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Lord of Mysteries 2: Circle of Inevitability

Cuttlefish That Loves Diving

Summary

Lord of the Mysteries, part two.

In 1368, at the end of July. Bloody scarlet will descend from heaven.

Lord of Mysteries 2: Circle of Inevitability novel is a popular light novel covering Fantasy, Mystery, and Psychological genres. Written by the Author Cuttlefish That Loves Diving. 1180 chapters have been released and translated.

Chapter 1: Foreigners

A price is always exacted for what fate bestows--adapted from Zweig's Mary Queen of Scots.

"I'm a nobody, with no time to notice the brightness of the sun.

"My parents couldn't help me, and I wasn't highly educated. I had no choice but to make it on my own in the city.

"I'd applied to many jobs, but no one ever hired me. Maybe it's because I'm not good at expressing myself, and I'm not the best communicator. I guess I just haven't shown enough ability.

"Once, I'd eaten two loaves of bread over a three-day period. Hunger kept me up at night. At least I paid a month's rent in advance, so I didn't have to face the cold winter wind outside.

"Finally, I found a job at the hospital's morgue, keeping vigil over the dead.

"Nighttime in the hospital was colder than I could have ever imagined. The corridor's wall lights were out, leaving everything shrouded in darkness. I could barely see my feet, and the only light seeping out was from the rooms.

"Mon Dieu, it reeked of something fierce. The smell of death lingered in the air. And from time to time, we had to help move the bodies into the morgue.

"It wasn't the most glamorous of jobs, but it put bread on the table. Plus, the free time at night allowed me to study. Few people ventured to the morgue, but when they did, they were there delivering bodies or taking them away for cremation. I had to make do without books, as I couldn't afford them, nor did I see any hope of saving up enough for them.

"But I had to thank my predecessor for leaving so suddenly, as it allowed me to get this job.

"I dreamed of working the day shift. Sleeping during the day and being awake at night made my body weak and my head throb."

"One day, a new corpse was brought in.

"From what I'd heard, it's the body of my predecessor who suddenly left.

"I was intrigued by the mysterious disappearance of my predecessor, and as soon as the others left the room, I pulled out the cabinet and quietly opened the body bag.

"He was an old man, with bluish-white skin and wrinkles covering his face. The poor lighting only served to make him look scarier.

"He didn't have much hair. Most of it was white. He had been stripped of his clothes, not even a piece of cloth was left on him.

"As a dead man without a family, the movers couldn't resist the opportunity to cash in on the guy.

"I saw a strange mark on his chest. It was bluish-black. I can't really explain it. The light was too dim at the time.

"I reached out and touched the mark, only to realize there was nothing special about it.

"Looking at my predecessor, I couldn't help but wonder if I'd end up like him when I grew old...

"I promised his body I'd be with him on his last journey, take him to the crematorium and then to the nearest free cemetery. I couldn't have the bureaucrats throwing him in the river or some forsaken land like trash.

"I knew I was gonna 'ave to sacrifice some shut-eye, but Dieu merci it was Sunday the next day. I could catch up on my lost sleep then.

"After saying that, I zipped up the bag and shoved it back in the cabinet.

"The room went darker and the shadows lengthened...

"Since that day, every time I close my eyes, I'm swallowed by a thick fog.

"Something tells me I'm not alone. Something not quite human is coming my way. But nobody will listen. They think I've lost my mind in this job; they say I need a doctor..."

A male customer sitting at the bar looked at the narrator who had suddenly stopped and asked, "And?"

The narrator suddenly stopped his tale, causing a male customer at the bar to take notice. This mid-thirties chap sported a drab duffel coat and pale yellow strides. His hair was slicked back, and he had a rough dark bowler hat by his side.

He seemed run-of-the-mill, like the rest of the punters in the alehouse, with dark locks and piercing blue peepers. Not particularly handsome, but not repugnant either. Nothing about him screamed for attention.

The narrator was a strapping lad in his late teens, with long limbs and chiseled features that could make any lass go weak in the knees. His short, jet-black hair and bright, blue eyes only added to his appeal.

The lad looked wistfully at the empty wine glass in front of him and let out a deep sigh.

"And then?"

"Then I quit my job and returned to the countryside so that I can tell you this bullshit," the lad responded with a sly grin spreading across his face.

The male guest was taken aback.

"Were you just pulling our leg?"

"Haha!" Laughter erupted around the bar.

However, the laughter was short-lived as a middle-aged man looked sternly at the slightly embarrassed customer and remarked, "You ain't from around here, are ya? Lumian spins a different yarn every day. Yesterday, he was a penniless bloke who got dumped by his fiancée, and today, he's a watchman for the dead!"

"Aye, he talks about spending thirty years east of the Serenzo River and then thirty years to the right of it. He's full of hot air, that one!" added another regular at the tavern.

All the men were farmers from the village of Cordu, wearing drab-colored tunics.

The black-haired lad, Lumian, leaned forward on the bar counter and rose to his feet. He flashed a cheeky grin and proclaimed, "As you all know, I ain't the one making this up. My sister pens these tales. She's a writer for some column known as Novel Weekly or other."

With that, Lumian turned around, spread his arms wide, and beamed at the foreign customer.

"Looks like she's crafted quite the tale. I'm sorry you misunderstood."

The unremarkable man in the brown tweed shirt smiled and stood up.

"What an intriguing story. And how might I address you?"

"Isn't it common courtesy to introduce oneself before inquiring of others?" Lumian replied, returning the man's smile.

The foreigner nodded.

"My name is Ryan Koss.

"These are my companions, Valentine and Leah."

The last sentence referred to the man and woman sitting beside him.

Valentine, a man in his late twenties with powdered blonde hair and piercing blue eyes, wore a white vest, a blue tweed jacket, and black trousers. It was evident that he had put considerable effort into his attire, as if he had been priming himself for a special rendezvous.

He had a rather chilly look on his face, not even sparing a glance for the farmers and herders around him.

Leah, on the other hand, was a striking young woman with long, light gray hair tied into an elaborate bun and a white veil perched atop her head.

Her eyes matched her hair and she regarded Lumian with an open smile, clearly amused by their exchange.

In the glow of the gas lamps inside the tavern, the woman named Leah showed off her sharp nose and stunningly curved lips. She was definitely a stunner in the countryside like Cordu.

She wore a snug white pleated cashmere dress with a small off-white coat and a pair of Marseillan boots. There were two tiny silver bells fastened to her veil and boots. They jingled as she walked into the tavern, drawing the attention of many--especially the men.

In their eyes, this was the kind of fashionable getup you'd only see in the big cities, like the provincial capital of Bigorre or even the capital city of Trier.

Lumian gave a nod of acknowledgement to the three foreigners.

"The name's Lumian Lee. You may address me as Lumian."

"Lee?" Leah blurted out.

"What's the matter? Y'all got a problem with my last name?" Lumian asked with a curious look on his face.

Ryan Koss took it upon himself to explain on Leah's behalf, "Your last name is downright frightening. I nearly lost control of my voice just now."

Observing the bewildered expressions of the farmers and herdsmen around him, he continued,

"Folks who have crossed paths with sailors and sea merchants are familiar with a saying that's making the rounds in the Five Seas:

"I'd rather come face to face with pirate Admirals or even kings than run into a bloke named Frank Lee.

"That person's last name is also Lee."

"Is he really that scary?" Lumian inquired.

Ryan shook his head in response.

"I'm not exactly sure, but if such a legend exists, then it can't be far from the truth."

He switched topics and said to Lumian, "Merci for the story. It merits a drink. What do you desire?"

"A glass of La Fée Verte." Lumian didn't beat around the bush and settled back into his seat.

Ryan Koss furrowed his brow.

"'La Fée Verte'... Absinthe?"

"I must remind you, absinthe is harmful to the human body. Such alcohol can lead to insanity and hallucinations."

"I didn't expect the trends of Trier to reach here," Leah chimed in with a grin.

Lumian acknowledged her comment tersely.

"So the people of Trier also enjoy La Fée Verte..."

"For us, life is already tough enough. No need to fret over a little more harm. This drink can calm our minds."

"Alright." Ryan leaned back in his chair and turned to the bartender. "A glass of La Fée Verte and another glass of Cœur Épicé."

Cœur Épicé was a renowned fruit-based spirit that had been distilled to perfection.

The thin, middle-aged man who had exposed Lumian's lies piped up. "Give me a glass of La Fée Verte too. After all, I was the one who told the truth just now. I can even tell you the truth about this kid's situation!" He glared at Lumian, daring him to object. "Foreigner, I can tell you still have your doubts about the authenticity of that story."

"Pierre, you'd do anything for a free glass of alcohol," Lumian retorted, scowling.

Before Ryan could even respond, Lumian added, "Why can't I tell my story and get an extra glass of La Fée Verte?"

"Because no one knows if they should believe you," Pierre smirked. "Your sister's favorite story to tell kids is 'The Boy Who Cried Wolf.' People who lie all the time lose their credibility eventually."

Lumian shrugged and watched as the bartender slid a glass of light green alcohol in front of him. "ça va," he said, unbothered.

Ryan turned to Lumian.

"Is that all right?"

"Sure thing, as long as your wallet can handle it," Lumian replied breezily.

"In that case, another glass of La Fée Verte," Ryan said with a nod.

Pierre's face lit up with a smile.

"Generous foreigner, you should steer clear of this one," he said, gesturing to Lumian. "He's the most mischievous bloke in the whole village."

"Five years ago, his sister Aurore brought him back to the village," Pierre continued. "He's been here ever since. Can you imagine? He was just a wee lad of thirteen at the time. How could he have made the trek to the hospital to become a corpse watchman? The nearest hospital is in Dariège at the foot of the mountain. It would take an entire afternoon to get there by foot."

"Brought back to the village?" Leah inquired, her voice tinged with suspicion.

She tilted her head, causing her bells to tinkle.

Pierre nodded in confirmation.

"Aurore moved here six years ago. A year later, she went on a journey and brought this lad back with her. Said she found him on the road, a starving, homeless child. She planned to adopt him."

"Then, he took on Aurore's last name, Lee. Even his name, Lumian, was given by Aurore."

"I don't even remember what my name was before Aurore gave me the name," Lumian, unfazed by the revelation, flashed a grin and took a sip of absinthe.

It was clear that his past did not bother him in the slightest.

Chapter 2: "Prank"

Ryan apologized politely to Lumian. "Forgive me, I did not expect such a situation," he said.

Lumian chuckled.

"Are you suggesting we need another glass of La Fée Verte?"

Without waiting for Ryan's response, he changed the subject.

"What brings foreigners like you to Cordu? Are you here to buy wool or leather?"

Many of Cordu's residents made their living as shepherds.

Ryan breathed a silent sigh of relief and seized the opportunity to explain their true purpose.

"We came to visit the Eternal Blazing Sun Church's padre, Guillaume Bénet, but he seems to be absent from both his home and the cathedral."

