

Inevitability 91

Chapter 91 Scheming

Lumian danced to lure in strange creatures. His objective: to use Invisibility to slip closer and analyze the flaming monster's habits and movements, gathering intel for future hunts.

Within a mere 30 to 40 seconds, he used ancient Hermes to reattach the mouth-orifice creature to himself.

An overwhelming hunger consumed Lumian, compelling him to open his mouth. It was as if his mouth had sprouted vortex-shaped teeth.

Swiftly, he stifled the ravenous and insane thoughts flooding his being, pulled out a small biscuit and a cube of cheese, and shoved them into his mouth, chewing and swallowing.

Simultaneously, he strengthened the mouth-orifice creature's invisibility, causing him to vanish from sight.

Having quelled his hunger, Lumian tried hard to clamp his mouth shut to prevent the aroma of biscuit and cheese from escaping.

He then trailed the flaming monster along the road's edge.

Before long, Lumian spotted the charred monster, its every limb ablaze.

It was constructing a new trap in the clearing from before.

You're already a monster, yet you're still so dedicated? Lumian silently jeered.

Naturally, he understood this was merely an expression of the monster's instinctive behavior.

Lumian dared not approach too closely, halting beside a crumbling wall at the clearing's perimeter.

He studied the flaming monster for a few moments before glancing back at the path he had traversed. He noticed that, although his footprints were faint and concealed in less conspicuous areas, they still existed.

Lumian eyed his current position and hatched a plan.

Closely monitoring the monster's movements, he seized a larger rock and hurled it to the side. As it flew, he pressed his right hand against the decaying wall and vaulted up, landing securely atop the wall.

Crash! Lumian's actions were flawlessly masked by the sound of the rock striking the ground.

After changing his vantage point, Lumian felt much more at ease. Monitoring his dwindling spirituality, he intently observed the flaming monster.

He discerned that the flaming monster's traps were neither concealed nor challenging to detect. They didn't exploit any logical vulnerabilities or inertidriven movement. They were simple and exposed.

The most elementary example was the flaming monster stretching a rope slightly above one's ankle between two ruined buildings across the clearing.

Any human or monster with normal vision could easily discover this trap.

At first, Lumian didn't grasp its purpose, but after placing himself in the monster's position, he gradually discerned its potential significance.

The intent of such traps was not to directly harm or ensnare enemies, but to forge an environment that enabled Hunters to exhibit their full potential.

In the heat of battle, one struggled to observe the environment and maintain situational awareness. Constantly distracted by these limitations, they occasionally had to slow down or alter their stance to evade traps. Hunters possessed the unique ability to remain alert to their surroundings at all times and exploit the environment to their advantage.

This disparity widened the gulf between their strengths.

An open conspiracy... Lumian nodded in understanding, recalling Aurore's words.

Suddenly, he perceived the flaming monster as a stern instructor imparting valuable lessons about Hunters to him.

Simultaneously, he remembered the content of Aurore's novel: Stealing from a master is punishable by death!

Eventually, the flaming monster ceased its activity. Its charred face instinctively scanned the vicinity.

Then, it strode towards the edge of the clearing near Lumian, flames dancing from its body.

Following a predetermined route to the next location? Lumian mused to himself, his excitement mounting.

For Hunters, discerning a quarry's path was invaluable.

Most traps lay hidden along such routes!

As the flaming monster ambled, it scrutinized its surroundings and examined the ground, remaining vigilant.

This caused Lumian to furrow his brow. He realized that a higher Sequence Hunter wouldn't be easily handled.

The most effective counter to Beyonders was often individuals or objects of a higher Sequence from the same pathway, even if the gap was only one or two Sequences.

I'm better at your strengths than you are. You may lack what I possess!

If not for his Dancer-related abilities and the Fallen Mercury dirk, Lumian wouldn't have dared to entertain any designs on the flaming monster.

Seven to eight seconds later, the flaming monster reached the edge of the clearing, approximately five to six meters from the crumbling wall.

As before, the flaming monster's gaze instinctively roved.

It paused, as if observing footprints near the wall's edge that appeared to have been left by someone.

Thump, thump. Lumian's heart pounded involuntarily.

He wasn't prepared to hunt the flaming monster just yet.

Despite the five to six meters between them, Lumian hesitated to kill the enemy with Fallen Mercury, knowing the latter hadn't stored an exchangeable fate.

If a fight erupted, he'd be hunted before he could activate the black thorn symbol!

Lumian struggled to control his heartbeat and breathing. His right hand hovered over the black cloth covering Fallen Mercury's blade, ready to tear it away at any moment.

If he leaped with full force from his current position, he might reach the flaming monster and avoid a long-range battle that favored his opponent.

Two or three seconds ticked by. The flaming monster averted its gaze and moved on.

It didn't seem to have noticed Lumian's footprints.

After covering another ten meters, the flaming monster suddenly spun around.

Flames erupted from its body, condensing into a massive, searing white fireball.

The fireball rocketed like a cannonball toward the spot where Lumian had been perched at the edge of the crumbling wall.

Following his instincts, Lumian, who was crouching on the wall, leaped down to the other side, where the flaming monster had laid its trap.

Boom!

A fiery blast erupted, causing the already unstable wall to collapse.

Upon landing, Lumian rolled twice to avoid falling debris and the shockwave laced with flames.

He immediately sprang back up, maintaining his "invisibility" as he sped through the traps left by the flaming monster and headed toward another exit in the clearing.

The flaming monster couldn't detect its enemy right away, so it focused on searching for clues.

Finally, it spotted a series of faint footprints.

By then, Lumian had reached the rope stretched between two collapsed buildings, easily jumping over it and fleeing the clearing.

He dashed to a natural trap and shook off his pursuer.

Having deactivated his invisibility, Lumian cursed in pain, "Too treacherous, too treacherous! One of these monsters' heads is worth two of Pons's. After finding my footprints, it pretended not to see them and deliberately increased the distance between us, fearing it might be defeated!"

As Lumian cursed, he felt like he had learned something new.

Of course, there were drawbacks to this approach: the increased distance gave Lumian room to escape.

Furthermore, his invisibility meant the flaming monster couldn't lock onto him right away. His chances of escaping were high.

After catching his breath and restoring some energy, Lumian mused while eating biscuits and cheese, “Based on what just happened, as long as I plan carefully and strike at the right moment, I can rely on Invisibility to create distance and escape to a safe location, waiting for the fate exchange to complete.”

Lumian's Invisibility would break upon attacking, but as long as he avoided contact, he could use it again.

This valuable insight emerged from his reconnaissance.

However, he also realized a problem. As a Hunter, I didn't bring water when I went 'hunting in the mountains!' I'm so thirsty!

Both cheese and biscuits required water.

The jerky Lumian intended to make in the future fell into this category too.

After resting briefly, he resolved to hunt Noodle Man, strip its bad fate, and store it in Fallen Mercury. He couldn't risk being defenseless in an emergency again.

A puppet's fate also belonged to Fallen Mercury and could be exchanged. But Lumian wasn't a wielder. He couldn't swap his fate with others. If he could, he'd gladly give away the bomb on him.

About thirty minutes later, Lumian tracked down Noodle Man, the grotesque hodgepodge of limbs and features.

Having completed the ritualistic dance in advance, Lumian strode towards Noodle Man openly. As expected, he found Noodle Man prostrate on the fetid ground, trembling uncontrollably.

Very obedient... Lumian praised, gripping an iron-black axe in his right hand and the pewter-black Fallen Mercury dirk in his left.

Though Fallen Mercury dirk's malignant aura seeped into Lumian's skin even without contact, he had long grown immune to its corrupting influence. What might drive ordinary Beyonders to losing control was nothing to him.

Lumian glowered at the pathetic Noodle Man cowering before him, retracting his gaze from the gnashing maw on its forehead.

“According to Aurore, death is a mercy for your kind. The sooner you expire, the sooner your suffering will end.”

As he spoke, Lumian crouched and plunged the pewter-black dirk deep into the back of Noodle Man's neck.

Noodle Man spasmed, but did not resist or struggle.

Lumian wrenched the dirk free and gripped his axe, swinging the weapon down with fluid grace.

The axehead cleaved through flesh and bone, sending Noodle Man's head tumbling across the ground with Fallen Mercury's swipe.

Blood erupted from the severed neck, splattering everywhere.

Noodle Man's twitching remains soon fell still, lifeless at last.

Lumian strode over to the head and retrieved Fallen mercury with his left hand.

In the fleeting second between breaths, an illusory river shimmered before his eyes.

The river appeared to be constructed from intricate mercury symbols, and each symbol seemed formed by the river itself.

At once, the river's branches disappeared, leaving only the primary current. It fractured midway and kinked as if wanting to double back to its source but for now could not prevail.

Chapter 92 Stripping Fate

Lumian couldn't grasp the meaning of the illusory river he saw or sensed. All he could surmise was that it symbolized fate. Guided by Fallen Mercury's instincts, he lifted the blade's tip and aimed it at a mercury symbol within the river.

As soon as he made contact with the mercury river, a series of scenes flashed through Lumian's mind: Noodle Man performing an enigmatic sacrificial dance; Noodle Man cowering before the black thorn symbol and prostrating itself; Noodle Man gathering the scattered flesh and blood throughout the dream ruins to satiate its hunger; Noodle Man attempting to approach the 'city wall' circle, but retreating each time as if afraid of something; Noodle Man's head severed by an axe...

Is this its entire existence since the loop began? Lumian realized this as he tried to stab the tip of Fallen Mercury at the mercury symbol representing Noodle Man's demise—the end of the illusory river.

It was too immense and heavy for him to succeed.

At that moment, the mercury symbol started to dissipate, and the illusory river gradually faded. The images in Lumian's mind grew hazy.

There's a time limit? Lumian didn't dare to dawdle. Adhering to the principle of proximity, he aimed the dark pewter dirk at Noodle Man's fate of succumbing to the black thorn symbol.

The mercury symbol, seemingly formed by the river's entanglement, was pried open, condensing into a droplet that seeped into the blade of Fallen Mercury.

In the next instant, the illusory river vanished entirely, preventing Lumian from witnessing Noodle Man's fate again.

He glanced down at Fallen Mercury and noticed the heretic symbols on the pewter-black blade undulating gently like water, as though infused with some vital force.

They had been mesmerizing from the start, but now they appeared even more sinister.

“Success...” Lumian whispered to himself in relief.

Fallen Mercury was now complete.

In the future, as long as he could wound the flaming monster with this heretic dirk in battle, he could swap the monster's fate of cowering before the black thorn symbol with the former.

Lumian wrapped the blade of Fallen Mercury in black cloth and sheathed it in his belt. He dealt with Noodle Man's corpse briefly, moving it into a half-collapsed building. He destroyed the building's last support, allowing rubble and wood to fall, burying everything inside.

