.

Lumian devoured two steaks in under ten minutes, sating his hunger.

Looking at the empty plate, he sighed, “Three minutes of possession needs at least two hours to recover...”

This didn't only mean eradicating hunger, but a recovery of spirituality too.

Lumian knew his current state wasn't fit for exploring. He found flour, sugar and other bits, using the oven at home to bake biscuits.

With cheese, this would be his main source of fuel in the ruins.

Had he more time, he'd have gotten jerky too—food shepherds often carried. As a Cordu resident, he knew how to make them.

Busy with this, Lumian pondered his dream ruin plans.

First, circle the city wall. Then hunt that flaming beast...

Only by amping up my strength can I better explore and unravel the secrets of the dream...

The flaming monster's strength was at least Sequence 7, and there was a high chance it was from the Hunter pathway. Its various abilities perfectly squashed Lumian. He hadn't planned on dealing with that dude anytime soon, hoping to first seek out prey that was weaker and on par with a Provoker. But now, scoring Fallen Mercury and Invisibility gave him a certain level of hope.

When his spirituality had mostly recovered, Lumian placed the baked biscuits and sliced cheese into a cloth pouch and slung it around his waist.

Then, he seriously wrapped his left hand in layers of white bandages and grabbed the evil dirk called Fallen Mercury.

Hauling his shotgun and axe, Lumian strode towards the door on the first floor with the other stuff he needed.

Suddenly, he had the feeling that he was a fully armed hunter preparing for a dangerous hunt.

Many thoughts surfaced in his mind.

My first move is to track the flaming monster's movements. Then I'll use Invisibility to sneak up on it and stab it with Fallen Mercury.

Before that, I'll hunt a weak monster and steal its bad fate. Then swap that fate with the flaming monster's.

I can't do the sacrificial dance while possessed and half-activate the black thorn symbol. Otherwise, the mouth-orifice monster will bolt from my body immediately. So, how do I get away from the flaming monster after hurting it and wait for the fate swap to finish? It'll easily lock onto me through my traces. Invisibility alone won't cut it...

Lumian hadn't figured out the last part yet. That depended on early intel.

As he opened the door and went into the wilderness, he had an odd feeling.

If I can successfully hunt the flaming monster, my Hunter potion will be fully digested.

In the area where he'd met the flaming monster before, Lumian held his pewter-black dirk in his left hand. He carefully searched for any traces, on high alert for sudden attacks.

After circling cautiously for nearly ten minutes, he finally found signs of the flaming monster.

In a collapsed house's corner, there were black scorch marks on a stone unlike any around it.

Where there's one, there's two. Lumian quickly tracked the flaming monster's location and slowly, cautiously followed its trail.

When the marks were fresh, he stopped and began to dance.