Pierre, who had enjoyed Ryan's free absinthe, kindly reminded him that there was only one church in Cordu.

The other locals around the bar counter were all drinking, but no one answered Ryan's question. The name seemed to represent some kind of

taboo or authority that couldn't be openly discussed.

Lumian took a sip of drink and thought for a few seconds before offering his assistance.

"I can roughly guess where the padre is. Do you need me to take you there?"

Leah didn't stand on ceremony. "If it's not too much trouble," she said.

Ryan nodded in agreement.

"Once you've finished your drink."

"Alright." Lumian raised his glass and finished the light-green alcohol.

He put down his glass and got to his feet.

"Let's go."

"Merci beaucoup," Ryan expressed his gratitude and gestured for Valentine and Leah to stand up.

Lumian's face lit up with a smile. "It's no problem at all. You heard my story and I enjoyed a complimentary drink. That makes us friends, n'est-ce pas?"

"Oui." Ryan nodded.

Lumian's grin widened, stretching from ear to ear. He opened his arms wide, beckoning the other party in for a hug.

"Ah, it is good to meet you, my cabbages," he exclaimed with fervor.

Ryan, who was about to be enveloped in a bear hug, froze.

"Cabbages?"

His expression was a mixture of perplexity and embarrassment.

Valentine and Leah mirrored his expression.

"It is a term of endearment we use for our friends," Lumian explained with innocent sincerity. "Everyone in the Dariège region is aware of it. It has been a tradition for centuries, believe me, my cabbages."

Leah couldn't help but glance around, producing the tinkling sounds.

Pierre and the others nodded in agreement, assuring the newcomers that Lumian's words were true. However, the grins on their faces hinted that they were pleased to see foreigners struggling to comprehend their affectionate greetings.

Lumian stroked his chin thoughtfully.

"Don't you fancy it?"

"Then I shall opt for a different option. It can also be used for friends.

"My dear bunnies, my darling chicks, my lovely ducks, or perhaps my adorable lambs? Which one tickles your fancy?"

But Ryan's expression was as stiff as a board, and Valentine's brow furrowed in confusion.

Leah let out a sigh, a mix of exasperation and amusement.

"Let's just stick with cabbage, shall we? At least it sounds normal."

Phew. Ryan let out a quiet sigh and gently grasped Valentine's elbow. He gave a slight nod and remarked, "They all seem like precious treasures in the family."

Without awaiting Lumian's response, he swiveled his body and addressed the bartender, "How much will it be?"

"Two verl d'or," replied the bartender, eyeing the glasses lined up on the counter.

Ryan settled the bill, and Leah shifted the conversation to a different subject.

"Lumian is an uncommon name."

"At least better than names like Pierre and Guillaume," Lumian countered with a grin. "If you were to call out Pierre in this place, a third of the people would turn their heads. Call out Guillaume, and another third will respond. As for this gentleman..."

He gestured to the skinny middle-aged man sipping his free drink.

"His full name is Pierre Guillaume."

Leah flashed a smile, skirting the topic of cabbage.

As they departed from the tavern, Lumian turned around and surveyed the surroundings.

"What's the matter?" Leah inquired with curiosity.

Lumian pondered for a moment and replied thoughtfully, "It's not just the three of you foreigners who came to the tavern today. Another person arrived earlier, but I don't know when they left."

"What did they look like?" Ryan asked with a serious expression.

Lumian took a moment to reflect.

"A lady. Very sophisticated. You can tell she's from the city with just one glance. I can't describe her appearance. Why don't I sketch her for you?"

"Do you know how to draw?" Leah queried, aware of Lumian's idiosyncrasies.

Lumian chortled.

"I don't."

"In that case, let's locate the padre first," Ryan decided, drawing the conversation to a close.

Cordu was a place devoid of street lamps at night, yet the twinkling stars above provided a faint glimmer that allowed the four of them to navigate the road. The yellowish light emanating from the windows on either side only added to the ethereal ambiance.

As they approached the Eternal Blazing Sun cathedral situated in the village square, the grandiose structure appeared somewhat blurry in the darkness, as if it was merging with the night.

"We've been here before. There's no one here," Valentine grumbled with a frown.

Lumian smiled and said, "No one at the front door doesn't mean there's no one elsewhere."

He then proceeded to lead Ryan and the others around the front of the cathedral towards the cemetery, where they found a dark brown wooden door.

Lumian didn't wait for Ryan to knock. Instead, he reached over and fiddled with the keyhole before opening the side door with a creak.

"That's not very nice, is it?" Ryan frowned.

Leah nodded in agreement, her bells tinkling.

"We're here to visit the padre, not to fight him."

"Alright," Lumian acquiesced.

He closed the wooden door and knocked lightly.

"Hey, is anyone there? I'll come in if you don't answer," he muttered in a low voice that was barely audible in the night.

There was no response from inside the cathedral.

Without hesitation, Lumian pushed open the door and gestured inside.

"Go on in."

Ryan hesitated. He looked at the darkness behind the door and glanced at his companions.

"Okay." He took a step forward, slow but firm.

Leah and Valentine followed closely behind.

The four silvery bells adorning Leah's boots and veil were eerily silent.

The environment was dim and eerie as the four of them made their way forward.

Out of nowhere, Ryan came to a halt and muttered in a low voice, "What's that noise?"

"Yes, I heard it too," Lumian agreed.

Without wasting any time, he forcefully pushed the door aside, and it opened with a loud clang, revealing what lay beyond.

The dimly lit space resembled a confessional. A beam of starlight shone through, revealing a naked man in his prime, lying atop a fair-skinned woman.

The scene stunned everyone, including the man and the woman.

Suddenly, the man sat up and bellowed at Ryan and his team, "Sacrebleu! You've ruined the holy church's plans!"

Amidst the reverberating roar, Lumian, who had quietly approached behind the group, waved his hand and spoke quickly, "Ah, it seems we have discovered our padre. Au revoir, my cabbages!"

Before anyone could react, Lumian dashed towards the side door, leaving his words to drift away in the wind.

As the team stood in shock, Leah, Ryan, and Valentine couldn't shake the words of the middle-aged man, Pierre Guillaume, from their minds: "...you should steer clear of this one. He's the most mischievous bloke in the whole village."

...

Lumian sauntered down the country road, hands tucked in his pockets while whistling a tune under the stars.

"As expected, the padre is having an affair with Madame Pualis."

"Mon dieu, these foreigners exude an air of prestige. The padre would never dream of crossing them. He must pay an exorbitant sum to keep his sordid dalliances under wraps and preserve his standing within the cathedral."

"Hmph, he only has himself to blame for lusting after Aurore. I have been biding my time for this chance..."

As Lumian muttered to himself, he returned to his abode on the outskirts of the hamlet.

The structure he called home was a peculiar semi-subterranean two-story affair. The ground floor doubled as both a kitchen and a lounge. A hefty oven and a grandiose stove dominated the room.

"Aurore! Aurore!" Lumian hollered as he trudged up the stairs.

No reply.

The upper storey was divided into three chambers and a lavatory, all the doors stood open.

Lumian peeped into each room but couldn't find his sister.

He mulled it over for a moment, then marched to the end of the corridor and clambered up the ladder that led to the roof.

The roof was a fiery orange, painted by the twilight sky. In the center sat a figure, holding their knees and staring contemplatively at the sparkling stars.

This was an exquisite woman, exceptionally so. Her long and thick locks were a shade of gold, her eyes a pale blue, and her facial features were intricate and refined.

Her gaze was fixated on the cosmos, her countenance serene, akin to that of a statue.

Lumian remained silent. He shifted to her side and sat next to her.

He lifted his head, gazing at the dense forest in the distance, absorbing the susurrus of the wind blowing through the trees.

After a while, the woman raised her arms and stretched, paying no heed to her appearance.

"Aurore, I don't understand why you come up here so often. What's so interesting about this view?" Lumian commented.

"Call me Grande Soeur!" Aurore scolded playfully, tapping Lumian's head with her finger.

Aurore sighed and thought to herself, "A philosopher once said that there are only two things worth revering in this world. One is the morality in one's heart, and the other is the cosmos above one's head."

Lumian noticed his sister's slightly melancholic expression and flashed a grin.

"I know the answer to this question. Emperor Roselle said so!"

"Pfft..." Aurore laughed.

She took a sniff and raised her beautiful golden eyebrows.

"You've been drinking again!"

"This is called socializing." Lumian took the opportunity to recount what had just happened. "I met three foreigners..."

Aurore could not help but laugh.

"I'm really afraid that the padre will have a heart attack."

Her expression then turned serious. "Lumian, don't provoke the padre anymore. It'll be troublesome if we get a new one."

"But I can't stand his face..." Lumian complained before Aurore stood up.

She looked down at her brother and smiled.

"Alright, it's bedtime, my inebriated brother," Aurore said with a smile as she threw out some silver dust.

Aurore flew down from the roof like a bird and entered the window on the second floor, leaving Lumian behind.

Lumian watched this quietly and shouted anxiously, "What about me?"

"Climb down yourself!" Aurore replied mercilessly.

Lumian pursed his lips, his smile fading bit by bit.

He watched the silver specks of light disappear in the night sky, sighed softly, and muttered to himself, "I wonder when I'll be able to possess such extraordinary powers..."

Chapter 3: Dream

Lumian lingered atop the roof, reluctant to descend just yet.

His visage was a picture of stoicism, betraying no emotion. Gone was the mischievous young man who frequented the tavern, always ready with a grin and a jest. In his place was a composed and resolute figure, unrecognizable to those who knew him before.

Since discovering Aurore's magical powers by chance, Lumian had been obsessed with obtaining them. But Aurore always warned him against it, citing the immense danger and agony that came with wielding such abilities. She refused to divulge the secret even if she knew how to grant them to mere mortals.

Lumian couldn't force her to reveal the method, so he resorted to pleading and persuading her at every turn.

After a few seconds of contemplation, Lumian sprang to his feet and made his way down to the edge of the roof. He climbed back to the second floor using the wooden ladder.

He strolled to Aurore's room, only to find the brown wooden door ajar before peeking inside.

Aurore sat at her desk, scribbling away with a champagne fountain pen, dressed in a sky-blue gown.

What is she writing so late into the night? Is it related to witchcraft? Lumian placed his hand on the door and quipped, "Writing in your diary, are you?"

"Who writes in a diary, honestly?" Aurore replied without looking up from her writing.

Lumian wasn't satisfied with her answer.

"But didn't Emperor Roselle keep several volumes of diaries?"

Roselle, the last emperor of the Intis Republic where the siblings currently lived, had brought down the Sauron dynasty and assumed the mantle of Caesar, thereby declaring himself emperor.

The man had made countless strides in the fields of science and engineering, having been credited with inventing the steam engine. Not to mention, he had charted the sea route to the Southern Continent and sparked an age of colonization. He was the embodiment of his time, a symbol of a bygone era over a century ago.