After this, Lumian circled back to where the flaming monster had appeared.

This time, he didn't approach for observation. Instead, he searched for footprints and other traces, taking time to identify which ones the target left while deliberately circling around.

After nearly two hours, Lumian gradually deciphered the flaming monster's habits and patterns. A mental hunting map emerged.

He spent some time surveying the predetermined battlefields, seeking natural traps to exploit.

Eventually, Lumian rubbed his forehead and decided to delve deeper into the ruins while he still had energy, gathering information for future explorations.

He remained vigilant and performed the sacrificial dance again, partially triggering the black thorn symbol.

With the 'amulet' in hand, Lumian quickly followed the same path as before.

He encountered monsters along the way, but they either fled before attacking or vanished from sight at a distance. The deeper he went, the more similar situations occurred.

Finally, when the burning sensation in his chest from the second sacrificial dance subsided, Lumian spotted the 'city wall' composed of twisted houses once more.

He rested a while, waiting for his spirituality to recover before performing the sacrificial dance again.

After the dance, sometimes forceful, sometimes graceful, Lumian headed in the direction where he found Fallen Mercury, the black thorn symbol activated.

After passing through the room where the flames had been extinguished, he slowed his pace, wary of a sudden assault.

After walking a while, Lumian noticed the light ahead had dimmed considerably. It was as if a massive creature high in the sky blocked the light, or the sun was obscured by something.

Lumian instinctively looked up, but saw only thick fog.

Unable to determine the cause, he could only draw Fallen Mercury and cautiously proceed.

In a moment, it felt as if he had transitioned from day to night.

Of course, this was an exaggeration. Lumian thought it more accurate to liken the foggy weather to a place shrouded in dark clouds.

Almost simultaneously, he yawned involuntarily, his exhaustion intensifying.

No, I can't sleep... Lumian forced himself to keep his eyes open as he retreated from the shadowy base of the mountain.

His mental state improved significantly. Although still tired, he could endure it.

You fall asleep the moment you enter. The deeper you go, the sleepier you become? Lumian mused silently. He turned and walked in another direction.

After another sacrificial dance, he arrived at an unfamiliar area.

To his right were 'walls' stacked with doors and windows. To his left lay a wasteland connected to the circle of building ruins, and ahead stood brown trees.

In the desolate ruins, the trees seemed incredibly resilient. They intertwined and embraced each other, forming a wooden wall five to six meters tall.

This wooden wall had numerous green leaves and branches, a stark contrast to the deathly silence and desolation surrounding it.

If it hadn't blocked the path to the back of the city wall, Lumian might have praised its tenacious vitality. But now, he could only express his dissatisfaction with the crude gesture of raising two middle fingers.

He could have chosen to take a detour and enter from the other side of the dream ruins, but he wasn't familiar with that area. His spirituality was nearly depleted, so there was no need to take the risk.

Lumian yawned unabashedly, his chest still burning as he retraced his steps.

As Lumian awoke, the first light of dawn had already crept through the thick curtains, casting an outline of the desk, chair, wardrobe, and other furnishings within the room.

Still early, he thought, glancing over at Aurore beside him.

Aurore's blonde hair lay strewn across the white pillow, her eyes closed in peaceful slumber.

Her right hand gripped the edge of the blanket, occasionally attempting to turn over but stopping instinctively. Her brow furrowed before gradually smoothing out.

Lumian had a good idea why his sister reacted this way.

She had hidden numerous bottles within her nightgown as a precaution. Sleeping on her side or stomach would undoubtedly cause her harm.

How exhausting, Lumian sighed inwardly, his expression tender and his heart at ease.

After a moment, he carefully slid out of bed and left the bedroom.

He moved toward a side balcony that led to the rooftop. Facing the distant crimson sky, he stretched his body.

Within a minute, Valentine emerged from his room and stood in the corridor.

"Are you also greeting the sun?" he asked, his usual cold demeanor replaced with warmth and approval.

Can I say no? Lumian smiled. "That's right."

Satisfied, Valentine stepped onto the balcony and stood tall, facing the rising sun.

He spread his arms wide, lifted his face toward the sky, and whispered, "Praise the Sun!"

With no other choice, Lumian mimicked the gesture. "Praise the Sun!"

Valentine lowered his arms and crossed them over his chest. After a moment of silent prayer, he opened his eyes and said to Lumian, "If the loop is successfully resolved, I'll introduce you to the bishop of Dariège. Or would you prefer Bigorre?"

"I prefer Trier," Lumian answered, smiling. "But where I go isn't up to me. It's up to my sister."

Valentine nodded and dropped the subject. He turned back toward the corridor and began patrolling.

Nothing happened until eight o'clock. The pair then went downstairs and prepared breakfast together.

Soon after, Ryan joined them to help. Leah woke up just before nine, leaving Aurore still asleep.

Ryan bit into his toast and asked Lumian, "Do you have any plans for today?"

Lumian hesitated before responding, "We should leave someone at home. Aurore can't be left to face a potential attack alone. The remaining two will accompany me to stock up on food and fetch some water. We must hold out until the twelfth night."

Cordu lacked a proper water supply. Aurore had installed a water tank on the roof during her renovations. As long as it was regularly filled and disinfected, it was as good as having running water.

"Yes, we need to do all this before Lent," Ryan agreed.

Lumian smiled brightly. "By the way, we should visit Madame Pualis and ask if she can help us investigate the dead Warlock and the owl in the tomb."

As expected, Valentine frowned, and Ryan's smile stiffened.

Leah sipped her water and offered a smile. "I'll stay with Aurore."

"No problem," Lumian agreed on behalf of Ryan and Valentine.

With no other choice, the two men acquiesced to visit the administrator's residence that morning.

Following breakfast, the trio exited the semi-subterranean two-story building and made their way toward Ol' Tavern.

They passed Shepherd Pierre Berry's home along the way.

Lumian's heart raced as he suggested to Ryan and Valentine, "Let's check on the three sheep."

He recalled the bleating he had heard the night before.

Understanding his meaning, Ryan and Valentine offered no objection.

They circled around to the rear of the Berrys' home, only to find an empty sheep pen.

The three sheep were gone.

Chapter 93 An Early Sacrifice

Gazing at the empty sheep pen littered with hay and dung, Ryan furrowed his brow and said, "Did they really fix the underground altar so quickly?"

He suspected the three missing sheep had been taken for sacrifice.

"Maybe these heretics have some special powers," Valentine replied with disdain.

As Lumian listened to their conversation, he suddenly remembered the faint sound of a sheep's bleating he heard the night before.

Could it have been one of the sheep being sacrificed? Puzzled, he shared his suspicion with Ryan and Valentine.

"That seems unlikely," Ryan dismissed, shaking his head. "The cathedral is hundreds of meters from your house, and the altar is underground."

What he meant was that even with a Hunter's enhanced hearing, it would be impossible to hear anything from the cathedral's underground.

Lumian shared that doubt, but couldn't explain why he heard the bleating. Simultaneously, a distinct burning sensation appeared in his chest as the black thorn symbol partially activated.

There was no way to fake this!

Burning sensation Lumian's heart raced, recalling something the mysterious woman had said.

Pray to yourself the principle of proximity

Thinking back to the ritual that invoked Dancer's power and the black thorn symbol, he formed a new hypothesis.

He heard the sheep bleating during the sacrifice because of mysticism!

In simpler terms, when the padre and his group performed their ritual and prayed to the hidden being, the principle of proximity also targeted the corruption in Lumian's body, partially triggering the black thorn symbol. As a result, Lumian could faintly hear the sheep's cries from afar.

Him being unable to respond or knowing how with the corruption now sealed by the owner of the bluish-black pattern the padre's ritual ultimately 'contacted' the hidden entity.

After the ritual, the burning sensation in Lumian's chest faded.

It seems no invisible, strange power had invaded Aurore's room last night. The anomaly in my body was just half-activated by the padre's ritual Lumian roughly understood how events had unfolded.

At that moment, Ryan warned his companions, "It appears our investigation of the cathedral's underground has alarmed the padre and his people. They've found a way to repair the altar and pray for strength ahead of time. From now on, we need to be extra vigilant. Don't assume things will only turn dangerous as Lent approaches."

"If I weren't worried about restarting the loop, I'd have dealt with them already!"

Valentine spat hatefully.

Then, he added gloomily, "Can you stop calling that servant of the evil god a padre? He's not worthy!"

Why was he a padre if he wasn't worthy? Lumian dared not voice his thoughts.

He wasn't afraid to voice his thoughts; but wanting to maintain his image in Valentine's eyes, he kept silent. After all, he might need to persuade this fanatic to do something later, like using his suicide to verify the essence of the cycle.

Ryan nodded.

“Let's visit Madame Pualis as soon as possible to replenish our supplies. We should stay inside as much as we can in the future.”

Lumian said nothing more, leaving Shepherd Pierre Berry's house through the back door and heading towards the castle on the hill.

Passing through the vibrant garden, the trio approached the partially opened door and informed the red-coated, white-panted manservant, “We need to see Madame Pualis.”

“Wait a moment.” The valet glanced at Ryan and Valentine before swiftly turning and vanishing through the door.

Soon after, the pale-faced 'midwife' in a grayish-white dress emerged.

Compared to last time, her face was even paler, and her eyes were so blank that it made one's heart turn cold.

Had Lumian not informed Ryan and Valentine beforehand that the 'midwife' wasn't 'dead,' they would have been shocked.

They had seen plenty of dead people turn into zombies. The Solar High Priest specialized in such matters. Valentine had purified dozens of similar cases, but it was beyond their understanding how a person diced into pieces could revert to their original appearance and seem more alive than dead.

The 'midwife' spoke in a monotone.

“Madame doesn't want to see you. Please leave.”

“We have urgent matters,” Lumian insisted. “Isn't Madame Pualis concerned that the person underground will disrupt her plans?”

The 'midwife' maintained her tone.

“Madame says it won't affect her.”

Hearing this, a chill ran down Lumian's spine.

It meant they would have a hard time getting Madame Pualis' help again.

Lumian smiled without displaying frustration or disappointment. Looking at the 'midwife,' he said, “But we might explore the tomb.”

He implied that during the exploration, either side could encounter trouble, triggering the loop to restart prematurely.

Unfazed, the 'midwife' remained stiff and blank.

“You can try, but you'll only be disappointed.”

What does she mean? Lumian couldn't grasp Madame Pualis' message.

Does she mean they could explore all they wanted, and she would offer some help at crucial moments, but they wouldn't find any valuable clues? The more Lumian pondered, the more he doubted that was her intended meaning. Otherwise, she wouldn't have refused their meeting request through the 'midwife.'