However, in his twilight years, he was double-crossed and assassinated in the White Maple Palace of Trier.

In the aftermath of his death, his diary pages were disseminated throughout the world, yet they were written in a tongue that nobody could decipher, as if the words didn't exist in this world.

"That's why Roselle ain't no honest man," Aurore, her back turned to Lumian, scoffed.

"So, what're you scribbling there?" Lumian queried.

That was the crux of the matter.

Aurore responded with a shrug, her voice dripping with indifference, "A letter."

"To whom?" Lumian couldn't help but scowl.

Aurore paused, laying down her exquisite golden champagne fountain pen, intricately patterned, to review her words and phrases.

"A pen pal."

"A what now?" Lumian furrowed his brow, thoroughly perplexed.

What the hell was that?

Aurore chuckled, running her fingers through her lustrous golden hair as she began to enlighten her brother.

"That's why I keep telling you to read more and study more. Quit wasting your days drinking and carousing!

"Look at you. What sets you apart from an illiterate?

"Pen pals are friends who become acquainted through newspapers, magazines, and other publications. They've never met and rely solely on letters to keep in touch."

"What's the point of having such a friend?" Lumian asked, rather concerned about this matter.

As he withdrew his hand from the door, he scratched his chin, deep in thought.

Aurore had never had a boyfriend before, so he couldn't allow her to be fooled by someone she had never met before.

"Meaning?" Aurore thought about it seriously. "First off, emotional value. Oui, I know you don't understand the concept. Humans need to connect with one another, but some things and emotions cannot be shared with the villagers, nor with you. I require a more private outlet to release my thoughts. These pen pals, whom I have not met in person, are perfect for that. Secondly, do not underestimate my pen pals. Some of them hold great power, and some possess extensive knowledge. For example, a pen pal gifted me this battery-operated lamp. Kerosene lamps and candles are too damaging to the eyes and not ideal for writing at night..."

Without waiting for Lumian to ask another question, Aurore waved her hand behind her.

"Get some rest, my inebriated brother! Bonne nuit!"

"Alright, bonne nuit." Lumian replied, trying to hide his frustration.

Aurore instructed, "Don't forget to close the door. It's positively frigid in here with all the windows and the door open like this."

Lumian slowly shut the door made of brown wood, then headed to his room where he removed his shoes before sitting on the bed.

In the dimness of the night, Lumian could make out the wooden table beside the window, the slanted chair, the small bookshelf against the wall, and the wardrobe on the other side.

He sat still, lost in thought.

He knew Aurore was a woman who kept her secrets to herself, and there were things she had not revealed to him. Lumian was not surprised, but he was worried that her secrets might put her in danger.

And when reality hit, his options were limited.

He was just an ordinary person, with a robust body and a sharp wit.

Thoughts came rushing in like waves crashing on the shore, and just as quickly they receded. Lumian took a deep breath and made his way to the washroom to freshen up.

Afterward, he removed his jacket-style brown coat and collapsed onto the cold bed.

The April air in the mountains was still nippy.

...

In the midst of his fugue state, Lumian perceived a murky mist, enveloping his surroundings and erasing everything in sight.

He trudged through the haze in a daze, yet regardless of which direction he took or how far he went, the fog always led him back to the same place--his bedroom.

The room was fashioned with a white four-piece bed, a wooden table and chair poised in front of the window, bookshelves, wardrobes, and the like.

...

Phew. Lumian's eyes flickered open with a start, the morning sun casting a light through the thin blue curtains.

He sat up, staring blankly at the room, feeling as if he was still trapped in a dream.

The same dream he had been having for days--the gray fog that refused to clear.

He raised a hand to his temples and muttered to himself in a deep voice, "It's getting more frequent. I have the same dream almost every day..."

Lumian's calm demeanor belied the fact that this dream hadn't brought about any negative effects, but it certainly had also failed to yield any positive outcomes.

"I pray that hidden in this is something propitious," Lumian murmured, as he rose from the bed.

Lumian opened the door to the corridor and was immediately met with a sound emanating from Aurore's room.

What a coincidence... Lumian smiled.

But then, a sudden thought hit him, causing him to take a step back and stand at the edge of the door.

When Aurore's bedroom door creaked open, Lumian quickly raised his right hand and began to massage his temples with a slightly pained expression on his face.

"What's wrong?" Aurore noticed his discomfort.

Success! Lumian cheered inwardly as he tried his best to calm himself down.

"I had that dream again," he replied in a deep voice.

Aurore's golden locks of hair cascaded down her shoulders as she furrowed her brows with concern.

"The previous method didn't work..." she murmured to herself before suggesting,

"Perhaps... I should find you a hypnotist, a real Hypnotist, and see what caused it."

"The kind with magical powers?" Lumian questioned deliberately.

Aurore nodded lightly in response.

"One of your pen pals?" Lumian couldn't help but ask.

"Why do you care about this? Think about how to solve your own problem!" Aurore retorted without hesitation.

Isn't that what's on my mind? Lumian muttered inwardly.

He took the opportunity to say, "Aurore, if I become a Warlock and gain extraordinary powers, I should be able to unlock the secret of the dream and end it completely."

"Don't even think about it!" Aurore replied without hesitation.

Her expression softened as she continued, "Lumian, I won't lie to you. This path we're taking is dangerous, painful, and downright treacherous. If I had

any other choice and if the world wasn't spiraling out of control, I'd be content with being a regular old writer and living a peaceful life."

Lumian didn't hesitate to interject, "Then let me shoulder the burden of danger and pain. I'll protect you, while you do what you love."

Those words had been repeating in his head for quite some time.

Aurore went quiet for a couple of seconds before a grin spread across her face.

"Are you discriminating against women?"

Before Lumian could say a word, she added with a serious tone, "It's too late to turn back now. Ain't no going back to what we had before."

"Fine, I get it. I'm gonna go wash up. You study hard at home today and get ready for the college entrance exams in June!"

"You said it yourself, the world is getting more dangerous. What's the point of taking exams?" Lumian muttered.

He believed that the key to success was strength, not some paper degree.

Aurore just smiled and said, "Knowledge is power, my uneducated brother."

Lumian had no response, so he just watched Aurore walk into the washroom.

...

In the afternoon, in the bustling townsquare of Cordu,

Reimund Greg caught sight of Lumian Lee crouched under an elm tree. His thoughts were shrouded in mystery.

"Shouldn't you be holed up at home with your nose buried in those books?" Reimund approached him, his voice dripping with envy.

Reimund was Lumian's confidant, standing at a moderate 1.7 meters, with brown hair and brown eyes. He was an ordinary-looking fellow with a slightly flushed complexion.

Lumian looked up at him and offered a charming grin.

"Did Aurore not fill you in? Even the hangman deserves a respite! I've been cooped up for so long, I needed a break."

All morning, he had been ruminating on the possibility of acquiring extraordinary powers without Aurore's assistance.

This required him to seek out clues and take the initiative to investigate.

Eventually, he felt that the rumors of magical powers circulating throughout the village held some truth and leads, so he purposely waited for Reimund here.

"If I were in your shoes, I wouldn't rest for more than fifteen minutes," Reimund drawled, leaning casually against the elm tree. "We don't have a sister who's well-read enough to teach us. I plan on learning how to herd sheep next year."

Lumian paid no attention to Reimund's remarks and spoke reflectively.

"Recall the tale of the Warlock for me."

Reimund couldn't quite understand Lumian's intentions, furrowing his brow in confusion.

"The one about the Warlock?"

"In the past, there was a Warlock in our village, but he died later. On the day of his burial, an owl flew in from outside and perched atop his bed. It only departed after the coffin was carried out.

"Then, the coffin became unbearably heavy. It took nine bulls to pull it."

Lumian pressed further, "How long ago was this?"

Reimund's expression grew increasingly perplexed.

"How should I know? I heard it from my father."

Chapter 4: Shepherd

Lumian sprang to his feet, his eyes flashing with determination. "Then let's go to your father."

He had always been a man of action, and he knew that investigating the village legend couldn't wait. If he dallied, his sister Aurore would surely catch wind of it, and she would never allow him to proceed.

In Aurore's eyes, delving into the realm of extraordinary powers was tantamount to playing with fire.

How can I not know that there's danger? Aurore wouldn't lie to me about this. But even if the world is ablaze, I have to keep walking. I can't let Aurore face this alone... As he got up, this thought flashed across Lumian's mind.

Every time Aurore mentioned that the world was becoming more dangerous, the seriousness and worry on her face couldn't be any more genuine!

Reimund Greg looked at Lumian with confusion etched on his face.

"Why are you looking for him?"

Lumian fixed him with a withering look. "Ask him how long ago the legend of the Warlock took place."

Why is this guy struggling to comprehend such a simple matter? Perhaps I need to find some time to test his intelligence.

Reimund still looked baffled as he gazed at Lumian.

"Why do you need to know such details?"

Uh... Should I bother trying to explain it to this clueless fellow? Or should I simply come up with a plausible excuse? He weighed his options.

Lumian's mind raced as he considered his next move. He knew that he couldn't keep his investigations a secret from his friends, but he also knew that pursuing the truth about the legend was a risky move. However, he quickly came up with an idea.

He flashed a grin that he usually reserved for moments when he was about to deceive someone.

"..." Reimund took two steps back, sensing that something was amiss. "Spill it!"

Lumian adjusted his dark-colored shirt and linen jacket before smiling.

"I believe the legend of the Warlock is worthy of our attention."

"What's so important about it?" Reimund asked after some thought.

"There was indeed a Warlock in our very village of Cordu in the past," Lumian said with a serious expression. "Think about it, my friend. When I lie, I don't provide specific details like the time, place, and background that anyone could easily verify. However, this legend mentions a Warlock who

lived in Cordu, and if it were a fabrication, it would be too easy for someone to expose it as such."

"But that was ages ago," Reimund countered.

"I'm also referring to the people who were around when the legend first started circulating," Lumian explained, his smile widening. "They could have easily confirmed whether or not a Warlock lived in Cordu at that time. And since the legend has been passed down through generations, it's highly likely that it's based on a real event."

Reimund remained unconvinced.

"But when you make up stories, you often use phrases like 'more than a hundred years ago,' 'centuries ago,' 'long, long ago,' to make it impossible for anyone to verify."

"That's precisely why I need to confirm it with your father," Lumian replied, a sly look in his eye that said: "You see where I'm going with this, don't you?"

"That's true..." Reimund nodded slowly, accepting Lumian's explanation, but he couldn't shake the feeling that something wasn't quite right.

As they left the square and delved deeper into the village, Reimund had a sudden epiphany.

"Mon Dieu, why do you want to confirm if such a legend is true?"

"Warlock, mon ami, that's what we're searching for! If we can confirm the house where he lived and the place where he was buried, we might uncover his secret and gain magical powers that go beyond mere mortals," Lumian replied, his truthful words dripping with deceit.

Reimund's expression turned skeptical: "Don't tell me lies."

"Mon ami, most of those tales are created to scare little children. How can they be true?

"And on top of that, anyone who seeks the power of a Warlock will end up in the Inquisition!"

The Intis Republic lay on the Northern Continent, where the orthodox deities were the Eternal Blazing Sun and the God of Steam and Machinery. These two churches divided the faith of almost all the people, and they didn't allow the Church of Evernight Goddess, the Church of the Lord of Storms from the Loen Kingdom, the Church of Earth Mother from the Feynapotter Kingdom, the Church of the God of Knowledge and Wisdom from Lenburg, and the Church of the God of Combat from the Feysac Empire to come in and preach.

The Eternal Blazing Sun Church's Inquisition was feared by all. Countless heretics had been locked up and subjected to unimaginable torture.

Lumian laughed.

"Why are you fretting now, my friend? You said it yourself, most of those legends are false. The chances of finding a Warlock's remains are slim to none.

"Besides, even if we do stumble upon the remains of a Warlock, we don't have to take on his forbidden power. We can give it to the Church and get a handsome reward. Oh right, a Warlock's grave is sure to be overflowing with treasures."

The Church that Lumian spoke of was the Church of the Eternal Blazing Sun. The Church of the God of Steam and Machinery wasn't found in Cordu, instead it was usually located in large cities and places with factories.

Seeing the temptation growing in Reimund's eyes, Lumian couldn't help but click his tongue in satisfaction.

"Do you really want to be a shepherd, my friend?"

The 'shepherd' he was not talking about the romanticized idea of a pastoral shepherd that city dwellers often had. No, this was a profession. Every morning, they would have to lead a flock of sheep out to graze and watch over them.

Cordu was located in Dariège, Riston Province. Being a shepherd was a profession here, a tough and lonely profession.

They worked for sheep owners, herding dozens, even hundreds of sheep back and forth between the mountains and plains.

This was known as a herding. Every autumn, the mountains around Cordu would wither, and the shepherds would lead the sheep out of the mountain pass to the warmer plains far away, sometimes crossing borders into Feynapotter, Lenburg, and other countries. By the beginning of May, they would have brought the sheep back to various villages to shear them and wean the lambs. In June, they would trek up the mountains and into the tall ranges. They'd live in shacks and make cheese while grazing the sheep until the weather turned cold.

The shepherds spent their entire lives on the move, traveling from place to place. They only had a small window to return to the village, which made starting a family nearly impossible. Most of them were single, and the few

widows who had no choice but to herd sheep for a living were highly sought after by the shepherds.

Reimund fell silent.

After a long while, he hesitantly said, "I'll listen to ya. It does sound like fun, and I could use somethin' to pass the time."

In the ordinary course of events, once the family decided which child would become a shepherd, they would dispatch him to a certain shepherd's location to assist between the ages of fifteen to eighteen. There, he would learn the ropes of shepherding. Three years later, the youngster would officially become a shepherd and seek employment elsewhere.

Seventeen-year-old Reimund, however, had found several reasons to postpone this matter for over two years. If his circumstances did not alter, he would have to start learning how to herd next year.

"Come on," Lumian said, patting Reimund's shoulder. "Is your father in the fields or at home?"

"Recently, there hasn't been much work. Lent is approaching swiftly. He's either at home or at the tavern." Reimund let out a voice of envy. "You don't know anything about this? You're definitely not a farmer. You have a fortunate sister!"

Lumian put his hands in his pockets and sauntered ahead, disregarding Reimund's lamentations.

As they approached the rundown tavern in the village, a person emerged from the side street.

This individual was dressed in a lengthy dark brown coat with a hood. A rope was tied around his waist, and he wore a pair of brand-new, supple black leather shoes.

"Pierre? Pierre of the Berrys?" Reimund cried out in surprise.

Lumian halted in his tracks and turned to look.

"That's me," Pierre Berry replied with a wide grin and a wave of his hand.

He was a scrawny man with sunken eyes and greasy, curly hair. His stubble suggested it had been quite some time since he last shaved.

"Why are you back?" Reimund asked in confusion.

Pierre Berry was a shepherd and it was only the beginning of April. He should be tending to his sheep in the fields beyond the mountain pass. How in the world did he find himself in the village?

He had only just begun his journey, and even if he had gone to Lenburg or the north of Feynapotter, it would take him a month to return to the Dariège mountains.

With his warm, smiling blue eyes, Pierre exclaimed joyfully, "Isn't it almost Lent? I haven't celebrated it for years. I can't miss it this year!"

"Don't you worry. I have a companion to help me look after the sheep. That's the beauty of being a shepherd. Without a supervisor, as long as I can find someone to help me, I can go wherever I please. I'm free as a bird."

Lent was a widely celebrated festival throughout Intis. People welcomed the arrival of spring in different ways and prayed for a fruitful harvest for the

year.

Although it had nothing to do with the Church of the Eternal Blazing Sun or the Church of the God of Steam and Machinery, it had already turned into folklore and didn't involve the worship of pagan deities. Therefore, it had gained the tacit approval of the orthodox factions.

"You want to see who'll be chosen as the Spring Elf this year, don't you?" Lumian teased, flashing a grin.

In Cordu, the people selected a gorgeous girl to play the role of the Spring Elf for Lent. It was all part of the celebration.

Pierre laughed along.

"I hope it's your sister Aurore, but she definitely won't agree, and she's not the right age either."

"Alright," he said, pointing towards the tavern just a stone's throw away. "I'll head to the cathedral to pray. Drinks on me later."

Reimund absentmindedly replied, "No need. You don't have much dough."

"Haha, as the good Lord Himself has said, 'Even if there's only one coin de cuivre, we have to share it with our frères pauvres.'" He recited an adage that was well-known among the shepherds in the Dariège region.

Lumian beamed at Reimund, saying, "Pierre's loaded. He's definitely treating us to a drink!"

He pointed to Pierre Berry's spanking new leather shoes.

Pierre Berry was thrilled.

"My new boss is not too shabby. He gave me a few sheep and some wool, cheese, and leather."

The shepherds were compensated with food, a small sum of money, and communal animals, cheese, wool, and leather. The amount they received was dependent on the agreement they had signed with their employer.

For shepherds who had to travel long distances, having a good and suitable pair of leather shoes was the most pressing and practical desire.

As Lumian watched Pierre Berry strut towards the town square, his gaze gradually became solemn and filled with suspicion.

He silently muttered to himself, Going away for a week or two or maybe even a month just to attend Lent?

Lumian paused for a moment, his eyes scanning the area before he turned and strode towards the local watering hole with Reimund.

The tavern was a nondescript establishment with no fancy moniker to speak of. The townsfolk affectionately referred to it as Ol' Tavern.

Upon entering, Lumian's eyes darted around the room in their habitual manner.

Suddenly, his gaze came to a halt.

There, before him, was the foreigner who had departed so hastily the night before.

She was alone, not in the company of Ryan, Leah, and Valentine.

Her dress was a long, flowing orange garment, and her locks were a rich brown, tousled in gentle curls. Her piercing, sky-blue eyes were fixed on the scarlet-hued drink that graced her delicate hand.

Beautiful and languid, she seemed out of place in the seedy, dimly lit tavern.

Chapter 5: Card

Kirsch. As expected of someone from a big city... Lumian's gaze eventually landed on the glass in the lady's hand.

The distilled spirit made from sugar and fermented cherries had a color and texture that appealed to the ladies. Of course, they could replace the cherries with other fruits, but it would alter the taste only slightly.

Cordu's Ol' Tavern had a limited stock of high-grade wine, including Kirsch, which Madame Pualis fell in love with during her visit to the provincial capital, Bigorre.

Madame Pualis was the wife of Béost, the local administrator and territorial judge. Her noble ancestors had lost their title during Emperor Roselle's reign.

Lumian knew that she was also one of the mistresses of the padre, Guillaume Bénet, but not many people in the village knew about it.

Lumian shifted his gaze away from the lady and walked towards the bar counter.

A man in his forties wearing a linen shirt and trousers of the same color was sitting there. His brown hair was no longer lush, and his face was creased from years of hard labor.

He was none other than Pierre Greg, Reimund's father.

Another Pierre.

At least a third of the people at the bar would answer to the call of Pierre, Lumian had joked earlier in front of Leah, Ryan, and the others.

In the village, when people talked about Pierre or Guillaume, they had to specify which family they were referring to.

Many families had fathers and children with the same names, making it impossible to tell them apart without adding "père," "aîné," or "junior" to their names.

Reimund sauntered up to his father's side and asked, "Papa, why don't you go to the square and chat with the others?"

The men in the village always convened under the ancient elm tree or in someone's abode, where they'd spend the day playing dice, cards, chess, and swapping all sorts of rumors—the tavern cost money, after all.

Pierre Greg, with a glass of rich red wine in hand, turned to his second son and said, "We'll go later. There shouldn't be many people at the square now."

That's right. Where did all the men in the village go? Lumian was immediately perplexed.

He had noticed the absence of the village men at the square.

"Monsieur, I want to ask you something," Lumian said bluntly.

Pierre Greg immediately turned alert.

"A new prank?"

The story of "The Boy Who Cried Wolf" does indeed have a basis in reality... Lumian turned his head, gesturing for Reimund to speak.

Reimund hesitated for a moment, gathering his thoughts.

"Papa, how long ago did the Warlock legend you told me happen? The one where it took nine bulls to pull the coffin."

Pierre Greg gulped down a mouthful of wine, his brow furrowed in puzzlement.

"Why are you asking this?"

"You know, your pépé told me this when I was just a wee lad," Reimund replied.

The Riston Province, where Cordu was located, and the neighboring provinces of Aulay and Suhit were located in the south of the Intis Republic. They were famous grape producers, and the wine here, especially the inferior ones, was very cheap. In some years, people could even drink wine like water.

Reimund was disappointed because it had been a long time since his grandfather had passed on.

Suddenly, Pierre Greg chimed in, "Your pépé claimed that he saw it with his own two eyes when he was but a young man. It spooked him so much that he became deathly afraid of owls. He was convinced that their evil talons could snatch his very soul away."

Lumian and Reimund's eyes sparked with excitement, almost in unison.

Merde, there were actual clues!

The legend of the Warlock—it was something that someone had actually experienced?

"Did P  p   mention anything about where the Warlock lived or where he was buried?" Reimund asked eagerly.

Pierre Greg shrugged. "Who cares?"

Not one to be deterred, Reimund persisted, determined to glean any shred of information. Before he could speak, Lumian intervened with a gentle touch on his shoulder as he spoke loudly, "The river awaits us."

Reimund was just about to take his leave with Lumian when Pierre Greg suddenly remembered something.

"Hold up, Reimund. You'll soon be a Greenwatcher, won't you? There's something you need to be aware of.