Before Lumian could consider other possibilities, Ryan thoughtfully asked, "Is Madame Pualis trying to tell us that the person in the tomb can easily control us and prevent our investigation without triggering the loop?"

"Yes." The 'midwife' nodded slowly, turned, and retreated deeper into the castle.

Lumian, Valentine, and Ryan exchanged glances and left, feeling helpless.

Their next stop was Ol' Tavern, where they could purchase plenty of provisions and barrels of cheap wine.

Entering Ol' Tavern, Lumian scanned the room but didn't spot the mysterious woman.

Disappointed, he focused on the bar counter, telling tavern owner Maurice Bnet what they needed.

After Ryan and Valentine hauled out wine barrels, Lumian lowered his voice and inquired, "Where's the other lady?"

Maurice Bnet shook his head.

"I don't know. Maybe she's in her room, somewhere else in the village, or even in Lige. She rented the room until the 9th. She's free to do as she pleases."

The 9th? The twelfth night? Lumian nodded thoughtfully.

April 9th was the so-called twelfth night that he and Aurore had deduced.

This also confirmed that March 29th was indeed the loop's first day.

If Ryan and the two other foreigners hadn't happened to enter Cordu on a particular cycle's first day, the loop would immediately restart and commence on March 29th whenever outsiders invaded the area.

"Damn." Lumian slapped his forehead and told the tavern owner, Maurice Bnet, "My stomach's acting up. I need the restroom. Tell them to wait for me."

Maurice Bnet's expression seemed to say: What are you up to now?

"Don't mess with me!"

The downside of having a bad reputation rears its ugly head once more Lumian chuckled.

"Don't worry, I'm really just using the restroom!"

As he spoke, he waved and sprinted toward the staircase.

He did want to use the restroom, but he was heading for the one upstairs.

Maurice Bnet glanced at his retreating figure and muttered, "Spring is here, and this scoundrel's hormones are raging"

His voice barely reached Lumian's ears.

Upon reaching the second floor, Lumian approached the restroom and positioned himself in front of the mysterious lady's room.

Knock, knock, knock. He rapped on the door.

No answer.

Noticing the absence of a "Do Not Disturb" sign on the handle, Lumian knocked twice more, each time louder than before.

Unfortunately, the mysterious lady never showed.

Lumian pondered for a moment before producing a slim wire and jiggling it in the keyhole.

The door creaked open, revealing an empty room.

The bed's blanket lay neatly folded, as though no one had occupied the space recently.

Lumian exhaled quietly and closed the door without venturing inside.

In the afternoon, the siblings congregated in Aurore's bedroom under the guise of instructing Lumian in the art of Hermes to swiftly enhance his strength.

Lumian kept his voice low as he recounted his excursion into the dream ruins the previous night. At last, he inquired, "Anything to add? About hunting the flaming monster?"

Though he was armed with Fallen Mercury and Invisibility, his confidence in hunting the flaming beast remained low.

It was a Sequence of the Hunter pathway that had experienced a qualitative transformation!

Aurore chuckled.

"You've covered all the bases. The only thing I can add is"

She lifted her hands, formed fists, and shook them gently.

"Break a leg!"

However, the tension in his chest subsided.

Aurore then said, "What remains are some cliché words: be careful, be careful, be very careful."

She sighed.

"It's a shame the mysterious lady isn't here. Otherwise, I could've crafted some simple, supplementary talismans, along with the Integrity Brooch, and had them brought into your dream."

"That's true." While Lumian felt disappointed, he wasn't disheartened. He had no intention of giving up.

At 9:50 pm, Lumian slid out of Aurore's bedroom and stalked down the hallway towards the washroom.

He intended to relieve himself before beginning his night watch.

Bathed in the crimson glow of the moon, the washroom was shrouded in darkness. Only the toilet was faintly visible.

Lumian bent over and unfastened his belt.

Behind him, the shadow on the wall abruptly writhed and morphed into a silhouette brandishing an axe high above its head!

Chapter 94 Attack

Lumian's eyes were narrowed, his body tensing as he sensed the pores on his skin open. An overwhelming premonition of danger washed over him.

In the dream ruins, he'd had no shortage of similar experiences. Instantly, he halted and tumbled to the side, like a boneless sack of flesh.

A whistling wind filled his ears as a razor-sharp axe grazed his body, slicing through the air.

Lumian hit the ground with a thud, attempting to roll to his feet. But pale-white and pitch-black, eerie arms extended from the surrounding shadows, grabbing his clothes and coiling around his body.

The cold sensation and stiffness seeped into Lumian's flesh. Twisting wildly, trying to escape the restraints with his powerful agility, he shouted, "Help..."

Two malicious, bumpy palms smothered his mouth, stifling his voice abruptly, leaving only a whimper.

Simultaneously, Lumian glimpsed an elongated humanoid shadow on the wall, raising the axe at him.

Clang!

A two-handed broadsword of pure light blocked the axe's slash.

Ryan was the first to rush over, not bothering with his Dawn Armor, and simply summoned a Sword of Dawn.

The shadowy axe took on a heavy, sharp, and dark appearance the moment it detached from the wall.

The second person to arrive at the washroom door was Leah, who had been in the opposite study. The silver bells on her veil and boots tinkled softly.

Leah raised her right palm and aimed her silver revolver at the strange arms grabbing Lumian.

They tightened, as if trying to drag Lumian into the shadows.

Blue blood vessels bulged from Lumian's neck, forehead, and hands, straining with all his might.

Yet, he couldn't fend off the pale-white and pitch-black arms. His body dissolved into the shadows piece by piece.

Bang!

Leah fired, and a golden bullet wrapped in blazing flames struck a pitch-black arm that seemed to drip ink.

The arm ignited, quickly releasing Lumian's neck and retreating into the shadowy corner.

Aurore arrived at the washroom to find such a scene.

Seeing a third of her brother's body thinned and darkened into a shadow, his expression growing increasingly rigid, Aurore wasted no time. She pulled iron-black materials from her hidden pocket and sprinkled the powder at Lumian, her light-blue eyes darkening.

Lumian felt an invisible hand grasp him and pull him toward Aurore.

He recalled his sister using a similar spell before, but it had pushed him away—this time, she yanked him closer.

The colossal hand's strength equaled that of the sinister arms, stopping Lumian's slide into the shadows.

Clang! Clang! Clang!

Ryan drove the figure with the sharp axe back into the wall.

The next second, Valentine appeared behind Leah and Aurore.

Witnessing Lumian's state, he spread his arms wide.

Golden illusory flames materialized around Lumian, incinerating countless wicked arms.

The pitch-black or pale-white arms either melted like candles or evaporated into black wisps of smoke.

Within seconds, four-fifths of the strange arms grabbing Lumian vanished.

The remaining arms struggled to resist the invisible hand and Lumian's efforts, releasing him one after another.

Feeling the grip on him loosen, Lumian was pulled by the invisible hand, half-flying and half-pouncing toward Aurore.

As the pitch-black and pale-white arms retracted, the axe-wielding figure froze on the wall, merging with the surrounding shadows, leaving no trace.

Lumian stood and surveyed the area, sneering.

“Is that it? Aren't you looking down on us by only sending one person?”

Aurore glared at him.

“Don't speak!”

How could he utter such ill-omened words at a time like this?

As Aurore's voice echoed in the corridor, a black, spiked vine, abnormally thick as if from the Abyss, descended from the study's ceiling.

At its top bloomed a massive, blood-red flower with a foul odor.

The flower expanded, as if stretching its mouth to the limit.

It suddenly engulfed Leah's head and writhed frantically.

As it chewed, the object in its mouth turned into a thin piece of paper and was shredded.

Immediately after, the radiant broadsword of light flew from the washroom, impaling the massive evil flower to the wall.

Streams of bright red blood oozed from the sword, evaporating into mist.

Simultaneously, tendrils of black vines cascaded from the ceiling of the Lumian residence, enveloping the walls and sealing the windows with enormous red blossoms.

Aurore swiftly produced a pearl-like powder and tossed it into the air, mingling it with summoned natural forces.

An unseen warm breeze blew, causing the black vines to wither and lose their vigor, no longer able to support the vivid red flowers suspended in midair.

The wilted vines dangled lifelessly from the second floor.

Not a bad result... Aurore mused to herself.

She had obtained the spell from a member of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society. Intended as a gardening spell for weeding, Aurore had acquired it at a bargain price, thinking it would be useful someday. Typically, it was used to clear weeds from building walls, but today it proved invaluable.

Nonetheless, the abyssal black vines were unnaturally resilient. They merely withered and didn't perish instantly.

This bought time for Valentine, who summoned the golden and illusory Fire of Light to incinerate the vile creatures in the corridor and rooms.

Ryan then flooded the area with the pure Sunrise Gleam, banishing all evil and obliterating all illusions.

Confronted with this situation he was powerless in, Hunter Lumian stifled his urge to perform the enigmatic dance. He observed his sister and the three outsiders collaborate to eradicate the anomaly that had invaded the second floor.

Soon, the black vines and red flowers disintegrated into smoke.

But Leah's veil and the silver bells on her boots continued to jingle, signaling that danger still lurked.

Lumian swiftly surveyed the scene and sniffed.

"The air doesn't smell right..."

A faint, sweet scent lingered.

"I feel a little dizzy and want to sleep," Leah confessed her unease.

The fumes from the burning vines and flowers contain an anesthetic? How sinister! Aurore, possessing extensive mysticism knowledge, acted promptly.

She produced a handful of transparent powder and scattered it forward.

A fierce wind materialized from nowhere, gusting through every corner of the second floor.

Ryan, Lumian, Valentine, and Leah dashed into separate rooms, throwing open the windows that had been sealed by the black vines.

As the innocuous wind subsided, Aurore turned to Lumian and inquired, "And now?"

Lumian sniffed cautiously. "Don't smell it anymore."

"I feel better, too," Leah chimed in.

At that moment, the silver bells on her veil and boots ceased their movement.

The crisis was averted.

"A probing attack from the padre and company?" Aurore speculated.

Lumian glanced at Valentine, who appeared troubled.

"Could be Guillaume Bénet, who just received a boon, or the already powerful Shepherd Pierre Berry."

Valentine's expression softened at Lumian's choice of words.

Ryan surveyed the area and declared in a deep voice, "Whichever the case, we must heighten our vigilance. From now on, let's split into two groups for shifts. We'll alternate between resting and standing guard, day or night."

A single guard risked being ambushed without timely assistance.

"No problem." Aurore and Lumian exchanged glances before adding, "I'll be in the same group as my brother."

Ryan and the others didn't object.