Greenwatchers had the crucial responsibility of patrolling the highland pastures around the village and nearby fields to prevent any illegal grazing during the prohibited period or livestock from ravaging the saplings.

Lumian didn't pay much heed to the conversation and made his way to the tavern's washroom.

As he exited the restroom, he took a detour to the female foreigner who was sipping on Kirsch. It was impossible to discern her age.

Although he had no intentions of striking up a conversation, he observed her with great detail. It might come in handy in the future, just like how he had used Ryan, Leah, and Valentine to infiltrate the padre's scandalous scene.

After a few subtle glances, Lumian was poised to head for the entrance of the tavern to wait for Reimund when the languid lady in the orange dress looked up.

Before Lumian could retract his gaze, his eyes met hers.

Lumian felt a little awkward as his thick skin couldn't protect him from the unexpected encounter.

Many thoughts immediately surfaced in his mind.

Maybe I should take a cue from the padre and administrators of the Church and praise her beauty? Or perhaps I should switch gears and hit on her? Alternatively, should I show my inexperience and hastily turn around to leave?

As Lumian made up his mind, the lady interrupted his thoughts and said with a smile, "Been having dreams, have you?"

Lumian was hit by a bolt of lightning. His thoughts went numb and his mind froze.

After a moment or two, he managed to force a smile and asked, "Dreaming isn't unusual, is it?"

The woman touched her cheek with one hand and sized Lumian up. She chuckled and said, "Lost in a misty dream, perhaps?"

How could she know? Lumian's pupils dilated instantly, and his expression betrayed a hint of fear.

Despite having experienced many things, he was still young, and for a moment, he couldn't control his emotions.

Stay calm, Lumian. Stay calm... He repeated to himself, trying to relax the muscles on his face, before asking, "Did you hear the tale I told those three foreigners last night?"

The woman didn't reply. Instead, she pulled out a stack of cards from her orange purse, which sat on the chair next to her.

She cast her gaze at Lumian once again and broke into a radiant smile.

"Draw a card. Perhaps it can aid you in unlocking the hidden secrets of that dream."

Wh— Lumian was taken aback, his guard instantly raised.

He was both enticed and wary.

He looked down at the card she presented him and furrowed his brows.

"Tarot?"

The card resembled the tarot cards created by Emperor Roselle for divination.

The woman looked down sheepishly and offered a self-deprecating smile.

"My apologies, I must have grabbed the wrong one."

She swiftly returned the 22 tarot cards to her medium-sized handbag and pulled out a different deck.

"This is also tarot, but it's from the Minor Arcana. You don't have the privilege to draw from the Major Arcana pack, and I don't have the authority to let you..."

The Minor Arcana consisted of 56 cards divided into four suits, each representing chalices, wands, swords, and pentacles.

What is she talking about... Lumian was bewildered by her words.

This woman was stunningly beautiful and sophisticated, yet there was an air of eccentricity about her that suggested she was not entirely sane.

"Draw one," she urged, waving the Minor Arcana cards in her hand. "It's complimentary, so there's no cost to try. It may be the solution to your dream predicament."

Lumian chuckled.

"My sister once said that free things often come at the most hefty price."

"That may be true," the lady said after some thought.

She laid down the Minor Arcana card with a delicate touch, careful not to upset the glass of Kirsch that sat beside it.

"But as long as you don't pay, no matter what, how can I, a foreigner, expect to make you pay in Cordu?"

That's right... perhaps it's worth a try. It wasn't easy for me to get a hint about that dream. I gotta give it a shot, but what about the Warlock's curse? Maybe I should get Aurore's help? Lumian's mind raced with conflicting thoughts, and he couldn't decide what to do.

The woman didn't seem to mind his hesitation.

After what seemed like an eternity, Lumian finally made up his mind. Slowly, he leaned forward and reached out his right hand. Carefully, he shuffled through the stack of Minor Arcana cards and extracted one from the middle.

"Seven of Wands." The languid woman's eyes drifted towards the card.

The image depicted a man in verdant attire, standing atop a mountain with a determined expression on his face. In his hand, he held a wand, poised for battle against the six wands representing his enemies that were attacking from the foot of the mountain.

"What does this mean?" Lumian asked.

The woman's lips curled into a smile.

"I shall interpret it for you. It symbolizes crisis, challenge, confrontation, courage, et cetera.

"However, what really matters is that this card now belongs to you. When the time comes, you will discover its true meaning."

"You're giving it to me?" Lumian's confusion grew with each passing moment.

Could this card truly be cursed?

The woman ignored his query and started to put away the remaining cards. She picked up her glass and finished the remaining Kirsch in a single gulp.

With graceful strides, she made her way towards the staircase on the side of Ol' Tavern and ascended to the second floor.

It was obvious that she lived there.

Lumian felt the urge to follow her, but something held him back. His thoughts were in disarray.

Is this really an ordinary card?

She gave it to me. Does that mean she'll never be able to use that deck again?

Aurore might be able to shed some light on this...

At this moment, Reimund approached Lumian.

"What's the matter, my friend?"

"Nothing much. That foreigner was quite the looker, isn't she?" Lumian said patronizingly.

"I reckon your sister, Aurore, is far more beautiful." Reimund then lowered his voice. "Lumian, my pépé has been gone for ages. What should we do next?"

Lumian, who was in a hurry to leave, pondered for a moment before answering,

"Firstly, we could track down an elder around your pépé's age who's still kicking. Alternatively, we could head to the cathedral and examine the registry. Uh, but that's something to consider at a later time."

Lumian remembered his recent altercation with the padre and decided it was better to avoid the cathedral, unless it was absolutely necessary.

As the only cathedral in Cordu, it held significant power, even acting as a government entity. It recorded all significant events, including deaths, and marriages.

Before Reimund could ask any further, Lumian interjected, "Let's split up and see who fits the bill. We'll inquire tomorrow."

"Agreed." Reimund immediately agreed.

...

In the semi-subterranean two-story building, Aurore listened intently to Lumian's tale, her piercing gaze fixed on the "Wand" card in his hand.

"It's an ordinary card, oui. I detect no malice or enchantments."

"Aurore, uh, Grande Soeur, what do you make of the foreigner's intentions? How did she know of my dream?" Lumian asked.

Aurore shook her head.

"Now that she has shown us her hand, we can only wait and see."

"I will keep a watchful eye on her for the next few days."

"Oh... And take this card. It may cause change. But have no fear, I will be watching."

"Alright." Lumian tried his best to relax.

...

In the dead of the night, Lumian deftly tucked the Wand card into the garments draping over the back of the chair, then slipped under the covers and shut his eyes.

Before long, a dense, ashen mist once again enveloped his vision.

Without warning, he jolted awake within his reverie.

He sensed his mind clearing, and a newfound lucidity taking hold.

Yet, the dreamworld swathed in that same murky haze lingered on.

Chapter 6: Ruins

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Could it be because of the tarot card that represents the Seven of Wands?

That woman said it would help me unlock the secret of the dream..

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

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

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

This dream did not replicate the Cordu where he lived.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Where is the dream secret hidden?

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

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

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

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

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

From what I can see, this dream is shrouded in secrecy, and it doesn't feel entirely my own. Lumian knew that blindly exploring it could lead to danger.

Yes, I will search for that woman tomorrow and see what information I can find. Then, I will make a decision...

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

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

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

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

I'm finally awake...

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

Lumian breathed a sigh of relief and whispered to himself.

In that moment, a knock reverberated through the door.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Aurore nodded pensively.

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

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

Lumian grunted curtly.

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

"Very well." Aurore offered no objection.

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

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

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

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

"Understood," Lumian replied solemnly.

...

Cordu, Ol' Tavern.

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

"Which chamber does the foreign madame occupy upstairs?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

...

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

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

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

He planned to wait here until the lady came out.

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

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

Finally, a soft creak.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Lumian glanced around the empty hallway. "Here?"

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

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

Lumian asked, organizing his thoughts carefully.

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

The lady laughed involuntarily.

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

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

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

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

The woman's lips curled into a smile.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The woman smiled enigmatically.

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

Chapter 7: Naroka

Once Lumian had departed from the Ol' Tavern, he found himself standing on the uneven road, uncertain of where to go next.

The morning sun beat down upon him, albeit with a slight chill in the air.

As he deliberated his next move, Reimund Greg emerged from the side.

"I was just looking for you."

Lumian quickly regained his composure and queried, "What's the issue?"

Reimund appeared taken aback.

"Have you forgotten? Today, we're supposed to seek out the elderly, around the same age as my p  p  , and inquire about the legend of the Warlock."

Lumian groaned, pressing his hand against his forehead in agony.

"Is that so? Why can't I recall? Or is this just your imagination?"

Reimund's expression shifted from one of concern to one of fear. Just as he was about to inquire further and confirm whether he had imagined the events of the previous day, Lumian's face lit up with a mischievous grin.

"You rascal, you're playing a joke on me again!" Reimund cursed, unable to contain his annoyance.

"You need to work on your cursing," Lumian chided, shaking his head in disappointment. "Even Ava can curse better than you."

Ava Lizier, the beautiful daughter of Cordu Village's renowned shoemaker Guillaume Lizier, was now a goose herder.

Reimund's expression shifted as he muttered, "Ava..."

He then looked at Lumian. "She's our friend, right?"

Lumian nodded with a smile. "Indeed she is."

The trio, along with Guillaume of the Berrys and Ava's cousin Azéma Lizier, were inseparable teenagers who often spent their days together.

"Why don't we bring Ava on board to help us uncover the truth behind the legend?" Reimund suggested. "As you know, her father always said, 'Why must a dowry be paid when a woman gets married? How many good families have fallen like this?' It pains her to hear it. She might be relieved if she could get some treasure or reward from the investigation."

"I've also heard the heads of several families in the village say similar things, including our padre," Lumian added with a sly grin. "They wish their brothers would stay at home forever. Even if they get married, they won't venture out alone to establish a family. That would require them to split the assets and give them their deserving share."

Lumian shot a furtive glance at Reimund and continued, "Therefore, many families prefer to let one of their children become a shepherd. This way, he

won't get married and will have a certain income. Most of the time, he can support himself."

Reimund's expression gradually darkened as he considered the implications of this issue.

He had never thought too deeply about it before.

This was precisely why he enjoyed spending time with Lumian. Although most people in the village believed that Lumian had a poor character and enjoyed lying and playing tricks, he was actually more knowledgeable than anyone his age. Reimund, on the other hand, felt like he didn't know much and spent his days in a daze, simply following through with his family's arrangements.

It's good that you know... Lumian thought to himself before skillfully steering the conversation back to their investigation.

"It's too late now. We must hurry up and ask around. We will get Ava tomorrow. Yes, we can also bring Guillaume-junior and Azéma on board later. Not only will this potentially lead to gains, but it will also be a fascinating activity that can train our abilities."

"Bring Guillaume-junior and Azéma too?" Reimund grumbled begrudgingly.

The more people involved, the less his share of the rewards would be.

Furthermore, if he included them, he would have fewer chances to win over Ava's affections.

Lumian regarded him with a touch of kindness and pity in his gaze.

Silly child, do you think Ava will fall for you? Her eyebrows are very high, and she only wants to marry into a good family. She clearly has a certain favorable impression of me, a 'villain', yet she can control herself...

In the Dariège region, having "high eyebrows" meant having high standards, and they wouldn't settle for just any average bloke.

"My sister always said there is strength in numbers," Lumian explained simply. "Who are the old croakers that we need to visit?"

"You didn't investigate?" Reimund asked in surprise.

How could I have the energy to investigate after the incident with the Wand card? Lumian smiled and quipped, "Of course I investigated. I am just testing your ability to gather information."

Reimund had no doubts.

"There are nine elders who are still alive in the village. They are about the same age as my p  p  , or a little older..."

Six women and three men. Ladies do live longer... Lumian listened quietly, deep in thought.

"There's no need to visit the last two. They're from another village and came here through marriage.

"Let's start with Naroka. She's the oldest and might have been an adult when the Warlock incident happened."

Naroka's real name wasn't actually Naroka. It was a title of respect for her.

In Riston Province, married women from prominent families or those who were the actual heads of households were entitled to the title "Madame". More than that, their names were marked with an "a" to proclaim their femininity, and prefixed with "Na" to signify their authority as Madames reigning over their domains.

Madame Pualis's family had been in decline for a long time, and at home she dutifully deferred to her husband Béost, the provincial administrator. Therefore, she didn't have a "Na" prefix or an "a" suffix. She could only be addressed as "Madame".

Naroka had been widowed early on in life, and as a result, she took over the family's accounts. Despite her two sons coming of age, getting married, and having children of their own, she kept her hand positioned squarely on the purse strings of the family fortunes.

This was a rare occurrence in Cordu, where men usually took charge of the family's affairs. In families where the father was absent, the eldest child would naturally take back the authority to manage the entire family from their mother once they reached adulthood.

"Okay," Reimund acquiesced without questioning Lumian's decision.

As they walked by a few buildings, Lumian spotted four old women basking in the sun as they chatted casually in front of a two-story house.

They sat very close to each other, catching lice on each other's bodies, which was a form of entertainment in the countryside of the Intis Republic that served to bring people closer and express affection.

"Do we ask her now?" Reimund hesitated, concerned that their pursuit of the truth behind the legend might spread throughout the village.

"Let's wait a little longer," Lumian replied solemnly, knowing that many rumors in the village were generated and spread through such gatherings.

After a while, the other three old women left one by one because they still had work to do at home.

"Good morning, Naroka." Lumian immediately walked over.

Naroka's hair was grizzled, and her eyes were slightly turbid. She wore a dark dress made of rough cloth, and her hands were covered in a layer of chicken skin with obvious patches on her face.

"When will Aurore join us? Many people in the village miss her," Naroka asked with a smile.

The men, I suppose? Lumian entered a state where he spoke his truth while the other talked about another matter and asked curiously, "Naroka, have you really seen a real Warlock? The one whose coffin nine bulls couldn't move?"

Naroka's visage shifted ever so slightly.

"Who told you that?"

"His pépé came back one night to tell him." Lumian began to spout nonsense.

Naroka was stunned. "Can souls really return..."

"My papa told me that Pépé had mentioned it when he was alive," Reimund interjected, unable to watch Lumian deceive the elderly woman.

Naroka's expression fell. After a moment of contemplation, she spoke up.

"Before he passed, none of us knew he was a Warlock. He acted perfectly normal."

Just like how you don't know that Aurore is a Warlock... Lumian thought to himself.

"Until he suddenly died and that owl flew over..." Naroka trailed off, lost in her memories.

The rest of her tale mirrored the legend.

Lumian pressed further.

"Where did that Warlock reside at that time?"

Naroka glanced at him.

"It's where you and Aurore are dwelling now.

"After that Warlock was laid to rest, the padre and a few others ransacked the place and burned it to the ground. For two or three decades, no one dared to approach that site. Eventually, the matter was forgotten. Later, Aurore came and purchased the land to rebuild the house."

Our place? Lumian's heart skipped a beat.

This answer was completely beyond his expectations!

In a flash, he realized that there were a multitude of problems he had previously overlooked.

With Aurore's knack for making money and her mysterious, unearthly abilities, why on earth would she settle down in the rural countryside of Cordu?

Cities like the provincial capital, Bigorre, the bustling textile center of Suhit, or even the capital itself, Trier, would be far better options. Even if Aurore was seeking a place with fresh air and a pristine environment, these urban centers boasted plenty of areas that would suit her needs.

Aurore once told him, "The best way to hide is to hide in a big city..." Lumian's mind raced as he struggled to calm himself.

Today, he learned that the land Aurore had chosen for their home, the land where their house stood, had once belonged to a powerful Warlock...

"Where is the Warlock buried?" Reimund interjected, unable to contain his curiosity.

With no hope of finding riches in Lumian's home, he could only hope that the Warlock's body held some sort of valuable secret.

Naroka said with amusement, "This was quite the affair. It undoubtedly sounded the alarm for the padre.

"In the old days, nine bulls were gathered to pull the coffin to the cemetery beside the cathedral. The padre performed a ritual to purify it. Eventually, the body was cremated and the remains were buried in a grave."

Reimund couldn't conceal his disappointment and muttered, "I see."

"Why do you inquire?" Naroka scrutinized Reimund's face before questioning.

Lumian cackled and spun a tale that sounded more like a fabrication. "We seek the Warlock's treasure."

"Kid, don't waste your time daydreaming," Naroka warned.

"Understood," Lumian replied meekly.

Lumian and Reimund bade Naroka farewell and hit the road toward the townsquare.

"There ain't no hope, Lumian. None at all," Reimund muttered, his spirits sinking as they circled a building.

"Indeed. All that could have been burned, has been burned. All that could have been taken, was taken decades ago," Lumian replied, nodding in agreement.

Despite the bleakness of their situation, Lumian wasn't disappointed thanks to the opportunity in his dream.

Reimund agreed.

"Aye, you're right. Of all the tales, only that blasted owl still remains."

Lumian's eyes lit up as he turned his gaze to the forest beyond the village. "Owl..." he murmured.

Reimund recoiled in horror and added hastily, "But it must have died years ago.

He wasn't one for consorting with the likes of owls and other evil creatures.

Down south in Intis, owls, nightingales, and ravens were thought to be sinister beings that served demons, stealing away human souls and bringing only misfortune.

Chapter 8: Owl

The idea hit Lumian like a bolt of lightning, but he didn't particularly fancy going through with it.

Ignoring the fact that years had flown by since the Warlock's demise and that the lifespan of owls was measly compared to humans, the sheer number of birds in the mountain was enough to make Lumian reconsider.

There were too many of the damn things!

That owl doesn't have any distinct markings... No, in the legends, there was no mention of anything specific about the owl. Naroka didn't disclose everything... We didn't inquire deeply enough... He snapped out of his thoughts and flashed a reassuring smile at Reimund.

"An owl tied to a Warlock could live for a hundred years."

As Reimund trembled with fear, he reassured him in a calm voice, "Don't fret, mon ami. This is my last resort. I do not wish to encounter a monster."

"Perhaps we should consult another old sage. Naroka may have overlooked a vital clue."

The man's tone turned seductive as he continued, "If I were a Warlock, I would not keep all my treasures with me or in my home. I would stash some

away in case the Inquisition attacked me. I would not have the luxury of time to collect my belongings. When I must flee, I would be left destitute."

The Inquisition of the Church of the Eternal Blazing Sun was notorious for hunting down Warlocks and Witches. Their "heroic deeds" were celebrated throughout the countryside.

Reimund's face lit up with excitement as he exclaimed, "You are right!"

He said with a yearning expression, "It's a shame. Too many years have elapsed. The Church's discovered riches must have been spent ages ago."

"Mon ami, that's a dangerous thought," Lumian teased.

Undeterred, they continued their visits to Pierre-père, Naferia, and other elders of the Maury family.

Although their responses mirrored Naroka's, Lumian and Reimund, with their newfound experience, managed to extract more details.

For instance, the owl was of medium size and resembled its kind. It had a pointed beak, a feline face, brown feathers with scattered spots, brownish-yellow eyes, and black pupils...

However, it was larger than the average owl, and its eyes appeared to spin. It was not as rigid or dim-witted as its kind.

All these peculiarities made the owl seem even more sinister in their descriptions.

"Seems like we've hit a dead end," Lumian stated to Reimund as they traveled to the townsquare. "We must focus on other legends."

Reimund was not as discouraged as he had been earlier. "Agreed. But which one should we pursue?"

This fellow is so proactive and hardworking... Lumian silently praised Reimund's enthusiasm and diligence and readied a reward for him.

He nodded and said, "Take your time and reflect on it. We shall discuss tomorrow. I shall impart combat techniques to you this afternoon."

"Marvelous!" Reimund exclaimed, overjoyed by the unforeseen instruction.

Aurore was a skilled fighter. After all, how else could she handle the savage and rough men in the village? Her younger brother was likely to be just as proficient.

After bidding farewell to Reimund Greg, Lumian veered onto the trail leading to his home.

As he walked, he spotted a group of men approaching him.

The leader was in his prime, not towering above 1.7 meters in height. He wore a white robe and had light black hair.

With a regal demeanor and decent facial features, the tip of his nose curled slightly in undisguised disgust and malice as he glared at Lumian with his blue eyes.

None other than the padre of the Eternal Blazing Sun Church in Cordu, Guillaume Bénét.

"I have been awaiting your arrival for quite some time," Guillaume Bénét bellowed in a baritone voice. "Did you deliberately bring those foreigners to

the cathedral?"

Lumian attempted to explain himself as he furtively took a step back. "I thought you were sleeping inside."

He had noticed Pons Bénét—the padre's younger sibling—standing beside Guillaume Bénét. Pons was in his early thirties, muscular, domineering, and a bully.

The other individuals with them were the padre's henchmen.

Guillaume Bénét signaled Pons with a glance as Lumian retreated.

Pons Bénét's grin turned sinister as he lunged forward, bellowing,

"Rascal, eet ees time zat you learn who ees ze father here!"

Before he could complete his sentence, Pons had already hastened his steps and pounced on Lumian. The other brutes followed suit.

In Cordu, a place where logic held no sway and apologies fell on deaf ears, brute force was the only language that could command respect. Guillaume Bénét, the padre, knew this all too well, having resorted to violence countless times before. So, when he learned that the outsiders had been ushered into the cathedral by Lumian, the priest wasted no time in making his move. He was determined to get hold of the ruffian and pummel him into submission until he lay bedridden for a month. The padre was keen to show Lumian the error of his ways and wouldn't rest until someone paid the price for his insolence.