Over the next few days, the two groups maintained a watchful eye in six-hour rotations. Although nothing transpired, as Lent drew near, they all felt the impending danger, anticipating relentless waves of peril.

During this period, Lumian continued exploring the dream while resting.

He didn't immediately hunt the flaming monster. Instead, he suppressed his impatience and sought to understand the creature's patterns.

With his Invisibility, long-range tracking, daily observation, and ample patience, Lumian finally gleaned the information he desired.

The flaming monster would set traps in the dream clearing each morning, practicing techniques it had mastered for 45 to 90 minutes. It would then follow a fixed route into a flesh-strewn area to replenish its energy.

Its afternoon activities were unpredictable, mainly patrolling its territory via different paths. Lumian had yet to discern its criteria for choosing routes.

In the evening, it would retrace the fixed route and re-enter the hunting zone.

Lumian remained ignorant of its nocturnal activities. He had only spent a maximum of six hours in the dream ruins and never ventured there at night.

The night before Lent.

Lumian jolted awake in the hazy gray fog of the dreamscape bedroom. He glanced at Fallen Mercury beside him and his mind snapped into sharp focus.

This was the night. He would hunt down the flaming monster.

Chapter 95 An "Out in the Open" Ambush

Lumian meticulously wrapped his left hand in layers of white bandages. He gathered his supplies: Fallen Mercury, his iron-black axe, gray amber perfume, biscuits, cheese, bloodied mutton chops, rope for traps, and a bag of cooled boiled water. Slipping his shotgun over his shoulder, he left his semi-subterranean dwelling.

Through the thin gray fog, he ventured into a barren wasteland, riddled with cracks. He entered the dreamlike ruins and strode toward the clearing where the flaming monster often lurked.

Hearing a distant noise, Lumian veered towards a path he anticipated the creature would take, arriving at a natural trap he'd discovered earlier.

A deep pit lay beside the road, with collapsed walls to the front and left. Stacked rocks bordered the right side, and behind it, a mostly collapsed house loomed.

Such a trap was difficult to spot. Lumian had found it only after scouring the area multiple times.

He crouched behind the pit, tossing in a few sharpened wooden stakes. He covered it with a rope net he'd woven earlier and camouflaged it with soil.

With the simple trap set, he placed his bait: two blood-soaked lamb chops, half on solid ground and half suspended above the pit.

Lumian stepped back, assessing the precarious balance. He retreated into the mostly collapsed house, perching himself on the remains of an outer wall.

He adjusted his position to watch the trap without being seen by passing monsters.

Next, he took out the gray amber perfume and sprayed it on the wall.

A delicate, sweet scent wafted through the air, carried by sporadic gusts of wind that blew through the ruins.

The fragrance clung to the wall and to Lumian.

Without hesitation, he leaped away, looping back to the path where the flaming monster would appear, positioning himself closer to its hunting grounds.

Once more, he changed direction, crossing the path and entering the ruins of a building opposite.

Reaching the rear of the crumbling structure, he stopped, leaned against the wall, and waited.

As with his strategy against the shotgun monster, Lumian never expected his trap to fool the flaming monster or wound it severely.

These decoys and alarms targeted the creature's keen senses, observation, and behavior.

Only a Hunter knew how to exploit a Hunter's strengths!

Of course, all this relied on the target operating primarily on instinct, its intelligence limited to combat.

Leaning against the wall, Lumian gripped Fallen Mercury in his bandaged left hand, tearing off the pitch-black cloth shrouding its surface.

He couldn't know how long it would take for the flaming monster to arrive; all he could do was be patient.

Patience was his strong suita remnant from his vagrant days.

Time crawled by. Unseen by Lumian, a charred, flame-tinged monster entered the path.

After walking over 20 meters, its nose twitched.

It detected the faint scent of blood.

The monster didn't immediately turn. As it continued, it surreptitiously scanned the source of the smell.

Passing the collapsed wall, the bloody lamb chops caught its eye.

Tempting food, but the flaming monster resisted its instincts, not devouring the bait.

It pressed on, slowing its pace.

Soon, an unusual fragrance filled its nostrils.

This Hunter seemed different from the one who had previously observed it while invisible. It lacked sufficient knowledge of Hunters and hadn't masked its scent beforehand.

Taking a few more steps, the flaming monster used the fragrance and subtle footprints to pinpoint the enemy hiding on the outer wall of the building behind the trap.

Feigning ignorance, it increased its distance by another seven to eight meters.

Suddenly, it whirled around, its scarlet flames rapidly condensing into a fireball tinged with white.

Boom!

With a flick of its right palm, the fireball hurtled towards Lumian's 'ambush' location, collapsing the outer wall and causing the house to shudder.

Hearing the explosion from a distance, Lumian abandoned his hiding spot, darting into the clearing, his movements a wild, distorted dance.

The explosion was like a signal flare, a stark reminder for him to swiftly ready the second phase of the trap.

Lumian and Aurore had devised this intricate plan, luring their prey into sending out their own signal flares.

In the midst of his mesmerizing dance, Lumian detected the hazy forms of the mouth-orifice monster, the shotgun monster, and the skinless monster.

By then, the flaming monster had already approached the collapsed wall, searching for any trace of its enemy.

Lumian danced for another ten to twenty seconds, his movements growing more intense. He drew out the ritual silver dagger with his right hand, making a small incision on his left wrist.

A single drop of blood emerged, congealing into a tiny sphere.

“I!”

He uttered the word in ancient Hermes, his voice barely above a whisper.

At that moment, the flaming monster had discovered the faint footprints Lumian had left behind. Catching a whiff of a subtle scent, it started tracking him.

Quickly shouting his follow-up command, Lumian watched as the mouth-orifice monster swallowed the blood droplet from the tip of the silver dagger and entered his body.

A wave of madness, bloodlust, cruel intent, and ravenous hunger washed over him.

Lumian fought back the discomfort, hastily bandaging his insignificant wound with a white strip he'd brought along.

Next, he popped a piece of cheese into his mouth, chewing and swallowing to make sure the residual gray amber scent on his body would mask any other mingled odors.

Throughout this process, Lumian sprinted to the edge of the road and halted at an inconspicuous spot.

He clenched his jaw tight and spun around, carefully retracing his steps along his previous path.

Relying on a Hunter's observation skills and Dancer's exaggerated flexibility, Lumian made sure to leave only faint footprints and no additional marks.

It wasn't long before he reached the center of the road and stopped.

Maintaining his invisibility, Lumian remained in plain sight on the road.

He waited, using shallow Cogitation and constant suspension to suppress any thoughts of attacking the flaming monster, a rudimentary way to disrupt its danger premonition.

His inspiration came from a Hunter's keen self-awareness.

After seven or eight seconds, the flaming monster's pitch-black form appeared in Lumian's sight. Utilizing his uncanny flexibility, he twisted his body to observe the approaching target.

The flaming monster followed the faint footprints and scent left behind by its enemy. Uninterrupted, it continued its pursuit.

Once back on the main road, it sniffed the air, unsurprised to detect a mild fragrance.

It instinctively lowered its head and found the inconspicuous footprints.

But it found no trace of traps in the vicinity.

Without hesitation, the flaming monster tracked the footprints to the other side of the road.

The charred face and displaced eyeballs loomed larger and clearer in Lumian's sight.

Holding his breath, Lumian didn't disrupt his Cogitation again, striving to empty his mind.

Five meters, three meters, one meter He lunged at the target, raising the Fallen Mercury in his left hand for a swift slash!

He didn't wait to close the gap further, fearing that it would trigger the prey's danger sense and prompt evasive maneuvers.

The flaming monster suddenly felt an overwhelming sense of danger.

Without thinking, it leaped to the side.

Simultaneously, its vision captured Lumian's figure, attacking with a pewter-black dirk in his bandaged left hand.

They were so close that despite the flaming monster's reaction, evasion was impossible. Lumian collided with it.

The fate extracted from Noodle Man infiltrated the target's body as an illusory mercury bead.

Meanwhile, a river of countless intricate mercury symbols briefly surfaced. Some of the destinies rapidly converged towards the pewter-black blade.

Lumian didn't bother selecting the destiny to exchange, letting Fallen Mercury do as it wished.

Boom!

The monster's flames erupted.

The forceful shockwave hurled Lumian and his Fallen Mercury away. Crimson flames ignited his clothes and scorched his facial skin.

Lumian bore the searing pain, twisting his waist midair to alter his trajectory.

As soon as he landed, he sprang to his feet and fled.

However, unable to re-enter the Invisibility state until the flames were extinguished, he remained visible.

Boom!

Despite his serpentine sprint, Lumian was still knocked off his feet by the fireball's aftershock. His back throbbed with numbing pain.

He struggled to his feet, scrambling away from the path and into the ruins where he had been hiding before.

The flaming monster pursued Lumian, who was unable to turn invisible once more.

Chapter 96 Prey and Hunter

The flaming monster pursued relentlessly, hurling crimson fireballs that blasted craters in the earth. Lumian was thrown off balance multiple times.

Flames licked at the charred logs that littered the desolate landscape, casting flickering red light in every direction.

Lumian barely spared a thought for the fire still consuming his clothes. Gritting his teeth against the searing pain, he was sent sprawling by the shockwaves of detonation after detonation. He staggered to his feet and careened wildly towards his destination—veering left, then right, arcing and darting straight ahead.

Mercifully, he didn't have far to go based on his plan. Just as he felt the taste of blood in his mouth and his body threatened to give out, a dilapidated building loomed before him.

Boom!

Lumian contorted his body mid-stride, narrowly avoiding a fireball. The scarlet projectile exploded just ahead, unleashing a hellish maelstrom of flames.

Seizing the moment, Lumian dropped to the ground and rolled beneath the worst of the conflagration. With the momentum, he tumbled into the partially collapsed structure.

The flaming monster halted and hesitated, wary of pursuing its prey into a potential death trap.

It watched as Lumian rolled deeper into the building, summoning a swarm of red Fire Ravens around it.

Their screeches filled the air as they took flight. Half of them dove towards the building's support beams, while the others bore down on Lumian from all sides.

These avian flames were unerring, constantly adjusting their trajectories to match Lumian's movements.

In that instant, the flaming monster could almost see its enemy's charred remains.

Fire Ravens were far more difficult to dodge than mere fireballs!

And then, Lumian disappeared from the monster's view.

He had rolled into a well-preserved basement.

Bang!

Lumian slammed the wooden door shut and leaped aside, using the force of the impact.

Swoosh! Swoosh! Swoosh! The scarlet Fire Ravens slammed into the door.

Boom!

The heavy door disintegrated into flaming splinters.

Rumble!

The remaining Fire Ravens struck their intended targets, bringing down the decaying structure in a torrent of debris.

Stone, wood, and dust engulfed the area, entombing the basement.

Lumian had already taken refuge in a corner, using the accumulated dirt to smother the flames that clung to him.

But he was still badly burned, his internal organs battered by the force of the explosions. Without swift medical attention, he wouldn't last another day.

The flaming monster's attack had been devastating, even more potent than Ryan sans his Hurricane of Light!

Lumian had intended to use Invisibility to elude the flaming monster, slipping into the basement to perform his enigmatic sacrificial dance, activating the black thorn symbol on his chest to terrify his foe. He'd planned to bide his time for Fallen Mercury to complete the exchange of fate. But the persistent fire had thwarted his Invisibility, nearly costing him his life.

The one consolation was that he had a backup plan in the event he couldn't escape the monster's pursuit, nor could he perform his sacrificial dance in peace.

He'd even considered collapsing the building to bury the basement and buy time, but the flaming monster had done the job for him.

Phew... Exhaling deeply, Lumian sat cross-legged.

He retrieved the bottle of gray amber perfume from Aurore, unscrewed the cap, and placed it before him.

Outside the demolished building, the flaming monster's gaze cut through the swirling dust, searching for any trace of its quarry.

It was certain that the cunning intruder wouldn't have been buried alive so easily.

Given the complexity of the traps he'd laid and his intimate knowledge of the ruins, he must have left himself an escape route!

The flaming monster wasn't particularly intelligent, but its Hunter's instincts led it to circle the collapsed building.

In less than ten seconds, it discovered a hidden cave entrance angling downward.

The opening was concealed by debris from the fallen structure, sheltered from the ensuing collapse. It was difficult to spot and tucked away in a discreet location.

The monster raised its right hand, conjuring a fist-sized white fireball in its palm.

With a sudden lunge, it hurled the fireball down the passageway.

The flames streaked through the air, penetrated the basement, and collided with the far wall.

Boom!

The blast wave didn't affect Lumian, who was deliberately hiding in another corner. It only overturned the bottle of gray amber perfume in front of him and quaked the entire basement.

The gurgle of liquid flowed from the open bottle, its elegant and sweet fragrance intensifying instantly.

Lumian leaned against the wall, eyes closed, lost in Cogitation.

His mind conjured a crimson sun, holding it steady for a few seconds.

Suddenly, a terrifying sound reached Lumian's ears, as if from an infinite distance yet unnervingly close.

Blue veins bulged across his face, hands, and neck, quickly turning red.

Simultaneously, silver-black spots seeped from his skin.

He opened his mouth to scream, but collapsed and curled up before a sound could escape.

Fallen Mercury slipped from Lumian's left palm, but it dared not make a move. It didn't even attempt to approach his exposed face or right hand to create a marionette through contact.

It just quivered there, violently.

Outside the basement, the monster poised to conjure a fireball froze beside the entrance Lumian had excavated.

It couldn't help but shudder.

A few seconds later, it fled, abandoning the hunt.

Lumian plunged into a darkness teeming with flickering flames. His mind was overwhelmed with excruciating pain and malevolent thoughts.

In that moment, death seemed preferable. He sensed something deep within him rapidly growing and taking form.

It appeared to be a trauma—composed of all negative personalities and a particular will. Once assembled into human shape, it would utterly supplant the original him.

Amid the unending darkness of despair and pain, Lumian caught a whiff of a scent.

Elegant and sweet.

It was Aurore's fragrance, a familiar aroma.

Aurore... Grande Soeur... Lumian slowly regained his composure, as if hearing the comforting melody once more.

I want to live!

The loop hasn't ended yet!

A rush of thoughts flooded back to him. Lumian finally vanquished the pitch-black will and the agony-laced darkness within his heart and opened his eyes.

The first thing in his sight was the toppled bottle of gray amber perfume on the ground.

It toppled? Lumian's heart ached as he reached out his right hand.

Initially, he'd only intended to mimic Aurore's use of incense to control his symptoms and rely on the natural perfume as a wake-up call. Unexpectedly, more than half the bottle had spilled.

In the next instant, his body quivered. He saw the charred, bloodstained back of his hand and the silver-black circular spots that had yet to fade.

Without needing a reminder, Lumian could “smell” the unfamiliar, hair-raising scent on himself.

If he crossed paths with Valentine now, he'd be “purified” by his Holy Light Summoning without revealing a thing.

Lumian scooped up the remaining half of the gray amber perfume, tightened the cap, and stowed it away.

He then picked up Fallen Mercury, still trembling violently, and asked in Hermes, “Is the fate exchange over?”

Fallen Mercury swiftly shook left and right, signaling it wasn't.

Lumian exhaled in relief.

He feared that by the time he awoke, the fate exchange would've been completed—the shock would last no more than a minute.

If he couldn't locate the flaming monster in time, his recent torment would be futile.

Breathe in, breathe out... Lumian adjusted his dreadful condition and mustered his remaining strength before crawling out of the basement through the hole he had dug earlier.

Each motion tugged at various wounds, making him wince in pain.

Upon exiting the basement, Lumian searched for the flaming monster's tracks and sighed inwardly.

Using Cogitation in such a state and fully activating the thorn symbol on my chest is downright suicidal...

I haven't done it since becoming a Hunter, barely repressing the symptoms with gray amber's scent. Had I done it a few times before, my body might have mutated slightly, turning me into a monster...

I can't risk this for a while unless I have a death wish...

He opted for Cogitation to fully activate the black thorn symbol on his chest rather than the sacrificial dance's partial activation, as time was of the essence and he couldn't perform the dance.

With Cogitation, he could frighten off the flaming monster in five or six seconds. The enigmatic sacrificial dance, however, took 30 to 40 seconds—even with his familiarity.

In Lumian's hunting strategy, this was his last resort. If he couldn't evade the flaming monster's pursuit by other means, he'd attempt Cogitation!

Lumian hadn't anticipated that Cogitation would leave him gravely injured from the start and on the brink of losing control, turning into a monster.

Before long, Lumian discovered the flaming monster's tracks and pursued them.

A few minutes later, the prints appeared fresher, so he slowed his pace.

Soon after, Fallen Mercury shuddered on its own, notifying Lumian that the fate exchange was complete.

Without hesitation, Lumian brandished the iron-black axe and charged forward, following the flaming monster's footprints.

In under twenty seconds, he spotted the scorched and smoldering prey.

It cowered in a rock-encircled corner, quaking.

Lumian dashed over, cast aside Fallen Mercury, and seized the axe with both hands, cleaving down with all his might.

With a dull thud, the flaming monster's head and body separated.

Bright red blood spurted out violently, igniting into scarlet flame clusters on the ground.

Lumian, unable to hold on any longer, collapsed to the ground with his axe.

Chapter 97 Courage

Lumian slumped to the ground, gasping for breath. He could barely muster the strength to move a finger.

Silently, he observed the crimson flames flickering on the ground, their intensity gradually diminishing until they snuffed out.

During this time, Lumian managed to lean forward and grab the Fallen Mercury with his left hand, while his right hand tightly gripped the iron-black axe, ready for any unexpected threats.

His focus was unwavering, and he remained on high alert.

Inwardly, he prayed to the Eternal Blazing Sun and the unknown, great being, hoping They would shield him from harm.

In his current state, even a mundane foe like the skinless monster could easily take him down, let alone the possibility of the flaming creature reviving itself unexpectedly.

As time ticked by, Lumian's spirituality and stamina gradually improved, but his injuries only worsened, leaving him disoriented and unfocused.

Hunters need to be cautious, level-headed, and patient—capable of using their environment to their advantage. Above all, they require courage.

Courage to confront the unexpected, to persevere in the face of crisis, to steel oneself when escape seems impossible, and to find a path out of the jaws of death...

Distracted by these thoughts, Lumian suddenly felt as if the Hunter potion coursing through him had been fully absorbed.

It was as if a barrier had shattered, and a tiny spark had merged with every fiber of his being.

All traces of Lumian's loss of control vanished, and his condition immediately improved.

Slowly, he rose to his feet and heaved a quiet sigh.

I've actually digested it...

This meant he was ready for the next potion.

Lumian, clutching the pewter-black dirk in his bandaged left hand, scanned his surroundings. Occasionally, he fixated on the flaming monster's remains, patiently awaiting the appearance of the Beyonder characteristics.

Unlike the shotgun monster's swift transformation, Lumian waited for half an hour. He wondered if the flaming monster still lived and whether he should strike it a few more times.

Finally, on the verge of collapsing from his injuries, red sparks burst forth from the monster's body.

Like fireflies, they swarmed around the corpse before gradually coalescing into a scarlet object resembling a heart.

The “heart” pulsed, its surface pocked with countless tiny holes, from which indistinct flames seeped.

Is this the main ingredient for the Pyromaniac potion? Lumian mused, reaching down to pick it up.

A searing pain radiated from his palm straight to his mind, making him instinctively want to fling the “heart” away to escape the agony.

Luckily, Lumian's skin had been numbed by the flaming monster's burns, allowing him to barely tolerate the relatively minor pain.

He tried wrapping the “heart” in a strip of cloth, but it instantly incinerated the fabric, reducing it to ashes.

After a moment's thought, Lumian set the Beyonder ingredient on the ground, wrapped the Fallen Mercury in the remaining black cloth, and secured it at his waist.

Next, he emptied the contents of the cloth bag containing the lead bullets into his pocket.

He then filled the bag halfway with soil from the area before tossing in the flame-wreathed heart.

But Lumian didn't stop there. He continued shoveling soil into the bag until the “heart” was entirely encased in layers of inflammable earth.

Exhaling, he carried the bag to the edge of the ruins, pondering a newly discovered problem.

I'm only a Sequence 9, and this is the main ingredient for the corresponding Sequence 7 Pyromaniac. I can't just advance to Sequence 7, can I?

This will make me lose control!

I initially thought the flaming monster would yield a Pyromaniac, Provoker, and Hunter Beyonder characteristic, but it's all mixed together...

Uncertain of what to do, Lumian stumbled away.

Miraculously, he didn't encounter a single monster on his way back. In his weakened state, any confrontation would have spelled disaster. His only hope was to rely on his keen observation and sharp senses to detect danger early and avoid it.

After an indeterminate amount of time, Lumian exited the dream ruins and traversed the barren wilderness, arriving back at his semi-subterranean two-story dwelling.

Laboriously, he climbed to the second floor and removed the Fallen Mercury, the cloth bag with the Pyromaniac ingredient, and the iron-black axe. He placed them on the bedside table or tossed them to the floor before staggering to the full-length mirror embedded in the wardrobe.

In the mirror, Lumian saw his ghostly pale face, marred by flame scars and faint silver-black patches on his skin.

His blue eyes flickered with an illusory silvery hue, entwined with darkness.