Of course, he had to avoid Aurore.

Regarding the law, he only needed to notify the administrator and the territory judge, Béost. The city sheriffs were unlikely to investigate such a minor issue in the countryside.

As an outsider, Béost would not offend a local-born padre unless there was significant conflict of interest.

Guillaume Bénet felt fortunate that the foreigners had not divulged his affair with Madame Pualis, the administrator's wife, to anyone. He was still unaware of this.

Despite their speed, Lumian was quicker. Just as Pons spoke, Lumian pivoted and dashed away.

He was familiar with the padre's character and methods.

Previously, a villager had accused Guillaume Bénet of having multiple mistresses and embezzling offerings from the Eternal Blazing Sun. He had also bullied others relentlessly in the village, hardly behaving like a man of the cloth. Subsequently, the villager had mysteriously died one afternoon.

Thud thud thud!

Lumian raced like the wind.

"Wait for your papa, eh? Attends ton père!" Pons shouted while chasing him. His pace was not sluggish either.

The thugs pursued closely behind him.

Instead of fleeing along the main road, Lumian darted into the nearest house.

The family was preparing lunch in the kitchen when they suddenly saw a stranger burst in.

With a swoosh, Lumian darted past them and leaped out of the kitchen window at the back.

By the time Pons and his cronies entered, the homeowner had regained his senses. He stood up to confront them and inquired, "What is going on? What are all of you doing?"

"Get out of ze way, old man!" Pons shoved the homeowner aside with force, but it slowed him down.

When they reached the window and jumped out, Lumian had already vanished into another trail.

After pursuing him for a while, they lost sight of Lumian entirely.

"Sacrebleu, ces chiens fous!" Pons spat on the roadside.

...

Outside the semi-subterranean two-story abode, Lumian gasped for breath before finally opening the door and entering the house as though nothing had happened.

"One, two, three, four; two, two, three, four..." A series of rhythmic shouts reverberated in his ears.

Lumian gazed at the empty space on the other side of the kitchen and observed Aurore's blond hair tied in a ponytail. She wore a flaxen shirt, tight

white pants, and dark sheepskin boots, leaping around and drenched in sweat.

In Cordu, the kitchen occupied most of the space on the first floor, serving as the family's core. Cooking and dining occurred here, as did receiving guests.

She's exercising again... Lumian was accustomed to Aurore's eccentricities and was unfazed by her exercise regimen.

Aurore often did strange things without giving any reason when probed.

At the very least, exercising is beneficial, and it's quite a feast for the eyes... Lumian observed silently.

After a while, Aurore stopped and squatted to turn off the black tape recorder.

She took the white towel from Lumian and instructed him as she wiped the sweat from her forehead,

"Remember, we have combat practice this afternoon."

"I have to study and learn combat. Aren't you demanding too much of me?" Lumian grumbled nonchalantly.

Aurore glanced at him, smiling, and retorted, "You must remember that our objective is the comprehensive development of the five educations of morality, intellect, physique, aesthetics, and labor!"

The more she spoke, the happier she became, as if recollecting something beautiful or amusing.

I have already failed moral education... Lumian muttered under his breath.

He queried, "What kind of combat?"

One of the things he failed to comprehend was that Aurore, who seemed delicate and frail, was an expert in combat. She mastered numerous fighting techniques and could easily overpower him.

Aurore pondered seriously, leaned forward slightly, and gazed into Lumian's eyes.

She then laughed heartily and declared, "Self-defense!"

"Huh?" Lumian exclaimed in astonishment. "Isn't that supposed to be for girls?"

Aurore stood tall and shook her head gravely, saying sincerely, "Boys must protect themselves when they are out. Who says boys don't encounter perverts?"

The smile on her lips was no longer hidden.

Lumian was unsure if his sister was joking or serious, so he remained silent as he retrieved the white towel and headed towards the stairs.

Suddenly, he felt something tighten under his foot, as if he had tripped over an obstacle. He stumbled forward.

In midair, Lumian hastily contracted his abs, extended his arm, and leaned on the chair beside him. He somersaulted and barely landed on his feet.

Aurore retracted her leg and chuckled.

"One of the fundamental combat principles is to be vigilant at all times. One cannot be complacent.

"Remember that, my novice brother?"

Her right hand had already clutched Lumian's back, but when she saw that he had regained control of his body, she let go.

"It's because I trust you too much..." Lumian grumbled.

He contemplated the matter and realized that this trust was meaningless. He had lost count of how many times he had been at the mercy of Aurore.

Aurore coughed and restrained her expression.

"How did it go with that woman?"

Lumian provided a brief summary of their conversation before declaring, "I intend to wait for your friends to respond before delving into the dream."

"Smart decision," Aurore affirmed.

Lumian changed the subject.

"What's for lunch?"

"We still have some leftover toast from this morning. I'll roast four more lamb chops for you," Aurore replied after contemplating for a moment.

"What about you?" Lumian inquired.

Aurore casually said, "I'll just have truffle bamboo chicken shreds topped with some cheese and onion soup. I tried it last time and found it to be quite..."

Before she could finish speaking, she suddenly froze.

The next moment, she raised her hands to cover her ears. The muscles on her face gradually contorted, making her appear somewhat ferocious.

Lumian observed silently, his eyes filled with anxiety and apprehension.

After a while, Aurore exhaled deeply and returned to her usual self.

Her forehead was drenched in sweat once more.

"What happened?" Lumian asked.

Aurore smiled and responded, "The ringing in my ears is acting up again. You know that I have this old problem."

Lumian didn't probe further. Instead, he said, "Alright, then I'll prepare lunch. Rest well."

Every time this occurred, his yearning for extraordinary abilities grew stronger, as it became a pressing matter.

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Chapter 9: Magazine

As the night settled in, Lumian finished dealing with his neighbors who had come to borrow the oven. He made his way up to the second floor, entering the room that served as Aurore's study.

In Cordu, many folks were destitute and couldn't afford their own ovens or large stoves. When they needed to toast bread or smoke meat, they had to borrow it from others and use it on the spot.

Aurore had always been lenient and accommodating when it came to this. Anyone could borrow her oven, but they had to pay the fuel costs or bring their own coal and wood.

Currently, she had donned her white silk nightdress and was curled up in a reclining chair, her focus solely on the book she held under the bright battery-powered lamp on the desk.

Lumian didn't wish to disturb her, so he nonchalantly pulled out a thinner book from the bookshelf and took a seat in the corner.

Hidden Veil... What kind of magazine is this? Lumian pondered, gazing at the cover that was adorned with cryptic symbols.

He swiftly flipped through the pages, and the more he read, the more he was taken aback.

This magazine delved into the very existence of the human soul. It discussed how all beings had a spirit, and through secret methods of communication between different spirits, one could obtain various kinds of aid.

Even if one wasn't devout, even if they only attended the Eternal Blazing Sun cathedral to pray and partake in Mass occasionally, two words couldn't help but flash through Lumian's mind: Sacrilege! Taboo!

As a Warlock who would undoubtedly be burned at the stake by the Inquisition if her true identity was exposed, it was customary for Aurore to have such books at her residence. However, Lumian could tell that this magazine had received the government's permission for publication!

Can such a thing be openly published?

Didn't they say that publication censorship had always been very strict?

Or is this a fake permit... Lumian looked up at Aurore and inquired, "Is this a prohibited magazine?"

Aurore took her eyes off her book and glanced at her brother. She responded in a nonchalant tone, "In the past, it was underground fiction. Later on, for some reason, it cleared the censors and was officially published. The Eternal Blazing Sun Church actually didn't care and tacitly agreed."

"Fiction?" Lumian was taken aback by his sister's choice of words.

"Of course, it's fiction. You're not taking it seriously, are you?" Aurore laughed. "If what's written is true, do you think it can still be published? If you follow the method written on it, other than making yourself mentally weak and neurotic, there won't be any additional gains. Yes... there will

occasionally be something real, but without the corresponding ritual language, it'll be a waste of effort no matter how hard you try."

This was the professional evaluation of a Warlock.

"Alright..." Lumian couldn't hide his disappointment. "I just find it strange that this can be published."

Aurore took a deep breath, her puffed-up cheeks accentuating her pondering.

"I don't know why either. Perhaps it's because the world has been seeing an influx of supernatural events lately, and it's becoming increasingly difficult to conceal them. The public is becoming more aware of their existence, and the government is slowly easing its grip on such topics. That's why books like these are being published. In Trier, Psychic, Lotus, and Arcane are the most popular magazines. I have them all on my bookshelf. If you want to come up with more realistic stories for the tavern, you should give them a read."

"Oui," Lumian responded eagerly, his interest piqued.

Simultaneously, he let out a wistful sigh deep in his heart.

Aurore's hoard of books was truly impressive and diverse!

Thanks to these tomes and Aurore's occasional elucidations, Lumian—a lad who had forsaken his schooling—had managed to acquire a reasonable comprehension of the world, continent, and nation he called home.

The world was divided into two great continents, one to the north and one to the south, separated by the treacherous Berserk Sea, where raging hurricanes battered any who dared to sail its waters. But the truly

mysterious lands lay to the east and west, on the legendary Eastern and Western Continents. No one had ever set foot there, and some wondered if they even existed at all.

Lumian and Aurore lived in the Intis Republic, a land situated in the heart of the Northern Continent. It was a nation bordered by the Fog Sea to the west, the Feysac Empire to the north, and the Hornacis mountain range and the Loen Kingdom to the east. To the south lay the Feynapotter kingdom, Lenburg, and Masin.

The small countries nestled between the Feynapotter Kingdom and the Loen Kingdom, such as Segar, together with Lenburg and Masin, were collectively known as the countries of the south-central region. They shared a common faith in the God of Knowledge and Wisdom.

The Southern Continent had already fallen under the dominion of the various powers of the Northern Continent. Whether it was the Balam Empire, the Paz Kingdom, the Haagenti Kingdom, or any of the other nations, they had all but lost their autonomy. Yet still, a fierce resistance against colonization burned in the hearts of the conquered.

In addition to the Berserk Sea dividing the Northern and Southern Continents, there were other great seas: the Fog Sea to the west of the Intis Republic, the Sonia Sea to the east of the Loen Kingdom, the North Sea to the north of the Feysac Empire, and the Polar Sea to the south of the Southern Continent. They were collectively known as the Five Seas.

Of all the nations of the Northern Continent, the Loen Kingdom was the strongest, with the Intis Republic close behind. The Feysac Empire, defeated in the last war, had fallen to fourth place. The Feynapotter Kingdom had risen to third place. And among the countries of the south-central region, Lenburg reigned supreme.

Compared to the simple folk in Cordu who only knew of the Intis Republic, the Feynapotter kingdom, and Lenburg, Lumian was practically a cartographer.