This was a sign that he had sustained severe injuries and nearly lost control.

If not for his home-field advantage in the dream ruins or the acquisition of Fallen Mercury and Invisibility, Lumian would have had no chance of defeating the flaming monster.

Munching on jerky and cheese to stave off the intense hunger left by his possession, he collapsed onto the bed.

He desperately needed to return to reality and rest for a while, allowing his body to recover swiftly.

Sunlight pierced through the curtains, casting the bedroom in a soft glow that highlighted Aurore's desk, cluttered with reference materials, reading notebooks, and stacks of manuscripts. It also illuminated a wardrobe filled with dresses and an exquisite full-body mirror.

Lumian opened his eyes to meet his sister's light-blue gaze.

Aurore watched him stir, her voice laced with concern. "How was it? Is everything alright?"

She knew that her brother had ventured into the dream ruins to hunt the flaming monster this time.

"I succeeded." Lumian sat up, his head feeling foggy. His skin tingled, and his bones threatened to snap.

But compared to the excruciating pain that had nearly killed him in the dream, this was nothing.

He lowered his gaze to examine his body. Red, swollen patches covered his skin, as if he were suffering from an allergic reaction.

"That's good..." Aurore sighed with relief. "An hour ago, you twitched all over and kicked me awake."

Lumian laughed, self-deprecating.

"It was indeed dangerous back then. I almost lost control."

"I was hesitant to wake you up, but you quickly calmed down and didn't scare me anymore," Aurore said, visibly relieved.

Lumian's heart stirred. "And you just kept looking at me?"

"That's right." Aurore nodded calmly. "If anything happens, I have to shake you awake and bring you back to reality. You can't die in your dreams."

Lumian suddenly felt the pain, struggle, and fear of nearly dying in his dream dissipate, replaced by a warm current surging from the depths of his heart.

He asked, almost without thinking, "You didn't wake up because I kicked you, did you? You haven't slept at all, have you?"

Aurore smiled and said, "That was my original plan, but considering how long you'd have to wait for that monster, and how I just finished my night duty, if I didn't catch up on sleep, I'd definitely be in a daze later. It'd be easy for me to make a mistake and not wake you up in time.

"So, I decided to put my hand on you and take the chance to catch some shut-eye.

"This way, I'd be able to sense any movement and wake up quickly. Heh heh, I was indeed kicked by you!"

As she spoke, she pointed at her right calf, where a visible bruise had formed.

Before Lumian could respond, she asked, "Tell me the details."

Suppressing his voice, Lumian recounted his ordeal, describing how he set up the trap, ambushed the monster, and how his clothes caught fire. Unable to turn invisible, he had no choice but to flee into the basement and fully activate the black thorn symbol with Cogitation.

Aurore listened intently, her expression occasionally betraying her worry for her brother's perilous situation. She was the kind of person who easily immersed herself in stories.

As the tale drew to a close, Lumian raised a question.

"How do I separate Provoker from the Pyromaniac Beyonder characteristic?"

He didn't know where to find the potion formula.

Aurore thought for a moment and said, "I don't know how to separate them. I've only heard that you might need the help of a high-level Beyonder for such a situation."

"A demigod?" Lumian guessed.

There were probably only three people he knew who had reached Sequence 4: the enigmatic lady, Madame Pualis, and the one lying in the coffin in the tomb.

Aurore nodded.

"I think so. Actually, you don't have to worry. I suspect the mysterious lady will come to you soon and provide some help. She always appears at critical points in your growth. This time should be no exception. After all, the loop hasn't been resolved and the secret of the dream ruins remains locked away."

"Go to Ol' Tavern to find her?" Lumian frowned.

Their agreement with Ryan and the others was to avoid going out as much as possible.

Aurore tersely acknowledged his words.

"Let's wait a while. She might visit us directly."

Aurore sighed and said, "For ordinary Beyonders, the potion formula isn't a problem, but you're different. There's corruption sealed in your body, and you can lose control if there's the slightest issue. You still need a complete and correct Provoker potion formula."

"Why don't ordinary Beyonders need potion formulas?" Lumian asked, surprised.

Aurore explained, "It's not that they don't need them, but anyone below Sequence 7 can advance just by consuming the main ingredient."

"Doesn't that risk losing control?" Lumian asked, astonished.

Aurore acknowledged tersely.

"Years ago, there was a high chance of losing control. But recently, Sequence 9 and Sequence 8 Beyonder characteristics can indeed be consumed directly. However, it's about 20 to 30% more dangerous than concocting a potion."

“Right, that's the conclusion reached by our president, Gandalf.”

Why? Just as Lumian was about to ask, a familiar song echoed from outside the house.

The siblings exchanged solemn glances.

Lent had begun, and the Spring Elf entourage had reached them.

Chapter 98 After the Celebration

A group of young men encircled Ava, singing and dancing as they arrived outside the Lumian residence.

Guillaume-junior of the Berry family strode to the door and slammed at it.

He was a friend of Lumian, Reimund, and Ava. With curly brown hair and prominent freckles, his blue eyes appeared smaller than average, as if perpetually narrowed.

With a creak, Aurore appeared before them.

Her blonde hair tied up, she wore a formal flounce-lined, light-collared dress. Aurore exuded energy, her face radiant—impossible to tell she hadn't slept well the night before.

Ava, donning a laurel crown woven from tree branches and flowers, stepped forward and sang,

“I'm the elf of spring,

“With a sweet face and a joyful ring,

“Come and sing, come and dance,

“For this is the only way,

To obtain a harvest that will stay...”

Aurore listened quietly, took the leaf, and handed Ava a small pottery jar containing animal fat.

“Bumper harvest! Bumper harvest!” The young men cheered.

As the Spring Elf entourage set off for the next location, Guillaume-junior deliberately lagged behind and asked Aurore, “Where's Lumian? I haven't seen him in the past two days. Is he not participating in the Lent celebration?”

Aurore laughed and replied, “He's sick.”

“Sick?” Guillaume-junior was slightly surprised. “He gets sick too?”

In his mind, Lumian was always brimming with energy. At most, he'd suffer minor injuries from a prank gone awry.

“I'll be worried if he never gets sick,” Aurore replied jokingly. “All humans fall sick.”

Guillaume-junior hurriedly waved at Aurore as the Spring Elf entourage moved further away.

“Tell Lumian I'll visit him after Lent!”

Aurore nodded slightly, watching Guillaume-junior sprint towards the entourage that had stopped in front of the next building.

“How was it?” Lumian stuck his head out beside his sister.

Aurore thought for a moment and said, “They're still normal, but I wonder what will happen at the end of the celebration.”

Lumian recalled the bloody scene of Ava's beheading at the celebration's end and the strange mood that agitated the young people. They had either gone mad sending off the Spring Elf or succumbed to mental and physical breakdown, collapsing to the ground. No one was spared.

Silently, he glanced at Ava singing in front of the neighbor's house and Guillaume-junior and company surrounding her. He slowly withdrew his gaze.

Ryan, Leah, and Valentine also arrived on the first floor and looked out through the window.

“We have to be very careful from now on,” Ryan said in a deep voice after the Spring Elf entourage left the area.

Aurore nodded and said, “Yeah.”

Before the celebration ended, they quickly prepared lunch and filled their stomachs.

Clang! Clang! Clang! The classic wall clock on the first floor chimed, signifying noon.

Lumian and the others, having tidied up the dining room, exchanged tense glances.

If the Lent celebration had gone smoothly, it would've ended by now.

And if the ritual to send the Spring Elf off was completed, who knew what Cordu would become?

In their semi-subterranean building, Lumian needed to raise his head slightly to see the situation outside the window.

The sky was a brilliant azure, filled with white clouds. The sun shone brightly, and there were no dark clouds, fog, or dim light as he had imagined.

Leah paced around the stove, the small silver bells on her veil and boots tinkling nonstop. It was neither intense nor soothing.

Seeing Aurore looking at her, she explained, “We're already in danger, and it's been an extended period of danger, but it's manageable at the moment.”

Aurore acknowledged and didn't inquire further.

Ryan, on the other hand, sighed and said, “By the twelfth night, it would be great if it was always at this level.”

Aurore blinked, embarrassed to tell this Dawn Paladin of the Machinery Hivemind not to jinx it.

Although Lumian's heart was heavy, he still smiled and replied to Ryan,

“There's a proverb in our Dariège region that says, 'Good and bad are all predestined.' Regardless of how worried we are, we can't change what happens next.”

What he didn't say was: The only thing they could do was muster up the courage to face it.

In the intermittent conversation that followed, the five of them were on guard against any abnormalities. However, be it the weather or the birds, everything was so normal that it only instilled greater fear in them.

After almost thirty minutes, they found themselves staring at the door simultaneously.

Footsteps drew near.

Soon after, Aurore's doorbell rang, the sound reverberating through the first floor.

Exchanging a glance with his sister, Lumian cautiously approached the door and peered through the peephole.

The man who had rung the doorbell was their neighbor, Louis Bedeau.

“What's going on?” Lumian cracked the door open, smiling.

Louis Bedeau had black hair and blue eyes. He was in his forties and had been injured while harvesting wheat in the fields when he was young. He had only three fingers on his left hand.

Clad in a grayish-blue blazer and dark pants, he said timidly, “I need to borrow your oven. It's Lent. We must bake some fresh bread for the kids.”

As he spoke, he lifted the flour bag and nudged the bag of inferior coal beside him.

Lumian hesitated for a moment before turning to Aurore.

Aurore nodded, signaling him to let Louis Bedeau in.

She had already discussed it with Ryan and the others in hushed tones, intending to observe the changes in the villagers who had participated in the Lent celebration up close.

“Just baking bread? I thought you'd make some bacon for your kids.” Lumian stepped aside and teased Louis Bedeau with a grin.

Louis Bedeau replied cautiously, “If we have a bumper harvest this year, there should be plenty of bacon.”

His eyes brimmed with anticipation, as if he was certain of a bountiful harvest.

Once inside, Louis Bedeau greeted Aurore and headed to the oven, busying himself.

The more Lumian and his companions observed, the stranger they found him.

Louis Bedeau didn't even glance at Ryan, Leah, and Valentine, as if they were invisible!

It was like a person who had already turned into a monster trying their best to pretend to be normal. However, as long as they encountered something that exceeded their original memories, they would display obvious abnormalities or ignore it.

Lumian instantly thought of the deputy padre, Michel Garrigue.

Initially, he appeared fine, but recently, all that remained were his daily activities of eating, sleeping, and urging others to pray. He ignored everything else!

Under the watchful eyes of the three foreigners, Louis Bedeau baked his bread mechanically, occasionally conversing with Lumian and Aurore.

It was very normal, yet very abnormal.

After Louis Bedeau left with the baked bread, Aurore looked at Ryan and the others, smiling wryly.

“Everyone who participated in the Lent celebration must have become like this.”

“It's like being replaced by a monster bit by bit,” Leah exclaimed sincerely.

She no longer forced a smile on her face.

Lumian had already regained his composure and posed a question.

“How can we save someone like this if we want to?”

“The only thing I can think of is purification,” Valentine replied with a sigh. “But if the abnormality is already closely integrated with humans, the final outcome might be purification together.”

At that moment, two more villagers passed by the window.

One of them was a regular customer of Ol' Tavern and Pierre Guillaume, who had scrounged Ryan's absinthe in a previous cycle.

He was happily chatting with his companion, seemingly discussing the excitement of the Lent celebration.

As they passed Lumian's door, they simultaneously turned their heads to look inside the house, their expressions eerily grim.

After an instant, they withdrew their gazes and resumed their conversation, smiles plastered on their faces.

If Lumian and his companions hadn't been watching the outside whenever someone passed by, they wouldn't have noticed the fleeting change in their expressions.

The louder the laughter outside, the more suffocated they felt.

Silence took over the conversation.

Eventually, the two villagers left, and Aurore sighed, saying, “This isn't just being replaced by monsters bit by bit. I suspect that the entire village is filled with monsters wearing human skin, except for us.”

Is this the complete Lent celebration? Lumian couldn't help but mutter to himself.

Ryan sternly warned, “It's going to get tougher every day. Everyone, hang in there.”

From noon to night, they kept vigil against mutated villagers attacking the house, but apart from the occasional passerby who gazed inside with a sullen or cold expression, nothing happened.

The situation weighed heavily on Aurore and the others.

Ryan surveyed the room and said gently, “There are still a few days until the twelfth night. Don't be so tense.

“After dinner, we'll split into two groups and take turns resting. We must maintain a good mental state.”

With such an experienced Beyonder with a calm demeanor, both Aurore and Lumian felt more at ease.

At midnight, Aurore and Lumian woke Leah and the others, then retreated to their bedroom.

Lumian glanced at the door and lowered his voice.

“That mysterious woman hasn't appeared. Should I find an opportunity to go out tomorrow and take a look at Ol' Tavern?”

“Everyone in the village might be a monster now. It'll be very dangerous if you go out.” Aurore disagreed.

She pondered for a moment and said, “Let's wait a little longer. If the mysterious woman doesn't appear tomorrow morning, I'll accompany you to Ol' Tavern in the afternoon.”

Lumian hesitated for a moment before nodding.

He planned to discuss with his sister tomorrow morning if they should ask Ryan and the others for help. The five of them could act together.

In the bedroom filled with a faint gray fog, Lumian opened his eyes.

He sat up and checked his body, realizing that his severe injuries had completely healed.

Just as he was about to marvel at the fact, he suddenly heard the sound of a doorbell ringing.

Someone's ringing the doorbell? The thought instinctively flashed through Lumian's mind. He habitually prepared to go down to the first floor to see who was visiting.

He had just taken a step when his entire body froze.

This was the dream ruins!

How could anyone visit?

Chapter 99 Guest

Instantly, Lumian tensed up.

He spun around and returned to the bed, scooping up Fallen Mercury with his bandaged left hand.

Grabbing his shotgun, he strode to the bedroom window while the doorbell continued to ring. He scrutinized the entrance.

There was no one there!

In that moment, Lumian's heart felt like it was about to seize.

He intended to activate his Spirit Vision for a better look.

Since he would hear the maddening and terrifying sound and show signs of losing control after entering Cogitation for a few seconds in the dream ruins, he couldn't use this ability smoothly. It took him a while to complete the corresponding operation.

However, even with his Spirit Vision activated, he still didn't notice anyone at the door.

Yet, the doorbell rang incessantly.

As his thoughts raced, Lumian seriously considered returning to bed, forcing himself to sleep and escape the dream.

But he felt that even if he returned to reality, he might not be able to evade the subsequent attack, considering the unknown danger that could invade his semi-subterranean two-story building at any moment.

Two scenarios:

If the person ringing the doorbell can enter, going to bed is as good as surrendering.

If they can't enter, I'll be safe as long as I don't open the door myself.

Regardless, I must go downstairs and take a look...

Lumian made up his mind quickly.

He sheathed Fallen Mercury at his waist, clipped his axe, and hoisted his shotgun. He stepped out of the room and cautiously descended the stairs.

Upon reaching the first floor, a figure came into view.

At the six-person dining table sat the enigmatic woman Lumian had been searching for.

She wore a white blouse with a large bow at the collar and loose pearl-gray pants. Her casual attire was deceptively elegant.

She sipped a pale-golden drink, a short black hat beside her.

Lumian relaxed and approached the mysterious woman with brown hair and blue eyes.

He set the shotgun and axe aside, pulled out a chair opposite the dining table, and sat down. He asked, "You can enter here?"

The woman set her glass down and smiled.

"How else do you think those materials were delivered to your room?"

As she spoke, the jingling sound ceased.

Lumian glanced at the door, puzzled.

"Since you're already inside, why were you still ringing the doorbell?"

She smiled and replied, "That's basic courtesy."

Courtesy that can scare people to death? Lumian dared only to mutter inwardly.

He got straight to the point.

"I've obtained the Pyromaniac Beyonder ingredient. Uh, it should be Pyromaniac."

The woman nodded gently.

“I know. That's why I came to see you.”

“Are you willing to help me separate the Provoker Beyonder characteristics and give me the corresponding potion formula?” Lumian suppressed his sudden joy and asked, “I was planning on finding you at Ol' Tavern.”

As for the price he would have to pay, he no longer cared.

The lady smiled and said, “With Cordu's current situation, it's very dangerous for you to go out, so I came here directly. I can indeed provide the help you want, but it won't be free this time.”

Lumian noticed that indecipherable emotion in the woman's eyes again, but the notion that it was no longer free reassured him.

The unknown was even more terrifying.

“What is the price I need to pay?” he asked without hesitation.

She replied calmly, “The separated Pyromaniac and Hunter Beyonder characteristics belong to me.”

That simple? Lumian was surprised.

He didn't even think of it as a price. After all, he wouldn't be able to use the Pyromaniac Beyonder characteristics for a long time.

She continued, “In addition to the help I originally provided, if there's any more in the future—if there's a future for you—you have to do something for me.”

Lumian sensed the inscrutable emotion in her eyes intensify.

He probed, “What if I don't?”

She laughed.

“Isn't it common for investments to fail? Didn't your sister lose some money buying stocks with divination?”

“What do you need me to do?” Lumian asked without hesitation.

She sighed softly.

“Let's talk about it if you can survive.”

“Alright, give me the Beyonder characteristic you obtained.”

Lumian rose and headed for the stairs leading to the second floor.

He barely restrained himself from sprinting up the staircase. When she could no longer see him, he dashed.

Soon, Lumian returned to the first floor with the cloth bag containing the Pyromaniac Beyonder characteristic and approached the dining table.

The woman raised her glass again and sipped the pale-gold liquid.

“What's this?” Lumian asked casually.

She explained simply, “It's an aperitif from Trier called Black Poca. It's brewed from ginger, cinnamon, nutmeg, and cloves soaked in sweet wine for a long time. It tastes pretty good.”

Having raised the topic merely to build rapport, Lumian didn't pry further. He opened the cloth bag and extracted the burning heart from the soil.

A scorching sensation seared his palm. Enduring the mild pain, he leaned forward and handed the Beyonders characteristic to the woman across the dining table.

She extended her left palm and let the “heart” hover in midair.

She glanced at Lumian and chuckled.

“When storing Beyonders characteristics in the future, remember to change their environment every once in a while. If such a thing comes into contact with something for too long, it's very likely to fuse with it and become a mystical item that needs to be sealed.”

Is that so... Lumian asked, “How often do I need to make a change?”

“Normally, it takes two to three days,” the woman said nonchalantly, “but accidents do happen. I recommend switching environments every 24 hours. With proper sealing and preservation, it could last months or even years. Also, if you've already mixed Beyonders ingredients into a potion, drink it as soon as possible. Otherwise, the liquid might merge with the bottle.”

As she spoke, a sudden flash enveloped her body, and the burning “heart” transformed into countless red fireflies.

The fireflies danced and swirled, coalescing into three distinct objects.

One was a dark red, springy, textured object. Another was a shrunken version of the burning heart, now missing numerous holes. The last was a black stone with a liquid-like surface and a potent odor.

The woman's right palm caressed the three objects, causing two to vanish into thin air.

All that remained on the dining table was the dark “rock,” about half the size of a fist.

“Is this the Provoker Beyonders characteristic?” Lumian asked eagerly.

The woman produced a post-it note and a silver fountain pen, scribbling down the potion formula, then reminded him, “You still lack mystical knowledge. After killing the monster, you only took the Beyonders characteristic.”

“Such Beyonders creatures are rich in spirituality. Many of their parts can be used to make charms, lotions, and ingredients for certain spells and rituals. For example, its blood is a supplementary ingredient for the Pyromaniac potion.”

“Although the Pyromaniac potion requires Fire Salamander blood, the monster's blood will do. It's essentially the same, and the effects might even be better.”

The more Lumian listened, the more regretful he became.

Although Aurore's adventure novels included scenes of hunting monsters and harvesting parts, he hadn't connected this to reality. He believed the flaming monster's only value was its Beyonder characteristic.

And now, retrieving it was impossible—the blood would have dried by now!

The woman ignored his reaction, tearing off the top note and letting it float toward Lumian.

Lumian grabbed it and read the words eagerly.

“Provoker potion formula:

“Main ingredient: One Provoker Beyonder characteristic;

“Supplementary ingredients: 50 milliliters of distilled liquor, 10 drops of honeysuckle extract, 5 grams of grapevine powder, 10 grams of fern powder;

“Usage: Drink it directly.”

After finishing, Lumian asked, puzzled, “There aren't any materials rich in spirituality...”

Like the Fire Salamander's blood.

She smiled and replied, “Different potions have different requirements. Yours mainly relies on symbolic mysticism.

“For example, ferns symbolize being 'easily influenced by others.' This aligns with the essence of a Provoker.”

So, a Provoker needs to sway others with their words? Lumian tucked the note away, pondering where he might find the supplementary ingredients.

Distilled liquor was available at home; Aurore used it in certain dishes. Grapevines and ferns were abundant in Dariège, though venturing out might be risky. The only item left was honeysuckle—he'd have to ask Aurore if she had any among her spell-casting supplies...

When Lumian looked up again, the woman across from him, along with the black short hat and the Black Poca aperitif, had disappeared.

He hadn't even noticed when she'd left.