It was no surprise really, considering the Cordu Village shepherds only traveled to their neighboring kingdoms of Feynapotter and Lenburg. They only had a limited understanding of these lands. The people in the northern villages of the Dariège region were just as provincial. Other than the surrounding settlements, they could only name Trier, Suhit, and a few other metropolitans.

Lumian was often baffled. How did Aurore come by such vast knowledge?

All the textbooks he read were penned by Aurore, and all his practice exams were prepared by her. Aurore had an answer for every question in the books he read!

But what stunned him even more was her expertise in various forms of combat.

It was simply mind-boggling that a woman in her twenties could accumulate so much wisdom. Some people couldn't amass that much knowledge even after living 50 or 60 years.

Could it be that these are the building blocks of a true Warlock? Lumian looked up again and gazed at Aurore, lost in thought.

As Aurore patted her cheeks while reading, she hardly seemed like a scholar or a warlock.

Aurore caught Lumian's gaze and demanded, "What are you ogling at?"

Lumian quickly changed the subject, "Last time you mentioned that I possess the knowledge required to pass the college entrance examination?"

Aurore pondered for a moment before responding, "In theory, you could gain admission to any university, but since I never took that particular exam, I can't say for certain what questions will be asked. Roselle sure did a number on the populace. Sigh, I guess it's a good thing..."

Undoubtedly, Emperor Roselle's reign spawned the college entrance examination, and it has remained a fixture of academic life to this day.

Aurore's mind suddenly shifted gears. She shot Lumian a sly grin and inquired, "Why did you not make your usual stop at the tavern today to regale the patrons with your tales?"

"I'm not truly an alcoholic," Lumian replied while flipping through his magazine. "Reading at home is equally enjoyable."

And it helps to calm my nerves and ease my mind... Lumian silently added.

Aurore nodded and glanced over at Lumian's spot in the corner of the room.

"Why are you sitting so far away, putting on an act of pitifulness, weakness, and helplessness?"

"Come closer. You need proper lighting to read at night, otherwise, your eyes will suffer."

Aurore sure has a way with words, Lumian mused. Although I understand the meaning behind "pitifulness," "weakness," and "helplessness," it's still an odd combination. Supposedly used to her idiosyncrasies by now, Lumian retrieved a chair and moved closer to the desk where Aurore sat.

The two of them spent the evening reading in silence, occasionally chatting, as the sound of their breathing mingled with the rustling of pages and the soft breeze that wafted in from outside the window. Peaceful and soothing.

...

As he bid Aurore goodnight, Lumian slipped back into his quarters.

He peeled off his coat and draped it across the back of the chair. He couldn't risk bringing the Wand card to bed with him; that would only raise suspicion, and his sister had sworn to keep a watchful eye on him at all times.

Just as he was about to approach the bed, Lumian froze, his heart skipping a beat.

His sharp eyes darted around the room, and he adjusted the chair that was usually positioned at a diagonal angle to face the window.

Then, he crawled into bed and extinguished the kerosene lamp resting on the cabinet next to him.

As he drifted off into the depths of slumber, Lumian was suddenly startled awake.

The bedroom was shrouded in a dense, gray fog.

Lumian, who was already mentally prepared, calmly took in his surroundings and made a realization.

The chair that he had meticulously arranged before retiring for the night was still positioned at an angle in his dream, just as it had been in reality in the

past.

This suggested that the dream world he had entered was not an exact reflection of reality. Perhaps it was a manifestation of his deepest subconscious desires. Although Lumian couldn't decipher its meaning, he knew that it was something to be remembered.

He walked over to the window, placed his hands on the sill, and gazed out.

The mountain made of brownish-red stones and reddish-brown soil, and the collapsed buildings that surrounded it, were still present.

The eerie silence of the place was deafening.

Time quickly passed. After much contemplation, Lumian made a firm decision.

He would embark on a preliminary exploration of the area tonight!

His past life on the streets had turned him into a man of action.

He didn't rush downstairs, however. Instead, he opened the cabinet and began to pile on clothes.

He didn't need them to keep warm, but he wanted to increase his "defense ability" in this way.

He grabbed a cotton shirt, cotton pants, and a leather jacket, stretching his body to feel the fit. Any more clothing would only hinder his agility, and that was crucial in a situation like this.

As he adjusted to his current state, Lumian had a sudden thought.

This is my dream. Can't I get whatever I want?

With that intention, he muttered to himself, "I want a breastplate and a revolver... I want a breastplate and a revolver..."

The room was still shrouded in a thin, gray fog.

This won't do. This dream is special... His disappointment was palpable, but he quickly regained his composure and made his way to the bedroom door. Stepping out into the corridor, he found himself in complete darkness. It was murky and dim.

Lumian pushed open the door to Aurore's bedroom and then her study. The layout was slightly different from reality, but he recognized it immediately. The biggest difference, of course, was that Aurore was nowhere to be found. The entire scene was frozen in shades of gray.

The first floor was no different.

Lumian scanned his surroundings, searching for a weapon to defend himself. He knew his home better than anyone else and quickly found two viable options.

The first was a two-meter-long fork made of steel. Aurore had said that it was effective and outstanding as long as the target didn't have a long-range weapon.

The second was a sharp, iron-black hand axe.

Ah, why not both... Lumian couldn't help but think of Aurore's oft-repeated phrase, but he quickly dismissed the idea.

Today was all about reconnaissance. He needed to be sly, hidden in the shadows.

Lugging around a cumbersome weapon would only hinder his movements and give him away.

Taking a deep breath, Lumian stooped down to retrieve the axe.

He rose to his full height and set off towards the door, barely visible in the misty haze.

With a deft hand, he opened the door, not making a sound.

Chapter 10: Blood

As Lumian stepped out the door, he felt as though he was transported to another world.

Before him lay no longer the familiar Cordu, but a dark-red mountain peak and the collapsed buildings surrounding it. Together, they formed a strange ruin.

The fog in the sky was thick and pale, making it difficult for light to enter. The ground was shattered and there were many rocks. Lumian gripped his axe tightly and inched forward carefully, his heart pounding in his chest. Along the way, he couldn't find a place to hide.

There were no weeds or trees.

Lumian walked in fear, his every sense on high alert. All he could do was hunch his back and comfort himself. At the very least, if there was any danger in this area, it would be obvious at a glance. He could discover it in advance.

Finally, he arrived at the ruins, a half-collapsed building that had been wrecked by fire.

Lumian surveyed the area for a moment and tentatively confirmed that there were no other creatures lurking about. Satisfied with his assessment, he

cautiously made his way inside the building, being mindful of the charred wood that could fall at any moment from midair.

As he searched the room, his eyes landed on a broken pot in the corner of the house. There was a hint of gold shining through the cracks.

Lumian approached the pot slowly and realized that it was a gold coin.

Can it be true? There's actually treasure in the ruins of my dream? He picked up the gold coin and wiped it against his body.

The patterns on the surface of the coin were revealed.

The coin featured a man's portrait carved on the front. His face was thin, and his hair was parted 30-70. There was a mustache on his lips, and his gaze was rather firm. On the back was a bunch of sweet iris flowers surrounding the number 20.

Lumian recognized the man depicted on the coin. It was none other than the first president of the Intis Republic, Levanx.

It's actually a Louis d'or... Lumian was rather surprised.

Firstly, he couldn't believe that the currency in this strange dream ruin was actually the currency of the Intis Republic in reality. And secondly, he had casually picked up something as valuable as a Louis d'or.

He knew that in the present day, the legal currencies of the Intis Republic were verl d'or and coppet. One verl d'or was equivalent to 100 coppet.

Coppet existed in the form of copper coins and silver coins. The copper coins were divided into three categories: 1 coppet, 5 coppet, 10 coppet, while the

silver coins had the denominations of 20 coppet and 50 coppet.

Verl d'or could be found in the form of silver coins, gold coins, or banknotes. In silver coins, there were denominations of 1, 5, and 10 verl d'or, while gold coins came in 5, 10, 20, 40, and 50 denominations.

The denominations of banknotes were even more varied, ranging from 5, 20, 50, 100, 200, 500, 1,000 verl d'or.

In reality, the people of Intis still clung to the old currency units. For example, the most widely used 5 coppet copper coins were known as 'lick.'

Similarly, gold coins worth 20 verl were commonly referred to as Louis d'or.

In the old currency era, Louis d'or had been known as Roselle. But after the Republic was established, the name was changed to Louis d'or in order to erase Emperor Roselle's influence.

As Lumian understood it, even in the rural area of Cordu, a Louis d'or could sustain a poor family with fields for an entire month.

He knew that without Aurore's high income, he might never have even seen what a Louis d'or looked like. In fact, in the entire village of Cordu, only the siblings and the family of the administrator had ever seen or owned a Louis d'or.

To any villager, this Louis d'or was an incredibly valuable gain.

Unfortunately, this is just a dream... Lumian couldn't help but feel a pang of disappointment.

This was something ordinary, making it unlikely he could "bring" it out of the dream.

But even so, he handled the Louis d'or with great care and respect. Having spent much of his life wandering, he knew the value of every coppet.

And he knew that one Louis d'or was equivalent to 2,000 coppet, which was equal to one gold pound in the Loen Kingdom, though slightly less. According to the papers he had read, 24 verl d'or could only be exchanged for one gold pound.

Lumian continued his search for any written information that could shed light on the ruins and their history. He wanted to see if this place corresponded to a certain location in reality, and whether a village in the Intis Republic had been "transported" into this dream world. The appearance of the Louis d'or had only fueled his curiosity.

As Lumian moved cautiously through the ruined building, his eyes fell upon a spot where a stove had once stood, now stained with a dark red color.

"Blood?" His pupils dilated as he quickly made a guess.

Immediately after, he made a judgment.

Although it wasn't fresh, it hadn't yet turned black—it looked as though it had just dripped there two or three days prior, or perhaps even more recently!

As his heart began to race, Lumian suddenly felt the light around him dim, as if something had silently blocked the light filtering through the dense fog from above!

The memory of past attacks flooded Lumian's mind like a turbulent wave, causing him to react instinctively.

Without a thought, he lunged forward and wrapped his body in midair, rolling on the ground to avoid any potential danger.

Thump!

A loud thump echoed through the air as something heavy fell behind him.

Lumian quickly rolled to the left side of the dilapidated stove, using a nearby rock to leverage himself around.

As he rose to his feet, axe at the ready, he saw an additional figure standing where he had just been moments before.

The dim light made it difficult to discern whether it was human or some kind of humanoid creature.

The figure hunched in front of Lumian was unlike anything he had ever seen before. It was a monster, with no clothes or shoes to speak of. Its skin had been peeled off, revealing the red muscles, blood vessels, and yellowed fascia beneath. Sticky liquid dripped from its body, yet it didn't fall to the ground.

It was a monster!

Its eyes seemed to be embedded in its face, and its mouth hung open with all its might, revealing uneven teeth and a long drool of saliva.

Despite all the ghost stories Lumian had fabricated in the past, he never expected to encounter such an evil spirit in real life.