This despite the fact that his Spirit Vision hadn't been deactivated the entire time.

Phew. Lumian exhaled and headed back to the bedroom, clutching the Provoker Beyonder characteristic and the potion formula, anticipation swelling within him.

He quickly lay down on the bed, intending to return to reality and consult Aurore, hoping to gather the additional ingredients by nightfall.

He didn't care that his Spirit Vision was still active; it would deactivate on its own once he fell asleep.

In the dead of night, Lumian opened his eyes and glanced over at Aurore.

He couldn't wait to share the news of acquiring the Provoker potion formula with his sister.

Yet, almost simultaneously, he spotted Aurore's mouth open slightly, a hazy, translucent figure emerging.

It was a bizarre, lizard-like creature!

Lumian's gaze locked in place. As the ethereal lizard surveyed its surroundings, he instinctively shut his eyes.

The "lizard" darted its gaze around before quickly scurrying away from Aurore's mouth and exiting the room.

Lumian reopened his eyes, staring at his sister in bewilderment.

Aurore's face was shrouded in darkness.

Her mouth hung slightly open as she slumbered peacefully.

Lumian observed her, motionless, as if he'd become a statue.

In the thick of night, his heart sank further into despair.

Chapter 100 Hesitation

Tick tock, tick tock, tick tock. The second hand of the wall clock echoed through the dark room.

After what felt like an eternity, Lumian finally shook off his nightmare.

He hastily reached over, gripping Aurore's shoulders and shaking her vigorously.

"Wake up! Wake up!"

He stifled his voice, careful not to alert the three official investigators on night duty.

Aurore's eyes remained tightly shut, her mouth slightly agape. No matter how much Lumian shook her, she didn't respond. She appeared like a living corpse, devoid of a soul.

Lumian's shaking gradually slowed, then ceased altogether.

He gazed at the sleeping Aurore, frozen in place for a long while.

He couldn't comprehend what was happening or when the issue had begun. The fear he felt mirrored the night he'd witnessed his grandfather's death.

From that day on, he'd embarked on his nomadic existence.

Lumian's fists clenched tighter, his body quivering slightly.

Abruptly, he spun around to face the window.

The translucent, ghostly "lizard" had returned to the room.

Lumian leaped off the bed, lunging with his right hand to grab the stunned creature as it caught sight of him awakening.

In the next instant, he jammed the “lizard” into his mouth, snarling with a twisted expression, “You like to worm your way into people's mouths, huh? Fine! I'll give you a chance!”

As he crammed the “lizard” into his mouth, he tore at it ferociously, his eyes bloodshot.

The “lizard” appeared too petrified to resist.

Just then, a voice sounded behind Lumian.

“What are you doing?”

It was Aurore's voice.

Lumian froze and slowly turned to look at the bed.

At some point, Aurore had woken up. Her blond hair disheveled, she sat up with her light-blue eyes filled with confusion and bewilderment.

Subconsciously, Lumian glanced down and realized that the “lizard” he had captured had long vanished.

For a moment, he didn't know if what he had just seen was a nightmare or reality.

“What's wrong?” Aurore frowned.

Lumian forced a smile.

“You kicked me off the bed while having a nightmare.”

“Is that so?” Aurore eyed her brother suspiciously, feeling like he was playing a prank.

She thought for a moment and said, “I had a nightmare. I dreamt that I was grabbed by a huge monster and stuffed into its mouth. I was so frightened that I struggled with all my might and finally woke up.”

As Lumian listened, a chill ran through his body, as if he had been submerged in an icy lake that hadn't completely thawed.

“Maybe, probably, I really kicked you” Aurore was a little embarrassed.

Lumian closed his eyes and smiled.

“I'm just kidding. I woke up because of something else.”

He then lowered his voice and said, “That mysterious lady appeared in the dream ruins and helped me separate the Provoker Beyond character and gave me the correct potion formula.”

“So, you woke up in joy and wanted to ask me if I had the corresponding supplementary ingredients?” Aurore deduced.

Lumian said with a smile, “That's right. By the way, do you have honeysuckle extract, grapevine powder, and fern powder?”

His smile was much more natural than before, but there seemed to be a flickering glint in his eyes.

Aurore mulled it over for a moment before responding, “I have both grapevine and fern. One is a ritual ingredient, and the other is a spell medium.”

“Honeysuckle flowers. We always have them at home. Don't you know that I soak them in water for drinking?”

As she spoke, she rummaged through the hidden pocket of her long dress.

“That's honeysuckle?” Lumian looked at his busy sister and deliberately smiled. “Why didn't you ask if I was given free help this time?”

Aurore took out a short grapevine and said with a smile, “You grind it into powder yourself!”

She didn't seem to hear Lumian's question.

“Alright.” Lumian pretended not to have asked.

He then said to his sister, “The Provoker potion still requires distilled liquor. I'll head to the cellar to retrieve it and strive to advance to Sequence 8 tonight.”

“It will take some time to make extracts from honeysuckle flowers,” Aurore said with a frown. “However, the supplementary ingredients for Low-Sequence Beyonders potions aren't that strict. You can use the entire honeysuckle flower as a substitute. You can consume them as long as the Beyonders characteristics can eventually dissolve.”

She then looked at the open door and asked in a low voice, “Aren't you afraid that Ryan and the others will be suspicious if you go to get distilled liquor in the middle of the night?”

Seeing his sister's reaction, Lumian forced his smile from being too stiff.

“As a regular at Ol' Tavern, waking up in the middle of the night and suddenly wanting to drink is very normal.

“Although alcohol has many disadvantages, it can at least relax my mind to a certain extent.”

What he meant was to use the excuse that the Lent celebration had ended and he was under too much stress. He had trouble sleeping and needed hard liquor to relax.

“Sure.” Aurore agreed.

Lumian turned around and walked to the door, the smile on his face gradually disappearing.

After exiting the door and arriving at the corridor, Lumian saw Ryan standing diagonally opposite him in a brown tweed shirt and pale-yellow pants. Leah and Valentine were at opposite ends of the corridor.

“Not sleeping anymore?” Ryan raised the kerosene lamp and looked at Lumian.

Lumian grinned.

“I'm heading to the cellar to get some liquor. How about it? Do you want a sip to relax?”

“I don't need it.” Ryan nodded. “You haven't experienced anything like this before. You're tense and under a lot of stress. It's understandable. Alcohol can indeed help.”

As he spoke, he walked towards the staircase with the flickering kerosene lamp.

“I'll go with you. You shouldn't move alone at a time like this.”

“Alright.” Lumian didn't object.

As the two entered the stairs, Leah took the initiative to approach Aurore's bedroom and stand guard at the door.

One step, two steps Lumian and Ryan descended to the shadowy first floor in silence.

As the faint light cast a glow over half the stove, Ryan asked casually, “Did something happen upstairs? I heard some commotion.”

His intention in suggesting they get alcohol from the cellar wasn't to advance tonight. The two-story building in the dream ruins also had a cellar and the distilled liquor. His main goal was to avoid Aurore and communicate with Ryan and the others about what had just happened.

However, when the words reached his lips, he almost couldn't bring himself to say them. He felt that the unsaid words were even more choking than the strongest liquor.

Ryan's expression turned serious.

“What's the matter?”

Lumian took a few deep breaths before saying, “Aurore, like the deputy padre, had a lizard that looked like a mini-elf coming out of her mouth.”

It was as if all his strength had been drained when he said this.

After seven to eight seconds, he recounted the entire incident. Instead of waking up willingly, he explained it as happening to wake up and seeing it.

Ryan listened quietly and didn't rush him. After he finished, he said gently, “You handled it well. We can't let her know that something's amiss. I'm worried that it will worsen the situation.

“Continue pretending that nothing happened. At dawn, I'll use the excuse that Cordu has been corrupted and that we need to undergo a purification every day to prevent ourselves from being affected. I'll get Valentine to try and exorcize the lizard.”

“Alright,” Lumian replied weakly.

He felt that the “lizard” had already fused deeply with his sister's soul. It wasn't that easy to exorcize and purify.

Ryan glanced at him and patted his shoulder gently.

“I can understand how you feel. If something similar happened to my family, I wouldn't be able to stay calm.

“But you have to remember that impatience can't solve anything.

“I know Valentine's purification might not be effective, but we have to give it a try to confirm that it won't work. Yes, that abnormality is most likely related to Cordu's loop. As long as we can finally break the loop, your sister should be able to recover.”

That's right This is equivalent to corruption. As long as I can remove all the corruption when the loop is lifted, Aurore will definitely be fine Lumian's eyes gradually lit up as he regained his motivation.

Ryan was rather satisfied with his reaction and said gently, “I need to remind you that you have to adapt to your sister's changes in the next few days. It's very likely that she'll be like the deputy padre, gradually losing herself to instincts. She'll act differently, following her memories and strongest emotions without reacting to anything else.”

Lumian fell silent for a moment before saying, “I'll adapt”

His voice became softer and softer until it trailed off.

After getting the distilled liquor from the cellar, the two of them returned to the second floor as if nothing had happened.

Upon entering the bedroom, Lumian smiled again.

He shook the bottle in his hand at Aurore and whispered, “It worked.”

Aurore smiled and pointed at the desk.

“The honeysuckle, grapevine, and fern are all there.”

Lumian nodded and placed the bottle on the desk.

He couldn't fall asleep no matter what.

He couldn't figure out when his sister had been corrupted and had the lizard enter her body. During this period, the two of them had been together every second. Even if Aurore went to the washroom, Leah would accompany her, and vice versa. How could there be a problem?

If it happened during our sleeping hours, why didn't anything happen to me? Lumian tried his best to recall, hoping to find the source. It would help resolve the abnormality.

Suddenly, he remembered something.

In the previous, previous cycle, Padre Guillaume Bnet had remarked that the Church didn't want to kill all the adults here and harvest a ruin. He said that he had other means even if Aurore really wanted to deal with them.

At that time, he was still an ordinary person.

Lumian initially believed that he was relying on Shepherd Pierre Berry, but with the current situation, he had a guess a crazy guess: Perhaps from the beginning, most people in the village had been parasitized by those strange lizard-like creatures, including Aurore!

As the twelfth night approached, the corresponding abnormality would become more and more obvious, and some people would show signs earlier.

The reason why he was spared was because he had the bluish-black symbol on him.

Recalling Aurore's lack of commitment in many matters in the second half of the previous, previous cycle, Lumian felt that his guess might be correct.

He couldn't help but grit his teeth.

At this moment, Ryan was patrolling the corridor with a kerosene lamp.

On the wall beside him, the shadow suddenly lengthened.

Almost at the same time, the small silver bells on Leah's veil and boots rang.

She felt her shoulders turn abnormally cold.